



A COMMUNITY NEEDS ANALYSIS WITH FURTHER EDUCATION STUDENTS: THOUGHTS AROUND PROGRESSION FROM FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Dr Sarah Sartori and Dilara Demir Bloom, February, 2023

A peer research project to explore further education students' thoughts about - where they're at, where they're going, and what they think about college and university.

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Artists: Dominique Ng from Ballyfermot College of Further Education and Esther Blodau.

Lastly, but most importantly, our most special thanks and respect goes to the participants who gave so generously of their time and experience to help us understand their thought process around progression pathways from FE to HE, and their experience in college and beyond. We thank you for sharing your experiences and we strive to represent them.

This report was prepared and authored by Dr Sarah Meaney Sartori and Dilara Demir Bloom for College Connect. The report has been peer-reviewed prior to publication. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors.

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FOREWORD

It really is a privilege, not only to take part in this research, but also to be given the opportunity to write this foreword and introduce you, the reader, to this report. Like many who work in the FET sector, we are very passionate and enthusiastic about the people, the learning and the experiences within it. What is clear from reading about these participants and their stories, is that this passion and enthusiasm is not misplaced, but rather is essential, and we would argue a prerequisite when working with groups so rich in diversity.

Working on this project gave us the opportunity to amplify the voice and acknowledge the strengths of the FE learner. As peer-researchers we were tasked with designing and delivering the focus group sessions. It was important for us that these sessions would reflect an FET learning environment. We took on this project alongside other work commitments and responsibilities. While this has been a fulfilling experience, we were at times faced with obstacles to overcome. This gave us further insight into the challenges faced by FE learners, who often have to balance work, personal life and other commitments while still trying to find time for their studies.

Any research of an underrepresented cohort is important but what is significant with this report is that it shines a light on many who reflect the richness of diversity. More and more we are told to value this richness of diversity and to celebrate difference. However, it is this same difference that continues to exclude people from more conventional HE environments.

Including the FE learner in these traditional educational spaces will not only enhance their experiences but will enhance the HE experience for all students.

This report clearly shows that we cannot view FE learners simply in terms of numbers. This 'numbers game' is only fun when no one is left out and everyone has a part to play. Flexibility and accessibility are key to levelling the playing field in terms of access to HE. This doesn't mean getting something for free or taking the easy road. What was clear to us when speaking to the participants was that the barriers they are facing in terms of access to HE, are by no means insurmountable but somehow systemically unavoidable.

This report captures the positivity and energy that is not only maintained but thrives among the people, the learning and the environment of FE. It also comes at a pivotal time in terms of institutional developments with regard to policy and governance. The establishment of the new FE/HE department brings opportunity to address many of the issues highlighted in this report and bring about real change. Real, lasting change however, can't just be in the policy and reporting of government bodies, but must also be in the hearts and minds of people and society as a whole.



Josh Golding & Sarah McManus
Peer-researchers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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There's no ONE way to go to university. There's lots of ways to go to university...So no ONE way is right...everybody will have had a different journey when they get to university.

– Focus Group Participant

INTRODUCTION - This Community Needs Analysis (CNA) is carried out by College Connect, in collaboration with Dublin City University (DCU). The research process engaged with 58 further education students in seven Further Education Colleges in the Dublin/DCU catchment area to find out how better to support their educational progression to higher education.

College Connect is a six-year project funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) under its Programme for Access to Higher Education – PATH 3. College Connect, led by Maynooth University supports access and widening participation of groups underrepresented in higher education in the MEND cluster (Midlands, East, and North Dublin region). The cluster is made up of Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Maynooth University, and Technological University of the Shannon, Midlands. The aim of the project is to empower and support non-traditional learners to access higher education.

STUDY AIM - The specific aim of this research project is to gain a greater understanding of who the further education (FE) student is, and what the factors are when it comes to deciding whether or not to progress to higher education, or indeed

whether to accept or refuse a place in HE. The study therefore also explores barriers and access to higher education for further education students, to gather their views and insights on the factors that encourage or discourage transition to higher education.

STUDY APPROACH - The study was carried out from March to July 2022 and used participative and creative approaches to encourage collaborative leadership and engagement throughout all stages of the research process. **This report includes findings and input from 58 FE students** over the age of 18, studying at seven FE colleges/centres in the Dublin and DCU catchment areas in the academic year 21/22. Peer researchers, Josh Golding, Sarah McManus and Karen Fenlon, carried out six focus groups, five in-person and one online, with 45 further education students. A further 13 FE students engaged with the research via a survey.

Five FE students from Ballyfermot College of Further Education (BCFE) engaged by creating the arts-based materials that were used during the focus groups to spark discussion, but did not themselves take part in focus groups or respond to the survey.

The themes explored and presented in this research and the subsequent report are; **participants' experiences in further education; attitudes towards higher education; progression from Further Education and Training (FET) to higher education; progression options following further education; barriers and benefits to HE progression; recommendations to support progression to HE from FE.** The findings from the research are supplemented and supported by an arts-based publication in the form of a comic zine drawn from initial analysis of the interview transcripts, by Dr Sarah Sartori, and illustrated by comic artist Dominique Ng, a graduate from BCFE.

FINDINGS - The Further Education and Training sector in Ireland supports around 200,000 unique learners whose education provision is delivered by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and a range of other providers and support agencies.¹ One of the FET sector's key strengths is the role it plays in supporting people who may face additional barriers in accessing education.² It is strongly upheld that FET is for everyone,³ and central to this is responding to the diversity of learners in further education, that includes learners with disabilities, migrants, Travellers, the long-term unemployed, and people with criminal justice history.

Since 2005 there have been four National Access Plans for access to higher education, which uphold the belief that people should have equity of access independent of their economic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances, so that our higher education

student population represents wider Irish society.⁴ Central to this is progression from FET to HE, yet there are differences between the Leaving Certificate pathway and the QQI pathway (undertaken by students in FET), that are inconsistent with equity of access.⁵ Further education has undergone considerable restructuring, that now includes a more cohesive approach across both the further and higher education sectors that promotes the complementary roles of both and aims to provide wider choice at transition points.⁶ On top of this is increased commitment at government level to progress a more unified third-level system that ensures equality and champions diversity.⁷

This study therefore makes a valuable contribution to our knowledge regarding progression from FET to HE by presenting the structural, institutional, and psychosocial barriers that participants raised as being obstacles to educational progression. Furthermore, by focusing this research on the perspective of FE students themselves, and exploring how they view and value HE, this research offers valuable insight towards a more holistic approach to progression from FE that requires us to move beyond reducing equity of access to HE to a numbers game.

The key findings are summarised below.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES OF FURTHER EDUCATION - Experiences of FE for most participants were largely positive.

1. SOLAS. (2020). Future FET.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. HEA. (2022). National Access Plan 2022-2028.

5. O'Sullivan. (2021).

6. DFHERIS. (2021). Statement of Strategy 2021-2023.

7. DFHERIS. (2022). Policy Platform: Progressing A Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge.

Participants spoke **positively about the teaching** in their FE courses and discussed **feeling supported** and **‘being treated like an adult.’**

“

Because they (FE teachers) are so patient and supportive to every situation like whatever situation you may have. Even the life is difficult on my side, but regardless with my teachers, all my teachers, they are very supportive.

– Focus Group Participant

FE students in this research also spoke of the importance of **peer support**, which they reported as having **benefited their mental health** and **improving their capacity to cope** with the workload of their course. They discussed the value of having a peer group with whom they could be themselves and stressed the importance of this in terms of **realising they were not alone** in their struggles.

“

That was probably the main thing that I learned when I came here, because I had so much that I was dealing with that. I thought I was the only one. But the (group of people) that are in the class. Everybody has so much... mental health issues...so much... within their own personal lives.

– Focus Group Participant

While participants spoke of having been nervous beginning their FET course, they affirmed that their self-confidence had grown upon completion, and spoke of a **sense of accomplishment** and **self-belief** that they had not had previously. Some spoke of how FE had changed their relationship with education and learning.

CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES OF FURTHER EDUCATION

Participants frequently referred to **financial pressure** and having to source **part-time employment** during their FET course to maintain themselves in education. Not having sufficient space or **not having a quiet area to study** while **balancing work and study** was a substantial source of stress for participants. Many participants also flagged **care responsibilities** and the added pressure of **child-rearing** or **caring for siblings** or **caring for elderly parents**.

“

Caring for my dad. Looking after my daughter (trying to juggle while attending college).

– Survey Respondent

Participants on this research also discussed the **volume of assignments in FET** and highlighted the **disparity between FE and HE** that included the **negative stigma** surrounding FET. Participants referred to the higher social status achieved for those participating on an undergraduate programme at a higher education institution. For some participants, this negative stigma manifested internally as feelings of **anxiety**, **low self-esteem** or **embarrassment** for having ‘ended up’ attending an FE college as opposed to a university.

“

There is a lot of (stigma) around the whole PLC courses, people kind of think, ‘that’s not a real course’. I’ve seen that a lot.

– Focus Group Participant

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO HE PROGRESSION

Participants identified barriers such as **socio-economic background**, **financial concerns**, **family/caring responsibilities** as the main barriers to progression from FE to HE. Many participants emphasised the importance of getting back to employment and becoming self-sufficient after a period of relying on others, and others questioned their **financial capacity** and **IT capacity** to be able to attend HE. Others spoke of the ‘**hidden costs**’ associated with university, such as **transport**, **food**, **accommodation** and the lack of or **loss of earnings** that would be incurred by attending university. Many participants highlighted the **income thresholds for fees support**, particularly in households with grown-up siblings where several family members might be working. Some participants pointed out that the **prolonged financial effort** required to obtain a university education might not guarantee the kind of employment or return that would be worth the outlay.

“

Like there’s people in my job who have done degrees in X and we’re working on the same level.

– Focus Group Participant

SOCIAL BARRIERS TO HE PROGRESSION

FE students also face internal barriers to progression to higher education such as **fear** and **apprehension** and expressed concerns about ‘**not fitting in**’ to the ‘middle-class institution’ and general student body representative of HEIs. Participants also intimated worry and **self-doubt** that they may **not be able to keep up with the academic workload** or of having the **IT skills required**, which they perceived as potentially more intense or **beyond their capability** compared to FET. There was also general consensus that HE would be more **anonymous**, with an increased onus to work independently coupled with **less one-to-one or tutor support**.

“

But what I think... just finishing a FET. We know, it was manageable...I was able...I was able for that (FE)...but will I be able the next time... Have I reached my potential? You know?

– Focus Group Participant

Participants imagined that the **size of classes** at university, that would involve learning in **large lecture halls**, could be very **intimidating**. They worried whether they would be able to navigate **large university campuses** along with the **dizzying array of university courses** on offer. Lastly, participants with family commitments believed that university would be **more time consuming** than FE and had concerns that the academic timetable might clash with their ability to fulfil **family responsibilities** such as **school drop-offs** and **school collections**.

POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS HE PROGRESSION

Perceived benefits of higher education included **higher income and earning potential**; the **higher social status** as a consequence of having a degree and the resulting **increase in opportunities** regarding **career choices**. There was an awareness in this of being **role-models** for their children and communities through their personal educational attainments.

“

I think the message (is) very apparent that a degree elevates you to higher status to potential for higher income.

– Focus Group Participant

Participants also mentioned the social benefits they associated with a university education, which included **making friends** and **opportunities to forge networks** which may enhance their careers.

“

And there are lots of opportunities not only to develop your brain, academically, but also to make social networks...a chance for a new beginning.

– Focus Group Participant

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ten recommendations are proposed to address the barriers and ‘discouragers’ identified in participants’ accounts and through literature and policy analysis that include:

- 1. INCREASE IN FUNDING & GRANTS SCHEMES:** Funding streams for FET to HE transition, with more flexible financial supports for those learners who are identified as students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and who wish to progress from FET to HE.
- 2. TARGETED INFORMATION ON FUNDING & GRANTS:** HEIs need to provide targeted accessible pre-entry information (like campus tours) and accessible resources on funding supports (like SAF) distributed through FE colleges and via the Guidance Counsellors working with FE students.
- 3. ACCESSIBLE & WELCOMING INFORMATION:** Review how each HEI communicates a ‘culture of welcome’ to FE students taking into consideration practicalities such as timetabling, class-sizes and supports available.
- 4. OUTREACH/MENTORING ACTIVITY:** HEIs should provide targeted outreach and mentoring activity that experientially promotes FET to HE progression.
- 5. GREATER COLLABORATION BETWEEN HEIS AND FE COLLEGES:** HEIs should expand strategic partnerships with FE colleges to provide ‘guaranteed/prioritised’ entry from FET to HE to support the transition of the FE student to HE.

6. **PARITY OF ESTEEM BETWEEN FET AND HE THROUGH PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITY:** Learning-partnership activity between HEIs and FE colleges to build parity of esteem and so that learners can see clear programme pathways through FE seamlessly into HE.
7. **EQUAL ENTRY MECHANISM/POINTS SYSTEM FOR FE STUDENTS:** Revision of CAO points allocation for FET to align with Leaving Certificate.
8. **GRANTS AND FREE-FEES SCHEMES FOR PART-TIME/DISTANCE LEARNING:** HEIs need to coordinate efforts to lobby for the extension of SUSI to part-time and flexible learners.
9. **PEER SUPPORT/MENTORING:** HEIs should have specific partnership models of support in place for FET to HE progression that include peer support and mentoring.
10. **IT SKILLS TRAINING:** HEIs to provide targeted computer skills training and support for FE students and to communicate these supports pre-entry.



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access & Disability
AONTAS	Irish National Adult Learning Organisation
BCFE	Ballyfermot College of Further Education
CC	College Connect
CNA	Community Needs Analysis
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DCU	Dublin City University
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DkIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology
ETB	Education and Training Board
FÁS	Training and Employment Authority
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
FETRC	Further Education and Training Research Centre
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IoT	Institute of Technology
MEND	Midlands East North Dublin
MU	Maynooth University
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RIA	Royal Irish Academy
SAF	Student Assistance Fund
SOLAS	Further Education and Skills Service
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VET	Vocational Education and Training

INTRODUCTION

“

There's no ONE way to go to university. There's lots of ways to go to university...So no ONE way is right... everybody will have had a different journey when they get to university.

– Focus Group Participant

This is a report of a Community Needs Analysis (CNA) carried out by College Connect (CC), with Further Education (FE) students focused on progression from FE to higher education (HE). College Connect is a six-year project funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) under its Programme for Access to Higher Education – PATH 3. Led by Maynooth University, CC supports methods that widening participation in university for groups underrepresented in higher education for the MEND cluster, covering the Midlands, East, and North Dublin (MEND) region. The cluster is made up of Dublin City University (DCU), Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT), Maynooth University (MU) and Technological University of the Shannon (TUS), Athlone Campus. The aim of CC is to empower and support learner groups underrepresented at third-level, such as FE students, to access HE.

Further Education and Training (FET) is the term used to describe the education and training options open to anyone over the age of 16, that are not part of the university or Institute of Technology/Technological University sector.

As well as prioritising accessibility and employability, along with progression to HE a significant priority for the FET sector in Ireland is to promote community and social engagement, facilitated by a learner-centred approach that fosters inclusion and promotes equity.

Further education plays a key role in supporting access to education for those who face additional barriers. The FE learner community is therefore diverse, including; early school leavers, learners with disabilities, learners from the Traveller and Roma communities, international protection applicants, migrants, refugees, prisoners and former prisoners, learners who are homeless and learners with English as a second language.⁸ The breadth of FE provision is equally diverse, and the new FET Strategy⁹ targets school leavers, lifelong learners, women returners, employees and employers.¹⁰ FE courses are provided at levels one to six on the National Framework of Qualification (NFQ), and include provision of core literacy, numeracy and digital-skill development as well as labour-market driven learning focused options, such as specific skills training, apprenticeships

8. Archer. (2021). Postgraduate Certificate in Diversity and Inclusion in FET.

9. SOLAS. (2021). Future FET.

10. *Ibid*, 9-14.

and traineeships. FET is delivered through Colleges of Further Education and 'dual provision' post-primary schools offering 'Post Leaving Certificate' (PLC) courses, as well as courses in Community and Adult Education Centres, Youthreach and Community Training Centres, Prison Education Services and in local area service centres among others.

This report includes findings and input from 58 FE students over the age of 18, studying at seven FE colleges/centres in the Dublin and DCU catchment areas in the academic year 21/22. The specific aim of this research project is to gain a greater understanding of who the FE student is, and what the factors are when it comes to deciding whether or not to progress to higher education, or indeed whether to accept or refuse a place in HE. DCU has played a lead role in this research due to the university's commitment to FET and its interest in supporting the strategic direction of the sector. DCU's Further Education and Training Research Centre (FETRC), serves to ensure that policy and practice in FET is driven by evidence-based research, and therefore perfectly placed DCU to be able to support this project. The project received additional guidance from a research oversight group, made up of key stakeholders with particular interest and expertise in FET. It is intended that this research acts as much as possible to complement existing work and research about progression to higher education from further education, by seeking community driven recommendations regarding the measures that could be taken to improve representation at HE for this cohort.

This research is the third in a series of College Connect Community Needs Analyses (CNA) that aim to find out 'what a community needs' to facilitate fairer and more equal access to HE. This CNA with FE students follows on from a CNA with prisoners and former prisoners in 2019¹¹ and a CNA with refugees and people seeking asylum in 2021.¹² As with the previous CNAs, this research has applied a participatory action research (PAR) methodology that involves stakeholders and participants at all stages of the research design and process. A total of 58 FE students participated in this research that includes 45 FE students, who took part in seven in-depth focus group workshops, and 13 FE students, who for one reason or another could not attend the in-person sessions and who took part in a survey. The field research took place over the period from March 2022 to July 2022. Peer researchers, DCU graduates, designed and led these focus groups in partnership with our research team carrying out this research. This CNA therefore has aligned with CC's objectives by acting as a vehicle to promote progression from FE to HE through working with community representatives who have lived experience of the research topic.

The report you are reading lays out the context in relation to FE to HE progression in Ireland and details how the research came about. Participatory Action Research is process-focused, so this report takes particular interest in the steps taken and the methodology used to explore participants' thoughts and experiences, as well as the methods used to document these.

11. Meaney. (2019).

12. Meaney Sartori & Nwanze. (2021).

Chapter One provides the background to the report and provides the context in relation to FE to HE progression and policy.

Chapter Two sets out the methodological approach to the research. It describes how participants were recruited, and the different methodologies used to explore participants' experience, such as word association, illustration and group discussion. Information on the FE colleges, that participated and who promoted this research among their student body, is also detailed in this section.

Chapter Three is the first chapter that documents the main findings from the research. This section is divided in two, with the first focusing on participants' positive experiences in FE and the second presenting the barriers that participants described as hindering their education progression.

Chapter Four is the second findings chapter and focuses on participants' thoughts about HE and their attitudes to university. This chapter contains some discussion relating participants' input to the literature on FE to HE progression.

Chapter Five is the final section of the report and leverages participant input, FE literature, and FET policy to put forward recommendations about what actions our Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could take to better support and encourage FE to HE progression. This is the concluding chapter that reflects on the research findings along with researcher observations.

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HE (higher education) is just for the upper class, the rich. And this is what you got in play. This is the mentality. Like now, it's going to cost so much! ...as I said, we didn't come from a rich family.

– Focus Group Participant

This Community Needs Analysis with FE students seeks to contribute to our understanding of FE to HE progression by blending qualitative data collection with arts-based and participatory methodologies to explore FE students' attitudes towards HE and thoughts around progression. 'What is counted becomes what counts,'¹³ and there is a dominance of notions around 'robust' data that attribute a higher truth value to quantitative data.¹⁴ However, research that foregrounds participant voice as it seeks to understand complex environments, has real value in terms of describing the lived experience of issues facing learners to policy makers.¹⁵ This research also employs creative methodologies and is therefore, markedly and consciously different to how most research on further education has been approached and has been done with the aim of provoking new insight. The presentation of research from multiple perspectives with an ethic of solidarity shifts the focus from the relatable individual, who garners empathy, to the contours of systemic factors affecting a community.¹⁶ The art zine that accompanies this report, the images of which are peppered throughout this report, were created with this ethic of solidarity in mind.

13. Merrifield. (1999). Performance Accountability.

14. Dowdall, et al. (2019). The National Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Forum.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Varma, A. (2020). Evoking Empathy or Enacting Solidarity with Marginalized Communities?

1

BACKGROUND TO THE COMMUNITY NEEDS ANALYSIS

YOUR LEARNING IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY, BUT I'M HERE TO HELP.

WOW THE TEACHERS IN COLLEGE AREN'T THE SAME AS IN SCHOOL AT ALL.

IF YOU WANT IT.

THEY'RE TREATING US LIKE ADULTS!

HOW DOES ANYONE DO THIS WHEN THEY'RE WORKING?

CAN'T KEEP MY EYES OPEN...

I NEED TO SEE THE DOCTOR

BUT HOW AM I GOING TO AFFORD IT?



“

I think when I was in school, I wasn't really informed about PLCs (Post-Leaving Certificate Courses) ...I probably would have seen PLCs as bad. There'd be such a negative stigma around it...

– Focus Group Participant

1.1 FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING (FET) – BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The Further Education and Training sector in Ireland supports around 200,000 unique learners whose education provision is delivered by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and a range of other providers and support agencies.¹⁷ Prior to 2013, Vocational Education Committees (VECs) were responsible for the provision of further education. Ireland's economic recession of 2008 was followed by the recovery programme and Ireland entered into a loan programme with various conditions by the European Commission, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁸ As part of the cost-cutting programme initiated in response to the crisis in the public finances¹⁹ and the structural reform programme which followed, FÁS (*An Foras Áiseanna Saothair* referred to in English as the Training and Employment Authority) was dissolved, and the new FET Authority, SOLAS (*An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna or*

'Further Education and Skills Service' in English), was established. The existing 33 VECs were amalgamated and restructured to form 16 ETBs under new directorship in 2016. The Further Education and Training Act (2013) was enacted and confirmed in statute the strategic leadership role and mandate of SOLAS, which was to include the development of a strategy in respect of the provision of FET and would be the first Irish government strategy for the sector.

The exceptional set of circumstances that included the global financial crash in 2008 and subsequent fiscal restructuring enforced on the government by the IMF, seemed to be a breakthrough in terms of producing a unified framework and national strategy for FET.²⁰ FET itself as a term, a kind of amalgamation of FE (from the UK) and VET (Vocational Education and Training from Europe), was not used in Ireland up until this structural change, and for the purpose of this report, the terms FE and FET will be used interchangeably.

17. SOLAS. (2020). Future FET.

18. UCD Geary Institute (2013). 'How governments retrench in crisis: the case of Ireland'.

19. O'Sullivan. (2018).

20. Mulvey. (2019). *Further Education and Training in Ireland*.

In May 2014, the Minister for Education and Skills launched the first National Further Education and Training Strategy²¹ in the history of the Irish State, which set out a roadmap to achieve the vision of a world-class FET system in Ireland from 2014-2019.²² The FET Strategy set a different tone and philosophy of that outlined in the 2000 Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education,²³ with some areas of the Strategy reading like a list of an amalgam between FÁS and VEC adult education/PLC provision.²⁴ While progression from FE to HE has always been a central aim of the sector,²⁵ the 2014-2019 Strategy set a target of 10% of new entrants to HE in 2016 as coming from FET.²⁶ In July 2020, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, (Simon Harris TD) and Minister of State for Further Education, (Niall Collins TD) launched the FET Strategy 2020-2024 that commits to ensuring that ‘people will move seamlessly between FET and HE with clear transition criteria in large numbers’ by 2024.²⁷

One of the key strengths of further education is the role it plays in supporting those who have traditionally been marginalised, or who face additional barriers in accessing education.²⁸

It is strongly upheld that FET is for everyone²⁹ and central to this is responding to the increasing diversity of learners in the sector and having the ability and capacity to meet their needs.³⁰ There are many cohorts with diverse needs, such as people with disabilities, new migrants, Travellers, the long-term unemployed and people with previous convictions, and ETBs are recommended to work in partnership with community and voluntary organisations representing and supporting these groups, to facilitate a pathway to engagement through FET.³¹ In 2018/19, 60% of FE learners were female, 58% were mature students and 1500 of those enrolled identified as Travellers.³² Almost 30% of FE students have a lower-secondary education (i.e., up to Junior Certificate level), while almost 15% have a third-level degree when enrolling on an FE course.³³ In 2020, there were 11,376 learners enrolled in FET programmes, who reported having at least one type of disability, constituting 7.5% of all learners.³⁴ ‘For many students who go on to further education, their FE qualification is an end in itself. With it, they can achieve an entry qualification for the labour market; for others, it is a step along a pathway to higher education’.³⁵

21. SOLAS. (2014). FET Strategy 2014-2019.

22. O’Sullivan. (2018).

23. DES. (2000). Learning for Life.

24. Mulvey. (2019). *Further education and training in Ireland*.

25. *Ibid.*

26. SOLAS. (2014). FET Strategy 2014-2019.

27. SOLAS. (2020). Future FET, 63.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. Archer. (2021). Postgraduate Certificate in Diversity and Inclusion in FET.

31. *Ibid.*

32. SOLAS. (2019). FET in Numbers 2019 - Traveller Community.

33. This data is sourced from the 2021 report by Dulee-Kinsolving and Guerin for the SOLAS Data Analytics Unit, ‘This is FET: Facts and Figures 2020’. The data used in this report was sourced from the Programme and Learner Support Systems (PLSS) database. PLSS collects and processes the personal data of the FET learners who are enrolled in SOLAS-funded programmes. Apprenticeship and eCollege provision are not included in this data.

34. *Ibid.*

35. HEA. (Dec 2015). National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019, 19.

Among 2016 FE graduates with full awards, 62% were in substantial employment in the first year after graduation, and over 30% of graduates in the same year were enrolled in higher education one year after graduation.³⁶

The features of FE that make it attractive to learners include smaller class sizes, individual attention and support, and a learner-centred approach. However, despite the restructuring, the FET sector has an image problem, and FET in Ireland has often struggled to reconcile the economic and educational values of our society.³⁷ Traditionally considered the ‘Cinderella of options for school leavers’,³⁸ the standing and esteem in which FE is held by Irish society has stood in contrast to the higher esteem in which HE is held.³⁹ This has echoes of historical bias towards the academic, where the children of more affluent social classes went to the secondary schools, while the children of lower socio-economic groups went to the vocational schools.⁴⁰ Years of disparity in terms of resourcing, evident in the rundown buildings allocated to FE providers against the backdrop of state-of-the-art facilities springing up for Institutes of Technology (IoTs),⁴¹ compounds this perception that has roots in a class issue and perpetuating negative notions about the value and desirability of FE.⁴² FET has had to work hard to try to shake its image as a progression route for those who have failed at school⁴³ (thereby inferring its inferiority), as opposed to a viable pathway to work, lifelong learning, or higher

education that includes those for whom the school system has failed. Continued work is therefore required to enhance and grow the profile of FET that demonstrates its benefits to potential learners, communities, employers and Government, ensuring that all parties can appreciate the nature of FET⁴⁴ as described by SOLAS below:

*FET is unique. FET is for everyone. It is available in every community in Ireland, and offers every individual, regardless of any previous level of education, a pathway to take them as far as they want to go.*⁴⁵

1.2 DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Since 2005 there have been three National Access Plans for access to higher education, with a fourth launched in September 2022, which uphold the belief that people should have equity of access independent of their economic background, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances, so that our higher education student population represents wider Irish society.⁴⁶

36. CSO. (2019). FE Outcomes, 11

37. Rami. (2018). Connecting Research.

38. McGuire. (2019). *The Irish Times*.

39. SOLAS. (2014). FET Strategy 2014-2019.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Maunsell. (2017).

42. Wallace. (2014).

43. *Ibid.*

44. Maloney. (2021). Exploring FET.

45. SOLAS. (2019). Future FET.

46. HEA. (August 2022), National Access Plan 2022-2028.

Higher education can serve as an important vehicle for social mobility and promoting access to high-quality higher education for a diversified population is crucial in terms of establishing more equal societies.⁴⁷ A higher education qualification has been shown to correlate with higher outcomes in terms of income, employment, and perhaps unsurprisingly, mental health,⁴⁸ although this is greatly dependent on how much the context provides access, retention, and labour opportunities for diverse graduates.⁴⁹ Widening participation work needs to continue through and, crucially, beyond HE. While increased access provision is supporting learners ‘through’ university, a lot more needs to be done ‘beyond,’ where undoubtedly, disproportionate challenges for non-traditional students in the search for decent graduate work remain.⁵⁰

Higher Education Institutions are committed to increasing the diversity of the student body attending Irish universities, and the vision of the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2022-2028* is to ensure that the student body entering into, participating in and completing HE at all levels reflect the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population.⁵¹ There are currently about 236,000 students in HEIs in Ireland – 53% are female and 47% are male, however, some specific categories of Irish society continue to be underrepresented; young people living with financial poverty, persons with a disability, and lone parents.

There are also categories of people whose participation rates in HE are particularly low or unknown, such as refugees and asylum seekers and young people in Direct Provision.⁵² The number of mature students in Irish HEIs makes up just over 10% of the HE student body in 2018/19, while the number of declared Travellers in HE was just 60 in 2019.⁵³ In the academic year of 2018/19 students registered with disability support services represented 6.2% (15,696) of the total student population in higher education.⁵⁴

Striking contrasts also continue to be documented in the profile of students attending individual third-level institutions and their field of study relevant to their socio-economic profile.⁵⁵ So, for example, Royal College of Surgeons and Trinity College Dublin (two of Ireland’s most prestigious HEIs) have among the highest proportion of students from affluent areas (36% and 33% respectively) and the lowest proportion of disadvantaged students (5%). While ‘prestigious’ courses, typically resulting in higher social status such as Medicine and Engineering, have the highest proportion of affluent students (35% and 28% respectively) and the lowest proportion of students deemed to be disadvantaged (4% and 5% respectively).⁵⁶ At the launch of the National Access Plan 2022-2028, the commitment to a truly inclusive third-level system ‘where neither your background nor experience has a bearing on your ability to attend or succeed in higher education’ was reiterated.⁵⁷

47. Álvarez-Rivadulla et al. (2022).

48. Walsh. (2018), The Independent.

49. Billingham. (2018).

50. O’Neill, et al. (2017).

51. *Ibid.*

52. RIA. (2021), Equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

53. *Ibid.*

54. AHEAD. (2020), Launch of Students with Disabilities 2018/19 Report.

55. O’Brien. (2020). The Irish Times.

56. *Ibid.*

57. DFHERIS. (August 2022). New National Access Plan.

The Plan lays out nine key performance indicators, including ‘progression from further education to higher education’ and ‘student diversity across selected fields of study’⁵⁸ and colleges that do not meet the targets set out in the €35m seven-year strategy could have funding withheld.⁵⁹

1.3 FET TO HE PROGRESSION

The formation of a new government department in 2020, dedicated to both further and higher education that sees new ministers in place to oversee a more cohesive approach across both sectors, commits to:

‘Promote the complementary roles of further and higher education and champion closer alignment and integration, facilitating enhanced information for school-leavers and for all seeking learning opportunities, providing a wider choice at transition points and enabling progression pathways across and between different institutions.’⁶⁰

Among the actions for the period 2021-2023 are commitments to more closely aligning FET and HE, including within the national skills policy framework (NFQ).⁶¹ On top of this is increased and recent commitment at government level to progress a more unified third-level system that ensures equality and champions diversity.⁶²

The diversity of students in FET across all of the priority groups as laid out in the National Plan⁶³ strengthens the existing argument for increasing progression from FE to HE, as it will, of course, in turn, work to increase the diversity of the student population at HE. However, the diversity of the FE student body also means that progression from FE to HE is more challenging to account for, as applicants may qualify under several access pathways. Mature students for example may find it less onerous to enter HE under mature access. Other pathways, where FE students might enter as other categories, include targeted scholarship schemes such as University of Sanctuary, (a scholarship for refugees and people in the asylum system), or through local FE college to HE programme links, scholarships for voluntary/ community/ arts or sporting achievements or through the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs). Some pathways are more distinctive than others, and candidates, and indeed FE providers may never be aware of the basis for entry once granted.⁶⁴

While HEIs are committed to the 10% target of FE students in the HE student body, and further education is recognised as an alternative entry route to higher education, there has been criticism of the ‘structural barriers’ imposed on FE routes of progression. There are differences between the Leaving Certificate (the final exam of the Irish secondary school system and the university matriculation examination in Ireland) and QQI pathways (undertaken by students in FET), which are ‘clearly not consistent with equity of access to HE’⁶⁵

58. HEA. (August 2022), National Access Plan 2022-2028, 24.

59. Walsh. (2018), The Independent.

60. DFHERIS. (March 2021). Statement of Strategy 2021-2023. 10.

61. *Ibid*, 18.

62. DFHERIS. (2022). Policy Platform: Progressing A Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge.

63. HEA. (August 2022), National Access Plan 2022-2028.

64. Rami et al. (2016), FET2HE Scoping Paper.

65. O’Sullivan. (2018).

These differences are in terms of academic standard required; eligibility to apply to the access schemes Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), an admissions scheme for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and through the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), which are only open to learners from the Leaving Certificate pathway.⁶⁶ Similarly, through the Central Applications Office (CAO), which processes applications for undergraduate courses in Irish HEIs, a points system applies that is calculated less favourably towards FE students (QQI) than Leaving Cert students. On top of this, a quota system operates within each university, where decisions are made regarding how many places are to be ring-fenced annually for FET, which may increase or decrease and not be applied to all courses all of the time. If the ultimate goal is for all students to have an equal chance of a place in HE, then one pathway cannot be seen as more advantageous than another, and an integrated FET recognition system within the mainstream CAO application system as an alternative to the current system, which is currently complicated and difficult for both FE providers and learners to navigate, has been called for.⁶⁷

While progress may appear slow in terms of accepting FET (QQI) qualifications as a legitimate pathway to HE, typically FE students are well-prepared for the challenges posed by HE and may in fact be more prepared than their counterparts who accessed HE via the Leaving Certificate.⁶⁸

The role of a teacher or tutor in FET has more in common with the role of a lecturer in HE than that of a second-level teacher, adopting learner-centred approaches and maintaining relationships defined by respect and equality as appropriate to adult learners.⁶⁹ Additionally, educators in FET and HE both work with modules or units of learning, instructional design and take a flexible approach to planning and delivery,⁷⁰ so the structure may be more familiar and less alien than to learners transitioning into higher education directly from second-level. Consequently, FE learners may be more able for the level of autonomy and responsibility that is required to progress through higher education. Research carried out in 2016 that explored the transition from FET to HE,⁷¹ reported a high proportion of FE students feeling well prepared for their higher education experience and also believing that FET had equipped them with many of the skills important in HE by giving them experience of different types of assessments and building their general academic skills.⁷²

1.4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The broad aim of this Community Needs Analysis (CNA) with FE students was to gain an understanding of the needs of this group in relation to higher education access and progression.

66. O'Sullivan. (2018).

67. *Ibid.*

68. National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. (2016).

69. Rami & O'Kelly. (2021).

70. *Ibid.*

71. National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. (2016).

72. *Ibid.*, 7.

The research also aimed to better understand FE students' thought process and attitude towards HE through the utilisation of creative methodologies and through a peer research process with peer researchers, who themselves had direct experience of transitioning from FET to HE. With these aims in mind, the CNA explored the following themes with participants:

- 1. What has been your experience of FET?**
- 2. What options are you considering following your FE course?**
- 3. What are your expectations and considerations about HE?**
- 4. What do you think are the risks and benefits of progressing to HE?**
- 5. What advice would you give yourself on entering FET if you could?**

College Connect is a widening participation project, and a clear focus is on facilitating a collaborative process between MEND HEIs and community partners. Therefore, this study worked with seven FE colleges/centres to engage participants, which is directly aligned with Goal 4 of the National Access Plan 2022-2028,⁷³ that specifies that partnerships and collaborative pathways between the FET and HE sectors be built on and improved in order to provide coherent information and joined-up supports and approaches to inclusion.⁷⁴ In recognition that both the FET and the HE sectors have equal roles in increasing access to lifelong learning and in providing learning and development options to meet the needs of underrepresented groups,⁷⁵ this CNA adopts a participative and collaborative

approach to bring key stakeholders to the table with the mutual aim of exploring how to better encourage and enable progression from FET to and through higher education. It is intended that the findings and recommendations from this research will inform MEND HEIs continuing work with FE colleges, and to identify the most appropriate initiatives that best suit the progression needs of FE students.

In the next chapter we set out the methodological approach to this research and describe how participants were recruited and the different methodologies used to explore participants' experience, such as word association, illustration and group discussion. Information on the FE colleges, who participated and who promoted this research with their students, is also detailed.

73. HEA. (August 2022), National Access Plan 2022-2028, 62.

74. *Ibid*, 62.

75. *Ibid*, 30.



WHAT AM I DOING HERE?
EVERYONE IS YOUNGER THAN ME
AND I HAVE SHIT TO PAY!

2

WHAT WE DID - CNA METHODOLOGY



NO ONE UNDERSTANDS ME
BECAUSE OF MY ACCENT.

THEY THINK I DON'T
UNDERSTAND ENGLISH,
I HAVE 30 YEARS
WORK EXPERIENCE.

“

I do remember my own pressure from school was that the teachers expected us to go to college as soon as we finished school. It was the way the way they were taught. ‘You have to go to college, you have to do your courses, as young as possible...get yourself a career’ ... and all... but just as I got older, I was like, ‘well actually, that’s just what worked for you.

– Focus Group Participant

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This Community Needs Analysis (CNA) with FE students is the third College Connect research project with National Access Plan priority groups and follows an impactful CNA with prisoners in partnership with the Pathways Centre,⁷⁶ which helped to support the prioritisation of people with criminal justice history in national access policy as well as the development of a specific scholarship for the MEND region for people with convictions, **Kickstart**. The second CNA with refugees and people seeking asylum in partnership with the Irish Refugee Council,⁷⁷ led to a series of events aimed at promoting a culture of welcome and inclusion for this cohort in MEND HEIs, helping to raise more awareness of the considerable issues people face in relation to international fees, transport and food while accessing college.

The research and community engagement process for this CNA also followed a structure based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) frameworks,⁷⁸ the principle of which is that stakeholders are invited into participative and democratic relationships in which they are encouraged to engage in genuine collaborative leadership.⁷⁹ As researchers we believe that one of the ways change happens in action research is through critical reflection of the processes, methods and results.⁸⁰ Reflection on each CNA, therefore initiates change in the process and how we do things. For this project, College Connect approached eight Further Education Colleges in the Dublin/DCU catchment area to invite them to take part in the research. Contact was made with the principals or vice principals, seven of whom expressed interest in supporting the project and encouraging their students to engage with the research process.

76. Meaney. (2019).

77. Meaney Sartori & Nwanze. (2021).

78. Heron & Reason. (1997).

79. Bland. (2017).

80. Morris & Muzychka, (2002), 53.

This CNA foregrounded arts-based methodologies, and for this, we partnered with the illustration department in Ballyfermot College of Further Education early on in the process, a process that is described in more detail later in this chapter. Again, and as with the other CNAs, peer research was employed as a methodology to better enable democratic engagement. This research project worked with two peer researchers, both experienced facilitators and DCU graduates, who had themselves come through FET, and who collaborated on the design and structure of the focus groups as well as being part of the steering group overseeing this process.

2.2 THE FE COLLEGES/ CENTRES

The following seven further education colleges/centres participated in this research and guidance counsellors and principals supported the team regarding the logistics, such as booking rooms and sharing the information with students.

Forty one further education students participated in five in-person focus groups that took place in the further education colleges/centres, where peer researchers were given access to a private classroom space. The online focus group had four further education student participants from one of the further education colleges. Thirteen further education students from three of the colleges participated via the survey. Additionally, five further education students from Ballyfermot College of Further Education engaged in creating the arts-based materials that were used during the focus groups, but students from BCFE did not themselves take part in focus groups or respond to the survey. Therefore, a total of 58 FE students took part in the research, but 63 FE students engaged with the research process. The breakdown is below.

NAME OF COLLEGE	ONLINE FOCUS GROUP	FACE-TO-FACE FG	SURVEY	CREATIVE CONTENT	TOTAL
BALLYFERMOT COLLEGE				5	5
COLÁISTE DHÚLAIGH		9	3		12
DUNBOYNE COLLEGE		4			4
KILLESTER COLLEGE OF FE		8	8		16
MARINO COLLEGE OF FE	4				4
THE PATHWAYS CENTRE		14			14
WHITEHALL COLLEGE OF FE		6	2		8
TOTAL ENGAGEMENTS	4	41	13		63
TOTAL RESEARCH	4	41	13		58

Ballyfermot College of Further Education - BCFE



BCFE is a college of further and higher education based in Ballyfermot in South Dublin, committed to providing vocational education through the provision of excellent teaching and guidance in a caring and supportive learning environment. BCFE offers courses from Levels 5 to Level 8 and strives to create a culture of critical engagement with global social justice issues, and to provide an educational framework that encourages graduates to meaningfully contribute to their community, both local and global. The college is made up of three buildings, and courses in BCFE provide students with relevant qualifications and competencies enabling them to succeed in work and in further studies. Louise Boughton, the Programme Leader in Illustration in BCFE, partnered with us on the creative element of this research project by facilitating her students to create materials for focus groups, and Sarah Sartori met with these students twice online to discuss the project and the brief. One of the students, Dominique Ng, whose designs are peppered throughout this report, went on to work with us as the illustrator on this project. AnnMarie Lyons, the Guidance Counsellor in BCFE, facilitated our engaging with students about this research, and Karen Fenlon (CC Project Support) went into the college to talk about the project and College Connect.

However, despite the support of staff in the college, while BCFE students took part in the arts-based work for this project, no students from BCFE took part in the focus groups or survey.

Coláiste Dhúlaigh - CDFE



Coláiste Dhúlaigh College of Further Education (CDFE) offers Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Courses at QQI level 5 and 6 and at Higher National Diploma in a wide range of disciplines. Most of CDFE's courses lead to entry to Universities and Institutes of Technology, with some courses gaining entry to second year. CDFE is located on four Dublin campuses, Coolock, Raheny, Kilbarrack and Malahide and provides programmes delivered by a team of tutors dedicated to the highest standards of teaching and learning in a caring, supportive and friendly atmosphere. Michelle Kelly is one of the Guidance Counsellors in CDFE, who supported this research. CDFE students participated in this research both through focus group attendance in CDFE and through the survey.

Dunboyne College - DCFE



Dunboyne College of Further Education (DCFE) provides a wide range of accredited courses to anyone wanting to be a nurse, teacher, scientist, sports coach, web designer, accountant, sound engineer, artist etc. The college offers practical training, providing useful and adaptable skills, and has built an excellent reputation over the past decade by providing high-quality education and training programmes. The college works to ensure that course developments match student requirements and industry trends through continuous innovation. DCFE is located just outside Dublin in County Meath and is along accessible bus and train routes. Meabh Nimmo, the Guidance Counsellor in Dunboyne College of Further Education supported students to engage with this research. DCFE students engaged with this research through a focus group held in DCFE.

Killester College of Further Education – KCFE



Killester College of Further Education in Dublin 5 strives to excel in responding to the educational needs of the community.

The programmes offered are learner-centred and provided in a friendly, inclusive and supportive environment, and range from QQI levels 4 to levels 5 and 6 and can be used to progress onto third-Level. The college welcomes all ages from school leavers to Mature students and particularly references early school leavers, the unemployed, those wanting to upskill, and people seeking to go on to third-level in terms of offering a platform. Dr. Rory O’Sullivan, the Principal of both KCFE and Marino CFE, supported this research, and Joan Donelan the Guidance Counsellor, helped us engage with KCFE students. KCFE students engaged with this research through a focus group in KCFE and through the survey.

Marino College of Further Education – Marino CFE



Marino College of Further Education is situated in Connolly House on the North Strand, Dublin. Marino CFE aims to support learners to progress to satisfying and financially rewarding employment or to a related area of further studies, and works to ensure programmes, facilities and equipment are updated to meet the changing needs of students and the ongoing advances in technology. Marino CFE offers a wide range of full and part time courses, at QQI Level 5 and Level 6. Eilish O’Connor, is the Guidance Counsellor in Marino CFE, who supported us to carry out the research with students. Marino CFE students engaged with this research through an online focus group.

The Pathways Centre



The Pathways Centre is an outreach initiative of the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB) Education Service to Prisons and is located in Dublin 1. Pathways offers respite to former prisoners in the crucial period after release by providing information, education, counselling, support and referral in a safe and understanding environment. The Pathways Centre offers a variety of courses, both accredited and non-accredited, from levels 3 to level 5, with its central aim being the reintegration of former prisoners. Niall Walsh, the Pathways Manager, and Christy Woods, the Sociology teacher in Pathways, supported this research process and our engagement with learners who were studying at level 5 in the centre. Students engaged through a focus group in the centre.

Whitehall College of Further Education -



Whitehall College of Further Education is situated at Colaiste Caoimhin, on Mobhi Road in Glasnevin, Dublin and offers day courses to school leavers and mature students, the majority of which offer the learner the opportunity to achieve a major QQI award at level 5 or level 6.

The Education and Training course in Whitehall College runs in partnership with DCU with students spending one day a week at the St. Patrick's DCU campus in Drumcondra. For those interested in a career in sciences, the Food Science and Nutrition and Dietetics courses have proven popular progression routes to related third level courses. Dr Ann O'Reilly, the Principal, Siobhan O'Carroll, the Vice Principal and Christine Brunton, the Student Council Co-ordinator supported our engagement with Whitehall FE students for this research. Whitehall students participated in this research through a focus group in the college and through the survey.

2.3 PEER-TO-PEER RESEARCH

Members of the FE community of practice have been actively involved in the design, implementation and analysis of this praxis-orientated work. Two peer researchers, Josh Golding and Sarah McManus, were recruited through DCU to work on the project. Both peer researchers graduated from DCU's Bachelor of Science in Education and Training and were recommended by Dr John Lalor, Assistant Professor in the School of Policy and Practice in the Institute of Education in DCU. Both Sarah and Josh accessed higher education through non-traditional access routes, and both are experienced facilitators currently working in adult and community education settings. Karen Fenlon, working as College Connect Project Support, who had also transitioned into HE from further education and has a background in Adult and Community Education, co-facilitated some of the focus groups.

In October 2021, due to the Covid-19 lockdown implemented by government, the initial meeting between Josh and Sarah with the College Connect research team was held online. At the meeting, the peer researchers were given an overview of the project and had the opportunity to discuss the design and expectations of the research in detail.

2.4 PEER RESEARCHER TRAINING

Peer researcher training was facilitated online and divided into two stages. The first concentrated on focus group structure and the incorporation of arts-based methodologies and critical engagement techniques, such as word association, group work and working with images. Josh and Sarah's experience as facilitators was brought into the process, and a 'lesson plan' designed for focus groups that utilised methods commonly used in the adult education classroom, such as group work, group discussion, and brainstorming, was devised.

The second stage involved three online sessions covering the practicalities of qualitative research: how focus groups would be recorded, how to use recording devices, how data would be collected, safely stored and transferred as per the ethics approval associated with this project, and the writing-up of research notes and reflections. This stage of the training was broken into five segments to include:

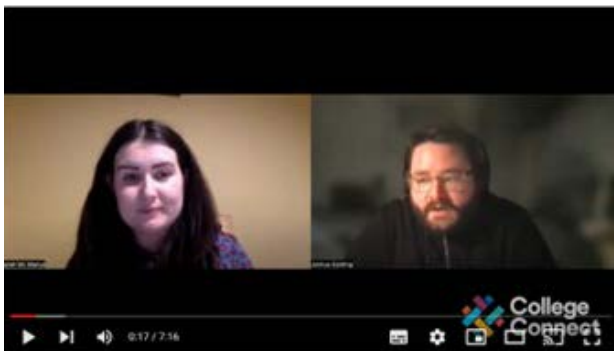
- Informed Consent
- Ethics and limits to the confidentiality clause

- Researcher skills – listening, honouring voice &, managing input, outlier view, etc.
- Research Methods – focus groups and use of the images
- Data protection
- Signposting of supports for participants in the focus groups

2.5 SELECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Further education students were recruited across the seven participating FE colleges with the assistance of the colleges, and a poster call was put out to students. An attempt was made to select students from across a broad range of subjects, in order to capture a representation of the student body across the college, as opposed to across one particular class/subject in the college. Therefore, a poster was sent out to all students via e-mail by staff in the FE colleges. Participants registered their interest by scanning the QR code or clicking the link on the poster. The images in the poster were designed by students in Ballyfermot College thus embodying the participatory ethos of the research methodology.

Prior to participating in focus groups, participants were required to watch a **preparatory video** (7-minutes) created by Josh and Sarah, which was designed to facilitate informed consent. Participants then took part in a 1.5-2 hour recorded focus group online or in-person.



45 FE students across the **seven FE colleges** registered to attend focus groups. **26 self-identified as female** and **19 self-identified as male**.

Not all students who registered to take part in focus groups were able to do so on the day. Therefore, a survey was designed with the research oversight group to facilitate participation for people who could not take part in person.

Thirteen FE students across **three FE colleges** took part in the survey. **Eleven self-identified as female** and **two self-identified as male**.

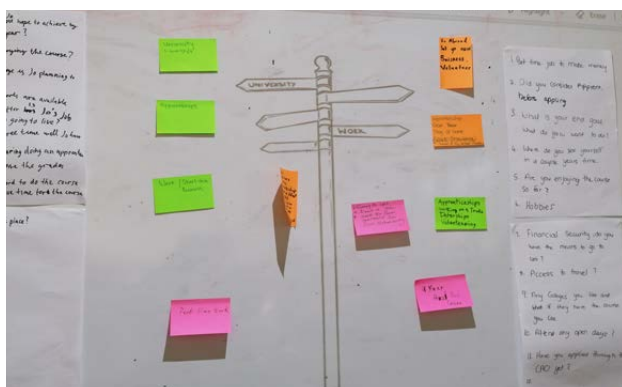
Participants were studying on a wide variety of courses which included:

- Addiction Studies
- Animal Science
- Animation and Illustration
- Business and Finance
- Classroom Assistant
- Computer Science
- Early-Learning and Childcare
- Education and Training
- Film Production
- Health Administration
- Horticulture
- Leaving Certificate
- Outdoor Education
- Pharmacy Assistant
- Pre-Nursing
- Pre-university Cultural and Heritage Studies
- Pre-university Environmental and Biodiversity Studies
- Pre-University Science

- Social Care
- Special Needs Assistant

2.6 FOCUS GROUPS AND FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURE

Between March and July 2022, we carried out six focus groups that included one online focus group and five face-to-face in-person focus groups with students in the aforementioned FE colleges.



Focus groups were initially scheduled to happen online and COVID-19 has revealed a digital divide between learners globally that widens between disadvantaged and better-off schools and families.⁸¹ At the time of writing, students in all educational institutions were still experiencing the impact of Covid-19 in adjusting their learning and returning to the learning space. So, when restrictions eased, there was some hesitancy and the transition to in-person learning is happening slowly.⁸² However, as highlighted by the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Working Group, chaired by AONTAS, many learners do not

have access to IT equipment or WIFI within the home, and some learners may be living in overcrowded or unsafe conditions.⁸³

College Connect's previous CNA with refugees and people seeking asylum had been facilitated online and had worked well, so the experience with FE students and connectivity issues, issues logging onto Zoom etc. came as a surprise. Due to a number of false starts and issues such as participants not having access to a device other than a phone, participants not having a quiet space to participate or having difficulty connecting to Zoom due to bandwidth and connectivity issues, we quickly pivoted to face-to-face and facilitation in person.

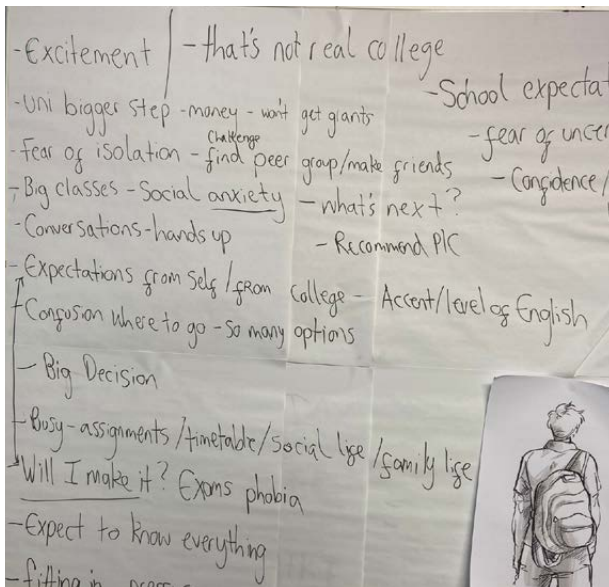
Each focus group had between three and fourteen participants. Focus groups lasted between one-and-a-half to two hours, depending on the group. Participative and arts-based research methods such as word association, illustration and group discussion were used to explore attitudes to higher education and progression from FET from a multitude of perspectives. The arts evoke emotional responses, and so the dialogue sparked by arts-based practice is highly engaged.⁸⁴ Furthermore, by connecting people on emotional and visceral levels, artistic forms of representation facilitate empathy. The research was facilitated dialogically utilised adult and community education methods such as flipcharts, post-it notes, and group discussions to capture participant input.

81. Darmody et al. (2020).

82. Cullinan et al. (2021).

83. AONTAS. (May 2020).

84. Leavy. (2007). 149-186.



Students in BCFE created four illustrations that were used to elicit conversation, and which moved the conversation from the personal 'I' to a degree of separation by focusing on a character 'Jo'. The degree of separation is key to being able to identify and pinpoint structural inequalities, which although not necessarily new knowledge, is in fact a new perspective by the very fact that is seen and experienced through a different lens.⁸⁵

Participants were asked to explore for Jo the following questions using images.

- **What might be going on for Jo as they attend FET?** – What are they trying to juggle? What are their fears/hopes? What challenges are they experiencing? What triumphs are they experiencing?



- **Gates of the university** – What's behind the university gates? What do you think of when you think of university? What preconceptions might Jo have in relation to university?



- **Crossroads** – Where next? What's after college? Will Jo be going on to further study, or have they got other plans?



- **Weighing it Up** – Consider the potential 'risks' versus the potential 'benefits' for Jo in going on to university following FET.



85. Meaney Sartori. (2020). 'Education will set you free?'

Following the focus group, participants were provided with a €25 voucher as an expression of gratitude from College Connect for their time. Karen Fenlon was available to participants and peer researchers after each session if they wished to speak about anything in the session and to signpost additional supports.

2.7 QUESTIONNAIRE/ SURVEY

To facilitate participants who were not able to attend in-person, a survey/questionnaire was designed in collaboration with the peer research team and the research oversight group as a methodological tool. The survey questions that emerged from the focus group interviews with participants, contained both open and closed questions. It was designed to capture the same information that participants in the focus groups discussed, as well as being able to substantiate the focus group findings with some quantitative data. As such, the themes of the closed questions were in relation to participants from the FE colleges, their subject and level of study. The survey is included in this report as an appendix.

In terms of open questions, participants were given the space to engage with the questions and input answers of any length, which centred around their experience of FET, what they plan to do after FET (if they have made plans), what type of work they are interested in and whether they intend to go on to attend university. In addition, the survey explored what, if anything, influenced their plans, and their feelings and thought process about university.

Perhaps due to a time delay as a result of our needing to reapply for ethics approval to circulate the survey, only 14 participants responded to the survey, and one of these had to be excluded as it was incomplete, so there were **13 valid responses**. The dissemination of the survey relied heavily on the FET Career Guidance staff, many of whom were on their summer break, but who shared the survey and accompanying e-mail with the students in their colleges where possible. We therefore do not see the survey data as separate to the focus group data, but as a methodological tool that was able to accommodate additional FE students to take part.

2.8 ARTS-BASED METHODS & REPRESENTATION

Students studying illustration at Ballyfermot College of Further Education, under the guidance of their Programme Leader, Louise Boughton, were asked to create four images to be used in focus groups to elicit discussion (as shown in the preceding section). The part of the brief that posed the most difficulty was asking the students to create a non-descript character to which participants could project their ideas. Essentially we were looking for a character that was non-gender specific and of indeterminate age, that participants could 'see themselves in'.



This was a more difficult task than initially thought and required several attempts before the image seen here of ‘Jo’ was developed.

Inspired by graphic novels such as Gord Downie’s *‘The Secret Path’*⁸⁶ that use illustration to describe the plight of First Nation children in residential schools in Canada, and projects such as those by the World Food Programme’s *‘Living Level-3: South Sudan’*⁸⁷ that use the form of a graphic novel to highlight the famine and civil war in Sudan, we chose to work with comic-book style illustration to communicate the research findings.

A graphic novel is usually taken to mean a long comic narrative for a mature audience, published in hardback or paperback and sold in bookstores, with serious literary themes and sophisticated artwork.⁸⁸ For many, the word comics

denotes a periodical for children, published on a weekly or monthly basis, sold at newsstands or in speciality comic book-stores, often with pages devoted to advertising and, when intended for younger readers, competitions and puzzles.⁸⁹ However, this distinction between graphic novels and comics is somewhat spurious, as comics are found in all shapes and formats, appeal to many different groups and age ranges, and encompass a huge variety of genres and styles. Both are utilised as a means to convey emotions that statistics and photographs cannot, and both offer the opportunity to convey a story based on reality, while providing the creative license to show things that can’t necessarily be shown through other means.⁹⁰

Once again, we worked with BCFE’s Louise Boughton, who put out a call to her Illustration graduates that College Connect was looking for an illustrator to partner with us on creating a zine to represent research findings from our FET CNA. A zine (pronounced ZEEN) is short for ‘fanzine’ and is a pamphlet-like publication that includes creative material that helps to express the author’s message. Zines have been around since the early 20th century. They were part of the science-fiction fan culture in the 30s and 40s, folk-music and rock-and-roll culture in the 50’s and 60’s, punk and political feminism in the 80s, 90s and 2000s. Today, they remain an important part of subcultural movements and underground and non-commercial press for voices that have been side-lined.⁹¹

86. Downie. (2016).

87. World Food Programme. (2017). *Living Level-3: South Sudan*.

88. Murray, Christopher. “graphic novel”. *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

89. *Ibid*.

90. O’Hare. (2017).

91. Kero. (2021).

Three students from BCFE sent in their portfolios to apply for the role of illustrator on the project and BCFE graduate Dominique Ng was appointed under the mentorship of professional artist Esther Blodau. Dominique Ng is a Dublin-based comic artist, who ever since she can remember has been reading all kinds of comics, which was a hobby passed on to her by her father. Dominique began creating characters and writing their stories at the age of 12 and discovered digital art at just 14 years of age. She went on to study Illustration in BCFE, graduating in 2022. Dominique's experience and style lent itself perfectly to the job of creating a comic-book representation of the research, and Esther's considerable experience of working as a professional and independent artist, positioned her to be able to mentor Dominique in relation to the following:

- Project planning.
- Time management.
- Communication around expectations, planning, style, delivery, feedback loops as well as any clarifying questions around the brief.
- Delivery and formats of artwork.

The text for the zine was pulled from transcripts of focus groups and the responses to the survey by the lead researcher. All of the text in the zine is verbatim from participants, and the story is laid out over eight pages and 33 images. Following the difficulty of creating one central character to represent every FE student, Dominique asked if she could create a number of characters. Four characters were settled on to broadly represent the research participants who participated in this research. The four characters are detailed below:



Character One



Mature Irish female student with caring responsibilities.

Character Two



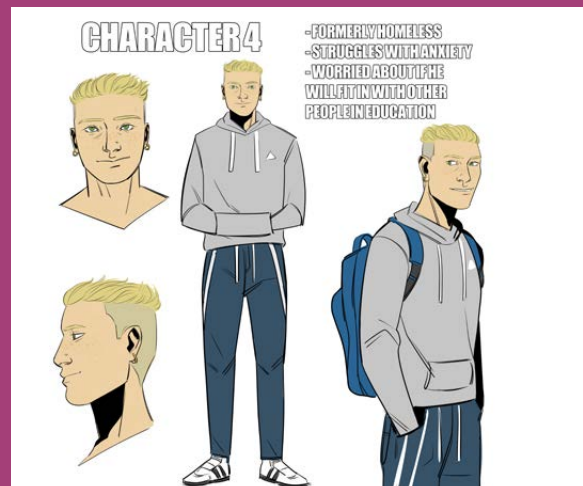
Mature male student of refugee background coming from Direct Provision.

Character Three



Young female student of mixed-race background with negative school experience.

Character Four



Young Irish male coming from homelessness with mental health difficulties.

It is intended that the zine accompanying this report can be used in outreach work with FE colleges. It folds up into a small pocket-sized pamphlet that can be opened out as a poster, which we hope will appeal to FE students due to its creative design and messaging and the fact that it has

been designed by one of their peers. The zine was also created in response to the stigma described in Chapter One and the perception of FET as the 'Cinderella of options for school leavers.'⁹²

92. O'Sullivan. (2018).

It is evident when we visit FE colleges, FET is often vibrant and innovative, while third-level education can sometimes be interpreted as outdated and stuffy.⁹³ We wanted to create a resource and communicative device that was representative of FET as cutting-edge and somewhat alternative (in a positive sense) to the more traditional mainstream education or university education. When we speak about progression in hierarchical terms, i.e., FET leads to higher education, it can create the perception, or as Paulo Freire says, a social myth of superiority which has a dominant tendency,⁹⁴ that FET has much to learn from higher education. In this research, we are interested in exploring whether the converse is also true and identifying what higher education has to learn from FET, particularly in relation to creating more inclusive campuses and facilitating diversity.

The following chapter will set out the main findings from the research, and focus on the experience of FET, both positive and negative, as highlighted by participants. This section of the report will also focus on participants' thoughts around HE and attitudes to university and situate these critically amongst the literature.



93. Matthews. (2022).

94. Freire. (1970), 476-521.



3

DISCUSSION: PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE OF FE



“

Because they (FE teachers) are so patient and supportive to every situation like whatever situation you may have. Even the life is difficult on my side, but regardless with my teachers, all my teachers, they are very supportive.

– Focus Group Participant

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at participants' experience of FET and discusses the findings under two main headings. The first is focused on participants' positive experiences in FET and the second presents the structural, institutional, and psychosocial barriers that participants raised as being obstacles to furthering their education. Exploring these themes enables us to delve into the connection between FE students' current experiences in FET and how these influence their perception in relation to barriers and opportunities to educational progression in higher education.

3.2 FET – PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE OF FET – THE TRIUMPHS

One of the goals of this report is to explore what higher education can learn from further education and vice versa, without positioning either as a superior or inferior education model. Gaining practical experiences and work placement experiences, adult-education pedagogies, smaller class sizes, having more one-to-one time with teachers, peer support

(particularly among mature or diverse groups of learners who understand each other's experiences), were highlighted by participants in focus groups as being fundamental to their having a positive experience in their FE college.

Participants spoke positively about the **teaching in their FE courses** and as highlighted by the quote at the beginning of this chapter, discussed **feeling supported** and referred to having received help, if or when they had a problem. Other participants described how being **treated like an adult**, which was a world away from their school experience, was pivotal in recognising that they had autonomy and freedom over their learning, though for some it took some getting used to.



“

That's a real hangover from school because the teachers in college aren't the same at all... they treat you like an adult...You're expecting it to be the same as school. It takes a while for your brain to say actually, you know, I'm not going to be sent up to the principal's office for not turning up to class, it's on me, my learning is my responsibility.

– Focus Group Participant

The additional support available in their FE college for disabled students was also flagged as being appreciated. One focus group participant highlighted how receiving additional assistance, when required, had helped facilitate a positive learning experience.

“

I have (disability) and the care was really good. Like they'll go out of their way to help you with anything you need.

– Focus Group Participant

While considering their experience with FE tutors and imagining what this experience might look like in HE, some participants described enjoying **one-to-one time with the teachers in FET** and believed that this 'luxury' would not be available to them in HE.

“

I think obviously college is like a big, a lot bigger step than like, one of these courses...So there obviously could be a lot of stress going on as well.

– Focus Group Participant

Survey participants surmised this would be down to larger class sizes and there was a notable perception of there being a difference between FE tutors and university lecturers, as well as a difference in terms of the workload involved between the two education models.



“

I think that the course I'm doing now is easy to allow students to have time one-on-one with their teacher while it will be different in university since there would be more people in the course and less time to connect with teachers/professors.

– Survey Respondent

“

Yes, I believe the FET tutors are very helpful and encouraging to all students. I don't imagine college you would get such individual attention. However, I do believe that the FET tutors have given us the skills, abilities and confidence to hit the ground running.

– Survey Respondent

“

Larger class sizes and workload (different in HE compared to FET)

– Survey Respondent



Another important part of the college experience is peer support⁹⁵ and social networks,⁹⁶ especially among groups of students identified as being marginalised. Peer support can initiate a feeling of community and a sense belonging and has a positive and direct effect on students' persistence in community college settings.⁹⁷ FE students in this research

95. Dennis et al. (2005), 223-236.

96. Sutherland. (2011), 267-279.

97. Garza et al. (2021), 30-51.

spoke of the importance of peer support and it being a significant factor that had contributed both to their enjoyment of their FE course, but also in terms of supporting them to not give up and drop out. They reported peer support as having benefited their mental health and their capacity to cope with the workload of their FE course. Participants also discussed the value of having a peer group with whom they could be themselves, share their worries and be heard, and stressed the importance in this in terms of realising they were not alone in their particular struggles.

“

I had so much that I was dealing with that. I thought I was the only one. But the (group of people) that are in the class. Everybody has so much... mental health issues...so much... within their own personal lives.

– Focus Group Participant

“

People feel very isolated and lonely... and believe that they're the only ones feeling this. Anytime you meet somebody that's similar...it's quite validating, and you feel heard...it makes it more manageable...they may be slightly ahead of you...you can look at them and think, 'right, this is achievable, if they can do it', or if they're behind you...you can give them a bit of confidence and say 'look, you'll get there'.

– Focus Group Participant

Participants suggested that more emphasis on the social aspect of the FET experience would be beneficial. This would correlate with research findings, which validate the idea that both social and academic aspects within community colleges are of critical importance for non-traditional students' persistence and sense of belonging.⁹⁸ Focus group participants expressed not really having had the opportunity to make friends on their course until later in the first term, something that was obviously impacted by the Covid-19 lockdowns. This would corroborate with the FET Learner Survey in 2021, undertaken by the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), where learners highlighted 'feeling alone' and 'relationship building issues,' as the hardest aspects of being a learner during Covid-19.⁹⁹

Students in this research described that the return to face-to-face learning on campus following the Covid-19 lockdowns had greatly enhanced their capacity to socialise and form connections with their peers. Participants suggested that post-Covid-19, more mixing should happen to facilitate networking and shared learning, both between students learning on the same course and between students from different disciplines that will likely work together in the 'real world.' Joint projects, such as one between students on nursing courses and those on paramedic courses, were put forward by some focus group participants as concrete examples of what this might look like in an FET setting.

“

It took nearly until Christmas to find out everyone's name in your class and develop an actual connection with them.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I would have liked to have seen more like integration between the courses because a lot of these courses will work with each other outside in the real world. If you had like the nursing students working with the paramedics and stuff like that, like work on a case together, it could be really fun or like the likes of forensics working with criminology on a little side project it would make students more interested in what they're learning.

– Focus Group Participant

Mature students mentioned the importance of making friends of a similar age and circumstance and referred to this aspect of peer support as being integral to their having a positive learning experience. Peer support has been shown to have the potential to impact mature student participation and success and has been recognised as being of particular importance for mature students from cohorts traditionally underrepresented at third-level and those identified as priority groups in the National Access Plan, such as refugees, Travellers or lone-parents.¹⁰⁰

98. García et al. (2019), 460–487.

99. ETBI. (2021). FET Learner Survey Report.

100. HEA. (2021). *Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education*.

“

I've never had an experience where (group of people) are so close and so supportive. And if anyone's struggling, we all jump in and pick each other up, like, college work or personal stuff, whatever. There's this huge support, it has just been fabulous and the teachers have been amazing, if I could afford it, I'd love to go on.

– Focus Group Participant

“

It's like, oh, my gosh, you know, you think you're the only one, but everybody, we're in the same boat because we're in a new phase of our lives, we're older.

– Focus Group Participant

Many participants referred to their **work placements** on their FE course, and how **beneficial** and **advantageous** they perceived these as being to their development. Students mentioned the importance of the experience of a work placement in helping them to make decisions for their future. For some people, the work placement experience had led them to decide to progress to HE. However, for others, it was mentioned that in some cases placements were not directly linked to courses during the Covid-19 lockdowns due to lack of availability. Consequently, these work placements were both less beneficial and less enjoyable for these FE students.



“

That (placement) was literally what cemented my decision to want to go further (degree course). I absolutely loved it, I actually stayed longer than I had to, because I just got on so great with them. And I had no prior experience with any of that...I really wanted to apply learning...so I really, I really enjoyed that.

– Focus Group Participant

“

Because of Covid you essentially just have to get work experience anywhere you can get it. (But) your placement...is supposed to be like a little bit of a taster on what you're going to be doing...that little opportunity where it's like, 'oh my god, I'm really enjoying doing this' or 'oh my god, what am I doing, this is actually not for me.

– Focus Group Participant

Finally, while participants spoke of having been nervous at the initial stages of their FE course, they affirmed that their **self-confidence** had grown and those who had completed an FE course spoke of a **sense of accomplishment** and **self-belief** that they had not previously experienced prior to this. Some spoke of how their relationship with education and learning had changed, and this **transformative potential** appeared especially significant for participants who narrated negative and disempowering mainstream education experiences, or who had previously failed or dropped out of other college courses.

“

...kind of nervous...because I dropped out of school when I was 16, like the week after I turned 16. And then when I finally did my level five...it was just really nice to know that it's a nice education rather than secondary school which wasn't nice.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I feel like I also gained confidence as well...I feel a lot of people come out of their shell, when they're like in a place around where people like them.

– Focus Group Participant

“

When I went to college first time round and then failed...I kind of said to myself, college wasn't for me, not (that) course...the whole thing...I'll never do it good if I go to a college, especially university, so don't bother ever again. So, I wrote myself off pretty much. This course has had the complete opposite effect than when I was eighteen...like a complete 180 on my experience.

– Focus Group Participant

Groups of students in further and adult education are often those who 'have been badly served by our system of schooling and ...written off by a system which is driven by meritocracy and fails to address issues of structural inequality that can shape communities' choices or lack of choices on their learning trajectories.'¹⁰¹ This structural gap has the potential to be worsened if met with an academic or vocational divide in FE contexts, further contributing to a social reproduction of inequality.¹⁰² However, and as participants here have described, further education also has transformative potential,¹⁰³ through offering unique and cohesive spaces, where transformative teaching and learning with peers from diverse backgrounds can take place, that nurture hope and well-being while simultaneously navigating difficult socio-economic contexts.¹⁰⁴

101. Smith & Duckworth. (2022).

102. Bourdieu. (2018), 71-112.

103. Freire. (1970).

104. Smith & Duckworth. (2022).

3.3 PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE OF FET – THE CHALLENGES

Some participants described how the initial stages of their college education as an FE student had been challenging. Some of the challenges raised might be similar for anyone returning to learning or entering into a new environment. For example, a couple of participants spoke of **feeling nervous** on their first day at FET. In some cases, this was because they did not know what to expect; they were coming in on their own without any friends, they were learning new skills they had never learned before, including computer skills. In other cases, it was because they were mature students, returning to an educational setting in which they felt nervous.

Participants on this research also expressed specific concerns in relation to being a further education student compared to a HE student. Some described being affected by the **negative stigma** surrounding FET, against the seemingly higher status of participating on an undergraduate programme at a higher education institution. In fact, the stigma of taking part in an FE course may prevent people from attending an FE course or college in the first place.¹⁰⁵ For some participants, this manifested as feelings of **anxiety**, **low self-esteem** or **embarrassment** for having 'ended up' attending an FE college as opposed to a university. The theme of **stigma** was typically raised initially through the fictional character of 'Jo' in focus groups and imagining the reaction of 'Jo's' peer-group, before participants related this to theme on a more personal level.

“

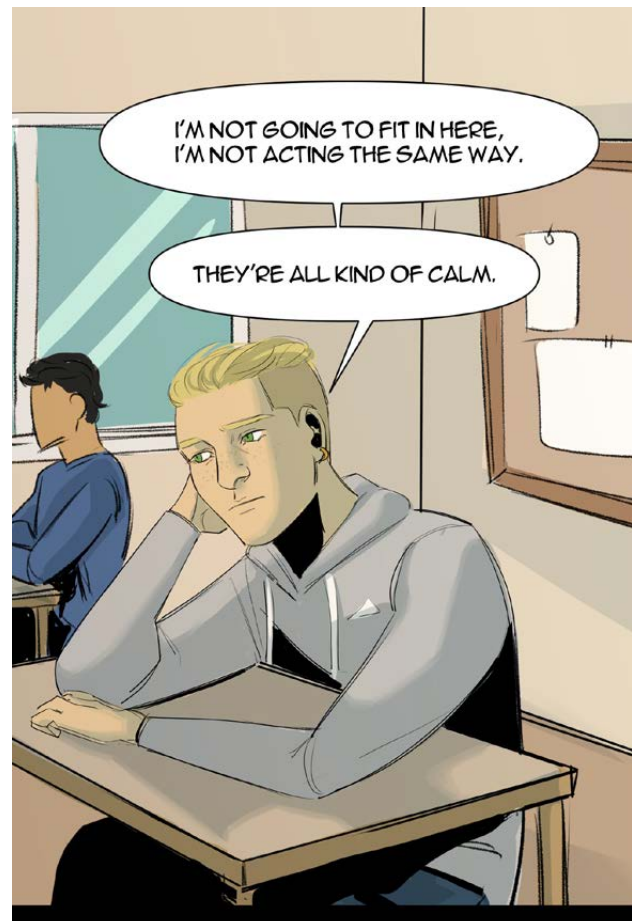
I love it like, I was a bit nervous on my first day going back as a mature student and someone who'd already done a degree, but like I was excited to go on, just something that I think I'm gonna be good at.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I was a mature student, and although I had done a degree course after my leaving cert., that was a long time ago and I wasn't sure my brain would be able to keep up

– Focus Group Participant



105. SOLAS. (2017), 19.

“

[Jo] might be embarrassed because to tell other people that he's (in) a PLC and not in college with the rest of his friends

– Focus Group Participant

While some participants internalised this stigma, some were critically aware of a negative comparison between FET and HE and discussed this theme in terms of societal expectations and preconceptions of what constitutes educational success.

“

There is a lot of (stigma) around the whole PLC courses, people kind of think, 'that's not a real course'. I've seen that a lot. Like, (they say) 'that's not college', when you say, 'I'm actually in college...Yeah?' I'm at home every weekend doing assignments

– Focus Group Participant

“

My own pressure from school was that the teachers expected us to go to college as soon as we finish school. It was the way they were taught, 'you have to go to college', 'you have to do your courses as young as possible,' okay, 'get yourself a career' and all. But as I got older, I was like, 'well actually that's just what worked for you'.

– Focus Group Participant



Stigma was even more profound but experienced differently for participants who had experience of **homelessness or prison**. These participants described worrying about their ability to fit in to the college setting and of needing to **adjust their language** accordingly.

“

The language was totally different... when you're living on the street... everyone judges you... that was the language spoke (to) communicate.. just to sort of put on a brave face on it. And so, when I did go back to college, I was using bad language but to me it wasn't..

– Focus Group Participant

“

Feeling inadequate. Wondering how he (Jo), is going to start talking to people. That's how I felt when I went back.

– Focus Group Participant

As discussed, FE students come from more diverse backgrounds, thereby facing additional barriers in accessing education.¹⁰⁶ Participants in this research raised these barriers consistently through the focus group discussions and their survey responses. The range of barriers faced by students include lower socio-economic background and financial pressure while studying, care responsibilities (children/siblings/elderly or sick parents), lack of access to healthcare, homelessness and other accommodation problems, migration status, disability, addiction and mental-health challenges. Many participants were experiencing multiple additional barriers, the intersectionality of which profoundly impacted their ability to participate fully in further education.

One of the most significant structural barriers that participants referred to frequently was **financial pressure** and having to source **part-time employment** during their FE course to maintain themselves in education. Balancing work and study was a substantial source of stress for participants who were struggling to stay on top of coursework and assignments while working.



106. SOLAS. (2020). Future FET.
107. Hardiman. (2011).

“

When you're working and studying, it's very hard. Yeah, it really is and your mind is not fully you know, I mean, you come home exhausted, you come after work and then you've to study at night and you get up the next morning and you're half asleep.

– Focus Group Participant

Care responsibilities are known to take time, space and energy from students' studies,¹⁰⁷ and many participants in this research emphasised this as an extra barrier to educational progression. The added pressure of child-rearing or caring for siblings or elderly parents requires considerable 'juggling' ability to stay on top of college work.

“

Caring for my dad. Looking after my daughter (trying to juggle while attending college)

– Survey Respondent

“

Family commitments, kids after school activities and part-time work... Ensuring every aspect of my life had sufficient time and commitment so nothing was neglected - kids , course work, my job.

– Survey Respondent



One participant described needing to work in order to **pay for healthcare**. The participant's health had deteriorated to the point that juggling work with their FE course load was creating a continual cycle of stress and ill-health, as one drove the other.

“

My health took like a massive dip...I didn't even have money to like, even just go to the GP. So it was like an emergency, I need to get a job now. And then as soon as I got a job, I did not understand how anyone could juggle a job and their further education at the same time, because especially when we hit March, and we got those five assignments at the same time.

– Focus Group Participant

Structural inequalities, such as the one described above, have worsened as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic thus fuelling educational inequality in Ireland and beyond.¹⁰⁸ Digital poverty (access to devices, internet and the skills to engage in online learning), as well as the implications of remote learning on assessment, learner engagement, connection and belonging, have also served to widen the educational divide, while simultaneously making visible many of the structural inequalities that were previously more hidden.¹⁰⁹ Participants in this research made specific reference to the Covid-19 pandemic as having a negative impact on their education.

“

I deferred for a year when I got the job, it was during the whole Covid thing and I was like I'm not going to be able to, I don't think I'd be able for the online whole part of it especially starting in a university.

– Focus Group Participant

Others highlighted how specific health concerns affected their stress levels during the worst waves of the pandemic.

“

[I was worried] If I got the virus (Covid) as I have a heart condition.

– Survey Respondent

108. Doyle. (2020), 1-10.

109. O'Reilly. (May 2021), *The Irish Times*.

The lack of a physical space for studying, and in particular, for remote learning, was described as problematic for some participants. Several learners spoke of living in shared accommodation, and of not having sufficient space or a quiet area to focus on their study, as being an additional barrier to their learning.

“

I'm staying with too many of us sometimes, I don't have a space to read.

– Focus Group Participant

3.4 CHAPTER REFLECTIONS

Despite considerable life challenges, participants mostly spoke about a positive FET experience that increased their confidence and self-esteem and that had acted, in some cases, as an antidote to previously negative learning experiences. Nevertheless, for some participants, there appeared to be a residual fear of failure or fragility in self-belief, that could impact their faith in their ability to succeed at third-level. Societal perceptions of FET as inferior to university and a stigma that somehow the education they were receiving was ‘not real college,’ for some participants seemed to feed the notion that they might ‘not be able for it’ (HE), despite research to the contrary which indicates that by and large, FE graduates are well-prepared for higher education and the challenges posed by a university course.¹¹⁰

FE students by virtue of being more diverse than HE students, are consequently more exposed to structural and societal inequalities that exist as barriers to educational progression. However, FET occupies and holds space for transformative learning that as participants suggest should be known more widely, with FE colleges promoted as inclusive and supportive teaching and learning spaces.

In the next chapter, we will present the findings in relation to FET to HE progression and delve into participants’ perceptions regarding university education and seek to examine if and how this interrelates with their experience in FET. We will also look at the barriers to HE that concern FE students as well as explore the perceived benefits that participants expect would be gleaned from higher education.

110. National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. (2016).

4

**DISCUSSION: PARTICIPANTS
THOUGHTS AROUND
PROGRESSION TO HE**

THIS IS THE START OF
SOMETHING BIGGER.

YOU'RE GOING TO BE FINE.

“

HE (higher education) is just for the upper class, the rich. And this is what you got in play. This is the mentality. Like now, it's going to cost so much!as I said, we didn't come from a rich family.

– Focus Group Participant

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This second findings chapter will present participants' thoughts around progression to higher education following their experience in FET. We will also discuss how FE students perceive HE and how these preconceptions might be influencing their decision-making process around progression. Focus group participants were shown an illustration of a scales and asked to 'weigh-up' the risks and benefits for 'Jo' in progressing to university. In this chapter, we will first present the risks and barriers to progression identified by participants, such as **socio-economic background, financial concerns, family/caring responsibilities or fear of failure**. The second section will explore participants' motivation for wanting to progress to HE and the perceived benefits, as well as examining their ideas surrounding the advantages of a university education for FE graduates.

4.2 HE VERSUS OTHER OPTIONS POST-FET

Prior to participants weighing up the 'risks' versus the 'benefits' of progressing to university, focus group discussions used an illustration of a crossroads to explore the range of options available to 'Jo' following graduation from their FE course. Participants brainstormed a wide-range of options, that were similar across all of the focus groups including; **progressing to university; staying in education** and gaining greater knowledge of their subject area; **finding a job or a new career path**; starting their **own business**; getting an **apprenticeship**; doing an **internship** or a **CE (Community Employment) scheme**; and **travelling abroad**.

Many participants emphasised the importance of getting back to work, sourcing employment and becoming self-sufficient again after a period of relying on others.

“

You know, do I depend on other people for the rest of my life? Or do I now find a job that I really like and know that I can be happy in that for the next 15 years, and have some security for the future?

– Focus Group Participant

“

I lost my job in Saudi Arabia as a teacher, because kindergarten kids don't teach online. So then, I did a master's degree at X College in applied English linguistics. And now I'm doing...a level four, event planning and marketing course.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I absolutely love it (my FE course). I was a bit nervous on my first day going back as a mature student and someone who'd already done a degree, but I was excited to go on something that I think I'm gonna be good at.

– Focus Group Participant

A Central Statistics Office (CSO) report found that 62% of 2016 FE graduates with major awards were in substantial employment in the first year after graduation,¹¹¹ and one of the cornerstones of the FET strategy 2020-2024 is the provision of courses designed to facilitate immediate entry to careers and employment, while facilitating options for lifelong learning is another.¹¹² Analysis of learning between FE courses has shown movement both up and down NFQ levels, as learners select offerings across the entire education and training continuum which suit their interests, motivation, up-skilling needs, and stage-of-life, while 10% of Post-Leaving-Cert (PLC) students have prior HE experience, highlighting the non-linear nature of education pathways.¹¹³

The next section in this chapter puts forward the barriers for progression to HE for FET students who would like to progress, from the perspective that higher education is neither superior nor the only viable option compared to a job or any other pathway FE students might choose to follow, but one that should be available to anyone who wants it, regardless of background.

111. SOLAS. (2020). Future FET, 25.

112. *Ibid*, 38.

113. *Ibid*, 54.

4.3 BARRIERS TO HE PROGRESSION: SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND & CIRCUMSTANCE

To get a sense of participants' attitudes to university, focus group participants were asked to reflect on the character 'Jo' and imagine how Jo would feel approaching the gates of the university. Responses typically revolved around Jo's **socioeconomic background** and circumstances. Participants gave examples of circumstances which would impact on Jo's expectations and considerations for entering HE including: **care responsibilities** such as children or younger siblings, elderly/incapacitated parents; whether Jo had been **working part-time** during their course; Jo's **financial capacity** to afford to attend HE; Jo's **age**, and whether higher education could be prioritised over employment at this age; whether Jo had experienced **homelessness, substance abuse, abuse** or another traumatic experience, that might impact on their **capacity to 'cope' in higher education**. Participants also reflected on **educational attainment**, whether Jo was the **first in their family** to go onto HE and the importance of **role models** or mentors, who can support the self-belief necessary that 'it can be you' in relation to progressing to higher education.



“

So, I think it all depends on Jo's background, as well as his desire to further his education...it's economic really, maybe he needs to work or get an apprenticeship to help fund his family who could be sick or anything, or maybe he wants to go to university to make a better life for himself.

– Focus Group Participant

“

It all depends on Jo's history, on where he's coming from. We don't know whether Jo has substance abuse (issues), we don't know. If... he has a history of being abused...A lot of these have to be taken into consideration.

– Focus Group Participant

For some participants, particularly those with caring responsibilities or children who themselves were of college-going age, attending university was simply not a financially viable option. Similarly, survey respondents, when asked directly what makes entering HE difficult, emphasised financial capacity and care responsibilities at large.

“

I have a daughter who's 21 ... I wouldn't be able to afford to send her and myself come (to the college)... it wouldn't be affordable for two of us to go.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I will have to continue working ... Demands of home life and teenagers... Would I be good enough to succeed?

– Survey Respondent

“

The hours around my dad's home care package.

– Survey Respondent

Mature students specifically spoke of how the decision to enter HE would have been a simpler one to take had they been younger. Now, they said, the decision to enter HE was complicated by **care responsibilities**, and while they were clear that progression

to HE was what they wanted, it became more a question of feasibility rather than one of desire or ambition. One participant referred to the opportunity to further their education as 'me time,' when weighing up the balance between furthering education and fulfilling family responsibilities.



“

“If you've just left school, it's probably more, 'what do I want to do?' Because when you're older, bills and responsibilities and people to be minded, you have to think, 'can I do it? Is it feasible for me to take it on?'

– Focus Group Participant

“

I absolutely do want more of that 'me time' [education] but whether I can... it's very tantalising, I'd love to jump in.

– Focus Group Participant

“

It has always been my dream to obtain a degree in nursing, but due to family commitments this dream has not been possible.

– Survey Respondent

4.3.1 ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO HE: ADMINISTRATIVE AND HIDDEN COSTS

Financial risk and hardship featured in all focus group discussions, with participants surmising, as they looked at an illustration of university gates, that the character ‘Jo’ would be apprehensive about the costs involved in completing a degree and wondering whether they would need to have a job and if holding down that job could be maintained along with the academic work that would be required. Participants also considered and spoke of the additional costs, aside from university fees, that would be involved for Jo, including transport to and from college,¹¹⁴ food and accommodation.

“

Huge thing to think about, it’s not just the course fees, you’d have to look at, it’s your transport It’s your phone bills, it’s your food costs...and rent.

– Focus Group Participant

“

...it’s really really expensive; like getting a train for example. I’ve to take two trains.

– Focus Group Participant

Participants discussed the increasing difficulty surrounding eligibility for grants such as Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), which is dependent on income thresholds that take into account ‘total household reckonable income’ and must not exceed €24,500 for a ‘special rate award’ that includes university fees and a contribution towards the cost of being a student of between €2575 and €6115, depending on the distance travelled to attend the university. HE students coming from families (with less than four dependent children) and with a total reckonable income of under €46,790, can also receive full university tuition fees, but with no student contribution to offset the additional costs. Furthermore, a household with more than one working adult, or with more than one adult in receipt of a social welfare payment, can easily find themselves above the threshold for SUSI, despite the fact that some social welfare payments were excluded from reckonable income.



114. See more on the distance effects as a form of social class and its relationship to HE participation in Ireland; Cullinan et al. (2013), 19-51.

“

And if you can't get a grant like, my sister is in university now. She lives at home with my parents, but they don't have a big income and she got refused from SUSI grant, she had to go out and get credit union loans, and she's only 20 years of age.

– Focus Group Participant

“

It is very frustrating... like I had to settle and do like a further education course rather than go to university. So it wouldn't be affordable for the two of us [my son and I] to go [at the same time].

– Focus Group Participant



The hidden costs of higher education serve to further intimidate FE participants, who are realistic about finance and costs. These circumstances and structural barriers are not so different from the challenges participants described experiencing during their FE education as discussed in Chapter Three. However, what is notable, is how participants are basing these concerns on the evidence of their experience in FET and struggling to make ends meet over the duration over their course.

Participants highlighted correctly that the duration of a university course would see a multiplication of the financial outlay that they had experienced during their FE course, with many pointing out that a prolonged financial risk might not necessarily be one worth taking.

“

What is the job (dream job) that you're willing to put the work in to get to... without thinking, 'oh Jesus I've to do four years in college!

– Focus Group Participant

“

I'm getting so much experience and working in the field (youth work) that I want to, and then I do be saying well 'why would I go to university for four years?' Like there's people in my job who have done degrees in X and we're working on the same level.

– Focus Group Participant

The length of time required to complete an undergraduate degree programme at third-level (typically three to four years), not only entails costs in itself with regard to tuition fees and transport/accommodation/food costs but is also a period of time where one would not be **earning a full salary**. This was expressed by participants as a daunting prospect.

“

The duration of the course, like myself, I was thinking of you know, like okay...how am I going to be poor...how long am I going to be you know, before getting a job...even work experience, how am I going to work myself around that for some time?

– Focus Group Participant

“

It's not just the time but it's the money and not earning [during HE].

– Focus Group Participant

4.3.2 SOCIAL BARRIERS TO HE FOR FE STUDENTS, INCLUDING 'FEAR'

FE students also face internal barriers to progression to higher education as highlighted in other research, where it has been shown that working-class students experience significant socio-cultural disjunction, apparently sensing exclusion and an oppositional attitude with regard to the middle-class institution and general student body representative of HEIs.^{115 116} Our research would support this theory in the Irish higher education context, where disengagement or distancing, is used as a self-protection mechanism.¹¹⁷

Some of the FE participants also distanced themselves from HE, both economically and socially, by expressing their different class position through statements such as; “**university education is not affordable for normal people,**” (like me), or that HE is only available to the rich or to those whose families can afford to pay for it.

“

HE is just for the upper class, the rich...Whereas as I said, we didn't come from a rich family.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I think [HE is] unaffordable for like normal people; it's [university education], you know what I mean, but just families that come from, middle class, that you haven't got a mad income coming in.

– Focus Group Participant

Participants in all focus groups stated that they imagined Jo being **afraid** and **apprehensive** while entering HE because of its unfamiliarity. Participants discussed the '**fear of the unknown**' as the university was likely to be significantly different from the familiarity of the FE college. In this respect, participants spoke of entering HE as, going beyond their comfort zone, which was an uncomfortable, if an exhilarating place to be.

115. Bourdieu & Passeron. (1979).

116. Finnegan & Merrill. (2017), 307-324.

117. Keane. (2011). 449-466.

“

It's a change in everything that he knows.

– Focus Group Participant

“

They'll be extremely nervous because he's stepping out of (their) comfort zone.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I would prefer to stay on this site (FE college). Because I'm comfortable, located here, I have to step out of my comfort zone. Here it's fine. But that's just so much more intimidating.

– Focus Group Participant

Participants also intimated that Jo would likely have worries and self-doubt that they may not be able to keep up with the **academic workload** required and concerns that the HE workload would be much more intense or **beyond their capability** compared to FET and that there would be an increased onus on them to work independently and with **less one-to-one support**.



“

But what I think (and) maybe Jo feels the same, just finishing a FET. We know, it was manageable...I was able...I was able for that (FE)...but will I be able the next time...This is what might stop Jo from progressing... Have I reached my potential? You know?

– Focus Group Participant

“

More people, you know, they might be more sophisticated, you know, they (assignments) mightn't be kind of laid out, you kind of have to do it yourself.

– Focus Group Participant

This discussion led to more institutional concerns around the **size of classes at university**, that learning in such **large lecture halls** could be very intimidating. Participants also expressed concerns about what lecturers would be like and how supportive they would be to students. In general, there was a perception that the academic workload, timetables, class sizes and teachers' attitudes, would all be larger and more intensive and therefore more intimidating at university compared to FET.



whether they would be able to find the buildings where their classes were held. Participants who had family commitments said that the academic timetable was a source of concern and might clash with their ability to attend classes and fulfil family responsibilities, including school drop-offs and collections:



“

[During FET] I learned from being able to, like, not be scared to put my hand up in a class that I could actually just have the conversation with the teacher, it was so much better. So I'm scared of going into college with the big, huge classrooms, the lectures, like it's gonna be a big step like having that many people and trying to listen to this one teacher at the top of the room. That's gonna be different.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I think sometimes family circumstances...leads to (selecting a course)...because like myself, you know, if I'm selecting a course, what I'll be concerned about is the timetable like, what time the course is going to start...(and) finishing

– Focus Group Participant

On a practical level, participants spoke about feeling intimidated by the vast array of university courses to choose from, along with the size of university campuses in comparison with the more intimate venue of the FE college. People are worried about their ability to navigate these spaces, and

Participants in all focus groups also discussed social considerations through the character 'Jo.' These included **fear of being isolated** of not being able to make friends or to find peers of a similar age or background.

“

Like when you're walking into the class or whatever you look for other mature students but in your specific course, there might not be any. So, I feel like...if Jo's a mature student that would be something he would think about.

– Focus Group Participant

Participants also described a fear of losing social or institutional support because of entering HE. They imagined Jo would be asking themselves what they would do if they were struggling and who they could turn to within and outside of the university for support.

“

Not being able to see your friends who are not in the college, or only occasionally encounter them.

– Focus Group Participant

This led on to conversations around the importance of resilience and of expectations, both of oneself and of those around them.

“

I'd say to look into if you have your own personal support...I feel like university has a lot of highs and downs. And if there's not people around you to push you on, people could just stop.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I think expectations are crucially important. Number one, the people in his life, do they have expectations for him to be successful, his own expectations that he sets for himself, does He consider himself to be a winner or a loser?”

– Focus Group Participant

Participant fears seem mainly centred around a central **fear of failure** magnified by a fear of having to drop out from HE. As coping mechanisms, participants highlighted the importance of **social support and role models**, who themselves have experience of succeeding at higher education. There was an awareness in this of being role-models for their own children and communities through their own educational attainments also, and people referred to self-encouragement and self-belief in order to keep going.

“

And then yeah, we're changing the mould, you can put barriers in your own way...and so what if you don't continue with it, just try because if you don't try you won't get anywhere. And like especially now that I'm a Mum I want to set a good example for my son.

– Focus Group Participant

“

Don't write yourself off...even if you fail a module, don't say this is the end. Just keep going.

– Focus Group Participant

“

Throughout your life, your parents choose what institute you go to, so it's a sense of autonomy I suppose. He chose this, he made this choice. A sense of accomplishment as well.

– Focus Group Participant

4.4 PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF PROGRESSION TO HE

The relationship between social mobility and higher education are widely discussed.^{118 119} With the 2008 global economic recession, Greece, Ireland and Spain were the worst affected countries in Europe and consequently have witnessed a major decline in the middle-income bracket of earners, which has impacted negatively on access to higher education.¹²⁰ Despite this drawback, higher education is still perceived to be an important pathway for better life outcomes,¹²¹ and certainly, participants on this research perceive many benefits in progressing to HE after their FE graduation. Some participants imagined through the character 'Jo' that graduation from higher education would result in a **sense of accomplishment** along with a **feeling of autonomy**, as university was something that they themselves would have self-chosen.

“

The self-fulfilment and satisfaction of just finishing the course...Belief in himself.

– Focus Group Participant

Other perceived benefits described by participants included **higher income** and **earning potential**; the **higher social status** as a consequence of having a degree and the resulting increase in opportunities regarding career choices, along with the freedom that comes with having more **flexibility** and **opportunities**, such as the ability to change careers in the future.



118. Boliver, & Wakeling. (2017), 1-6.
119. Brown et al. (2013), 637-643.
120. Mok & Neubauer. (2016), 1-12.
121. Stuart. (2012).

“

Jo will have a lot more job opportunities with his degree.

– Focus Group Participant

“

I think the message (is) very apparent that a degree elevates you to higher status to potential for higher income. And without a degree, people will view you, whether it's fair or not...as at the bottom of the ladder.

– Focus Group Participant

“

Just opportunities across the board, better conditions and this absolutely has to do with the proper course.

– Focus Group Participant

Participants also mentioned the **social benefits** they associated with a university education, which included making friends, highlighting the fact they felt there was an opportunity to meet like-minded people at university given the larger number of people and the wide range of courses, societies and clubs on offer.

“

Secondary school is very vague in its subjects...Whereas with college and university, you're constantly (doing) the same thing, you want to work towards the same goal together. So that's kind of why university...is better to kind of make friends.

– Focus Group Participant

More than one participant thought that these social opportunities might lead to romantic opportunities such as 'meeting your future spouse' as well as affording participants with the **opportunities to forge networks** which may enhance their careers. Research has shown that between 20%¹²² and 28%¹²³ of married couples met at university. The cultural capital that comes with the networking opportunities afforded to elite universities such as Oxford or Cambridge, is evidenced in the domination of 'major professions' such as senior judge, cabinet ministers and diplomats, which are made up of 71%, 57% and 51% of 'Oxbridge' graduates respectively.¹²⁴ Making 'contacts', both with lecturers and with fellow students, were flagged as having the potential to furnish participants on this research with entrepreneurial opportunities that they may not otherwise be in a position to make.

122. Spalding. (2018). *Society*19.

123. Duffy. (2013), *The Journal*.

124. Ferber. (2022). *The New Statesman*.

“

Opportunity to make new friends. A lot of people meet their future spouses at university...it's an exciting time. And there are lots of opportunities not only to develop your brain, academically, but also to make social networks...a chance for a new beginning.

– Focus Group Participant

4.5 CHAPTER REFLECTIONS

As we have seen, economic, social and institutional barriers, as well as perceptions of difference between FET and HE can impede on FET to HE progression and may in fact deter people completely. With the rising cost of living in Ireland, which is being referred to broadly as a crisis, we are witnessing an increase in public debate on how to reduce the cost of higher education.¹²⁵ The DFHERIS has responded by publishing a plan,¹²⁶ that recommends increasing grant schemes, reducing students' contributions (third-level undergraduate fees were reduced by €1,000 as a one-off measure for 22/23),¹²⁷ reducing the duration of HE,

along with facilitating more flexible modes of learning.¹²⁸ Although these actions and recommendations will hopefully address some of the economic issues at play in relation to access to higher education and as highlighted by the research participants here, **financial concerns** are currently the most significant barrier to access to HE in Ireland.¹²⁹ SUSI, the State's student support body, has seen a steady downward trend in the number of grants being awarded, while numbers attending higher education continues to rise.¹³¹ In 2020, 79,000 students were awarded grants by, 7% fewer than in 2015 when 85,000 students were deemed eligible,¹³² and in 2022 the number awarded the grant dropped to under 63,000,¹³³ which is a decrease of 25% to the national student grant scheme in just seven years compared to the increase in overall student numbers in HE, which was more than 17% for the corresponding period.¹³⁴

The findings in this chapter have shown that whether social, economic or psychological, many participants value **HE as a transformative space** and progression to higher education is an option that many FE students are interested in pursuing. Applications to HE from those with a FET QQI award have increased significantly, from under 3,000 in 2001 to over 14,000 by 2018.¹³⁵ On top of this, students who went on to attend FET from schools, which had a low progression rate to third level, are

125. The Minister of Education announced a possibility of a 25 % increase in student grants and a considerable reduction in third-level fees as part of the Budget 2023. Loughlin. (Sep 2022). *Irish Examiner*.

126. DFHERIS. (Sep 2022). Funding the Future.

127. UCD. (Sept 2022).

128. DFHERIS. (Sep 2022). Funding the Future.

129. Scanlon et al. (2019), 343-357.

130. HEA. (Oct 2020).

131. O'Kelly. (Oct 2021). *RTE*.

132. *Ibid*.

133. Phelan. (2021). *Irish Mirror*.

134. HEA. (Oct. 2020).

135. DES. (June 2020), 15.

being seen to be progressing on to higher education and outperforming those who enter college immediately after school.¹³⁶ That said, data from 2017 and 2018 shows that the acceptance rate by FE applicants through the Central Applications Office (CAO) was 54.3% and 54.8% respectively, which is below the total CAO acceptance rate, which was over 59 % in both years, meaning FE applicants are less likely than Leaving Cert students to take up HE opportunities on offer.¹³⁷ Exploring FE students hopes and fears around progression to HE and connecting these to their experience in FET, helps us to examine why this might be the case.

Certainly, the primary concern is financial, and FE students are basing these concerns on their real-life experience of juggling finances during FET, a concern which is undoubtedly impacted by the decline in student grants. There does, however, seem to be a lack of awareness about other schemes that may be available for financial support, such as the **1916 Bursary Fund**, where each HEI has a limited number of bursaries at three different tiers awarded to eligible applicants that present the greatest need, including certain groups underrepresented at higher education such as refugees, Travellers and Roma, people with criminal justice history, lone parents and survivors of domestic violence, or the **Student Assistance Fund** (SAF), a HEA fund that provides financial support to full or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties that is administered by each HEI.

FE students also worry about whether they will receive other support in HE, such as teacher and peer support, and there is a perception that HE will be a **large anonymous space** and have expectations with regards to **time tabling, academic ability, online capability, financial capacity and self-directed learning**, that FE students feel uncertain about having the capacity to fulfil. The following chapter is the final chapter and will recommend actions that could be taken by our HEIs to help assuage participant concerns, as well as putting forward suggestions that we believe need to be taken at policy level to better encourage FET to HE progression.

136. McGuire. (2022). *The Irish Times*.

137. DES. (June 2020), 15.

5

RECOMMENDATIONS

HEY, I THINK I REALISED I'M NOT IN A POSITION TO GO TO UNIVERSITY.

MAYBE IN A FEW YEARS FROM MY DAUGHTER'S GROWN UP.

I'VE DONE MY LEVEL 5 AND I'M WORKING NOW.

BUT BY BEING HIGHER UP IN EDUCATION, YOU WILL BE HIGHER UP WITH INCOME.

WITHOUT A DEGREE PEOPLE WILL VIEW YOU THE BOTTOM OF THE LADDER.

WELL IT'S UNAFFORDABLE FOR NORMAL PEOPLE YOU CAN'T GET A GR

YOU KNOW, I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT UNIVERSITY...

...I THINK I'D BE SCARED WITH THE HUGE CLASSROOMS AND LECTURE HALLS.

YEAH IT'S UNAFFORDABLE FOR THE WHOLE... AND THE MONEY

THERE'S TOO MANY TO PAY FOR!

“

No price can be put on a person gaining further education. A university qualification opens up many more career opportunities. The student gets to meet new people from different backgrounds with different opinions this opens the student mind to questioning their attitudes and beliefs and can enrich their life's experiences.

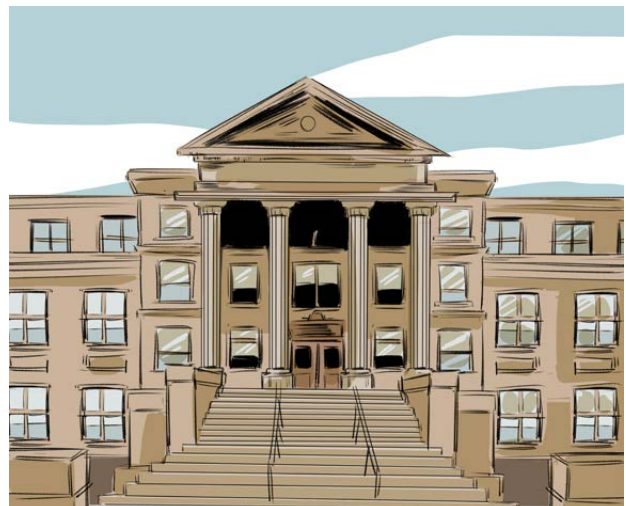
– Survey Respondent

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Key themes emerged which run throughout this report and form important framing concepts about the intersectional and complex nature of experiences and barriers faced by underrepresented students in FE and HE. The research participants overcame many of these barriers through their positive experience in FET, however, many worry about their financial capacity to progress to HE. These worries are based on their experience of financial pressure and the difficulty in juggling family or work responsibilities with academic workload while in FET. On top of this, participants are aware of the difficulty in accessing financial supports, such as SUSI, and in this research at least, seemed unaware of additional funds and bursaries such as the SAF., or the 1916 Bursary Fund as mentioned in the previous chapter.

FE students also have additional ‘imagined’ barriers when it comes to progression to higher education as laid out in Chapter Four. These include preconceived ideas about class-sizes (which they imagine as being significantly larger and taking place in traditional lecture halls allowing little scope for discussion or student

input), the level of commitment in terms of time (imagined as significantly greater than FET), lack of any support (lecturers perceived as ‘unreachable’ with no mention of Access services and additional financial supports such as SAF or 1916), and ‘not fitting in’ (HE student body is imagined as being younger and less diverse). Just as there is a residual and historical bias when it comes to FET, some of these assumptions about HE could be assuaged by clear and accessible communication between HEIs and FE colleges.



In terms of positive preconceptions about higher education, FE participants believe that university will afford them more opportunities with more course choices and better prospects through widening their social and professional networks.

FE learners assume to be academically challenged but see this as a worthwhile payoff in terms of the confidence and growth in their abilities that they would expect in return.

“

Confidence is the biggest benefit, confidence in your own abilities and confident you can bring lots to a future job...You meet lots of people from all walks of life and will expand your horizons.

– Survey Respondent

In this chapter, we draw on participant input to put forward a series of recommendations, some of which are for policy change, and others, which we believe require a cultural shift in how we view FET to HE progression, to be implemented across the sectors.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants in this study discussed the challenges and barriers that they imagined stood in the way of progression to HE or impacted on the decision around whether or not to accept a place in HE. The following are a series of recommendations, drawn from participant input and/or substantiated by the literature on FET to HE progression, which we believe would better support FE students to access and participate in higher education. These recommendations are presented below:

5.2.1 INCREASE IN FUNDING & GRANTS SCHEMES FOR FE STUDENTS

Currently, FE students are not eligible for the access schemes HEAR and DARE. This ineligibility for FE students seems inequitable in terms of second-level progression. Participants also discussed the increasing difficulty surrounding eligibility for SUSI grants, and how these grants are not sufficient to cover the costs of food and travel. The estimated monthly cost of attending higher education for undergraduates is €1,229, or €11,064 for the full academic year, which is approximately 10% higher than the costs reported by FE students¹³⁸ and fails to consider the impact of loss-of-earning potential on learners and their families. The issue of funding and supports for FE learners who transition to higher education has previously been recommended as warranting further consideration,¹³⁹ and this research echoes calls for specific, targeted and flexible provision of FET-HE funding stream(s), for learners progressing from FET into higher education, to support them into and through university.

Recommendation 1: Funding streams for FET to HE transition, with more flexible financial supports for those learners who are identified as students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and who wish to progress from FET to HE.

138. Indecon. (2022), 17. In this report, the monthly cost includes accommodation, food, transportation, leisure, childcare, healthcare, fees & other costs in this order.

139. DES. (June 2020).

5.2.2 TARGETED INFORMATION ON FUNDING & GRANTS FOR FE STUDENTS

While FE participants raised concerns around access to grants such as SUSI, there was also a notable lack of awareness about other funding schemes that may be available, such as the 1916 Bursary Fund or the SAF, which provides financial support to full or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending college. The Further Education and Training Course Hub lists grants and schemes available for FE students,¹²⁶ however, eligibility requirements, particularly for part-time learners, may preclude certain FE students from financial support. With regard to SAF, the fund varies from one HEI to another so FE students could struggle to find out if, or what, they may be entitled to. For example:

- Each HEI decides the individual amount of SAF available to FE students, as this is dependent on the amount allocated to SAF by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The information on how much a FE student can get from SAF is variable, unclear, or unavailable online. On the TUS Athlone website there is no amount written,¹²⁷ DCU's website states that the average award that can vary from year to year, e.g., 200-400/500 euros,¹²⁸ while on the MU website the amount for the SAF means-tested fund for 2022/23 is written as exactly 400 euros.
- FE students do not automatically receive the SAF, as HEAR students do, because they have not provided the same socio-economic information as part of their application.

- SAF applications dates are subject to change and depend on the HEI. While TUS Athlone SAF applications are open only once with an October deadline, DCU opens it twice (November and February).

Our research indicates that the financial supports available to FE students are not widely known by them and understanding how much they could qualify for could be pivotal in the decision-making process. In the absence of a specific dedicated fund for FE students progressing to HE, HEIs need to avoid ambiguity with regard to funding supports, as specifically FE students need to know **how much** they could qualify for, **how often** over the course of their study and **how to apply** for them as the documentation required can be off-putting. This information needs to be based on previous allocations, communicated pre-entry and disseminated through outreach activity with FE colleges and their Guidance Counsellors.

Recommendation 2: HEIs need to provide targeted accessible pre-entry information (like campus tours) and resources on funding supports (like SAF) distributed through FE colleges and via the Guidance Counsellors working with FE students.

5.2.3 ACCESSIBLE & WELCOMING INFORMATION FOR FE LEARNERS ABOUT HEI CLASS SIZES, TIMETABLES & SUPPORT

Aside from financial concerns, FE participants are concerned about the demands that higher education would place on them in terms of time, 'fitting in' and whether they would be able to cope with the overwhelm.

Many participants referenced **class sizes**, **timetables** and a 'lack' of **one-to-one support** as being concerning factors that would potentially influence their decision-making on whether or not to progress to HE. Others referenced hypothetically not '**fitting in**' due to being older or from a different background than the stereotypical background attributed to the higher education student; white, affluent and middle-class.¹⁴⁰ Knowing how many days/hours your course requires you to be on campus could be the difference between accepting or refusing a place in higher education, as FE students are often juggling caring responsibilities and operating on shoestring budgets. It is difficult to obtain transparent information regarding progression pathways for FE students,¹⁴¹ and while MEND HEIs all offer information about QQI FET entry routes on their websites, and MU showcases a video discussion on QQI PLC links to Maynooth University, the content is overly focused and wordy with regard to entry requirements and the points system (that don't seem to consider that 60% of FE learners are over 23 so would therefore be eligible for the mature entry route). A more accessible page with a limited wordcount that links to a booklet/brochure/handbook promoting QQI/FET pathways into university, could be a useful resource communicating a culture of welcome focused on FE students that addresses concerns around class sizes, timetabling and financial supports as well as one-to-one supports available.

Recommendation 3: Review how each HEI communicates a 'culture of welcome' to FE students taking into consideration practicalities such as timetabling, class-sizes and supports available.

5.2.4 OUTREACH/MENTORING ACTIVITY IN FE COLLEGES

Some FE students perceive HE as an inaccessible 'ivory tower' as described in Chapter 4. Some of these preconceptions might be intertwined with the fear of failure and have a direct impact on the decision-making process around progression to HE. Participant fears are around the intensity of commitment to HE; they perceive HE as more demanding than FET with respect to duration, heavy academic workload, larger class sizes, lack of attention by teachers. In general, they have preconceptions of HE as a much more intense experience, which might be 'beyond their capability' while juggling working, studying and care responsibilities. This research used peer research with researchers who themselves had progressed from FET to HE. Much of focus group conversations was taken up with peer researchers sharing information based on their own experience of supports, dialogic learning spaces, and manageable assignments in HE. Outreach and/or mentoring activity between HEIs and FE colleges, where FE students can engage in discussion and activities with peers who have made that step of progressing to HE, would serve to challenge their assumptions about 'what university is' and 'who university is for.' This would help demystify the university experience and better support progression.

Recommendation 4: HEIs to provide targeted outreach and mentoring activity that experientially promotes FET to HE progression.

140. Lynch. (2020). *The Journal*.

141. Rami et al. (2016), FET2HE Scoping Paper.

5.2.5 GREATER COLLABORATION BETWEEN HEIS AND FE COLLEGES

Research participants discussed feeling nervous about progression to HE and expressed a fear that while they had been able to manage in the smaller more intimate FE college, they may struggle to cope in a larger university. As Minister Harris plans for a new unified tertiary system¹⁴², partnerships between FE colleges and HEIs become strategically more viable and students can undertake part of their degree in their FE college, where they are familiar. This can help alleviate additional stress and support transition to HE and enhancing partnerships between FET and HE is a key objective of the National Access Plan.¹⁴³ Partnerships between HEIs and FE colleges can support or guarantee admission to a HEI with an 'associate degree' or QQI level 6 from a 'community partner,' have been successful abroad¹⁴⁴ and at home, where preferential entry is offered to students who successfully complete a linked FET programme in partner colleges of Further Education.¹⁴⁵

Recommendation 5: HEIs should expand strategic partnerships with FE colleges to provide 'guaranteed/prioritised' entry from FET to HE to support the transition of the FE student to HE.

5.2.6 PARITY OF ESTEEM BETWEEN FET AND HE THROUGH PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITY

FET is perceived as a narrow skills formation training and this has to change. As identified by the participants of this research, FET can be a transformative educational setting and there is much HEIs can learn from FET and vice versa, without positioning either as a superior or inferior education model. Participants appreciated FE education, including work-placement experiences, adult-education pedagogies, smaller class sizes, having more one-to-one time with teachers, peer support (particularly among mature or diverse groups of learners who understand each other's experiences). They also gained self-esteem as a result of their FET experience, which supported their decision-making process after FET, including the decision around progression to HE. Greater emphasis on partnerships between HEIs and FE colleges that include collaboration on teaching or lecturing through reciprocal guest lectures or other activities, would help to build the profile of FET while simultaneously promoting HE as being more accessible to FE learners.

Recommendation 6: Learning-partnership activity between HEIs and FE colleges to build parity of esteem and so that learners can see clear programme pathways through FE seamlessly into HE.

142. DFHERIS. (December 2022). *Unified Tertiary Sector*.

143. HEA. (August 2022). *National Access Plan 2022-2028*.

144. O'Callaghan, & O'Sullivan. (2019), 28-34.

145. SETU website, *Further Education Progression Scheme*.

5.2.7 EQUAL ENTRY MECHANISM/ POINTS SYSTEM FOR FE STUDENTS

As it currently stands, there is a lower numerical value placed on the QQI pathway than on the Leaving Certificate pathway, which is inconsistent with equity of access to HE. This inequity was further highlighted following the grade inflation that occurred with the 20/21 Leaving Cert and the corresponding increase in the CAO points requirement for many courses. This resulted in a double inequity for FE graduates, who would normally have expected to progress to HE.¹⁴⁶ This research would echo previous calls for an integrated and transparent FET recognition system within the CAO application system that aligns and streamlines both pathways so that one is not considered more favourably than the other.^{147 148}

Recommendation 7: Revision of CAO points allocation for FET to align with Leaving Certificate.



5.2.8 GRANTS AND FREE-FEES SCHEMES FOR PART-TIME/ DISTANCE LEARNING

One of the most mentioned themes in this research was that of caring responsibilities and the impact of care on progression options. These care responsibilities range from taking care of sick or elderly relatives, to raising younger siblings, to childcare. Despite multiple submissions to the SUSI grant review process in 2021 calling for the scheme to be extended to part-time learners,^{149 150 151} the scheme remains accessible to full-time learners only, which fails to recognise that having the capacity to study full-time is in and of itself a privilege and one that may not be afforded to lone-parents, students with a disability, mature students with caring responsibilities and others. While there are national childcare scheme subsidies in Ireland, and recently it was announced that the minimum rates will be increased from 0.50 cents to 1.40 cents per hour effective January 2023,¹⁵² these rates do not cover the actual cost of childcare. Covid-19 resulted in increased flexibility in how courses are offered as HEIs moved most courses online¹⁵³ and inflexibility in the context of the student grant scheme needs to be understood as impacting detrimentally on non-traditional university students, such as FE students, and their ability to participate equitably in education progression.

Recommendation 8: HEIs need to coordinate efforts to lobby for the extension of SUSI to part-time and flexible learners.

146. O'Sullivan. (2018), 206.

147. DES. (June 2020).

148. SOLAS. (2020), Future FET.

149. One Family. (April 2021).

150. Disability Federation of Ireland. (April 2021).

151. AONTAS. (April 2021).

152. National Childcare Scheme. (October 2022).

153. One Family. (April 2021), 8.

5.2.9 PEER SUPPORT/MENTORING

Participants suggested that post-Covid 19, more mixing and group work should happen during their FE course, to facilitate networking and shared learning, both between students learning on the same course and between students from different disciplines that will likely work together in the 'real world.' Peer support was emphasised as being hugely important to participants' ability to progress through FET, particularly during times of difficulty. Participants also expressed concern about a supposed lack of peer support in university, particularly because the student profile in higher education is perceived as being very different from that of a FE student. Mature students referred to the importance of making friends of a similar age and circumstance as a motivation to 'keep going'. Initiatives such as the ACCESS+ initiative between Cork ETB, University College Cork and Munster Technological University targets learners in post-primary and follows them through to FET and HE by establishing a connection with a 'link person' or 'connector,' who supports the learner's progression through a combination of peer support, mentoring and financial support, and there have been calls for this model to be expanded nationwide.¹⁵⁴

Recommendation 9: HEIs should have specific partnership models of support in place for FET to HE progression that include peer support and mentoring.

5.2.10 IT SKILLS TRAINING

The digital gap between different learners exacerbated with the pandemic but it existed before the pandemic,¹⁵⁵ which served to highlight the issue of digital exclusion for many vulnerable groups in society.¹⁵⁶ Technology plays a significant role in higher education and FE participants worried that their IT skills would not be sufficient for progression to higher education.



Participants identified the need for targeted training in IT skills as well as availability of digital equipment, WIFI and spaces/hubs with WIFI and computer access since they might not have the required space to study at home, particularly for those in Direct Provision or shared accommodation.

The absence of educational technology and IT support, for both the teachers and the learners in FET, on a par with supports available at third-level, prove a significant obstacle to be addressed as part of the learning process,¹⁵⁷ and one which may have a direct impact on FET to HE progression.

154. HEA. (2022). FET Colleges Ireland.

155. O'Brien. (August 2021), *The Irish Times*.

156. HEA. (2022). FET Colleges Ireland.

157. *Ibid*.

Recommendation 10: HEIs to provide targeted computer skills training and support for FE students and to communicate these supports pre-entry.

5.3 FINAL REFLECTIONS

“

I'm so glad I did it...it's gonna be a lot more enjoyable than you (I) thought on the first day. This is the start of something much bigger!

– Focus Group Participant

As a closing exercise in focus groups, we asked participants what advice they would give their former selves at the start of their FET journey. In all the focus groups, people said that they would tell themselves not to worry so much, not to put themselves under so much pressure and to enjoy the experience. They also said that they would emphasise that however nervous and fearful they might feel on the first day of FET, it was going to get better and become one of the most enjoyable and fulfilling experiences of their lives.

One of the most significant dispositional barriers to engaging with FET is self-esteem,¹⁵⁸ and many participants who took part in this research had a negative secondary school experience, that was remedied by their positive experience in FET and which helped build their self-confidence and self-efficacy.

However, higher education institutions need to be cognisant of the long-term impact of negative school experience and to rethink higher education pathways for non-traditional learners. At a recent international seminar organised by An Cosán (an innovative model of community education based in Jobstown in Dublin), Dr. Rebekah Brennan (UCC) and Dr. Thomas Murray (An Cosán), discussed how flexible and blended-learning programmes that value lived experience (where people can relate to the subjects and each other) and take a holistic approach to learning, offer an alternative pathway to HE by supporting education progression through an interdependent ecology of actions and supports.¹⁵⁹ The alternative, is a conveyor belt of higher education, where university is regarded as an extension of compulsory schooling and ironically does not produce the diverse workforce necessary for a balanced and productive society for which it was designed and upon which it relies.¹⁶⁰ To actively encourage diversity at third-level, we believe that HE should work with FET towards providing/supporting community-based higher education that takes a 'whole-person' approach to educational progression.

Many of the participants in this research voiced their concerns about whether the cost and length of time required to undertake a degree would be worth it, and certainly funnelling students into college creates perversities in the labour market, as while a vastly credentialed world offers profound benefits, the distressing reality is that suddenly degrees aren't worth anything.¹⁶¹

158. SOLAS. (2017).

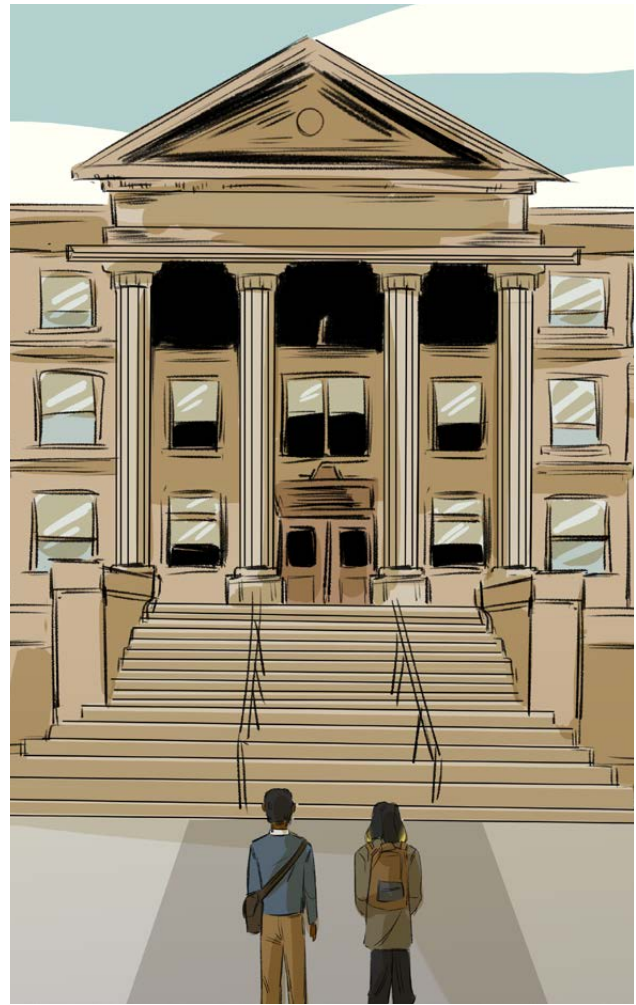
159. Rebekah & Murray. (November 18, 2022).

160. Conover. (2016), 26-27.

161. *Ibid*, 27.

HEIs need to ensure that the university experience fulfils learner expectations when they cross the threshold, and serves to develop their capacity to be able to achieve their objectives. A skewing of emphasis on entry into HE rather than on student experience and post-graduation destination, ignores the extent to which students are enabled or constrained as agents of equality.¹⁶²

This research examines HE from the perspective of FE students themselves and explores how they view and value HE. While some hold the belief that HE will be socially and economically value, there are others who remain unconvinced. Access on its own does not ensure upward social mobility for excluded social groups,¹⁶³ unless it is part of a university which is a critical and reflexive space and which fosters agency.¹⁶⁴ The voices of FE students have, we believe, have showed us how a more holistic approach to progression from FET to HE could indeed be the *'start of something much bigger,'* but this requires us to move beyond viewing equity of access to higher education as a numbers game.



162. Fleming et al. (2017).

163. Brown & Lauder. (2011).

164. Fleming et al. (2017), 128.

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APPENDIX : FE STUDENT SURVEY





FET Student Survey - Attitudes towards University

Page 1: Purpose of this research and about you

The purpose of this survey and this research is to help us understand why more FET students don't go on to university after completing FET college courses.

Therefore, this research is about exploring and finding out about your attitudes to university as an FET student and also to understand your thought-making and decision-making process around whether or not you would like to attend university after college.

We are particularly interested in hearing your thoughts if you...

...are going on to university after your FET course.

...had previously thought about going on to university after your FET course and have changed your mind.

...have never thought about going on to university either before or after your FET course.

NB - There are no right or wrong answers, we would simply love to hear from you so that we can try to make our universities more welcoming to FET students.

1. Please tick the box below to give consent to participate in the survey. Please note that you can only proceed with the survey if you give your consent. All information you provide will be treated with confidentiality. You can withdraw from the survey at any time. I consent to participate in the survey.

Yes

2. I am over 18. (Note you can only participate in this research if you are over 18 at the time of taking part).

Yes

3. Please tick the appropriate box

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to say

4. What age are you?

- 18-25
- 25-35
- Over 35

5. Can you confirm that you attend one of the following FET colleges

- Marino College of Further Education
- Ballyfermot College of Further Education
- Whitehall College of Further Education
- Plunkett College of Further Education
- Coláiste Dhúlaigh College of Further Education
- Killester College of Further Education
- Dunboyne College of Further Education
- Other

5.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

6. What QQI level or equivalent is your course?

- Level 5
- Level 6

7. What is the name of your course?

8. How long is your course for?

- 1 Year
- 2 Years
- Other

8.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

9. What year of your course are you in?

Page 2: About you in college

10. What kind of things are you trying to juggle while attending college? (Family responsibilities, work etc.)

11. What do you hope to gain from your attending college?

12. What worries/challenges (if any) have you had to contend with while attending college?

13. What triumphs (if any) have you experienced while attending college? E.g. Passing assignments, finding out new talents that you have, becoming aware of new opportunities etc.

Page 3: About you after college

14. What plans (if any) have you made for after college?

15. What has mostly influenced your decision about what to do after college?

16. Are you thinking about attending university when your course is complete?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

16.a. Can you tell us more about this?

17. What are the specific things that will/would make progressing further with your education difficult?

18. If you do go to university, will you also have to work?

- Yes
- No
- Other

18.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

19. If you don't go to university after college, what type of work will you pursue?

Page 4: Your attitudes to university

20. What do you think might be the differences between where you are studying now and university?

21. What feelings do you think a person might experience starting university? e.g. nervous, excited etc.

22. What challenges do you think might a person experience while attending university? e.g. financial, level, accommodation etc.

23. What do you think are the benefits (if any) for someone attending university?

24. Are there any potential risks for someone attending university?

Page 5: Final thoughts and details

25. Is there anything else we have not mentioned that you would like to add?

26. Would you be interested in taking part in a focus-group in the DCU Campus with other Further Education and Training students to further discuss ? This would be a confidential space facilitated by two former FET students who have now completed their study at university. You will receive a €25 gift voucher to thank you for your time and participation in the focus group.

- Yes I would be interested
- No I would not be interested

26.a. If you would be interested in taking part in a focus group in DCU, please provide your email address here so that we may contact you -

26.a.i. Please confirm your email address -

26.b. Please provide your email address if you would like to be entered into the draw for a €100 one-for-all voucher.

26.b.i. Please confirm your email address -

Page 6: Final page

Thank you so much for participating in this survey to help us to understand the choices that college students make around transition from Further Education, in particular in relation to whether or not to progress to university.

We really appreciate your taking the time to participate!

Your participation in this survey is anonymous and we will not share your email with anyone. If you have any queries or concerns about this research or if you wish to withdraw your contribution you can contact the research lead -

Dr. Sarah Meaney Sartori, Research Manager, College Connect Programme MEND Region, Maynooth University Access Department

T: +353 1 7086387/0873502405

E: sarah.sartori@mu.ie **W:** [@MU_MAP](http://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/access-office)

You may also contact the Maynooth Social Research Ethics Committee, if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above. Please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection>

Thank you for taking the time to read this.



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