



Relationality, recognition and reward at the margins

Teachers' experiences of mature student access courses in Irish higher education

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Dedication	viii
List of figures	ix
List of appendices	x
Abbreviations	xi
Abstract	xiii

Chapter One: Introducing my research study

1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Positioning myself in my research	4
1.3	Rationale and motivation for my research	6
1.4	My research questions	8
1.4.1	Using the term ‘teacher’	9
1.5	Theoretically situating my study	10
1.6	Structure of my thesis and overview of chapters	13

Chapter Two: Setting the scene – system, policy and practice contexts

2.1	Introduction	16
2.2	The higher education system in Ireland	16
2.3	Irish higher education policy	20
2.3.1	The impact of neoliberal ideology on higher education	22
2.3.2	The 2007 global financial crisis	24
2.3.3	The influence of the ‘Hunt Report’	26
2.3.4	Higher education’s policy agenda today	28
2.4	Understanding ‘equity of access’ as higher education policy ..	29
2.4.1	The evolution of national access policy and practice	33
2.4.2	Access courses as an equity of access initiative	38
2.4.3	Organisational positioning of access courses	40
2.4.3.1	Status of access courses nationally	42
2.4.3.2	Adult education provision within higher education	46
2.5	Mature students as an equity of access target group	51
2.5.1	Mature student participation in higher education	53
2.5.1.1	Mature students’ experiences of higher education	56
2.5.2	Mature student participation on access courses	62
2.5.2.1	Mature students’ experiences of access courses	64

2.5.3	Teachers' experiences of access courses	70
2.6	Relevance of adult education philosophies	73
2.6.1	Insight from andragogy	75
2.6.2	Application to the MSAC context	77
2.7	Conclusion	79

Chapter Three: Relationality in education

3.1	Introduction	81
3.2	Mapping the relational landscape	85
3.2.1	Overview	85
3.2.2	Care and caring in education	87
3.2.2.1	Care as a value in higher education teaching	91
3.2.3	Relationality within critical education approaches	93
3.2.3.1	Freire's dialogical approach	94
3.2.3.2	Biesta's concept of 'learnification'	96
3.2.3.3	Insights from critical education	97
3.2.4	An uneasy place for emotions and alternative ways of knowing	99
3.3	Relational pedagogy	105
3.3.1	Origins of relational pedagogy	105
3.3.2	Describing and 'doing' relational pedagogy	109
3.3.3	The place and value of relational pedagogy in higher education	114
3.3.3.1	Relevance of relational pedagogy to the MSAC context	120
3.3.4	Mattering and belonging	121
3.3.5	Is a relationality pedagogy sufficient?	124
3.4	Recognition	126
3.4.1	Honneth's solidarity / self-esteem concept	128
3.4.2	Fraser's 'misrecognition as status subordination'	131
3.4.3	Marginality	133
3.5	Drawing my conceptual framework together	134
3.6	Conclusion	138

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1	Introduction	139
4.2	My epistemology	139
4.2.1	Settling on a research paradigm	142
4.3	Qualitative research	143
4.3.1	Taking an exploratory approach	145
4.3.2	Validity and reliability in qualitative research	148
4.4	Case study	150

4.4.1	Inviting MSAC teacher participants	152
4.4.2	HEI descriptions	154
4.4.3	Research participant profiles	156
4.5	Interviews as a data collection method	157
4.5.1	Online interviewing	161
4.6	Data analysis and coding	164
4.6.1	Thematic analysis	165
4.6.2	Data coding	167
4.6.2.1	Field texts and analytic memos	174
4.6.3	Finalising themes	175
4.6.4	Connecting data to theory	177
4.7	Ethical considerations	179
4.7.1	Reflexivity	179
4.7.2	Insider and outsider	181
4.7.3	Ethics protocol	185
4.8	Conclusion	185

Chapter Five: Becoming and being a MSAC teacher

5.1	Introduction	187
5.2	Participants' interest in teaching	187
5.2.1	Teaching experience prior to the MSAC	188
5.2.2	Motivations to teach	189
5.2.3	Getting involved with the MSAC	191
5.3	Teaching approaches in the MSAC classroom	194
5.3.1	Preparing for standards required at undergraduate level	194
5.3.2	Awareness of students' motivations, circumstances and experiences	196
5.3.3	Peer learning and support	202
5.3.4	Active student participation	203
5.3.5	Dealing with learner anxiety	205
5.3.6	Understanding, empathy and recognition	207
5.4	Becoming a 'better teacher'	209
5.4.1	Autonomy and responsibility	211
5.5	Summary of 'Becoming and being a MSAC teacher'	213

Chapter Six: Reward and relationship

6.1	Introduction	215
6.2	Benefits and rewards	216
6.2.1	Confidence and self-belief	216
6.2.2	Job satisfaction	217
6.2.3	Observing learner growth and transformation	220

6.2.4	“Anti-teaching”	222
6.2.5	Receiving student feedback	224
6.3	Relationality and connection	225
6.3.1	Impact of Covid	229
6.4	Summary of ‘Reward and relationship’	233

Chapter Seven: Teaching below the radar

7.1	Introduction	235
7.2	Awareness of mature student access courses	235
7.2.1	Participants’ own awareness of MSAC	235
7.2.2	Participants’ awareness of an ‘access agenda’	237
7.2.3	Academic colleagues’ awareness of MSAC	239
7.3	Insecurity of MSAC teaching work	244
7.3.1	Pay and contracts	245
7.3.1.1	Casual and part-time staff	245
7.3.1.2	PhD students’ perspectives	248
7.3.1.3	Impact on personal values and commitment to access work ..	249
7.3.2	Recognition and belonging	250
7.4	Value of teaching in higher education	253
7.5	Summary of ‘Teaching below the radar’	256

Chapter Eight: Discussion

8.1	Introduction	257
8.2	Characteristics of an MSAC teaching space	260
8.2.1	Teaching in a ‘border country’	260
8.2.2	Space for multiple knowledges	264
8.2.3	Beliefs, values and dispositions	270
8.2.4	Section summary	275
8.3	A relational teaching and learning space	277
8.3.1	Learning and becoming ‘in relation’	277
8.3.2	Making teaching spaces ‘habitable’	283
8.3.3	A place for emotions	289
8.3.4	Pedagogy within a pandemic	294
8.3.5	Section summary	297
8.4	Status of access teaching	298
8.4.1	Programme status and subordination of ‘pure’ teaching	298
8.4.2	Teacher status and belonging	304
8.4.3	A ‘futureless’ occupation	306
8.4.4	Section summary	310
8.5	Conclusion	311

Chapter Nine: Conclusions and recommendations

9.1	Introduction	316
9.1.1	Overview of findings	317
9.1.2	Filling the research gap	318
9.2	Implications and recommendations from my research findings	320
9.2.1	Recognising higher education access courses and teachers	321
9.2.1.1	Institutional responsibility for equity of access	321
9.2.1.2	Recognition of access course teacher role	324
9.2.1.3	Teacher learning and development	328
9.2.1.4	Teacher inclusion and belonging	329
9.2.2	Importance of fostering relational competencies and cultures	332
9.2.2.1	Educators as relational and political beings	332
9.2.2.2	A reflection on higher education from the border country	337
9.2.2.3	Relational pedagogy's importance to social inclusion and lifelong learning in higher education	340
9.3	Contribution of this research study	343
9.4	Limitations of this research	345
9.5	Parting thoughts	346
	 Bibliography	 350
	Appendices	392

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List of figures

Figure 2.1: Higher education system performance framework	29
Figure 2.2: Mature student participation in higher education in Ireland ...	54
Figure 2.3: Mature student participation on access courses in Ireland	63
Figure 3.1: Conceptual framework	82
Figure 4.1: Participant profile overview	156
Figure 4.2: Phases of thematic analysis	166
Figure 4.3: Examples of open and simultaneous coding	170
Figure 4.4: Transcript documents in MAXQDA with total number of coded segments	171
Figure 4.5: Extract from transcript showing simultaneous coding	171
Figure 4.6: ‘Good rapport / more equal relationship’ code segments	172
Figure 4.7: Code families in MAXQDA	173
Figure 4.8: Summary of macro themes	176
Figure 4.9: Starting to connect data to theory and literature	178
Figure 8.1: Reflecting on research findings through conceptual lenses	259

List of appendices

Appendix A:	Research participant interview guide	392
Appendix B:	Invitation to participate in research	393
Appendix C:	Information sheet for research participants	394
Appendix D:	Participant consent form	398
Appendix E:	Ethics approval	400
Appendix F:	Review of Irish Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) literature	401
Appendix G:	Initial non-categorised open code list	406
Appendix H:	Interim expanded and categorised code list	411
Appendix I:	Final code system in MAXQDA	419
Appendix J:	Example of code map in MAXQDA	422
Appendix K:	Early “hands-on” approach to thematic mapping	423
Appendix L:	Later thematic map	424
Appendix M:	Extract from fieldwork reflective journal	425

Abbreviations

ACE	Adult and Continuing Education
AISHE	All-Ireland Society for Higher Education
AWP	Access and Widening Participation
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CPE	Continuing Professional Education
DARE	Disability Access Route to Higher Education
DES	Department of Education and Science <i>or</i> Department of Education and Skills
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
EAEA	European Association for the Education of Adults
EAN	European Access Network
ECF	Employment Control Framework
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ERT	Emergency Remote Teaching
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
EUA	European University Association
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
FY	Foundation Year
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HR	Human Resources
IFUT	Irish Federation of University Teachers
IoT	Institute of Technology
IT	Information Technology

KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LCS	Love, Care and Solidarity
MSAC	Mature Student Access Course
MSI	Mature Students Ireland
MSO	Mature Student Officer
NAP	National Access Plan
NPM	New Public Management
NTO	National Tertiary Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PATH	Programme for Access to Higher Education
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RCEN	Relation-Centred Education Network
RCT	Relational Cultural Theory
RGAM	Recurrent Grant Allocation Model
RTA	Relational Teaching Approach
SoTL	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TA	Thematic Analysis <i>or</i> Teaching Assistant
TAP	Trinity Access Programme
TU	Technological University
T&L	Teaching and Learning
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

Abstract

This is a study of higher education teachers' experiences of teaching on mature student access courses (MSACs) in Irish higher education. This qualitative research is an exploratory case study and is based on semi-structured interviews carried out online with nine MSAC teachers in two higher education institutions in Ireland. MSACs are long-standing operational elements of Irish higher education equity of access strategy and teachers' experiences of teaching on these courses has been largely absent from Irish research literature up to now. The aim of this study is to present these educators' perspectives of their work in this contextualised teaching space and thus to offer insight into the personal and professional meaning and value of this teaching in higher education.

These teaching roles are analysed against a backdrop of neoliberal practices and dominant academic cultures in higher education and participants' experiences are explored through the interconnecting conceptual lenses of relational pedagogy and recognition. The study is significant from the perspective that the MSACs are located on the periphery of higher education institutions' organisational structures and academic cultures, yet these educators are responsible for supporting non-traditional students to prepare for and successfully progress to higher education under a national equity of access remit. This is a core higher education mission which is central to institutional strategy, as well as to evaluation of institutional and higher education system performance at national level.

My findings suggest that at the micro and meso levels MSAC teaching is highly rewarding, professionally developmental work for my participants when considered through a relational lens, however that my participants experience a lack of recognition of this work and of their own professional status as teachers in higher education at a more macro, institutional level. For some, this impacts on their self-esteem and on their capacity to commit on a long-term basis to critical equity of access work in higher education.

A key argument of this thesis is that engaging in relation-centred education is as important for teachers' growth and development, and for their institutional sense of belonging, as it is for students, and that an access course is a key site within higher education that offers this kind of experience and opportunity. In these teaching contexts a pedagogy of relation is also a pedagogy of recognition and thus this thesis argues for the need to create and promote opportunities to prioritise relational teaching within the dominant teaching-research dualism of higher education and to explicitly recognise the value and place of relation-centred teaching spaces, practices and teachers.

Chapter One: Introducing my research study

*"It is in letting go, we stay connected
In freeing, we are strong
It is through kindness that we grow
And by loving we belong"*
(Fingleton, 2021)

1.1 Introduction

This is a study of the experiences of mature student access course (MSAC) teachers in two Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). The study is located within my long-standing core professional practice of supporting mature student access to, and participation in, higher education. It explores the experiences and voices of nine MSAC teachers through the separate and interconnecting lenses of relational pedagogy and recognition. Access courses form part of the equity of access 'agenda' which has been a key aspect of national higher education policy for over 30 years (Walsh 2014a; Loxley et al., 2017a). The 'access agenda' aims to address the educational inequality and disadvantage experienced by identified communities or societal groups¹ that are typically under-represented in higher education, with the aim being that the student body in higher education should reflect the diversity and social mix of Irish society today (HEA, 2015; HEA, 2022a). Access courses are one of many initiatives designed to respond to this wider equity of access agenda in Ireland and their purpose is to prepare 'non-traditional' learners, who typically do not hold conventional entry qualifications, for progression to undergraduate studies (Jones, 2006; Fleming, 2010; Brosnan, 2013; Fleming et al., 2017b; O'Sullivan et al., 2019). The broader policy context for equity of access work is elaborated further in Chapter Two.

Access courses, also known as 'return to learning' courses or 'foundation courses' (Fleming, 2010), include those that are designed specifically for adult learners, typically called 'mature students' in the higher education lexicon. Throughout this thesis these

¹ Current priority groups in Irish higher education include entrants from socio-economic groups or backgrounds that have low participation in higher education; students with disabilities; and members of the Traveller and Roma communities. (HEA, 2022a)

courses will be referred to as mature student access courses (MSACs). MSACs are usually aligned, either formally or informally, with Levels 5 or 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications² which places them at pre-entry to higher education course level. The primary purpose of MSACs is to provide a pathway to undergraduate education for adult learners who do not hold conventional entry qualifications and/or for those who have been out of formal education for a long period of time. In other words, they give learners “the time and space to acclimatise to HE” (O’Sullivan et al., 2019, p. 19). MSACs serve a broad range of functions for these ‘second-chance’ adult learners including confidence-building, development of peer relationships and support, bridging an academic or qualifications gap, and building social and cultural capital prior to entry to higher education. Supplementation of the ‘attainment gap’ (O’Sullivan et al., 2019) is undertaken by offering general skills subjects such as maths, computer skills, science, and study skills at foundation or revision level, as well as offering foundation level studies in more ‘specialised’ higher education academic subjects such as Philosophy, Sociology and Engineering (as examples). In Ireland, many MSACs are funded, managed and delivered directly by higher education Access Services, although some are delivered in partnership with the further education sector (Murphy, 2009; Fleming, 2010). As Access Services in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) are considered professional services, funded and positioned separately from academic departments, many MSACs are taught by a mix of part-time or ‘hourly casual’ teachers, PhD students, and on occasion by full- or part-time academic staff who are assigned by their department to teach a specific MSAC subject, on request of the Access Service. A more detailed account of how MSACs align with higher education equity of access policy is given in Section 2.4.2.

Given that MSACs are typically delivered in and by HEIs and are designed for adult learners who are returning to formal education, MSAC teachers’ professional practice could be suggested to lie at the interface of higher education and adult education, two distinct educational fields of practice. Higher education predominantly offers formal and structured learning opportunities leading to awards at the upper levels (levels 6 to 10)

² [https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-\(NFQ\).aspx](https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx)

of the National Framework of Qualifications and, as a public good (Marginson, 2011; DES 2018), is considered to serve multiple purposes. These purposes include the provision of liberal, professional and vocational education to meet a range of regional and national agendas, such as employability and economic development, as well as education for citizenship and societal development (Jarvis, 1987; Fallis, 2005; DFHERIS, 2021; HEA, 2023a). Higher education is thus considered to be a driver of both social and economic change. The field of adult education, on the other hand, is not so easily delineated or defined (Merrill, 2009; Halx, 2010; Knowles et al., 2015; Bowl, 2017; Biesta, 2018) and unlike higher education, many (although not all) adult education 'offerings' do not operate within a standardised qualifications framework or governance structure. Merriam and Caffarella (1991, p. 45) describe adult education as "a large and amorphous field of practice, with no neat boundaries such as age." At its simplest adult education can be described as any form of education or learning – credited or non-accredited - undertaken by adult learners outside of the compulsory education system (primary and post-primary) or outside of the normal expected progression trajectory of school to tertiary education. It is offered in a wide variety of sites and contexts such as in community settings, further education, workplaces and higher education institutions, encompassing the breadth of formal, non-formal and informal learning (UNESCO, 2022). The Irish government has long defined adult education as any "systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training" (DES, 2000, p. 12) while from a public policy perspective Keogh (2004, p. 18) defines it as "publicly-funded provision of adult learning in statutory and other agencies". In its broadest form therefore, adult education can encompass a wide range of learning opportunities from basic literacy to vocational skills training, through to personal development and lifelong learning courses and thus can also serve a broad range of purposes (Merrill, 2009; Slowey, 2016; Biesta 2018). Fundamentally however, what differentiates MSACs from other forms of adult education and/or continuing professional education provision in higher education (where students are likely to primarily be adult learners) is the specific purpose of MSACs of providing a direct pathway to undergraduate studies for adult learners.

It is not simply the plurality of learning sites, and diversity of educational purposes and learners, that distinguishes adult education as a field of practice from that of higher education, but that it also has a range of distinct philosophical bases (Elias and Merriam, 2005) and I will elaborate on this point further in Section 2.6. In brief however, from a philosophical standpoint, adult education and higher education typically espouse very different epistemologies and pedagogies. Part of higher education's role is to create and share new knowledge, increasingly considered and treated as a commodity (Kauppinen, 2014; Lynch, 2015) and from a pedagogical perspective, is typically considered to be 'transferred' through the expertise of the lecturer to the student (Marginson, 2011). On the other hand, from an epistemological viewpoint knowledge is not considered to reside with 'experts' under an adult education ethos, but rather its creation is seen as a joint endeavour between teacher and learner, drawing on the experiential knowledge of all parties (Freire, 1970; Knowles, 1990). Higher education access courses, and particularly MSACs, are thus located at interesting cultural, structural, philosophical and policy intersections (Johnston et al., 2012). These divergent views on the expert possession versus the co-creation of knowledge typically creates a tension, not just for educators working at this interface, but also for professional services staff. We align our work with the strategic goals of our HEIs and with national policy, based on objectives around 'access', 'participation' and 'success' (HEA, 2022a) of non-traditional students and our work typically focuses on optimising students' experiences and outcomes of engaging in higher education. However, reflecting on our relationship with our students and what this brings to our practice enables us, as practitioners, and as adult educators in a higher education space, to be knowledge-makers also. Therefore, throughout this thesis I will consider aspects of adult and higher education philosophies and practices drawing on MSAC teachers' experiences, which I hope in turn will support an additional understanding of the value and contribution of MSACs to higher education, as courses that are positioned within these intersecting fields of practice.

1.2 Positioning myself in my research

I have worked in Irish higher education for most of my career, including over 14 years in the area of mature student access to higher education. I have also worked on a voluntary

basis as an adult literacy tutor, as an overseas volunteer working with young adults in vocational education, and as a volunteer English language tutor. When I embarked on the Doctorate in Higher and Adult Education (DHAЕ) in Maynooth University, I had been working as Mature Student Officer (MSO) for six years in an Irish university. One of my responsibilities in that role was to coordinate provision of an MSAC, a year-long pre-entry course designed to support adults to prepare academically, culturally and personally to progress to undergraduate studies. For five years prior to being MSO I had coordinated provision of a cross-institutional outreach access course for non-traditional learners which included both younger students and adult learners. Therefore, at the time of embarking on my doctoral research I had spent a total of 11 years supporting adult learners to progress to higher education via their participation on access courses.

I have always enjoyed working with mature students in particular for the connections, and at times the lasting friendships, that have developed with some of these students over the years. My personal experiences of working with mature students led me to wonder about how my colleagues who taught mature students experienced their own work. Although I did not teach on the MSAC myself, I worked with committed educators with a passion for teaching, who created learning environments that enabled their students to confidently and successfully transition into undergraduate studies. As course director of an MSAC, my interest in exploring teachers' experiences of this teaching space lay in my profound belief that my teaching colleagues contributed significantly to the ultimate successful participation of their students in higher education. And even though I had frequently observed and heard how much enjoyment my MSAC teaching colleagues got from their work, I had no real insight into what teaching on an MSAC meant to them personally or professionally and particularly considering the structural, social and cultural higher education contexts in which the course was positioned. Through this research therefore, I sought to deepen my understanding of teachers' experiences of this work, and thus to gain deeper insight into the meaning and value for teachers of these teaching spaces in higher education.

By the time I had completed my fieldwork however, I had taken on the role of Director of Student Services in my HEI, with leadership responsibility for the strategic

development of access and widening participation (AWP) services, along with a wide range of other professional student services. While this move took me away from the ‘coalface’ of working with mature students and MSAC teachers, remaining embedded in this research ensured that I maintained my own awareness of MSAC teachers’ contribution to the wider work of AWP services and to the institution. I also remained mindful of the critical issues of power and privilege that arise in education through my continued engagement in my research and the analysis of my participants’ experiences. My personal reflections on my research findings from this additional professional perspective are included in the final chapter of this thesis.

1.3 Rationale and motivation for my research

Access courses, due to their small size and their underpinning philosophy of social justice and inclusion, are typically delivered within an ethos of care and supportive relationships (Jones, 2006; Scanlon, 2009; Busher et al., 2015a; James et al., 2016) and the pivotal role that access course teachers play in engendering positive student experiences has been identified in many studies (Fleming, 2010; Foster, 2008; Murphy, 2009; Johnston et al., 2012; Brosnan, 2013; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015). In my own HEI regular formal and informal student feedback on the MSAC demonstrated the value of the course in supporting mature student progression to undergraduate studies within which the commitment and care shown by MSAC teachers to their students was often highlighted. Irish research on mature students’ experiences of higher education more generally is prolific (e.g. Murphy and Fleming, 2000; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a; Giblin, 2015; Keane, 2017; Kearns, 2017) and some research has also been carried out on different aspects of access courses (MSACs and others) in Ireland (e.g. Brosnan, 2013; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017; O’Sullivan et al., 2019; Forster et al., 2022). These studies are valuable for what they tell us about what is important to mature students in returning to higher education, highlighting the need for supportive teachers and learning environments, as well as identifying the personal and practical challenges (e.g. financial, time constraints, lack of confidence) experienced by mature students in higher education. This literature will be explored in Chapter Two to provide important contextual background to my research.

However, as with much research on educational interventions more generally, the focus of research on access courses, as equity of access initiatives or as part of formal course evaluations, has primarily remained on the 'subjects' of the interventions i.e. on the students. Significantly less research has been undertaken on the experiences of professional staff or teachers whose work directly supports the access agenda in Irish higher education (Fleming et al., 2017b). In other words, studies on access courses carried out to date have, for the most part, focused on students' experiences of these courses, with limited prominence given to teachers' perspectives or experiences. Merriam and Bierema (2014, p. 251) point out that "oftentimes the *educator* is overlooked in discussions of teaching and learning in adult education. We believe this is a mistake as the work of helping adults learn begins with the well-being and mindset of the educator, and where he or she is involved in the learning". In a similar vein, McKillican (2020, p. 121) suggests that "it is important to listen to these (educators') voices as these key stakeholders in adult education have much to say about the educational relationship with the learner and other aspects of adult education and how it impacts on society, the learner *and the educators themselves*" (my italics). As adult educators, these authors highlight the importance of the affective and relational dimensions of the educational experience for educators. While my participants are not adult educators *per se* in that they teach in higher education rather than in the adult education sector, I agree with the contention that the voices of those who teach adult learners, particularly in the MSAC teaching space in higher education, have been largely overlooked in discussions and research to date on access initiatives. Therefore, my research complements existing studies on access courses by exploring the experiences and perspectives of those who teach on these programmes. As well as being personally valuable to the learners themselves, we know that such courses are valuable to higher education from a policy alignment perspective, and for their contribution to meeting equity of access strategic objectives and targets. But the personal and professional value of these courses to those who teach on them is an area which has been under-explored and is a perspective which my research aims to illuminate, albeit based on a limited number of participant responses.

The primary aim of my research therefore is to document an account of MSAC teachers' experiences of teaching on these courses and to understand what their accounts tell us about the meaning for them of engaging in this work. As Palmer (1997, p. 12) asks, "students are dependent on teachers for grades – but what are teachers dependent on students for?" This is an important question which, as higher education educators and professionals, we rarely stop to consider, and is critical given the centrality of equity of access within institutional and national higher education policy. I liken my interest in this research focus to Finnegan et al.'s (2017, p. 124) sentiment that:

"Put crudely, HE is meant to do something to students: this is held to be socially and economically valuable but this is perceived to not need much exploration or explication as it will happen regardless by crossing the threshold. The experience of being in a college, or the type of learning that occurs in HE, do not have to be delved into in any detail ... This of course renders students mute but also means that in a very profound sense we simply do not know enough about what is actually happening to them in HE and through the access experience".

Something similar could be said of MSAC teachers (and, I suggest from my own experience, of access professionals more generally). I do not mean to imply that MSAC teaching 'does' something to teachers, but rather that their experiences and perspectives of working in this space are not generally visible. In embarking on this research however, while my personal perception was that the contribution of MSAC teachers' work was largely 'unseen' outside the Access Service, I sought to be mindful of Armitage and Welsby's (2009, p. 113) contention that "people, on the whole, are always speaking in the spaces they inhabit ... They are only ever silent to those who aren't listening". This research was my opportunity to listen more closely.

1.4 My research questions

My research was guided initially by one overarching question: *"How do higher education teachers describe their experiences of their work on a mature student access course?"* within which a number of sub-questions were explored:

- Who teaches on MSACs and why?
- How do MSAC teachers experience the teacher-learner relationship?
- How does MSAC teaching differ from other teaching in higher education?
- What is the distinctive value of this teaching space in higher education?

- What meaning do MSAC teachers attribute to their experiences within the broader policy context of equity of access to higher education?

Ultimately however, given the conversations that unfolded with my participants this latter question expanded in its focus as my thesis developed to encompass an exploration of how MSAC teachers experienced their sense of place or belonging within the institution as a result of working within this policy context.

This research effectively interrogates a teaching experience which resides at the interface of adult and higher education pedagogies and practices, and therefore aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of this teaching space and particularly to how it is shaped through relationship. By undertaking this research, I aimed to inform my own practice as Mature Student Officer and MSAC course director (as I was at the time I commenced this research). I also aimed to contribute to the dearth of knowledge which continues to exist with respect to ‘access teaching’ in Ireland as well as to add to the wider body of knowledge on the impact and relevance of higher education access courses.

1.4.1 Using the term ‘teacher’

I chose to use the term ‘teacher’ when articulating my initial research question, and I use the general term ‘MSAC teacher’ throughout this thesis, albeit ‘teacher’ is not a term which is commonly used in higher education. In the context of my research, it means ‘those who teach on MSACs’. ‘Lecturer’, ‘tutor’, ‘teaching assistant’, ‘professor’, ‘college teacher’ – these are all titles that are more commonly used in higher education. The straightforward title of ‘teacher’ is usually reserved for those who teach within the primary, post-primary and further education sectors while ‘adult educator’ is often used in the field of adult education (e.g. Brookfield, 2005; Merrill, 2009). My experience on the ground has been that MSAC teachers tend to be a mix of PhD students, part-time college teachers, “casual hourly” staff and, on occasion, full-time lecturers. Thus, there is no clear or unique professional title which can be ascribed to MSAC teachers, and they do not form a distinct professional teaching cohort within the Irish education system.

The colloquial term that I have personally used for many years is ‘MSAC tutor’ which is a title that reflects the more intimate nature of small class teaching in higher education. It is also a title which reflects the dual pedagogical and pastoral nature of such roles historically in higher education (Grant, 2021). However, through my study for this DHAE programme, having explored the work of educational writers such as Palmer (1998), hooks (1994), Daloz (2012) and Schwartz (2019), who often refer to themselves as higher education ‘teachers’, I chose to use the term ‘teacher’ as the most inclusive one for my research. Given the positioning and purpose of these courses within higher education, I also sought to distinguish the activity of teaching from the activity of lecturing as the former evokes a closer sense of connection between teacher and learner. The term ‘teacher’ also encapsulated the core of my participants’ MSAC work, and I hoped would be inclusive enough of all participants’ varying professional and employment statuses within both participating HEIs that everyone would be able to identify with and recognise themselves in this title.

1.5 Theoretically situating my study

Fingleton’s (2021) beautifully simple but profound poetic reflections on life during Covid lockdown at the start of this chapter remind us of the value of human connection in our lives and of the importance of nurturing caring and supportive relationships. As Fingleton observes, in the unforeseen circumstances that were created by Covid, society found ways to stay connected – in work, in life, in education – and that connectedness with each other was in fact maintained by staying physically apart. The lines of this poem are apt as an opening reflection to my thesis as they reflect some of the themes and concepts which are presented herein, the conversations for which took place during the most restrictive times of the pandemic. While the impact of Covid is not foregrounded in my research, inevitably it did feature in my participants’ experiences, and is included for how its impact re-emphasised the value of connection and relationality in education.

My research examines a highly contextualised teaching and learning space in higher education by turning its gaze to the educators who work with adult learners and through my findings asks, as Gravett (2023, p. 5) does:

“how do we connect to others, and what is the impact of connections in higher education ... What does it feel like to feel that we matter? ... What do connections and mattering look like in the digital university, and how might higher education move from metrics to mattering? There are no easy answers to these questions. But the questions themselves are important. Examining these questions offers cracks, interstices, writings in the margins of the dominant discourses of higher education.”

Themes such as connection, care, belonging and relationality have long featured in education literature (e.g. hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998; Lynch et al., 2007, 2009; Schwartz, 2019) and are themes which surface throughout my research. My conceptual framework draws on a number of related ideas and concepts which centre around the two core ideas of *relationality* and *recognition*, which I use to analyse and interpret MSAC teachers’ experiences. These include concepts such as relational pedagogy (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004; Murphy and Brown, 2012; Gravett, 2023), care (Tronto, 1993; Lynch et al, 2007; Noddings, 2013), and belonging and mattering (Schwartz, 2019; Gravett, 2023). I also draw on contrasting concepts within my conceptual framework, such as those of marginality (Schlossberg, 1989; Bradatan and Craiutu, 2012), recognition (Honneth, 1995) and status subordination (Fraser, 2000) which help me to interpret and juxtapose my participants’ experiences of relational *disconnection* and *misrecognition* within the wider institution.

A wide range of pedagogies are commonly associated with teaching adult learners, albeit they are not exclusive to this cohort of learners. These include critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), andragogy (Knowles, 1990), transformative pedagogy (Mezirow, 1997), and engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994). The concept of relational pedagogy (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004) encapsulates many common aspects of these, such as the centrality of relationships and a commitment to participatory engagement, and more recently has been considered as an important pedagogical lens through which to consider teaching in higher education (Bovill, 2020; Gravett, 2023). It is also used to highlight the benefit to higher education teachers themselves of adopting relational approaches in the classroom, as much as for how such approaches can benefit their students. Although my research does not explicitly or exclusively examine pedagogy in the MSAC classroom, adopting a pedagogical lens through which to interpret my participants’ experiences

supports my understanding of the specific teaching context of these courses, outside my own professional administrative and management experience as course director.

The value of examining the experiences of MSAC teachers through a relational lens is quite simply, as Gravett (2023) states, because relationships in education matter. They matter between students and teachers, between teachers and teachers, and between students and students. They matter because of the “cultures of individualism and instrumentalism, that permeate higher education ... Individualism, and the freedom to pursue one’s desires, has become a taken-for-granted value – commonplace, common sense. But, in an extreme form, it can also be seen as corrosive to collegiality” (Gravett, 2023, p. 3). They matter even more so in higher education as it operates today, with its focus on performativity, accountability, professional status and other managerialist cultures and practices (Lynch et al., 2012; Lynch and Grummell, 2017). They matter because of how higher education has changed, including how we connect with each other in more recent times due to the impact of the pandemic. Therefore, Gravett suggests that “understanding relationships – connections, mattering, and *relationality* – as fundamental to teaching and learning can offer potential to change the way we experience our work as educators” (ibid., p. 1). This is a significant statement which offers much food for thought and is an important point on which I reflect throughout this thesis.

In this thesis therefore, I am bringing together concepts from relational education literature and from recognition literature to explore the unique positioning and experiences of MSAC teachers in higher education in Ireland. Themes evident within the literature suggest that enacting a relational approach to education facilitates growth and fulfilment – not just for learners, but increasingly also self-development and teacher satisfaction are considered (Graham et al., 1992; Felten and Lambert, 2020; Gravett et al., 2022). Likewise, recognition is associated with self-fulfilment or self-actualisation and is also considered to be achieved intersubjectively (Honneth, 1995). Throughout this thesis I aim to provide an ‘empirically-grounded reflection’ (Ivancheva et al., 2019) on the connection between relational pedagogy and recognition as it pertains to the experiences of MSAC teachers in higher education. Ultimately, I suggest that the reward

of teaching is at the intersection of relationality, recognition and growth, and understanding that intersection in this highly contextualised – and oftentimes marginalised – teaching space, is critical to understanding the role and contribution of MSACs, and MSAC teachers, within higher education.

1.6 Structure of my thesis and overview of chapters

This thesis is organised into nine chapters. This chapter introduced and set the scene for my research and outlined my research question, my motivations for undertaking this study and its broad theoretical positioning.

Chapter Two focuses on the policy and practice context for this study. It describes the Irish higher education system, within which the institutions for this research are located, and outlines how higher education policy has evolved. It goes on to explore general policy and practice related to equity of access, a core higher education system objective, before setting out policy and practice specifically with respect to mature students as an equity of access target group. It explores research studies on mature student experiences of higher education, as well as their experiences of access courses. The chapter also explores literature which offers an insight into educators' experiences of these courses, albeit this body of literature is more limited. The nature and focus of access courses, as specific equity of access initiatives, are then presented. The chapter also highlights relevant aspects of adult education philosophies and pedagogies which help to demonstrate where adult education and higher education intersect in the context of MSACs.

Chapter Three presents the conceptual framework for this study. The chapter commences by mapping the relational landscape as it pertains to education more generally. It then goes on to explore core concepts such as relational pedagogy, belonging, mattering and marginality (Schlossberg, 1989; Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004; Schwartz, 2019; Gravett, 2023). The chapter also explores the concept of 'recognition' (Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2000), used to illustrate my participants' contrasting experiences of connection within the institution with their experiences of connection

within the classroom. I then bring the concepts of relational pedagogy and recognition together to argue that there is a mutually reinforcing connection between positive relationships and teacher self-esteem in the context of MSAC teaching in higher education i.e. that you cannot have recognition without relationship, and that the absence of recognition (or misrecognition) occurs in the absence of relationship. The chapter concludes with a summary of the overall framework and how I use it to address my research questions and interpret my findings.

Chapter Four presents a detailed account of the research methodology I adopted to undertake this research, as well as presenting ethical considerations and my own epistemological positioning. My research design aligns with my research objective of exploring the lived experiences of MSAC teachers and thus outlines a qualitative research approach (Ponterotto, 2005), in which I carry out one-to-one interviews, within an overarching exploratory case study framework (Yin, 2018). This approach facilitated me to explore human (i.e. teachers') experiences set within the 'bounded systems' of specific higher education policy and programmes. I interpreted my findings taking a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to distil out three core themes, each of which are subsequently presented in the following three chapters.

Chapter Five presents the first findings theme of 'Becoming and being an MSAC teacher'. This theme explores my participants' interest in teaching, how they became involved in teaching on an MSAC, their teaching strategies and approaches with MSAC students, and how some participants felt that teaching on an MSAC helped them to become 'better teachers'. Overall, this theme demonstrates my participants' positive attitudes and opinions towards their MSAC teaching experiences and demonstrates the alignment of this work with their personal values and motivations to teach.

Chapter Six presents the second findings theme of 'Reward and relationship'. This theme explores the benefits and rewards of MSAC teaching as identified by my participants, such as job satisfaction and increased self-confidence, as well as the relationality and connection they experience as part of this work, particularly with their students. The value of this connection is highlighted even further when participants relate

experiencing its absence or diminishment when teaching online during the pandemic. The findings offer a strong sense of positive and impactful feeling which arises for participants through their work and highlights a strong sense of relationality within this teaching context.

Chapter Seven presents the third findings theme of 'Teaching below the radar'. The findings in this theme demonstrate a general lack of awareness of MSACs in each of the HEIs, and the lack of visibility of the participants' work more widely within the institution, highlighting the continued 'peripheral' nature of access work (Brosnan, 2013) within Irish higher education. This theme also presents findings which relate to the insecure nature of this teaching work in higher education and how, when combined with the lack of awareness of MSACs, impacts some participants' sense of recognition and belonging within the institution.

In Chapter Eight I discuss my research findings across the three core themes drawing on literature relevant to my conceptual framework, such as that of relational pedagogy and recognition, to guide my discussion and consideration of the key findings. The main discussion areas I present include the characteristics of an MSAC teaching space, relationality within MSAC teaching and the status of access teaching, and thus of access educators, in higher education.

Finally, in Chapter Nine I revisit my core research questions and summarise my findings. I draw together some conclusions with respect to my research, such as the value of a relation-centred education and culture, and the contribution of access courses in higher education. I offer recommendations for future policy and practice, as well as for potential further research in this area. I identify the limitations of my research study, and I highlight the unique contribution to knowledge that my research makes in the wider field. I also reflect briefly on my learning journey as practitioner-researcher and implications for my own professional practice going forward.

Chapter Two: Setting the scene – system, policy and practice contexts

“Equality is the guiding principle of our times, and this is one of our biggest efforts towards equality.” (Chris, research participant)

2.1 Introduction

The policy context for this research lies within the higher education sector, which is also where the courses and participants who are involved in this research are organisationally located. However, given that the specific teaching context revolves around adult learners, and thus embraces elements of adult education pedagogy, I suggest that my research is, in reality, located at the ‘blurred boundary’ (Merrill, 2009) of adult education and higher education. In that respect I have tried to remain cognisant of this boundary in setting out the policy and practice contexts for this research so that I can identify where the interconnections between these fields of practice can support a meaningful interpretation of my participants’ experiences. To that end I will first present an overview of the Irish higher education sector, focusing on policies and practices which provide relevant contextual background to my research, and specifically those related to ‘equity of access’. I also include an overview of the philosophical foundations of adult education to support an understanding of how and where relevant elements of adult education as a field of practice interconnect with those in higher education. By exploring these interfaces, this contextual overview will ultimately be useful in generating a broader understanding of the boundaries, interconnections and even tensions between these two fields of practice with respect to my research topic.

2.2 The higher education system in Ireland

Higher education systems globally have expanded, diversified and changed considerably over the past fifty plus years, evolving from primarily ‘elite’ systems or institutions, to develop ‘mass’ and ‘universal’ systems of education (Trow, 2007). The rapid expansion of higher education in advanced industrial economies commenced in particular after World War Two as a result of an increasing demand for workers with more than a secondary school education to support recovering and developing economies, as well as

an increasing demand for access to higher education from groups that would not traditionally have attended university. This demand resulted in significant and rapid growth in the overall numbers attending higher education, requiring development of 'non-elite' higher education institutions (Trow, 2007, 2010) and ultimately resulting in significant growth in the overall size of higher education systems.

Similar to many countries over that time period, Ireland's higher education system also evolved through those phases of what Trow (2007) describes as 'elite' to 'mass plus elite' and 'universal' systems. While the nature of 'elite' and 'universal' in these institutions is debated, the expanded scale of provision is undisputed. In 1965, Ireland had five universities and a number of teacher training colleges (Walsh, 2014a). The years from 1970 to 2000 saw the development of 14 Institutes of Technology³, as well as two new universities⁴, to support provision of 'mass' higher education in Ireland with a complementary and expanded focus on higher education programmes in more technical and vocational areas, and for the purpose also of supporting regional economic development. A 'binary' higher education system (Fleming et al., 2017a) was therefore effectively created in Ireland as the Institutes of Technology offered lower level qualifications in technical and professional areas of study and, as their courses generally required lower levels of CAO points for entry, they facilitated students from their own local geographic areas and from lower socio-economic groups to participate in higher education (ibid.). The Irish system has continued to evolve since then, and in 2024 includes seven universities, five technological universities, two institutes of technology and three Colleges of Education⁵. There is also a small number of professional and private third-level institutions that receive public funding, which provide specialist education in fields such as art and design, medicine, business, theology, music and law. Student numbers within the Irish higher education system have grown over 14-fold from 18,127 in 1965 (Walsh, 2014a) to 265,905 enrolments across all levels and modes of

³ Many were originally created as Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) and subsequently became Institutes of Technology (IoT).

⁴ Originally established as 'National Institutes for Higher Education' (NIHE) in Dublin and Limerick; both received university status in 1989, with the power to award their own degrees.

⁵ <https://hea.ie/higher-education-institutions/>

study in 2023/24, with over 48,000 new entrants enrolling in higher education courses that year⁶.

The Irish higher education system operates under the remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is the statutory agency which is responsible for ensuring effective governance and regulation of the system overall as well as that of individual higher education institutions (HEIs), for leading strategic development of the higher education sector, and for allocating exchequer funding to HEIs. The HEA is also responsible for ensuring the alignment of institutional strategies with national strategic objectives for higher education, while having regard to institutional autonomy and academic freedom. It does this through the development and monitoring of multi-annual institutional performance agreements which support performance management at both institutional and system-wide levels (see Section 2.3.4).

The ecology and structure of the Irish higher education system continues to evolve to meet the demands of a changing economy and society. The most recent significant reshaping of the system resulted in the development of a new network of technological universities (TU) under the Technological Universities Act 2018. The five current TUs have been created through the merging of twelve former Institutes of Technology (IoT) for the purposes of building on and extending the mission of the IoTs to provide “research-informed teaching across all levels of higher education, linking their programmes to the needs of their region’s citizens, businesses and professions” (OECD, 2022, p. 1). This development has occurred despite the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) advocating in 2004 for retention of the binary system of higher education, contending at the time that the differentiation of programme offerings and institutional sizes and cultures between universities and IoTs played a critical role in supporting the ‘access agenda’ (Fleming et al., 2017a). In addition, in 2023, a new National Tertiary Office⁷ (NTO) was established within the HEA to progress development of joint tertiary degree programmes between further and

⁶ <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures>

⁷ <https://nto.hea.ie/>

higher education institutions. The NTO was established in partnership with SOLAS, the state agency which oversees the development of the further education and training (FET) sector in Ireland. This development had been highlighted in the current National Further Education and Training Strategy (SOLAS, 2020) and is supporting the government's ambition to create a unified third level system in Ireland which is driven by and supports the needs of learners, offering diverse and progressive pathways across and between both further and higher education institutions.

Despite the perceived contribution of the binary higher education system in supporting equity of access, Fleming et al. (2017a) contend that such a system effectively offers access to "segmented and stratified disciplines and careers" (p. 7) as opposed to offering universal and equitable access for all. This latest systemic development of tertiary degree programmes acknowledges to some extent the continued prevailing inequities in society and thus in access to higher education, and the need to mitigate educational disadvantage by creating educational pathways – to higher education and to more elite careers - for groups that continue to be under-represented, including mature students. As I will present in more detail in Section 2.5, up to now educational pathways for mature students to higher education have primarily been through further education or through access courses offered by HEIs. The development of tertiary degree programmes signals a critical strategic step towards integrating further and higher education and is anticipated to make higher education more accessible to adult learners who do not have upper secondary education qualifications, amongst others. While an analysis of these developments is beyond the scope of this thesis and given that these programmes are still in the pilot phase of development, they are relevant to note here from the perspective that they potentially add to alternative entry routes to higher education, including to universities. However, recent years have seen falling numbers of mature students enrolling in full-time undergraduate education due to, amongst other reasons, more employment opportunities within an improved economy, the increasing cost of attending third-level, and a broader choice of more flexibly-delivered higher education courses (HEA, 2021). The trends in mature student participation in higher education are elaborated further in Section 2.5.1. Therefore, with respect to tertiary

degree courses, it remains to be seen in the future what measurable impact they will have on the demand for MSAC places from mature students.

2.3 Irish higher education policy

Walsh (2014a, 2014b, 2018) offers a comprehensive account of the evolution of the Irish higher education system and of the government's role in the transformation of the sector over the course of almost a century. He demonstrates that both economic and social justice considerations have influenced macro-level higher education policy in Ireland. Equality of educational opportunity, for example, was adopted as a key policy objective in the mid-1960s with the introduction of free second-level education. Equity of access to higher education, which supports greater diversity and social inclusion in the student population, emerged as a policy priority from 1995 onwards, including the introduction of free undergraduate education in 1997 as one means of widening participation in higher education in Ireland (Hazelkorn, 2014). Equity of access continues to remain at the core of national and institutional policy up to the present day, having remained firmly at the heart of successive national statements of strategy and action plans for education. Further insight into Irish equity of access policy is presented in Section 2.4.

Skilbeck (2000, p. 3) posits the view that higher education has:

“a key role in advancing the values of social justice, democratic life and their wider dissemination in society. This is not a separate, free standing, theoretically dispensable role, but a central or core value, part of the enduring concept of education as universal enlightenment, civic development, and personal fulfilment”.

The rationale for ensuring that equity of access to higher education continues to be a core policy objective is that it can simultaneously address both purposes of ‘human capital’ development and overcoming barriers to equality (Fleming et al., 2017b; Merrill et al., 2020). However, over the years the Irish government's view of the role and purpose of higher education has been strongly influenced by views espoused by international institutions such as the OECD and the European Union (EU) around the role of education, training and lifelong learning in the development of strong economies capable of competing on an international stage (Walsh, 2014a; Lynch, 2015). Therefore,

while equality of educational opportunity has always been core to national higher education strategy in Ireland and has been a driver for educational reform, much of the expansion experienced in the Irish higher education system continued to be driven by a dominant policy narrative around knowledge-based economic development, and which remains at the forefront of current national policy. For example, the government's *Statement of Strategy 2021-2023* (DFHERIS, 2021) for the further and higher education sector highlights the importance of higher education, research, and innovation for helping Ireland to become a leading knowledge economy. It is interesting also to note that the higher education system is now being described as the "higher education and research system" (HEA, 2023b, p. 5). This highlights the equal prominence being placed on the research mission of higher education in contributing to knowledge creation and innovation, in providing evidence for informed public policy (OCED, 2021), and to securing a sustainable future with respect to the climate and environment for society as a whole.

As previously mentioned, universities are traditionally grounded in philosophies of academic freedom, equality, and the production of knowledge through research with a focus on preparing graduates for the 'elite' or professional classes and sectors (Fallis, 2005). In Ireland, Institutes of Technology ('non-elite' HEIs) were developed to meet the growing need and demand for a higher level of technical knowledge and skills and to support participation in higher education of a more diverse student body (Fleming et al., 2017a). As already mentioned, they did this by providing courses at lower levels of qualification than those offered by universities, and tended to have greater participation rates of students from lower social classes (ibid.) However, despite this traditional 'divide' the ideas of 'human capital' theory have underpinned national higher education policy for well over half a century (Walsh, 2014b), regularly influenced also by the views of international institutions such as the OECD. That organisation's review of the Irish higher education system in 2004 "presented the creation of a knowledge-based economy as the key rationale for investment in tertiary education" (ibid., p. 33) in order to develop Ireland's competitive advantage within the global marketplace. This has resulted in the 'public good' dimension of higher education, considered important for the development and wellbeing of society more generally (Marginson, 2011; DES, 2018)

being superseded by a more functionalist perspective, which views the *primary* purpose of higher education as being to add to a nation's 'stock' of human capital (Becker, 1993, cited in Finnegan et al., 2017; Holborow and O'Sullivan, 2017), in order to contribute to national economic prosperity, and when necessary to economic recovery. Fleming et al. (2017b, p. 42) suggest that, as a result, the current Irish higher education system offers "too many courses (which) focus on the utilitarian ... to the detriment of courses and programmes that may be of benefit to oneself and society rather than the economy". This is evident in the dominant position which professional and technical courses hold over the traditional liberal arts offerings in many HEIs, in the growing practices of embedding workplace learning in the undergraduate curriculum and the priority given to development of continuing professional development courses in higher education (Keogh, 2004; Moreland and Cownie, 2019; Shannon, 2019; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2021). A more detailed exploration of this latter development in particular is covered in Section 2.4.3.2.

2.3.1 The impact of neoliberal ideology on higher education

Neoliberalism, as an ideology, has taken strong root in higher education systems globally, having considerably influenced political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism may be defined as:

"a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices." (ibid., p. 2)

In other words, under neoliberal principles, the State favours increasing privatisation of public services, taking a high-level regulatory role in public affairs. It facilitates the development of markets for services, such as education, by ensuring that institutional arrangements allow for competitive entry in the global marketplace (Harvey, 2005; Lynch and Grummell, 2017). Harvey argues that this has had the effect of the state withdrawing to a greater extent from welfare provision whereby the "social safety net is reduced to bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility" (ibid., p. 76) resulting in greater impoverishment across larger segments

of the population. This approach is viewed as fundamentally working against a social justice orientation (Gouthro and Holloway, 2023), or as Giroux (2014a, p. 240) bluntly puts it, neoliberalism has resulted in a “pathological individualism” across the system.

While to some these viewpoints may seem somewhat extreme, the power of neoliberalism is considered to be far-reaching. Harvey (2005, p. 3) proposes that proponents of neoliberal thinking and principles have occupied positions of influence and power in education, as well as in many other areas of national and international public life, for some time and therefore neoliberal thinking has “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse” in public services. Giroux (2015, p. 91) describes the neoliberal university as seeming to have a “pathological disdain for community, trust and collaboration”. How this is seen to manifest in higher education is through new public management (NPM) or “new managerialism” as the mode of governance associated with neoliberalism in the public sector (Lynch et al., 2012). This is a governance model whereby services are expected to become more efficient and accountable by adopting private sector management models. NPM’s impact in higher education has been that HEIs now emphasise practices and values of efficiency, innovation and performance to a much greater extent than heretofore, partly in response to the State’s requirement for greater accountability for public funding. Fallis (2005, p. 2) argues that accountability presents a complex reality to higher education from the perspective that “universities receive public money and a fundamental principle of democracy is that elected representatives be accountable for the use of public funds”. While I largely agree with Fallis’ viewpoint in that as public servants we are accountable for expenditure of public funds, the challenge under such a regime is that the ‘public good’ mission of higher education, including that of equality of opportunity, runs the risk of being ‘de-prioritised’ as education becomes increasingly regarded as a commodity (Lynch, 2015) and higher education in particular is required to be more accountable for its ‘performance’ against national system-level objectives (e.g. HEA, 2023b). This effectively puts higher education in an unenviable tension with its ‘public good’ mission and its social justice orientation, especially in relation to equity of access.

2.3.2 The 2007 global financial crisis

The impact of neoliberal practices on Irish higher education was exacerbated by the 2007 global financial crisis, caused by structural and regulatory weaknesses in the financial system. This crisis led to many financial institutions being ‘bailed out’ by national governments, caused sharp declines in stock prices, and ultimately led to a global recession. In Ireland this resulted in significant cuts in public sector spending as the Irish government grappled with the impact of the economic crisis and HEIs suffered along with much of the rest of the public sector. Between 2008 and 2015, state grants to higher education fell by 38% (Clarke et al., 2018), while over a similar period there was an increase of 16% in student numbers and a reduction in higher education staff numbers of 4,500 (Jennings, 2016). In addition, the cost to students of attending higher education increased over this period as the ‘student contribution fee’⁸ rose from €150 in 2008 to €3,000 in 2016. These measures led to a serious reduction in resource allocation to HEIs, deteriorating staff-student ratios and even greater challenges for students in affording higher education. The first Employment Control Framework (ECF) was instituted in 2009 for the higher education sector to deal with the effects of the recession and to assist with national recovery by limiting overall staffing and prohibiting permanent contracts for non-core staff. In other words, the ECF created a fixed ceiling for permanent staff in higher education. This measure was instrumental in creating a situation whereby higher education institutions became increasingly reliant on casual and part-time staff, and outsourcing of employment contracts, to support their work (Loxley, 2014; O’Keefe and Courtois, 2015; Cush, 2016; Clarke et al., 2018). Precarious employment, described as “a state of existence in which material provision and psychological wellness are adversely affected by a lack of regular or secure income” (IFUT, 2023, p. 10), thus took hold in higher education. Other education sectors such as community and further education also experienced similar precarity of employment issues (O’Neill, 2015; Fitzsimons, 2017).

⁸ <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/third-level-education/fees-and-supports-for-third-level-education/fees/> - an annual student contribution, formerly called the student services charge; it is also known as a registration fee, and it covers student services and examinations.

A 2015 trade unions survey of academic staff across the higher education sector documented “deteriorating working conditions with less time for research ... longer hours and heavier, non-productive administrative burdens; and greater exclusion from decision-making processes” (Holborow and O’Sullivan, 2017, p. 110). For non-permanent staff, these burdens were reported to be on top of a “nightmarish ‘hamster wheel’ in which individuals, whose average age is 39, are trapped in a cycle of shouldering much of the burden of increased workloads, with little credit and with diminishing prospects for conventional employment” (ibid.). Casualisation and precarious working conditions have exacerbated existing gender inequalities and unequal power relations in higher education (O’Keefe and Courtois, 2019; IFUT, 2023) and has resulted in the creation of a cadre of higher education staff “for whom no commitment to regular, ongoing, transparent or reliable work is made” and who are effectively “excluded from the community to which they make such a valuable, though not valued, contribution” (IFUT, 2023, p. 7). Similarly, in the UK casualisation in higher education has been described as ‘dehumanising’, with staff reporting feeling like ‘second-class academics’ on precarious contracts resulting in significant negative psycho-social impacts on well-being, income and their ability to do their jobs well (Megoran and Mason, 2020). Such austerity measures enforced upon and/or adopted by the higher education sector are suggested to have permanently changed the structure of education services and to have become a business model on which higher education has come to depend (Holborow and O’Sullivan, 2017; Megoran and Mason, 2020).

The negative impact of casualisation and precarity of work, exacerbated also by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on institutional working practices, can still be felt within the higher education system today including with respect to concerns around institutional morale, quality of teaching, access to international mobility opportunities, and continuation of the ‘crisis’ management model with resultant negative impact on the student experience (Shankar et al., 2021; Fitzsimons et al., 2022; IFUT, 2023; Courtois and O’Keefe, 2024). The impact on staff has been palpable and stark as 32% of academic roles are reported to be occupied by individuals who consider themselves to be precariously employed (IFUT, 2023). This is not helped by the fact that an ECF remains

in place today which continues to keep Irish higher education staffing levels below international norms and at the bottom third of staffing levels in Europe (Pruvot et al., 2023). This is despite the fact that funding to the sector increased by 40%, while staffing increased by 18% between 2015 and 2022⁹. A recommendation was recently issued by the European Universities Association (EUA) to remove the ECF as it seriously limits the autonomy of Irish HEIs with respect to recruitment, salaries and promotions for staff. Change is starting to become evident as it was reported in 2023 that hundreds of posts were to be created in higher education (Donnelly, 2023) representing the first real easing of employment controls on the sector in many years. The impact of this apparent easing has yet to be seen or to be fully felt across the sector as the economy and the higher education system deal with new global challenges such as the impact of the pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. Therefore, the resonance of years of control over staffing levels in higher education is still being felt, as are NPM practices, and will be shown through this research to have also impacted some of my participants.

2.3.3 *The influence of the ‘Hunt Report’*

While Irish higher education policy is informed by a wide range of cross-sectoral policies and strategies (HEA, 2018a; HEA, 2023b), the core of current government policy emanated from the seminal *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES, 2011), also known as the *Hunt Report*. This report, described by Holborow and O’Sullivan (2017, p. 112) as a “keystone document” with respect to Irish higher education strategy, has profoundly influenced the structure, strategic direction and governance of Irish higher education since it was published. The *Hunt Report* effectively set out a road map for the development and governance of higher education, influenced by the austerity climate of the time and thus by the discourse that much of public expenditure, including higher education, was a luxury and needed to be trimmed. The report was “positioned as a response to the country’s economic predicament (and) re-cemented the notion, already formally in place in Ireland since the 1960s, of education as serving the economy” (ibid.)

⁹ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-03-01/59/#pg-answers-59>

and continues to be cited as one of the underpinning frameworks of current higher education strategy, performance and policy (HEA, 2023b).

The *Hunt Report* was commissioned to assess the Irish higher education system's 'fitness for purpose' (Hazelkorn, 2014) in the wake of the financial crisis and to make recommendations that would support its development in an increasingly globalised education marketplace. Underpinned by neoliberal principles, and by the values and language of managerialism, its recommendations emphasised developing a more efficient and accountable higher education system through strategies such as greater collaboration between HEIs, aligning Ireland's national research strategy to economic needs, greater provision of flexible and part-time learning opportunities, and greater internationalisation of higher education. The need for structural change and accountability is a constant theme running throughout the report (Clarke et al., 2018). Significantly, the *Hunt Report* recommended the introduction of service level agreements (SLAs) between the State and HEIs, ultimately operationalised through 'compact agreements', and now called 'performance agreements'. The development of these performance agreements has meant that HEIs are effectively no longer the almost fully autonomous institutions that they had been up to that point. These agreements predicate the allocation of funding to HEIs on institutional performance, through the achievement of agreed targets and objectives as well as the alignment of HEI strategic direction with national priorities, articulated in a higher education system performance framework¹⁰. The aim of these frameworks is fundamentally to "hold the higher education system accountable for performance and delivery of national priorities; to monitor performance of the system; and to enable HEIs to identify their strategic niche and mission through the agreement of a performance compact with the Higher Education Authority" (HEA, 2022b, p. 2). There was thus an emergence of a new focus on accountability in corporate governance and regulatory culture and structures following the *Hunt Report* while HEI accountability for performance and for securing

¹⁰ <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/managing-performance/system-performance-framework/>

value for money with respect to their activities is now also enshrined in legislation through the HEA (Act) 2022¹¹.

2.3.4 Higher education's policy agenda today

At the time my research was carried out, the national higher education policy agenda was broad and diverse. The system performance framework at the time, covering the period 2018 to 2020, prioritised system objectives in the areas of internationalisation; skills development and employability; research, development and innovation; governance and operations; and equality of opportunity for society (HEA, 2018a). The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted the development of a new system performance framework, which was finally published in 2023 (HEA, 2023b). The new framework is presented in the form of a matrix comprising four key pillars and 11 transversal areas of impact which capture national system priorities and outcomes, as shown in Figure 2.1. 'Access and participation' is one of the four key pillars, as is 'teaching and learning', while 'equality, diversity, inclusion and belonging' is a transversal area of impact intersecting across both of these key pillars. This demonstrates that the equity of access agenda remains at the core of current higher education policy and priority objectives. However, as my research will show, this commitment is not necessarily felt at a practical or personal level by some staff who support operationalisation of this policy on the ground, and their experiences provide an insight into the challenging juxtaposition of strategy, policy and operations within equity of access work.

¹¹ <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/31/enacted/en/html>

Figure 2.1: Higher education system performance framework

Transversal Areas of Impact	Pillars			
	Teaching & Learning	Research & Innovation	Access & Participation	Engagement
	Flexibility, Upskilling & Lifelong Learning			
	Climate & Sustainable Development			
	Student Success			
	Enterprise			
	Society			
	Region			
	International			
	Digital Transformation			
	Equality, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging			
	Institutional Leadership & Culture			
	Sectoral & Tertiary Cohesion			

(Source: HEA 2023b, p. 22)

2.4 Understanding ‘equity of access’ as higher education policy

The term ‘equity of access’ as it pertains to educational opportunity has for many years been synonymous with access to higher education. Equity of access refers to the extent or ease with which individuals from societal groups who are typically ‘under-represented’ in higher education (sometimes referred to ‘non-traditional’ students) can avail of opportunities to access, participate in and successfully complete higher education on an equitable basis with their peers (HEA, 2022a). What is unique about the ‘access movement’ more generally within higher education is its explicit focus on “redress(ing) the balance of educational disadvantage and promot(ing) equality of opportunity within the higher education sector” (Jones, 2006, p. 485).

Clancy and Goastellec (2007) offer a useful overview of the evolution of equity of access to higher education internationally. They point out that the “dominant norm governing access has been characterised by an emphasis on equality of opportunity” (p. 139) as

opposed to on equality of rights. They posit that the reason for this emphasis on equality is that access (in the general sense of the word) to higher education is, and always will be competitive, and “will always privilege those with superior economic, social and cultural resources” (ibid.) and therefore some form of affirmative action is required to support those who experience less privilege. Despite overall increasing numbers of students participating in and graduating from higher education internationally (OECD, 2023), access to higher education for students from particular societal groups continues to present a challenge. To that end, equity of access and inclusion in higher education have been key education priorities within the EU for many years. The Council of Europe defined an access policy as being one that: “aims both at the widening of participation in higher education to all sectors of society, and ensuring that this participation is effective (that is, in conditions which ensure that personal effort will lead to successful completion” (Council of Europe, 1999, p. 3, cited Skilbeck, 2000, p. 16). In Ireland, the purpose of equity of access policy is to ensure that “every student has an equal opportunity to achieve their potential and that any social or economic constraints that might prevent a student from having equal opportunities are mitigated” (HEA, 2022a, p. 17).

The European Access Network (EAN) is a European-wide organisation that promotes policies, encourages exchanges and undertakes collaborative research on access to higher education. Data is collected and monitored at European level¹² on the social dimension of higher education, examining students’ social and economic conditions in order to provide cross-country comparisons, inform national policies and develop strategies and action plans. Strengthening the social dimension of higher education has been identified as a top priority in the EU in the post-Covid era as it is acknowledged that Covid exacerbated pre-existing educational disadvantage internationally, rather than causing it (Hauschildt et al., 2021).

“EU policy stresses the importance of integrating the social dimension in the purposes, functions, actions and delivery of education in HEIs. Although higher education participation and attainment has increased in Europe over the past two decades, this has not led to equity of participation. Challenges remain in participation at European

¹² Eurostudent.eu

and institutional level of students in categories who are statistically less likely to access and attain higher education” (HEA, 2022a, p. 37).

One way to consider access is as operating along a continuum - from reasonably narrow terms such as the means by which a person is recognised for their learning and thus gains admission to higher education (Fleming, 2010) to “comprehensive and integrated systemic change both inside *and* outside of HE” (Loxley et al., 2017b, p. 49). The term ‘widening participation’ therefore is sometimes used as an alternative to ‘access’ and speaks more to a focus on broadening and supporting diversity and inclusion rather than simply increasing student numbers entering higher education. Widening participation “also implies a broader engagement with the student” (Fleming, 2010, p. 63) with a focus on the student’s experience of higher education, on retention and progression, and a commitment to systemic change within the institution, as well as across the sector. Fleming and Murphy (1999) also make a valuable distinction between ‘access’ and ‘accessibility’, the latter of which indicates the supports and structures that are necessary to address the more systemic issues which become the barriers that are experienced by identified target groups.

In Ireland, those target groups include individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds, older learners, ethnic minority students, Traveller and Roma students, and students with disabilities (HEA, 2022a). These are individuals or communities whose participation in higher education is typically constrained by structural factors or barriers to such an extent that they require “a complex and delicate ecosystem of formal and informal supports” (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a, p. 8) to mitigate against these barriers (Fleming, 2010; Merrill, 2015). Such barriers typically include cultural, social, financial and educational barriers (Jones, 2006; O’Reilly, 2008) and access and widening participation initiatives more generally have thus largely focused on measures such as admissions procedures, dedicated funding streams, reasonable accommodations, outreach to communities, and providing information, guidance and post-entry supports (Leech et al., 2016; Fleming et al., 2017b). In Ireland such initiatives, primarily undertaken through the work of HEI Access Services, have been found to be successful

in supporting growing numbers of ‘non-traditional’ students to participate in higher education (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a; Fleming et al., 2017b).

Before delving further into the evolution of Irish access policy and practice, it is worthwhile noting that while the focus of dedicated Access Services in higher education has been on supporting access and participation of under-represented student groups, Skilbeck’s (2000, p. 14) report on *Access and Equity in Higher Education*, commissioned by the HEA over twenty years ago, defined equity of access as pertaining to both students *and staff* in higher education:

“(1) policies and procedures for enabling and encouraging groups in society at present under-represented as students in higher education institutions and programmes or study areas, to gain access to and demonstrate successful performance in higher education, and transition to the labour market and (2) extending opportunities for suitably qualified people, regardless of gender, ethnicity, disability or other extraneous considerations, to achieve staff positions in higher education and to advance professionally according to merit and achievement and without discrimination based on these extraneous considerations.”

The staff dimension of equality has not been as significantly to the forefront of national higher education policy until more recent years. However, the HEA is now driving a range of initiatives through its Centre of Excellence in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion¹³ (EDI), established in 2019, to embed institutional cultures of EDI in the higher education sector. The focus of the Centre was initially on the area of gender equality, but now includes all aspects of EDI, including race equality and sexual consent. This development has seen the creation of dedicated EDI offices in many HEIs in recent years and initiatives developed include engagement with the Athena Swan charter¹⁴ in Irish HEIs for the purposes of supporting and transforming gender equality in higher education and research, development of the Race Equality Implementation Plan 2022-2024 and the National Framework for Consent¹⁵. It is relevant to note that, while the focus of EDI is on under-represented communities and groups and not necessarily on equality from a contractual or employment perspective, my research effectively juxtaposes the concept

¹³ <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/centre-information/>

¹⁴ <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/athena-swan/>

¹⁵ <https://hea.ie/policy/gender/ending-sexual-violence-and-harassment-in-irish-higher-education-institutions/>

of equity of access to and participation in higher education for students on access courses and equity of access to and participation in higher education as valued and recognised educators, for teachers of those same courses.

2.4.1 The evolution of national access policy and practice

Equity of access has formed part of Irish higher education policy for many years. Loxley et al. (2017b) offer a comprehensive overview of its evolution, documenting relevant publications and legislation from 1959 to 2016 which have been influential in this field. In Ireland, as in many countries, educational disadvantage pervades all levels of the education system. The rapid expansion of the Irish higher education system from the 1960s onwards did not automatically lead to more equitable access for societal groups, particularly with respect to access to university education. Although access emerged as a counterbalance to the ‘elite’ view of universities, the early years of the system expansion led to deeper participation for groups who would normally attend higher education as opposed to wider participation for groups who would not have traditionally attended (Trow, 2007; Loxley et al., 2017a). Therefore, numerous government initiatives have been put in place over the years to address educational disadvantage and to make the education system as a whole more accessible and equitable. Amongst these initiatives has been ‘Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools’ (DEIS)¹⁶, an action plan put in place by the government in 2005 to address the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities within the primary and second-level system. However, the need for access measures reflects the patterns of inequality that are the “accumulated result of disadvantage manifesting itself early in the educational cycle” (Fleming and Gallagher, 2003, p. 1) and therefore a range of national initiatives have also been put in place in higher education to address these ongoing challenges. Amongst these include the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR)¹⁷ and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE)¹⁸ schemes, admissions schemes for Leaving

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4260-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools-an-action-plan-for-educational-inclusion/>

¹⁷ <https://accesscollege.ie/hear/>

¹⁸ <https://accesscollege.ie/dare/>

Certificate students whose socio-economic status and/or disability may impact them in progressing on to, and participating successfully and equitably in, higher education.

‘Equity of access’ as part of a broader equality agenda in Irish higher education is enshrined in section 36 of the Universities Act 1997¹⁹, which explicitly names the “promotion of equality of access as a function of the university sector” (Fleming, 2010, p. 93). As previously highlighted, it is a high-level system performance objective for higher education in Ireland, with the aim that its student population is as fully representative of Irish society as possible. Equity of access is reflected in the HEA’s own founding legislation and has been put on a statutory basis in the HEA Act 2022. The Irish government has traditionally taken a targeted approach to supporting access to higher education for particular societal groups and this approach has been significantly influenced by the longitudinal work of Patrick Clancy and others on socio-economic class participation in higher education (e.g. Clancy, 1982, 1988, 1995, 2001, 2015; Clancy and Wall, 2000; Lynch and O’Riordan, 1996). Over time equity of access in Irish higher education has become synonymous with the government initiatives mentioned above, as well as with objectives and actions designed to progress the access agenda, supported by dedicated organisational structures at both national and institutional levels, such as institutional Access Services and the National Access Office within the HEA. Access work in higher education is acknowledged to require dedicated funding support and successive governments have taken a dual approach to this through the provision of core funding through the Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM)²⁰ and funding for targeted access initiatives. 1996 saw the start of the HEA targeted initiatives to support access to higher education for mature students, socio-economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities (Fleming, 2010) and a few years later these targeted initiatives expanded to include refugees and traveller groups. The most recent funding scheme put in place was the Programme for Access to Higher Education

¹⁹ <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1997/act/24/section/36/enacted/en/html#sec36>

²⁰ Recurrent Grant Allocation Model (RGAM) - <https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/how-we-fund/>

(PATH)²¹ which prioritises bursaries for disadvantaged students, access to teacher education, community engagement and universal design, amongst other areas.

The National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (National Access Office), established in 2003, was set up to deal with the “problem of fragmentation and disparity” (Loxley et al., 2017a, p. 103) of access initiatives which were emerging at the time, as well as to develop policy in this area. It has largely done this through production, monitoring and evaluation of a series of National Access Plans since 2004. These plans have largely been actioned by HEIs through the implementation of initiatives and activities to support the access, participation and success of identified under-represented student groups. In the early years of access work such initiatives were typically based on what Kearns (2017) describes as the ‘deficit model’ of participation in which access became about providing entry mechanisms and supports. This resulted in students fitting into “pre-existing structures and practices” (Loxley et al., 2017b, p. 50) rather than about addressing the more fundamental systemic and structural inequalities in education, in society and in our educational institutions. This is not an uncontested approach as the authors argue that targeted initiatives may end up problematising the students being supported and thus over-simplifying what is in fact a very complex reality for many societal members and groups.

The first and second National Access Plans (NAP) (HEA, 2004; HEA, 2008), rated by Loxley et al. (2017b) as ‘moderately ambitious’, focused primarily on prioritising key ‘target groups’ (socio-economically disadvantaged students, mature students, and students with disabilities) for access to higher education, setting numerical targets for participation of these groups and prioritising the funding of ‘access work’. These NAPs also proposed actions to encourage collaboration and development of educational pathways between further education and higher education to address access issues given that students from these target groups were more likely to participate in further education. Over time the government has revisited how designated categories for access are defined. The third NAP, the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher*

²¹ <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/>

Education 2015-2019 (HEA, 2015) still included target participation rates for underrepresented student groups. It did not deviate significantly from the core identified target groups but rather included part-time/flexible learners and further education award holders as additional key target groups. However, this NAP also set objectives which sought more of a cultural, rather than a structural transformation in HEIs and in the wider system (Fleming et al., 2017b; Walsh, 2018). These included objectives such as ‘mainstreaming’ equity of access, building robust data systems to provide evidence on which to base future policy, and creating sustainable community-higher education engagement to support learners at risk of educational disadvantage. However, as Ryan (2019, p. 10-11) points out NAPs at the time did not consider:

“intersectionality of disadvantage and the quantitative targets are unconnected, so that for example there is a target for mature students (as a cohort) and students with disabilities (as a cohort) but no target for (mature) students with a disability ... There is within these quantitative targets an assumption that a single characteristic, disability, social class, age etc. defines the individuals within that cohort. There is also an assumption of homogeneity, of identical experiences, barriers, and outcomes.”

A shift in understanding of the complexities of educational disadvantage and inequality is reflected in the fourth and latest National Access Plan, which covers the period 2022 to 2028 (HEA, 2022a). This plan sets out the government’s continuing ambition for an inclusive, diverse higher education system and a key priority in the new plan is to move beyond just access to “full participation and eventual success” for all students (ibid, p. 21). Universal design, defined as “the creation of an environment which can be accessed by all and enables full engagement, progression and success for all students” (HEA, 2022b, p. 15), is also highlighted as a guiding principle for the development of an inclusive, diverse higher education system. The plan acknowledges the fact that significant barriers remain in place for particular societal groups (e.g. members of the Traveller and Roma communities) and for individuals from particular communities or life backgrounds (e.g. asylum seekers, those who have experienced the care system) in accessing and achieving success in higher education in Ireland. Some very practical barriers continue to be experienced by these groups e.g. the cost of going to college, capacity within HEIs and the lack of availability of flexible learning options. The plan sets out a much broader and more inclusive definition of socio-economic disadvantage than heretofore whilst still calling out key priority target groups for action and particular

consideration and support (socio-economically disadvantaged students, students with disability, Traveller and Roma students). The plan highlights specific cohorts of students within each of these groups who continue to experience significant barriers in accessing higher education and thus who continue to be marginalised and under-represented within the higher education sector. The plan also highlights that participation rates for groups such as students from the Irish Traveller community, students from disadvantaged areas and first-time mature students, continue to be low and that the higher education system did not meet participation targets set in previous NAPs.

The current NAP also acknowledges the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and that this disruption is likely to continue to impact on equity of access to higher education for some time. It also suggests that “some people ‘simply do not see themselves as belonging’ and that cultural and social reasons also contribute to lower participation” (HEA, 2022a, p. 22). The very fact that Ireland has published a fourth NAP, consistently highlighting similar target groups to those identified in the earlier plans, demonstrates the challenge and complexity of addressing the institutional and systemic barriers experienced by many people in Irish society in accessing and participating in higher education even today and the continuing need for targeted initiatives, investment and policy development in equity of access.

Part of the challenge in Irish higher education is that national policy has never been prescriptive with respect to what access initiatives should be rolled out or how institutional policy should be formed or operationalised. The result has been, as Finnegan et al. (2017, p. 107) suggest, that access policies in Ireland are best described as an “evolving constellation of guidelines, proposals, assessment techniques and normative aspirations which has resulted in a relatively stable ‘access agenda’” and which underpins major aspects of HEA policy. ‘Pre-entry’ access courses quickly became a popular and very effective means of creating an accessible and supportive pathway for non-traditional learners to progress to undergraduate education (see Section 2.4.2). Over time however, the concept and understanding of access and widening participation in higher education has broadened, become more nuanced, more complex and multi-dimensional and it is now also acknowledged more explicitly within the most recent NAP

to be a system-wide objective, not just a whole-of-institution objective (HEA, 2022a). In an ideal world HEIs would create environments which are inclusive across a range of dimensions and normative practices (e.g. curricular, pedagogical, social and cultural), thereby effectively negating the need to differentiate supports for students in terms of equity groups (Loxley et al., 2017b). This could be suggested to be the ‘gold standard’ for HEIs in terms of inclusivity and while higher education is moving forward in this direction with the inclusion of ‘universal design’ as an underpinning principle within the latest National Access Plan there is still a long way to go.

2.4.2 Access courses as an equity of access initiative

Access courses are one type of initiative which form part of the wider ‘access’ agenda (Fleming, 2010; Brosnan, 2013; Busher et al., 2015a; Leech et al., 2016; Fleming et al., 2017b). Their purpose is to support ‘non-traditional’ learners, who typically do not possess conventional entry qualifications, to prepare for progression to undergraduate education. These learners can include both mature and non-mature learners. Although such courses are not ubiquitous across European higher education systems, featuring in fact in only half of these (Fleming et al., 2017b), the UK in particular has a strong history of access course provision as they started to be developed there from the 1970s onwards (Jones, 2006). They are also known as ‘return to learning’ courses or ‘foundation courses’ (Fleming, 2010) and in Ireland they are usually aligned, either formally or informally, with Levels 5 or 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications²². Access courses for mature students (MSACs) typically attract ‘second chance’ learners and thus are underpinned by a strong social justice agenda as they attempt to redress the balance of educational disadvantage experienced by individuals earlier in their lives (Jones, 2006; Busher et al., 2015a). Access courses serve a broad range of functions for students including confidence-building, development of peer relationships and support, bridging an academic/qualifications gap, and building social and cultural capital prior to students’ entry to higher education.

²² [https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-\(NFQ\).aspx](https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx)

Access courses in Ireland can be difficult to compare with each other due to a lack of uniformity with respect to formats and modes of delivery, many having evolved over time through targeted funding initiatives (Fleming, 2010). There is a diverse range of delivery models of such courses in place including those delivered by and within HEIs, as well as courses delivered by partnerships of higher and further education institutions. Fleming pointed out however that there was “no national centralised system of planning and validation of access courses” (ibid., p. 125), and therefore no standardised framework (which still remains the case today), and as a result it was difficult to establish exactly how many courses were available and the number of enrolled students. The impact of this lack of a national framework will be addressed further in Section 2.4.3.1.

The most comprehensive study of access courses in Ireland – for both mature and non-mature students - was undertaken over 15 years ago (Murphy, 2009), commissioned by the HEA. The research aimed to describe and quantify access course provision within higher education institutions and to compare them on various aspects such as student profile, curriculum and programme outcomes. The objective of the study was to identify good practice and offer policy recommendations regarding access course provision. The study found that there was a significant diversity in models of provision at the time, with most programmes (95%) delivered either by a single HEI or by a partnership of HEIs, while the remainder were delivered by partnerships of higher and further education institutions. The study also found that the programmes made a significant contribution to widening access to higher education and found evidence of high levels of success in terms of completion and progression from access programmes and positive impact on students and their wider communities. With respect to progression of students, progression rates were reported to be higher from courses delivered within a HEI, over those delivered outside or by partnership models. The report therefore suggested that:

“access courses delivered within the HE sector should be recognised as having a unique contribution to make to the national widening and access participation agenda. Besides their positive progression outcomes, they have resulted in valuable insights regarding barriers to access and participation and developed significant experience as to approaches to address these barriers including those involving strategic local and regional partnerships” (Murphy, 2009, p. 11).

The value to students of these courses has been found to arise not just from the learning activities engaged in, but also from the socio-cultural opportunity they offer students to ‘demystify’ higher education by giving students “the time and space to acclimatise to HE” (O’Sullivan et al., 2019, p. 19) as well as to build support networks prior to progression, including with tutors (TAP, 2007; Share and Carroll, 2013; Keane, 2015; Leech et al., 2016). The importance for students of being present on campus and familiarising themselves with the physical and academic environment is critical to students’ future success and thus access courses have been found to show greater success than other pre-entry initiatives (Leech et al., 2016). The purpose of access courses is to emulate the higher education experience as closely as possible in a ‘safe’, contained environment and to support the student with building a positive relationship to learning and to the institution.

2.4.3 Organisational positioning of access courses

Despite equity of access being central to higher education policy and system performance access courses could be suggested to operate on the ‘periphery’ of the teaching remit of many HEIs. In other words, they are mostly positioned in and continue to operate as the responsibility of Access Services rather than forming part of the core academic work of HEIs, despite their pedagogical function. This sense of peripherality has also been found to relate to access work more generally. Ten years ago, Brosnan (2013, p. 159) found that access work was “still work in progress” in terms of its positioning within Irish HEIs’ strategy:

“The thread of adult access being on the periphery was also evident in institutional documentation. Adult access was referred to, obliquely, within strategic plans and mission statements and interview data reflected this, apart from the Capital University where there seemed to be buy-in from all members of the college staff. But, in the main, there were dedicated access plans and policies in place which were not integrated with core institution strategic planning work” (ibid., p. 194).

Brosnan also found that there were issues in relation to the status of access staff, including access course teaching staff. Themes identified in her research included casualisation of labour, lack of job security and lack of access to promotional opportunities. Brosnan recommended that access work, including access teaching work, should be “more embedded in formal processes and structures of institutions” (ibid., p.

196). Fleming (2010, p. 126) had also previously identified that resourcing of access work more generally, and particularly the use of part-time staff who were “typically not connected to the institution” to teach on access courses served to add to the sense of disconnect between access course work and the HEI.

A similar finding in more recent years emerged from an evaluation by Magrath and Fitzsimons (2017, p. 19) of a Return to Learning course (RTL) in which “some staff members felt that the current operationalisation of the RTL was too reliant on associate staff and should instead be more central to the core activities of the department of Adult and Community Education” within that HEI. The authors also issued recommendations from their evaluation in relation to the adequacy of tutors’ terms and conditions of employment and their contractual arrangements, although this was more so from the perspective of embedding the course as a core activity within a university department as opposed to directly addressing tutors’ related concerns or experiences. Fitzsimons and O’Neill’s earlier (2015) study on a higher education Foundation Course had also found that the strategic location of the programme in the Access Service, rather than in an academic department, was felt by some participants to weaken the programme resulting in it being associated with a deficit model.

This theme of access courses feeling ‘separate’ to the core teaching function of an institution has also been reported in studies with access course teachers in other jurisdictions, even though many of these courses are delivered in further education colleges, rather than in higher education (see Section 2.4.3.1). In the UK, some Access to Higher Education (AHE) tutors reported the sense that these courses were “marginalised in their colleges through the geographies of exclusion that were constructed by senior staff” (Busher et al., 2015a, p. 135). This feeling of separateness or marginalisation, of not having a clear ‘home’ in the college, resulted in some tutors feeling ‘neither here nor there’, “betwixt and between in terms of their identity, neither part of the A-level team, nor part of vocational education, nor part of the HE part of the college where one existed” (ibid.). Likewise, teacher participants in Strauss and Hunter’s (2018, pp. 883-884) New Zealand study “felt that they and their students were negatively positioned in their respective institutes... Staff are greatly frustrated that

while upper management pay lip service to the importance of foundation studies education, they do not make any real commitment to the sector". This lack of commitment was experienced as an impact of the government's neoliberal approach by increasing casualisation of labour in institutes, job insecurity and a lack of dedicated physical resources to these programmes.

Although the Irish research above is not particularly recent, having many years' experience myself as an access practitioner, I would argue that the sentiments regarding the perceived peripheral nature, particularly of access teaching and access courses, still holds true today. I suggest that these perceived disconnects between 'access teaching' in Ireland, and the core academic work of the institution, potentially arises from different factors which have led to a lack of strategic or clear positioning of these courses in Irish HEIs. I posit that these factors include the ill-defined status of access courses at national level which has contributed in turn to a 'looseness' associated with the role of access course teacher; and the current low visibility of the value of adult education more generally in HEIs. I will briefly explore each of these issues below to provide added context to support an understanding of the positioning of MSACs in Irish higher education.

2.4.3.1 Status of access courses nationally

Teaching in higher education primarily takes the form of lecturing or tutoring in specific subjects or disciplines and is undertaken by, for example, professors, lecturers, teaching assistants, college teachers, and also frequently by postgraduate research students. For the most part these teaching positions lie with academic departments, faculties or schools who are responsible for designing and delivering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The route to teaching in higher education in Ireland remains largely predicated on achievement of an honours degree in the relevant subject or discipline, supplemented by higher learning at master's degree level; increasingly, a minimum of a PhD or professional doctorate is also a requirement to secure an academic position. While not explicitly designed to develop teaching competencies, a postgraduate qualification is deemed to be evidence of an individual's expert level of

knowledge in their subject, which is considered to be the primary requirement to qualify someone to take up an academic teaching position.

For other formal education sectors such as primary, post-primary or further education, the Teaching Council²³ sets out the pathways and qualifications that are recognised in order for an individual to formally qualify and register as a teacher. While formal teaching qualifications have long been a requirement to take up the profession of either a primary or post-primary school teacher, the professionalisation of teaching within the further education and training sector is a more recent development in Ireland (Grummell and Murray, 2015; Walsh et al., 2020) as since 2013, further education teacher applicants who wish to register with the Teaching Council have to have obtained a Council approved FE teacher education qualification. Thus, by and large, all formal education sectors in Ireland have clear professional structures for teaching and thus a “clear process for public recognition of their staff as teaching professionals” (Grummell and Murray, 2015, p. 439).

In Ireland however, the responsibility for delivering access courses within HEIs most often rests with Access Services rather than with academic departments, as is the case for the courses and HEIs in this study. There is no formally recognised teaching position in higher education as that of ‘access course teacher’. Like most teaching in higher education, a formal teaching qualification is not required to teach on an access course and thus the route to access course teaching largely mirrors that of the route to teaching in higher education more generally. The access courses in this study are taught by a mix of part-time, casual (e.g. hourly-paid) teachers, PhD students, and postdoctoral researchers, all recruited largely through word of mouth by the respective Access Services. This implies an absence of clear processes or qualification requirements within the Irish higher education system for becoming an access course teacher and demonstrates that there is a distinct ‘looseness’ associated with this teaching role, certainly within the HEIs in this study.

²³ <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/>

Although access courses in Ireland, and particularly those delivered in higher education, have frequently been demonstrated to be highly successful for students in terms of preparing them for undergraduate education (TAP, 2007; Murphy, 2009; Fleming, 2010; Keane, 2015), objectives were set out in the third National Access Plan (HEA 2015) around the standardisation of access courses and for such courses to be located solely within the further education sector by 2019, albeit delivered in partnership between further and higher education. The initial recommendation for such an action was made almost 20 years ago (Healy et al., 2001) and despite the mid-term review of the third National Access Plan (HEA, 2018b) maintaining the objective as a priority for action by 2021, it remains unactioned today at national level. Thus, the majority of these courses continue to be delivered in and by HEIs. No clear rationale or evidence was offered for the pursuit of this objective although there was a general consensus reported from both the further and higher education sectors for the potential in a partnership approach to delivering access programmes (Murphy, 2009; Brosnan, 2013). The fourth and current National Access Plan does not address specific objectives around access courses however it does highlight the need for a coherent and joined-up whole-of-system approach to accessing higher education. The focus of national policy however seems to have shifted to the development of joint tertiary degrees between further and higher education and it remains to be seen over time what impact in real terms that tertiary programmes will have on student demand for HEI-delivered access or foundation courses.

The lack of progress on developing national policy or a standardised framework for access courses contrasts with the situation in England and Wales where access courses, known as 'Access to Higher Education Diplomas'²⁴ (AHE courses), are part of a more structured and standardised system (Fleming, 2010), being formally monitored and quality assured by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). A framework for the recognition of access courses was developed in the UK in 1989 due to the growth in demand for and provision of these courses and there are currently over 1,200 recognised AHE courses in the UK, delivered flexibly i.e. both full-time and part-time. Unlike in Ireland where access

²⁴ <https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/>

courses have remained largely the responsibility of the higher education sector, in the UK responsibility for delivery of all pre-university level qualifications was formally relegated to Colleges of Further Education under the Further Education Act (1992) (Moreland and Cownie, 2019). Along with a 1987 UK Department of Education White Paper which gave formal recognition to AHE courses as an official pathway to higher education, these moves helped to formalise the link between the 'Access movement', including access courses, and higher education (Jones, 2006). Therefore, in the UK AHE courses are typically delivered in further education colleges, adult education centres and community centres, as well as still in some universities (where this is the case the majority of these are based within academic departments (Leech et al., 2016; O'Sullivan et al., 2019)) and are usually developed and approved in collaboration between the different education sectors (Leech et al., 2016). These courses are widely recognised by UK universities who are often involved in the development of new courses to ensure that course content is appropriate, and they have been found to have contributed significantly to widening participation in higher education in the UK (Farmer, 2017).

The structure and approach taken in the UK to the provision of access courses highlights important differences to the approach taken in Ireland, where there is no national quality assurance and no standardised delivery of such programmes, and where numbers enrolling on such courses annually are significantly smaller. For example, in Ireland in 2023/24²⁵, 0.5% of new entrants to higher education in that year were reported to have entered on the basis of an access or foundation course. This equates to 241 students (this figure includes both mature and non-mature students), compared to the UK where in 2021/22²⁶ 40,855 students enrolled on AHE courses, while 23,290 AHE students entered higher education that year. Even allowing for population difference, the scale of access courses delivered in Ireland is vastly smaller. Therefore, the lack of national policy around access courses in Ireland and the significantly smaller size of the sector could be suggested to have influenced the continuing peripheral status of these programmes, and their associated teaching roles, in higher education.

²⁵ <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/>

²⁶ <https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/regulating-access/statistics>

2.4.3.2 Adult education provision within higher education

Although the primary influence on the development of MSACs by Irish HEIs was national access policy, given the type of programmes on which my research focuses and the sector in which these are located, exploring the positioning and focus of adult education provision more generally in higher education offers some additional insight into the positioning of MSACs and particularly from the perspective of understanding how adult learners have traditionally been supported within or by the academy. While an in-depth analysis of the development of adult education provision in higher education is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is useful to note that such provision has been fulfilled in different ways and under different strategic priorities.

Universities have a strong tradition of providing ‘extra-mural’ or ‘popular adult education’ since the early twentieth century through adult education departments (Hunt, 2007). They have also had a long history of engagement with their local and wider geographic communities through university ‘extension initiatives’ (i.e. programmes that were offered in centres and settings outside of main university campuses) (Browning, 1887; Walsh, 2011) and through other community engagement and education initiatives. Community education, a sector for which its main concern is in working with disadvantaged groups and communities, can be said to be “part of a long tradition of adult education” (Lovett, 1997, p. 39). Community education is commonly associated with education that happens outside of traditional institutions (Fitzsimons, 2017) with close links to critical and transformative education (e.g. Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1997) and to community development initiatives and purposes (Lovett, 1997; Connolly, 2005). However, Lovett (*ibid.*) highlights that community education can also include classes and courses delivered by formal education providers, such as universities, in community settings. These initiatives made both formal and informal higher education courses more easily available to a wider population of students from a range of backgrounds and ages (Walsh, 2011). Therefore, we can see that higher education has had a long tradition of engaging with adult learners both ‘on site’ and in the community, and for a range of purposes, thus making a clear delineation between adult and higher education pedagogies and purposes challenging to present.

In some respects, such initiatives could be described as ‘access before access’ as they opened higher education learning opportunities to alternative student populations, albeit not necessarily for the purpose of supporting ‘equity of access’. In Ireland, this concept only really emerged in the late 20th Century as a policy objective for higher education more generally (Loxley et al., 2017b). Nonetheless, Irish education policy has consistently identified the higher education sector as one of a number of important providers of formal adult education in Ireland. The first comprehensive report produced on adult education was the *Adult Education in Ireland Report* (Murphy, 1973), commissioned by the Irish government. This report advocated for the provision of adult education, particularly on an equality basis, and initially positioned HEIs as key providers of adult education in Ireland (Fitzsimons, 2017). The Universities Act 1997 subsequently reaffirmed that one of the objectives of universities was to facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education (Murphy and Fleming, 2000) and this was followed by the *White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000) which called for the integration of adult learning within mainstream higher education (Hunt, 2017). The provision of formal adult education by HEIs over the years has therefore been facilitated variously through adult and community education (ACE) departments, which typically worked on the boundaries between universities and local communities (Hunt, 2007), and through continuing professional education (CPE) departments, usually responsible for provision of part-time and flexible education, the latter of which could be viewed as “a forerunner to the widening participation model” (Moreland and Cownie, 2019, p. 62). MSACs could also be considered as adult education provision, albeit these courses have primarily been offered and managed by Access Services, outside of the above departments, and their explicit purpose is to support learner access to undergraduate courses.

The provision of adult education by higher education has also been strongly influenced by the ‘lifelong learning’ movement and it is useful to reflect briefly on how this discourse evolved on the international stage. Elfert (2020, p. 17) states that “lifelong learning as a policy concept came to prominence in the 1960s in the context of accelerating post-war social transformation and economic growth that required greater

democratization of educational institutions”. The meaning of the lifelong learning concept on the international stage was articulated over time in two ‘flagship’ UNESCO reports - the *Faure Report* in 1972 and the *Delors Report* in 1996. These reports situated and conceptualised lifelong learning within UNESCO’s “universal and utopian” (ibid.) humanistic roots as “part of a wider effort to address inequalities through international cooperation and the reform and development of the welfare state” (Finnegan and Grummell, 2020, p. 5) and thus “represented an emancipatory and rights-based concept” (Elfert, 2020, p. 17). These ideas therefore aligned lifelong learning with liberal and radical social ideals and with the development of more democratic societies.

However, the OCED and the World Bank were highly influential international organisations which strongly promoted neoliberal policies and politics. Thus, their influence saw the push for lifelong learning opportunities becoming predominantly aligned from the 1980s onwards with an economic dimension, as an investment in human capital, and a ‘knowledge economy’ discourse. This put lifelong learning “out of kilter” with the “philosophical and democratic ethos of UNESCO’s reports” (Finnegan and Grummell, 2020, p. 5) and shifted it towards the “more powerful economic interpretations of the concept that dominate education policies today” (Elfert, 2020, p. 18). The emerging international discourse of lifelong learning at the time of the Universities Act in 1997 in Ireland therefore was moving further away from its ‘humanistic’ roots and was becoming more and more aligned with a human capital perspective. The aforementioned *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* indicated that adult education was still considered to be the “last area of mass education which remain(ed) to be developed in Ireland” (DES, 2000, p. 10) and “set about promoting an inclusive agenda, which included calling for the integration of adult learning within mainstream HE as well as advocating training, up-skilling and meeting labour market needs through further and HE” (Hunt, 2017, p. 220). Thus, the White Paper effectively combined both human capital and social justice discourses in its vision statement for adult education / lifelong learning which were strongly linked to the government’s policy agenda at the time of developing a stronger ‘knowledge economy’ thus aligning strategies for both education and labour market policies (Shannon, 2019).

Therefore, while acknowledging the multiple purposes of adult education in contributing to economic, personal, community and organisational development, with the *White Paper* the State – and many HEIs with it – took a more functional view in terms of adult education's contribution to labour market upskilling, employability and economic development (Grummell, 2007; Hunt, 2017; Shannon, 2019). This mirrored a similar discourse and priority shift to that being experienced in the UK around the same time (Merrill, 2009; Bowl, 2017). Thus, 'popular adult education' within many HEIs, in Ireland as elsewhere, gradually became largely replaced with a focus on work- or life-related 'training' and human resource development, and many adult education departments were rebranded as 'adult and continuing education' or 'lifelong learning' departments, becoming more and more subsumed within the understanding of lifelong learning as a contributor to the knowledge economy (Hunt, 2007; Suoranta, 2023), with possibly some exceptions in those HEIs with strong adult and community education traditions. This significant shift reflected the "increasing influence of central government on university affairs and shifting political imperatives and funding mechanisms in education generally" (Hunt, 2007, p. 769).

The three main agendas of lifelong learning today are seen as being to support economic progress and development; personal development and fulfilment; social inclusiveness and democratic understanding (Biesta, 2018) and engagement with learning within this paradigm is widely considered to be the responsibility of the individual adult learner (Grummell, 2007; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011b). Fejes (2014, pp. 118-119) distinguishes this growing dichotomy between education and learning and its relevance for relational engagement clearly, claiming that lifelong learning:

has become the dominant manner in which to speak about the education and learning of adults in policy terms ... (However) while education often refers to a relationship between the educator and the student (a relational concept), learning refers to an activity that a person can do by his/herself."

Aspects of the lifelong learning agenda have been suggested to be embedded in a range of policy initiatives over the years, including in equity of access (Slowey, 2012; Hunt, 2017). While the responsibility for increasing under-represented communities' participation in higher education in Ireland has largely (although not exclusively) fallen

to Access Services, with respect to MSACs can the lifelong learning and access agendas be considered to be “competing, conflicting or complementary” (Hunt, 2017, p. 231)? Critics suggest that maintaining equality and social justice objectives to the front and centre of higher education policy is challenging within a neoliberal system as economic considerations continually override equality considerations. Reay (2012, p. 588), for example, suggests that a “neoliberal, socially just educational system is a contradiction in terms” and questions the extent to which such a system “is possible in an unjust society given the degree to which educational systems reflect the societies they grow out of” (ibid., p. 592). Kearns (2017, p. 31) also notes this divergence arguing that “while the notion of social inclusion and personal benefit continue to nominally form part of the rhetoric behind (widening access) policy, this appears secondary to more pressing concerns about mobilising sufficient human resources to meet the challenges of the global knowledge economy.” In a similar vein, Loxley et al. (2017b, p. 53) posit that widening participation, while remaining at the core of higher education policy, has moved more towards becoming an “integral part of the strategy for national economic renewal”.

Therefore, while ostensibly the lifelong learning and widening access agendas are – or should be - complementary, given the primacy given to development of the knowledge economy and the human capital required to support its development, I suggest that these agendas, albeit not conflicting, are in fact more competing than complementary. For example, although the funding streams for equity of access and for lifelong learning provision in higher education remain separate, a further ‘instrumental’ shift has become evident in more recent years with respect to funding for lifelong learning courses, evidenced by the development of the recent national ‘micro-creds project’²⁷ which aims to establish a national framework for quality assured and accredited micro-credentials. These are small units of learning which are typically offered as “stackable modules” (e.g. they can count towards a higher education qualification), have a strong skills-based focus aligned to industry need, and that are delivered in flexible learning modes (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2021). Although provision of micro-creds by higher education

²⁷ <https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/learning-teaching/microcreds/microcreds-project-overview/>

is ostensibly situated within a lifelong learning and social democratic discourse by making learning yet more 'accessible' to individual learners, they effectively strengthen the employability skills discourse and maintain higher education's focus on outputs and learning outcomes by repackaging programmes into small, bite-sized components of learning (ibid.), rather than being fundamentally driven by a social justice objective.

In responding to the demand for employability skills, microcredentials help to maintain the view that "learning is about work, that the purpose of learning is to prepare individuals for the labour market, and that this can be achieved in small bite-sized chunks" (ibid., p. 215). This approach reinforces the dominant discourse around lifelong learning as being the responsibility of the individual under an economic development agenda. This also positions the importance and value of such a project to higher education in Ireland in stark contrast to the continued absence of, or impetus to create, any kind of a national framework or policy for access courses. This change continues to be driven by economic and government strategy to up-skill the workforce and to prioritise provision of accredited courses over non-accredited courses, particularly in the higher education sector. However, for the most part MSACs were developed by and remain located in Access Services which may have protected some of them from potential "demise" within HEIs wherein institutional strategy moved more strongly and definitively towards CPE and away from 'extra-mural' adult education provision (Keogh, 2004; Hunt, 2017). This also demonstrates the broader higher education culture and discourse within which adult access to higher education, including through MSACs, has been located for many years – that of adult participation in lifelong learning for the purposes of economic and human capital development.

2.5 Mature students as an equity of access target group

The need to address adult learners' access to higher education on equity grounds was initially addressed in the previously mentioned *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000). This paper identified that the participation level of mature students in higher education in Ireland was the lowest in the OCED at the time and recommended the establishment of a targeted fund for higher education to develop

strategies to support adult participation, subsequently seen in the development and funding of successive NAPs. The term ‘mature student’ is used almost exclusively in a higher education context in Ireland while the term ‘adult learner’ is a broader one which extends to all types of learning settings in which non-school-going learners participate, including adult and community education and further education. Therefore, not every adult learner is necessarily a ‘mature student’ from a higher education equity of access policy perspective. Merriam and Bierema (2014) describe the main differences between adult learners and non-adult learners which could equally be applied to distinguishing mature students from non-mature students. The authors point out that while mature students may be studying full-time, they typically have a range of other roles and responsibilities (caring, work, financial etc.) to which they add the role of student. Mature students also typically have more life experience behind them than does the student who enters higher education directly from second-level education. This latter distinction in particular is considered to be a key characteristic of all adult learners. Adult learners are also considered to be at a different developmental stage of life with regard to their learning needs and interests and are often self-motivated to improve some aspect of their lives, from the personal, to financial, to social. This has been borne out time and again by research that has been carried out on mature students’ motivations for participating in higher education (Fleming, 2010; Fleming et al., 2010; Bruen, 2014; Kearns, 2017).

The policy definition of a mature student for many years has been a simple age-related definition, which can differ by country (Fleming, 2010). In Ireland, a mature student is someone who is aged 23 years or older on 1st January in the year of application for entry to higher education (HEA, 2022a) while, by contrast, in the UK the age of entry to higher education for mature students is 21²⁸. However, such an approach does not necessarily identify or address the vast range of life circumstances which may prevent someone from progressing to higher education. Mature students are a heterogeneous group, being individuals from diverse social and educational backgrounds, cultures, ages, abilities, work and life experiences, and bring with them a wealth of prior knowledge

²⁸ www.ucas.com/undergraduate/student-life/mature-undergraduate-students

and learning to higher education. In reality, the only commonality among mature students is that of being above a certain age on entry to higher education. Kearns (2017, p. 191) points out that mature students tend to “fall into several equity groups identified in policy and that those at the greatest risk potentially identify with a number of different characteristics of non-traditional students.” The life circumstances of mature students are also a distinguishing feature for this cohort - 12% of mature students do not have a leaving certificate compared to 2% of the rest of the student population, while 32% of full-time mature students in Ireland have children (HEA, 2019a).

As already highlighted, the most recent National Access Plan now acknowledges the intersectionality of disadvantage for all target groups, including mature students. For many years the priority for mature student entry was on first-time entrants (i.e. those who had never accessed higher education). However, the need for ‘second-chance’ mature students (i.e. those who previously attended higher education but did not complete a course) to be supported to access and participate in higher education has been recognised in the current National Access Plan, along with a recognition of the need to focus on increasing the participation of disadvantaged mature students. What is interesting within the current NAP is that mature students are no longer a primary target group (although curiously they remain so from a system performance reporting perspective) but rather are included within the broader definition of societal groups who can experience socio-economic disadvantage. Many of these groups are those who avail of pre-entry programmes such as access courses to support their preparation for entry to higher education.

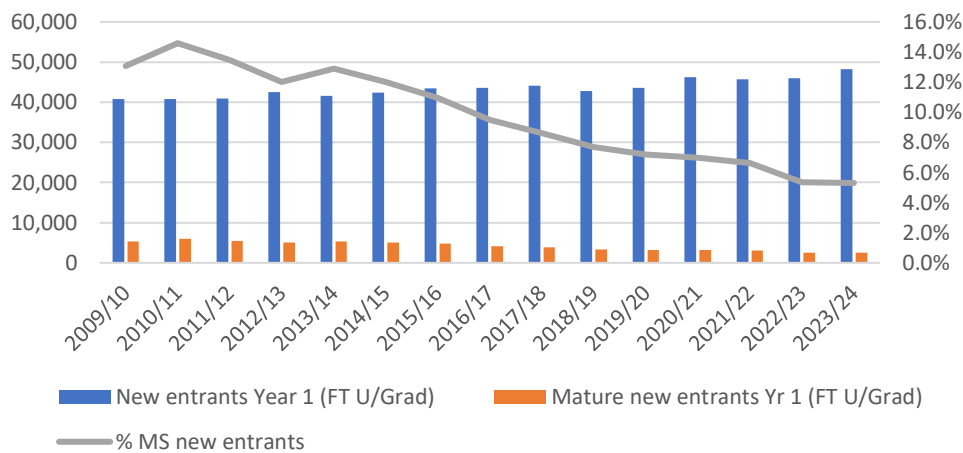
2.5.1 Mature student participation in higher education

The most recent published figure for mature student participation in full-time undergraduate education in Ireland (i.e. excluding access and foundation courses) is 5.3% (2,560 mature students) of new entrants in 2023/24²⁹, down from 5.4% in the previous year but slightly up in absolute numbers by 90 mature student entrants nationally. Notwithstanding this recent increase, Irish higher education has seen a

²⁹ <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/>

steady decline in mature student participation over more than a decade from a high of 14.6% (5,944 students) in 2010/11 (see Figure 2.2)³⁰, despite the continued availability of dedicated mature student supports in HEIs.

Figure 2.2: Mature student participation in higher education in Ireland



Factors contributing to this proportional decline are widely acknowledged to be a recovering economy and higher rates of employment; the increasing cost of attending third-level; a broader choice of higher education programmes including Springboard³¹, apprenticeships and more recently, micro-credentials; and an increasing student population overall. Recognising this decline, as part of its review of the NAP 2015-2019, the HEA commissioned research economists, Indecon, to conduct a review of mature student participation in higher education in Ireland, having acknowledged that the original target participation rate of 16% for full-time mature student entrants that had been set in the third NAP was far from being achieved. Among the objectives of the review were to analyse trends in mature student participation in higher education; to investigate barriers and challenges to accessing higher education, particularly for mature students from NAP target groups; review current supporting structures, including the adequacy of financial supports; and to make recommendations to support participation of mature students in higher education into the future.

³⁰ Data compiled from: HEA Institutional and System Profiles Reports, HEA Key Facts and Figures Reports and HEA data dashboard. Available <https://hea.ie/resource-category/statistics/publications/> and <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/>

³¹ <https://springboardcourses.ie/>

The result was a report entitled *Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education: What are the Challenges? Recommendations for the Future* (HEA, 2021). Amongst its key findings, the study reported that the fall in mature student participation coincided with a fall in unemployment and economic recovery from 2011 onwards. The main barriers for mature students to participating in higher education such as financial costs and family commitments, along with a lack of part-time and flexible options were identified in the report, largely unchanged from much previous research that had been undertaken (see Section 2.5.1.1). These barriers were particularly acute for mature students from the four key NAP target groups (persons from disadvantaged areas, persons with a disability, lone parents and Irish travellers) and the study recommended that “scarce exchequer resources should (therefore) be focused on supporting the most disadvantaged and underrepresented communities to access HE” (ibid., p. xviii). Other recommendations within the report suggested greater provision of and funding for part-time and flexible learning opportunities, continuing institutional-level support for mature students, and developing more integrated pathways between further and higher education.

This shift in prioritisation is now evident in the most recent NAP which highlights the need to target mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The numerical target which has been set in the current NAP for mature student participation focuses on the participation of mature students as a proportion of all new entrants from *disadvantaged* backgrounds, seeking an increase from 11% to 20% by 2028. This is a departure from previous NAPs which focused on ‘simple’ numerical target participation rates for mature students as a percentage of *all* new entrants e.g. the second NAP set a target participation rate of 17% for full-time mature student entrants, while the third NAP had recalibrated this as 16%, acknowledging declining rates of participation as a result of the overall growth in the student population, amongst other factors. However, one must question the rationale for continuing to use a numeric target approach to ‘measuring’ the participation of mature students in higher education as such measures do not consider the range of economic, socio-cultural, systemic and other factors that impact access, participation and success of any under-represented student group, not just

mature students. Nor do they ‘measure’ the quality of the student’s experience or the impact on their lives, or on the lives of those around them. However, the fact that equity of access and participation is a key system-level objective under a self-regulatory approach means that, to a large extent, the reporting of HEI access ‘performance’ under higher education performance agreements up to now has been largely limited to reporting on the achievement of targets or key performance indicators (KPIs), thus running the risk of rendering and maintaining equity as a “measurable *product* of access” (Finnegan et al., 2017, p. 114), rather than seeking to instil it as a core value within higher education. In fact, these authors describe access as a “subsystem within HE reform”, used to “justify the push to ‘modernise’ HE so that it becomes more integrated and a more responsive set of learning spaces” (ibid.). Albeit the new system performance framework does encourage HEIs to engage with a range of evidence to support selection of institutional objectives and to report on both qualitative and quantitative data in measuring performance, in my own experience the complexity of factors impacting equity of access to higher education for so many in Irish society, makes it challenging to ‘measure’ and report on the impact of access interventions in an easily ‘digestible’ way, and to use this data to have meaningful influence at a strategic level. Thus, this makes it difficult for performance measurement in this space to truly move beyond quantitative targets and KPIs. The challenge of demonstrating meaningful impact with respect to equity of access initiatives leads to an apparent contradiction between its primacy as a core higher education system objective and its embedding in Irish higher education policy and the notion, as some researchers have suggested, that ‘access work’ continues to be situated on the periphery of higher education (Brosnan, 2013). This policy versus practice contradiction will be interrogated further as the presentation of my research unfolds throughout this thesis.

2.5.1.1 Mature students’ experiences of higher education

The experiences of mature students who engage in higher education has been an area of research interest over many years and have been well documented in an Irish context (e.g. Fleming and Murphy, 1999; Inglis and Murphy, 1999; Murphy and Fleming, 2000; Healy et al., 2001; Dolan, 2008; Staunton, 2008; Fleming et al., 2010; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a, 2011b; Finnegan, 2012; Kelly, 2013; Kirwan, 2013; Bruen, 2014;

Gannon, 2014; Giblin, 2015; Kinsella, 2015; Keane, 2017; Kearns, 2017). It is useful to consider what we know about mature students' experiences of higher education more generally before exploring their participation in and experiences of MSACs, as studies carried out on mature students' experiences tell us something about the kinds of issues that are important to them in returning to higher education and therefore about the kinds of relationships that are important to support their participation.

Such experiences have been identified as being related to academic, as well as non-academic (e.g. social, financial etc) aspects of mature students' time in higher education. Research findings tend to fall into three broad categories: mature students' motivations for engaging in higher education and transition barriers they experience in returning; their experiences of being a student, including learning and other supports they find helpful as well as barriers to participation; and graduate outcomes or impact on their lives of ultimately achieving a higher education qualification. The focus of research on the mature student experience in higher education in Ireland also reflects much of the research that has been carried out in other jurisdictions (e.g. Reay, 2002; Mercer and Saunders, 2004; MacFadgen, 2007; Lusk, 2008; O'Shea and Stone, 2011; Merrill, 2015; Guthrie, 2016; Heagney and Benson, 2017; Merrill et al., 2020). While the mature student experience of higher education is not the main focus of my research, it is valuable nonetheless to briefly consider the key themes arising in this research space as background context. It is also useful at this point to note that mature students' motivations, transition and participation challenges and barriers experienced, as well as personal outcomes and benefits, are very similar to those reported within studies carried out specifically on their experiences of access courses (e.g. Reay et al., 2002; Coveney-O'Beirne, 2006; Jones, 2006; Waller, 2006; Fleming, 2010; Fenge, 2011; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Wilson, 2016; Elsom et al., 2017; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017; Busher and James, 2019; Busher and James, 2020). Therefore, in Section 2.5.2.1 in which I later explore mature students' experiences of access courses, I will focus on what distinguishes their experience of these courses from their experiences of undergraduate education more generally.

Fleming (2010) suggests that motivation is critical in determining or predicting the potential for mature students to remain and progress in higher education, and that it can be intrinsic, self-determined motivation, or extrinsic, as a response to external situations. Key themes which have been documented with respect to mature students' motivations for participating in higher education include pursuing learning for personal and intellectual development, realisation of an unfulfilled ambition, improvement of career prospects and credentialization, and the desire to be a role model or positive influence on family and the wider community and thus to generate valuable social and/or cultural capital with respect to education for families and communities (Reay, 2003; TAP, 2007, 2010; Dolan, 2008; Staunton, 2008; Fleming, 2010; Share and Carroll, 2013; Bruen, 2014; Kirwan, 2015; Kearns, 2017; Merrill et al., 2020). Mature students may participate for various and interconnected reasons (Fleming, 2010; Kearns, 2017) while participation in higher education has been found to be highly valued by mature students as it is believed to be a "space of opportunity, development and upward mobility" (Merrill et al., 2020, p. 168) and to offer security with respect to work opportunities, particularly by mature students from working-class backgrounds.

Barriers to participating in higher education for mature students have been found to include institutional barriers (e.g. inflexible programme structures and timetables, enrolment procedures, assessment instruments), financial barriers (e.g. lack of access to funding, childcare costs, commuting costs) and personal challenges (e.g. lack of confidence, mental health issues) (Healy et al., 2001; Risquez et al., 2007; Dolan, 2008; Staunton 2008; O'Brien et al., 2009; Bruen, 2014; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a; Quilty et al., 2016; Fleming et al., 2017b; Kearns 2017). Likewise, adapting to the 'culture' of higher education ('culture shock'), including developing academic practices and skills such as essay writing, exams, and study skills have been identified as challenges for mature students (Inglis and Murphy, 1999; Murphy and Fleming, 2000; Healy et al., 2001; Risquez et al., 2007; TAP, 2007; Dolan, 2008; O'Brien et al., 2009; Bruen, 2014; Keane, 2015). These myriad barriers are typically accompanied by feelings of fear, anxiety and social isolation, particularly when combined with being amongst younger age students (Risquez et al., 2007; TAP, 2007). Despite higher education student populations becoming more diverse, mature students unfortunately still frequently

report feeling “marginalised and ‘like fish out of water’ as a result of their age, class, gender, ethnicity or disability” (Merrill and Fejes, 2018, p. 8).

It is acknowledged in much of this literature that institutional structures and practices (e.g. timetables, assessments, exams, teaching strategies) have been designed primarily for learners progressing into higher education directly from second-level and typically have not considered the needs of adult learners. The structure of the academic year for example usually means trying to find a balance between a depth of engagement with subjects and the time available in which to complete the requirements of a course, and thus such barriers have meant that mature students need to adopt a more pragmatic approach to their studies (Merrill, 2001; Risquez et al., 2007). The research has frequently noted the disproportionate impact of such system rigidities on mature students, aptly described by Apple (2013, p. 115) as “bureaucratically determined ... (and) averse to ‘difference’”. From the start therefore, mature students are disadvantaged with respect to the way in which higher education is structured and delivered, particularly full-time undergraduate education, thus making it quite a challenge for most to fit education within their already busy and responsible lives. However, the rise in awareness of the need for universal design for learning (UDL)³² practices and policies in higher education to create more inclusive learning environments for an increasingly diverse student body is slowly taking hold, acknowledging also the need for a cultural and pedagogical shift in higher education to ensure universal access and participation for all – this relates to the need to address the ‘accessibility’ of higher education for mature students identified by Fleming and Murphy (1999), referred to in Section 2.4.

The reported outcomes for mature students of participating in higher education fall into both personal and professional spheres. From a personal perspective, mature students report improved self-belief, confidence and a sense of achievement, an increase in social and cultural capital, and improved job prospects, income and security (Staunton, 2008; Fleming et al., 2010; Kirwan, 2015; Merrill et al., 2020). On this latter point however,

³² <https://www.ahead.ie/udl>

some studies report that “the relationship between access to higher education for mature students and equal opportunity access to the labour market is not as straightforward as the simple acquisition of a degree qualification may suggest” (Staunton, 2008, p. 2) with “subtle variations depending on a range of factors ranging from age, gender, social class background, type and level of programme studies” (ibid., p. 251). Similarly, Kirwan (2015) found that the benefits to income for mature students of gaining a higher education qualification was mixed or as Fleming et al. (2010, p. 2) suggest, “more modest than expected”.

One of the aspects of mature students’ experiences, and indeed of many non-traditional student groups, which has been identified as facilitating their successful participation in higher education is the importance of experiencing supportive learning environments. Supportive and trusting teacher-learner relationships have been identified as contributing to student persistence and retention and to mitigating feelings of exclusion (MacFadgen, 2007; Pearce and Down, 2011; Kirwan, 2015). These relationships are described as those which recognise mature students’ prior knowledge and experiences and demonstrate a sensitivity to mature students’ educational needs, including pedagogical practices such as interactivity in teaching and learning spaces and shared learning (Murphy and Fleming, 2000; Merrill, 2001; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a; Bruen, 2014). They are also relationships in which the social distance between lecturer and student is experienced as minimal due to greater commonality in age and/or life experiences, such as having children or other caring responsibilities. However, these are not ubiquitous findings as a level of dissatisfaction amongst mature students with the support received from lecturers or other services has also been identified (e.g. O’Brien et al., 2009), with degrees of variation of support ultimately coming down to how individual lecturers or other support staff engage with these students. The kind of teacher-learner relationship which is experienced by mature students on access courses, compared to that on undergraduate education, is one of their distinguishing features and I will focus on this aspect of these courses in Section 2.5.2.1.

Pastoral care or support, either from lecturers or dedicated advisors or support staff, is also identified by mature students as an important support (Murphy and Fleming, 2000;

Merrill, 2001; Bruen, 2014; Kirwan, 2015). Today many Irish HEIs have dedicated Mature Student Officers³³ whose role is to support the access, participation and success of older learners in full-time undergraduate education and the availability of this personal support from higher education staff, including teaching staff and those working in access offices, has been identified as critical by many mature students (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a). Peer support and peer relationships have also been identified as essential in helping mature students to adapt to academic language and culture as well as to develop a sense of connectedness to others and a sense of belonging in higher education (Risquez et al., 2007; O'Brien et al., 2009; Fleming et al., 2010; Bruen, 2014; Merrill, 2015).

The findings above signify that personal relationships within the educational experience are important to mature students. Keane (2009, 2011) reported on under-represented students', including mature students', relational experiences both within and outside higher education. The author's research presents findings on relational experiences in education from the students' perspectives and focuses on their relationships with peers within the institution and with friends outside of the institution. Relationships with educators were not explored, nor was the experience of staff regarding their relationships with under-represented learners explored as part of the study. Nonetheless Keane (2009, p. 95) concludes that "HEIs have a key role to play in facilitating and supporting a richer social and relational experience for all students, especially in an era of widening participation". The study does highlight the importance of relationality in higher education teaching in an era of increasing diversity in the higher education student population. It is valuable to note that Keane's work is part of a wider research focus on access and diversity in teaching and learning in Irish higher education, including diversity within disciplines (e.g. Keane, 2012, 2017; Keane and Heinz, 2015; Heinz and Keane, 2018; Keane et al., 2023a, 2023b).

³³ www.maturestudentsireland.ie

2.5.2 Mature student participation on access courses

Fleming (2010) cites a draft study by Christle (2006) which signified that in 2005/06 there were 20 access courses for mature students in Irish HEIs that year, with a total estimated enrolment of 708 participants. The same data was presented in Murphy's (2009) study which was carried out a few years later. At the time my own research was undertaken, a publication by Mature Students Ireland (MSI)³⁴, the national network for Mature Student Officers in Ireland, suggests that there were 18 access courses available to mature students in Irish HEIs. National statistics available from the HEA³⁵ indicate that there were 385 mature students enrolled on access or foundation courses in Ireland in 2023/24, across ten HEIs, which is a vastly reduced participation figure compared to that presented by Fleming and Murphy for the early years of access course delivery. However, interestingly it does represent an increase in actual participation numbers compared to 2022/23 (290 students), reversing what had been a downward national trend, with two HEIs in particular contributing to this increase. Exploring the reasons behind this recent increase and indeed, whether such an increase will be sustained into the future, is beyond the scope of my research. However, it is useful to note that despite the movements in numbers, the participation of mature students on access courses as a percentage of overall participation has remained reasonably steady in more recent years (see Figure 2.3).

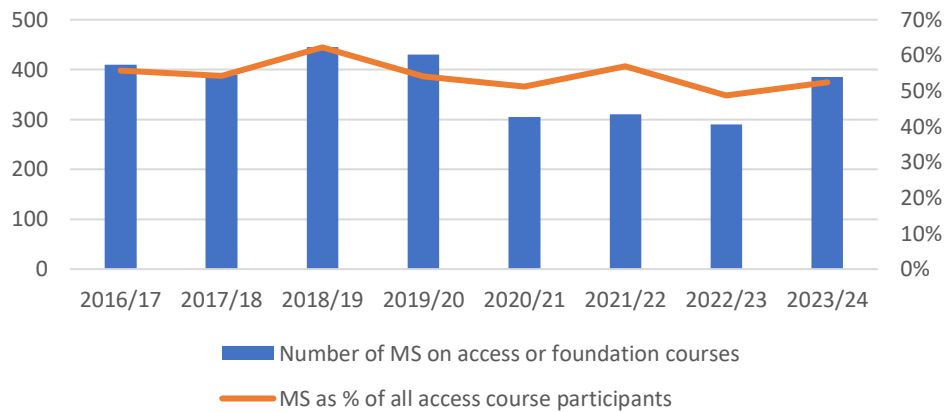
The Indecon report referred to in Section 2.5.1 also addressed the importance of pre-entry and foundation courses for mature students. In relation to these the study found that "almost three in four mature students reported having participated in education and training prior to engaging in HE. Over half participated in a FET course, while 21% participated in a community education course" (HEA, 2021, p. xvii) and noted that these courses provided an important pathway to higher education for mature learners. Fleming and Finnegan (2011a, p. 7) identified similar findings in their study of non-traditional learners, whereby mature students reported that "the encouragement from

³⁴ <http://maturestudents.ie/> - Mature Student Admissions Requirements 2019

³⁵ <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/>

adult education tutors, other students and career guidance counsellors was a key part of many students' access story".

Figure 2.3: Mature student participation on access courses in Ireland



The Indecon report highlighted that:

"international experience, and the experience of many institutions in Ireland, suggests that the funding and provision of foundation/bridging courses in advance of attending a HEI can greatly assist students. This can involve partnerships between the higher and further education/community education sectors in the running of access/foundation courses that will provide a range of options to meet the specific needs of disadvantaged communities" (HEA, 2021, p. xix).

The report did not make a recommendation with respect to access courses other than this, however it is notable that the value of these courses to mature students was highlighted as MSACs have been found to be built on and around supportive relationships with teaching and access staff. Small class teaching and participatory classes were distinct features of access courses identified by Murphy (2009). Amongst other factors such as peer support and socialisation to a third-level environment, relationships developed with higher education staff (teachers and access staff) were identified as being important in supporting the transition of learners from an access course to undergraduate education, particularly for adult learners. Lynch and O'Riordan (1996, cited in Fleming, 2010) identified that the commitment by staff to the objectives and ideals of such courses was of greater importance to the success of these courses than was having specialised knowledge or training in access. However, despite their underpinning social justice agenda, research by Brosnan (2013, p. 226) on adult access courses suggests that, in Ireland, while there are "different rationales for offering these

courses ... in the main, analysis confirms that institutions develop this genre of programme in order to augment mature student numbers and be accountable to external funders for ‘survival’ in the system”. Similarly in the UK, Johnston et al. (2012, p. 91) suggest that access courses are a “practical means of implementing access policy to increase the numbers of ‘mature’ students entering university”. These latter views reveal a dissonance between the personal value – to students and to teachers – of such courses and the institutional value, which suggests a focus on performance metrics. However, such courses are taught and engaged with by individuals with wide and varied life stories and experiences. While the experience, knowledge and empathy that access course teachers bring to their work in teaching mature students has been identified in some studies (Foster, 2008; Murphy, 2009; Busher et al., 2015a), no in-depth exploration that I am aware of has been undertaken of teachers’ experiences of delivering these courses, and particularly in the context of the neoliberal, performative culture which pervades much higher education work today. Exploration of teachers’ experiences of such courses through my own research therefore makes an important contribution in shifting the lens away from the performative aspect of these courses and towards the personal and relational.

2.5.2.1 Mature students’ experiences of access courses

This section will explore research which has been carried out on mature students’ experiences of access courses, both in Ireland and elsewhere, albeit research with such a focus still remains relatively limited (Wilson, 2016; Forster et al., 2022). Many of the studies carried out on access and foundation courses have focused or reported on aspects such as course effectiveness or graduate outcomes (e.g. Coveney-O’Beirne, 2006; TAP, 2007; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017), pedagogical approaches (e.g. Murphy, 2009; Dodd, 2016; Newton, 2016), student profiles (Fleming, 2010; Lisciandro and Gibbs, 2016; Busher and James, 2020), or students’ perspectives and experiences of these courses (e.g. Reay et al., 2002; Jones, 2006; Waller, 2006; Fenge, 2011; Johnston et al., 2012; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015; Marshall, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017; Busher and James, 2019; Elsom et al., 2019; O’Sullivan et al., 2019). As I mentioned in Section 2.5.1.1, many of the motivations, benefits, challenges and barriers experienced by mature students on

undergraduate education are similar to those experienced by mature students on access courses. Therefore, in this section I will focus on presenting the key distinguishing aspects of mature students' experiences of access courses, the primary one of which is the kind of learning environment created and the teacher-student relationship therein.

To start however, it is useful to note that a high level of satisfaction overall with access courses has been reported by mature students (Coveney-O'Beirne, 2006; Brosnan, 2013; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Wilson, 2016; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017; Forster et al., 2022). The specific benefits to mature students of participating in an access course, compared to going straight into undergraduate education, have been identified by students as having increased self-confidence and being better prepared for third level study, as well as experiencing a sense of personal achievement in completing a course (Coveney-O'Beirne, 2006; Jones, 2006; TAP, 2007; Brosnan, 2013; Busher et al., 2015b; Keane, 2015; Wilson, 2016; Forster et al., 2022). Mature students also report that participating on access courses helps them to develop a sense of community with the student body at large (TAP, 2007; Forster et al., 2022), something that is critically important for non-traditional and under-represented student groups to develop a sense of belonging in higher education. The graduate outcomes for students who have participated in access courses, and who ultimately progressed on to undergraduate education have also been reported as highly positive and transformational (Keane, 2015).

Studies highlighted in Section 2.5.1.1 illustrated that experiencing a supportive learning environment is important to mature students, but that this is not a ubiquitous experience for them in undergraduate education. A supportive learning environment for adult learners is typically one that offers a sense of welcome, trust, belonging and collaboration and that helps to remove any emotional blocks to learning that may exist for learners (Knowles, 1990; Merriam and Caffarella, 1991; Elias and Merriam, 2005; Brookfield, 2015). Creating such an environment requires adult educators to employ appropriate pedagogical and affective practices (Elias and Merriam, 2005; Merriam and Bierama, 2014) in order to foster a space in which learners can grow both personally and academically (MacFagden, 2007). Loxley et al. (2017b, p. 88) suggest that, although

small in terms of student numbers, access courses can “offer an intense pedagogical experience”. Experiencing a supportive learning environment has been identified by participating students in a range of studies on mature student access courses (e.g. Jones, 2006; Scanlon, 2009; Fenge, 2011; Brosnan, 2013; Share and Carroll, 2013; Busher et al., 2015b; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015; Keane, 2015; James et al., 2016; Lisciandro and Gibbs, 2016; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017; Busher and James, 2020; Forster et al., 2022) and the pedagogical practices and teaching philosophies adopted by access course teachers, such as small class teaching and highly participatory classes, tend to mirror those of adult education more generally (Reay et al., 2002; Murphy, 2009; Johnston et al., 2012; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017).

The culture of supportive and collaborative learning environments on mature student access courses arises, in part, from *how* such courses are taught (Scanlon, 2009; Busher and James, 2020). In other words, as put forward by Scanlon (2009, p. 36) “it is the pedagogical approach of the teacher which largely determines the learning environment”. The role of the educator on such courses is acknowledged to be critical for “nurturing and cultivating the educational aspirations of the mature students and for their sensitivity to the unique educational and personal needs of mature learners” (TAP, 2007, p. i). This suggests that access course teachers need to be cognisant of who their learners are, their backgrounds and experiences, to adjust their teaching to accommodate these circumstances and to set their learners up for success. In Jones’ (2006, p. 491) study with AHE Social Work students “personal support and encouragement were seen (by students) to be just as important as help with formal study skills” while the key difference reported by students between their undergraduate experience and their access experience “tended to be identified in terms of academic support rather than academic level” (ibid., p. 492). A critical aspect of access course teachers’ work in doing this is in helping their students to develop the study skills and learning capacities necessary for higher education learning and engagement and to do this in such a way that they feel confident in progressing on with their studies. Therefore, creating a “supportive environment of mutual trust and respect” (Dodd, 2016, p. 157) is important and suggests that an important aspect of this is changing students’ perception of the tutor from “significant other” to learning support” (ibid., p. 158), thus invoking a

more relational approach to teaching and learning. The central role that the teacher plays is of particular importance where adult learners may have had previous negative experiences of education (Jones, 2006; Scanlon, 2009; Elsom et al., 2017; Busher and James, 2019). Pedagogical approaches such as creating learning partnerships between students are suggested to lessen the risk of access course students feeling isolated while more open or social interactions with teachers and peers and offering constructive feedback to students, is also suggested to contribute to access students' growth in confidence (Dodd, 2016; Forster et al., 2022).

Access course teachers need to have more than expertise in their subject; they also need to be able to teach their subject in an interesting and engaging way that makes it accessible to their learners, as well as captivating their learners' attention (Scanlon, 2009; Busher et al., 2014). Creating an energising and interesting learning environment, through demonstrating enthusiasm for teaching and for their subject (Busher et al., 2014; Busher et al., 2015b), is critical for the engagement of adult learners who often lead complex lives and have multiple roles and responsibilities, which can distract them from their learning (Scanlon, 2009). Other specific aspects of pedagogy that are reported by students as lending to the creation of supportive learning environments include a high level of interaction and dialogue in class and creation of a relaxed or 'safe' atmosphere (i.e. removal of fear) by teachers; small group work; adoption of a learner-centred approach; encouragement of peer support; creation of a collaborative ethos; drawing on learners' experiences as a resource; focusing on the development of study skills and learning capacities; and using suitable methods of assessment including the provision of feedback (Murphy and Fleming, 2000; Reay et al., 2002; Coveney-O'Beirne, 2006; Jones, 2006; O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Busher et al., 2014; Busher et al., 2015b; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; James et al., 2016; Wilson, 2016; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017; Busher and James, 2019; Forster et al., 2022).

As with adult education more generally the quality of relationship between teacher and learner on mature student access courses is fundamental to the fostering of positive learning environments and can ultimately impact on student retention and success (Scanlon, 2009; James et al., 2016; Lisciandro and Gibbs, 2016). For example, teacher-

learner relationships which are built on mutual trust, respect and collaboration have been identified as critical for building access course students' self-confidence and self-esteem (Jones, 2006; Scanlon, 2009; James et al., 2016; Elsom et al., 2017; Busher and James, 2020). Student respondents to Busher and James' (2020, p. 648) study suggested that the collaborative learning culture that was developed on their AHE courses "was due to the way in which the tutors behaved" i.e. the students felt that their tutors were open to developing positive and mutually respectful relationships with the students and wanted their students to succeed. Students in Jones' (2006) study found that they were respected and treated like adults by their AHE tutors which was significant for them in feeling supported as learners. One way in which students have identified that their access course teachers demonstrated this behaviour was by getting to know their learners as individuals, thus developing an understanding of the realities and complexities of their learners' lives outside of college (Scanlon, 2009; Busher et al., 2014, 2015b; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Elsom et al., 2017; Magrath and Fitzsimons 2017; Busher and James, 2019, 2020). Elsom et al. (2017) point out that while many aspects of students' lives are outside the control of the education provider and of teaching and support staff, students still need support to achieve their goals. Thus "having teaching, administrative and support staff who are empathetic and accepting of students' individual circumstances is an important factor in supporting students to successful completion" (ibid., p. 261). Acknowledging the difficulties of their learners' lives and the competing demands on their time, and helping them to navigate these demands, is a demonstration of respect by teachers for their learners (Busher and James, 2020). Giving students time, being open to questions, listening, and taking time to explain and re-explain concepts and material, and proactively communicating with their students has also been identified by students as another way in which access course teachers behave to create supportive learning environments (Scanlon, 2009; Busher et al., 2014; Busher et al., 2015b). Access course teachers also engender trust by making their learners aware of aspects of their experiences that will be different in undergraduate education (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007).

The approachability and availability of teaching staff has also been identified by mature students as a significant motivator and thus as being critical to a positive educational

experience (Coveney-O’Beirne, 2006; Jones, 2006; Scanlon, 2009; Brosnan, 2013; Busher et al., 2014; Busher et al., 2015b; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015; James et al., 2016; Lisciandro and Gibbs, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Elsom et al., 2017; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017; Busher and James, 2020; Forster et al., 2022). Approachability is demonstrated for example by the practice of teaching staff using their first names when working with their students (Busher et al., 2014). This lack of formality is experienced by adult learners as positive and encouraging (O’Donnell and Tobbell, 2007) and students feel that they are thus not being “talk(ed) down to” (ibid., p. 321), something that they may experience in other education settings. Students in Brosnan’s (2013) study described this as teachers adopting a ‘non-elitist’ approach. This creates a greater equality in the teacher-learner relationship which in turn demonstrates a mutual trust and respect between teacher and learner. Scanlon (2009, p. 34) describes a teacher who adopted such an approach as the “expert teacher who blurred the boundaries between herself and her students, an exceptional teacher who was respected both for the way she interacted with students and for her expertise”.

What these studies all demonstrate is that from the mature students’ perspectives, their confidence to participate and succeed on access courses and to subsequently transition to undergraduate education was significantly influenced by the personal, respectful and trustworthy relationships that they developed with their teachers while the overall culture and ethos of access courses is identified by students as being “vital to their personal and academic confidence, development and success” (Jones, 2006, p. 493). Magrath and Fitzsimons (2017, p. 16) reported a key finding of “the affection and respect with which participants spoke about the core tutors who students felt were a critical part of their success”, as well as the high level of support and care demonstrated by core tutors on access courses, which enabled them to “draw out potential” (ibid., p. 84) from their students. At the heart of these learning environments is a strong relational ethos between teacher and learner, in terms of both pedagogical and affective practices. This is very evident from studies carried out that have explored mature students’ perspectives of access courses, and the relational approaches adopted by access course teachers and unique levels of support offered (Brosnan, 2013) have been noted as being at odds with teaching and learning approaches more generally in higher

education (Murphy and Fleming, 2000). However, it is the access course teachers' perspectives which is the focus of my own study, and the next section therefore explores research which has been carried out on this aspect of these programmes.

2.5.3 Teachers' experiences of access courses

In this section I explore studies which present findings with respect to teachers' experiences or perspectives of mature student access courses. However, unlike research on students' experiences of access courses, research which explicitly foregrounds and analyses teachers' experiences is limited. From an Irish teaching and learning (T&L) perspective, research work does not frequently delve into equity groups or into teachers' experiences of teaching these groups and has tended instead to focus on "disciplinary domains and/or pedagogical or curricula techniques or the functional dimensions of T&L" (Loxley et al., 2017c, p. 239). My own exploration of this specific body of literature is outlined in Appendix F and, for the most part, I have found that in research or evaluations on MSACs where teachers' experiences or opinions *are* included (e.g. Reay, 2002; Reay et al., 2002; Jones, 2006; MacFagden, 2007; Murphy, 2009; Brosnan, 2013; Busher et al., 2015; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017), their voices do not feature prominently. In these studies, teachers' experiences have been included primarily to offer insight into how they perceive their *students'* experiences of access courses (Jones, 2006), or to explore in more depth the "themes and issues which were arising from the inquiry into student experience" (Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015, p. 85), as opposed to exploring in any real depth the value or meaning that teaching on these courses has for the teachers themselves. Teachers' perspectives have also been included to provide contextual information on historical and structural aspects of programmes as part of course evaluations (Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017) and/or to seek insights on working practices and values as part of a larger study on adult access policy where MSACs form part of HEI access initiatives (Brosnan, 2013). However, one of the most directly relevant pieces of research to my own study is research that was undertaken by Busher et al. (2015a) as part of a broader qualitative study on both students' and tutors' experiences

of Access to Higher Education (AHE) courses in the UK and findings from that study, where relevant, are included below.

Staff who teach mature students on access courses have been found to demonstrate a commitment to 'second-chance' learning (Jones, 2006; Brosnan, 2013; Busher et al., 2015a). In some cases, teachers indicated having similar experiences in their own lives to those of their students and thus were able to empathise with their students and the challenges they were experiencing in returning to education (Busher et al., 2015a). Other teachers took up teaching on access courses from a moral perspective or from a personal commitment to social justice (Jones, 2006; Busher et al., 2015a). The tutors in Jones' (2006, p. 491) study of AHE social work courses "saw the process of helping students to understand and overcome previous negative experiences of education as being central to their role". In return, positive feelings and commitment amongst teaching staff with respect to their work on access courses have been found (Busher et al., 2015a; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017) with staff reporting such work to be "rewarding" and offering a "tangible return on their time investment" (Brosnan, 2013, p. 163). Busher et al. (2015a, p. 129) also found that a "common aspect of tutors' stories was their preference for teaching adults" with some of their participants using phrases such as "*I love our learners*" and "*I just love teaching adults*" (ibid.) to express positive experiences of this teaching. These preferences were suggested to be partly due to the commitment displayed by mature students to their studies compared to participants' experiences of teaching younger students. Some responses from access course co-ordinators in Brosnan's study imply that professional access staff considered it a "genuine privilege" (ibid., p. 217) to work with adult learners, given the contribution such learners bring to third-level in terms of learning styles, attitudes, expansion of community and diversity. With regard to the impact of the work on tutors themselves, Busher et al. (2015a, p. 134) found that the "the complexity of tutors' work with AHE students had a noticeable impact on tutors' personal lives" from the perspective that some expressed gratitude for being able to be a part of positive change in students' lives. Albeit tutors described the work as "very stressful, very demanding" because of the demands required on their time to get to know the personal

circumstances of their learners, they also described it as being “the most fun I’ve ever had and still been paid for” (ibid.).

Studies also report that access course teachers find that the culture and approach of access courses “nurture people in the right way” (Busher et al., 2015a, p. 130) and much of this is a result of the pedagogical approaches and strong elements of affective practices adopted by teachers. For example, AHE tutors demonstrated a recognition of the diversity and complexity of their learners’ wider lives and a strong awareness that many, being mature students, had external responsibilities (e.g. caring, jobs) and life circumstances (health, low self-esteem, complex families) which complicated their lives as learners (Busher et al., 2015a; Strauss and Hunter, 2018). Therefore, tutors understood that they needed to take time to “understand the students and the communities from which they come” (Busher et al., 2015a, p. 131) in order that they could create the kind of supportive learning environments that were needed by their learners. Tutors did this by being available, approachable and taking the time to listen to what was going on for students and where they were struggling, accepting this as part of their work (Busher et al., 2015a; Strauss and Hunter, 2018). This attention to the lives of their learners built their awareness of the broader socio-economic circumstances of their students’ lives, enabling them to take cognisance of such circumstances when, for example, they supported students by offering deadline extensions. Access course tutors also construct emotional and academic support which helps to build their students’ self-confidence and thus contributes to their ultimate success on the course. This often involves the provision of “extensive pastoral support” (Busher et al., 2015a, p. 136), resulting in a dual role of teaching and caring.

Tutors’ pedagogical strategies were highly supportive and served to scaffold the development of learning for life (Towler et al., 2011; Strauss and Hunter, 2018) and the development of the independent learning skills required by students in third-level education. Tutors recognised the importance of their own subject expertise, the necessity for students to meet the formal requirements of the course, supporting students with study skills and practical advice, encouraging peer learning and support, providing timely and detailed feedback, and being flexible as regards deadlines. They

managed this by “working as partners with students, rather than treating students as subordinates” (Busher et al., 2015a, p. 133) identifying the creation of “successful learning communities” as the “purpose of their work as teachers on AHE courses” (ibid., p. 137). Such approaches within access courses reflect an adult education ethos and pedagogy (Reay, 2002; Reay et al., 2002). Ultimately however, access courses teachers’ own views suggest that building supportive relationships with their students was at the heart of their pedagogical expertise and approach.

What these studies demonstrate is that teachers report largely positive experiences of their work in teaching adult learners on access courses, particularly with respect to the relational aspects of the work and the connections that they develop with their learners. Teachers see it as their responsibility to create an ethos and culture on these programmes that is highly supportive for students. Similar to students’ reported experiences, teachers’ experiences indicate that at the heart of these learning environments is a strong relational ethos between teacher and learner, in terms of both pedagogical and affective practices, particularly with respect to the significance of relationships of learning and experience, and that in fact, such practices are interdependent. However, as I have already noted elsewhere, different pedagogical approaches are normally adopted in higher education to those that are typically embraced in adult education. Given that my participants are teaching adult learners within a higher education access and widening participation context, it is relevant to briefly note some of the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of adult education to support an understanding of the relevance of these with respect to how teachers articulate their experiences of their work on MSACs, which I address in the next section.

2.6 Relevance of adult education philosophies

Adult education as a field of practice has a range of philosophical bases. Elias and Merriam (2005) outline the five main adult education philosophies which include liberal, progressive, behaviourist, humanistic and radical adult education. The role of a teacher in the progressive, humanistic and radical philosophies is that of an organiser or facilitator of learning, rather than as an ‘expert’ transmitter of knowledge as it is in the

liberal and behaviourist philosophies (Cox, 2015). In Ireland, the adult education sector more broadly is widely acknowledged to be influenced by the radical or critical education tradition of Freire (1970) and its philosophy of dialogue and conscientisation, which focuses on giving people the tools to understand their position in broader processes of structural and societal inequality, and thus to instigate change through collective action.

A pioneer in the field of adult education, Lindeman (1926) stated that the purpose of adult education is fundamentally to discover the meaning of experience, by helping people to learn from and understand their own life experiences. One of the key principles expressed within the adult learning and education literature is the importance of building curriculum and programmes around learners' experiences, needs and interests, thus exemplifying its humanistic and democratic roots (Brookfield, 2015; Knowles et al., 2015; Parkinson et al., 2021). In other words, adult education is distinguished from other forms of adult learning by the goals and purposes for which the learning event is designed, and adult education in its truest sense focuses on the development of the individual and on personal growth. Recognition of the learner's own experience within the learning process is therefore fundamental to adult education as adult educators draw on these experiences to co-create knowledge in the learning process, and also requires a critical analysis of that experience and its broader context for learning to occur (Knowles, 1990; Brookfield 1995, 2015).

Adult education is thus typically characterised by features such as valuing learners' personal experiences as a source of knowledge, the co-production of knowledge between educator and learner, self-directed learning and self-motivation, development of a learner-centred curriculum, and the promotion of active learning and critical thinking in a collaborative, facilitative learning process (Jarvis, 1987; Knowles et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2022). In this scenario, the role of the adult educator is to "discover ways of helping adults to examine their habits and biases and open their minds to new approaches" (Knowles, 1990, p. 58). The work of adult educators therefore needs to be underpinned by principles and values such as a collaborative teacher-learner relationship, co-creation of knowledge, collaborative learning, critical reflection and

recognition of learners' own experiences (Merriam and Brockett, 1997; Ryan et al., 2009; Brookfield, 2015; Knowles et al., 2015; Bowl, 2017).

2.6.1 Insight from andragogy

Individuals learn in many different ways and learning theories can offer insight into the processes that people engage in as they learn and into the conditions that support learning, and thus can help educators to be more responsive to their learners' needs (Merriam and Bierema, 2014). Theories of adult learning posit that adults learn differently to younger learners and there are a number of well-known adult learning theories including the theory of self-directed learning (Tough, 1967; Maslow, 1968) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997). However, most adult learning theories are rooted in Knowles' andragogy (1990) which has been considered to be the dominant philosophy of adult education in the North American context for many years (Merriam, 2001; Merriam and Bierema, 2014). Andragogy considers the role of an adult educator to be more of a facilitator of the learning process over and above the transfer of knowledge or content (Knowles et al., 2015; Bowl, 2017). As my research focuses on teachers' experiences of teaching mature students who are adult learners, it is helpful to consider how andragogy can offer insight into the importance of relationality as well as into the symbiotic nature of the teacher-learner relationship.

Drawing on Lindeman's (1926) early work, andragogy was formally developed as a theory of adult learning in the early 1970s by Malcolm Knowles as an attempt to distinguish it from the more child-oriented 'pedagogy' and to offer a theory of adult learning for the field of adult education (Merriam and Bierema, 2014; Knowles et al., 2015). Knowles' ideas have guided the development of teaching strategies for adult learners throughout the years and have been formative in guiding the ideas of adult educators. Critics have debated andragogy's stance as a theory however, describing it instead as a set of guidelines, assumptions or principles of good practice about adult learning (Brookfield, 1995; Merriam, 2001). Knowles himself subsequently posited that pedagogy and andragogy operated more on a continuum (Knowles, 1989) rather than each being stand-alone theories. He subsequently ceased calling andragogy a theory, describing it ultimately as a conceptual framework or a model of assumptions about

learning that can guide an educator's practice in working with adult learners and that can be applied to all adult learning situations.

Andragogy is described as a "transactional model in that it speaks to the *characteristics* of the learning transaction, not to the esoteric goals and aims of that transaction. Thus, it is applicable to any adult learning transaction, from community education to human resource development" (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 2) (my italics). It therefore focuses on the principles of the learning transaction, rather than on its purpose, thereby counteracting critiques that andragogy does not set out to achieve social or societal change as an outcome of learning, a specific aim that is often associated with the discipline of adult education. Andragogy focuses on the individual learner's needs and orientation and is suggested to work best when "it is adapted to fit the uniqueness of the learners and the learning situation" (ibid, p. 3). However, andragogy is also described by Knowles et al. as a *process* model as opposed to a *content* model of learning. In a content model, the teacher is considered to be an instructor, making decisions on content, teaching and presentation methods. In a process model, the teacher is considered a facilitator of learning, involving the learners proactively in the learning process. The teacher is also cognisant of the importance of the social and environmental aspects of learning such as creating an environment conducive to learning (both physically and psychologically – to engender trust, respect and collaboration), identifying learners' learning needs, identifying content to meet those needs and so on. Therefore, a participatory learning environment is critical and a dialogic relationship with adult learners is necessary in order to be able to shape the learning experience in this way. For Knowles (1990, p. 58) "to adults, their experience is *who they are*" therefore, recognition by the teacher of the learner's experience is effectively a recognition of the learner themselves, and this cannot be done without the teacher getting to know their learners as individuals. This requires the development of a relationship between teacher and learner.

A consideration of andragogy helps to support the underlying concepts of this thesis through what it tells us about the role of the educator in working with adult learners and their experience of the teaching and learning environment through adopting these

principles. According to Knowles et al. (2015, pp. 246-247) within an andragogical model the way in which teachers work with their learners can have a positive impact on the teacher themselves:

“A different system of psychic rewards takes place in the instructor/facilitator. Rewards from controlling students is replaced with getting rewards from releasing students. The releasing rewards are much more satisfying.”

Under andragogical principles by taking a process approach to teaching, rather than a content approach, the authors contend that this fundamentally requires relationship building, involving students in planning, and encouraging student initiative in the learning process, thus highlighting the ‘reward’ element of relationship building and connection. Therefore, while andragogy as a learning theory primarily considers what it means for the adult learners’ experience of learning (Merriam and Bierama, 2014), it is also valuable for what it suggests that teaching within these principles means for the teacher. The consideration of andragogy therefore highlights teacher-learner relationships in adult teaching and learning settings as being fundamental to a positive, social and connected teaching and learning experience for both parties.

2.6.2 Application to the MSAC context

Adult educators who embrace the emancipatory education (Freire, 1970) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) traditions work explicitly with the life experiences of their learners, as much as they share their own subject knowledge. It is the drawing on the life experiences of learners which facilitates the critical reflection and transformation which is at the heart of radical, humanistic and transformative adult education philosophies. When we consider the above aspects of adult education with respect to MSAC teachers’ work, as highlighted previously the nature of access courses is that they operate to a set curriculum, given their objective of supporting learners to develop a baseline of knowledge, skill and academic competence before they progress to undergraduate education. In these teaching contexts, the ‘what’ of the education is therefore already by and large pre-defined, as is typical of a higher education curriculum. In that context, Murphy and Fleming (2000, p. 81) offer a useful distinction with respect to how knowledge is treated in adult education, compared to in higher education:

“Where the academy validates objective knowledge, adult education, particularly in its liberal and community education formats, celebrates the subjective and the experiential. The world of experience becomes the central issue and basis upon which learning takes place, rather than the world of ideas.”

Higher education teaching therefore has a much stronger pure pedagogic function i.e. higher education teachers are ‘facilitators of learning’ but not necessarily ‘critical practitioners’ (Malcolm and Zukas, 2000, cited in Hunt, 2007). With respect to curriculum development, MSACs themselves could not be said to be firmly rooted in adult education philosophical bases, however there are aspects of adult education values and pedagogic practices which are evident in MSAC teaching and which influence how teachers report how they experience their work. Johnston et al. (2012, pp. 82-83) describe this space well with respect to access courses:

“students on access courses are an interesting group to research, because they are positioned at the meeting point of a number of powerful learning environments, each with its own tradition, ethos, theory and practice of learning ... In terms of curriculum and pedagogy, the (access) course provides a) a form of preparation for the first year experience as it would be understood in the relevant Higher Education literature, and b) a space for transformational personal development as it would be understood within the Adult Education literature. These aspects may be said to overlap in varying degrees, depending on the perceptions and needs of the students, staff and the course designers.”

Researchers’ interest in researching students’ experiences at this ‘meeting point’ has been prolific as I have already explored in Section 2.5.2. However, I suggest that this space is a powerful learning environment precisely because it is equally a powerful teaching environment. Such a description of this teaching space would imply that teaching on these programmes requires a strong awareness of what *both* adult and higher education pedagogies can bring to this environment. Different perspectives on the emphasis of teaching practices employed on access courses have emerged in previous studies. For example, Johnston et al. (2012, p. 87-88) go on to suggest that the actual design of access courses “is more aligned to the practices currently employed in the first year of undergraduate study at university rather than more encompassing notions of personal development” which are associated with adult education. However, other researchers have found that the teaching approaches taken by access course teachers have aligned more closely with the learner-centred approaches of adult

education such as dialogic relationships, small group work and development of appropriate learning spaces (Murphy and Fleming, 2000; Murphy, 2009; Busher et al., 2015a; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015). Therefore, albeit MSACs are designed for a specific purpose and largely operate to set curricula, the importance and value of teachers drawing on adult education pedagogical principles and values such as relationships of learning and on learner experience to support development of that relationship, as opposed to for the co-creation of knowledge, will be demonstrated throughout my research.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter described the Irish higher education system and outlined how higher education policy has evolved. It explored general policy and practice related to equity of access, a higher education system objective, as well as setting out policy and practice specifically with respect to mature students as a higher education equity of access target group, and to access courses as a specific equity of access initiative. Equity of access has been at the core of higher education policy in Ireland for over 30 years and access courses are one equity of access initiative that support participation in higher education for students who have traditionally been under-represented in that educational sector. With respect to those courses that are designed for mature students, they differ from adult education courses in that the primary focus of access courses is on individual growth and learning for the purposes of progression to undergraduate education, rather than on collective or community learning for the purposes of emancipation or social improvement. This chapter explored research studies on mature student experiences of higher education, as well as their experiences of access courses in which it is interesting to observe that research findings with respect to mature students' engagement in higher education have remained relatively consistent over many years.

The chapter also explored literature which offers an insight into educators' experiences of teaching on access courses, albeit this body of literature is more limited. The selected literature presented demonstrates the important role that the teacher plays in generating positive learning experiences for mature students or adult learners. It is

useful to highlight these perspectives as the relationship between teacher and learner has been identified in a number of studies for its importance for creating positive and supportive learning environments for adult learners in higher education. As Section 2.5.2.1 outlined, access course students typically describe experiencing positive relationships with their tutors, and receiving valuable emotional and academic support from their tutors, which are key in creating supportive learning environments on these courses. A recognition of the foundations of adult education philosophy and pedagogy within this chapter offered a broader context for understanding the positioning of this work and an initial identification of the interfaces between higher education and adult education with respect to my participants' experiences. These interfaces emerge in the focus on relationality in the educative space and in the connection between teacher and learner, rather than through any definitive philosophical or pedagogical approaches.

The presentation and review of this literature also offers the insight, I would argue, that the experiences of the educators who work with mature access students has unintentionally been omitted from educational research. Research often tends to focus on the target of an intervention or initiative, as has been the case with respect to equity of access in Ireland i.e. the gaze of the research focuses downwards rather than inwards or upwards. Indeed, this lack of visibility of MSAC teacher experiences could also be a function of the perceived peripherality of higher education access courses that has frequently been identified by researchers in Ireland (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Brosnan, 2013; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017) and that will be discussed further throughout this thesis.

Chapter Three: Relationality in education

"The relational dimension of education is the dark matter we are not seeing ... what we cannot quantify becomes invisible, "dark". But reality does not cease to exist just because we lack the means for observing it." (Sidorkin, 2023, p. 3)

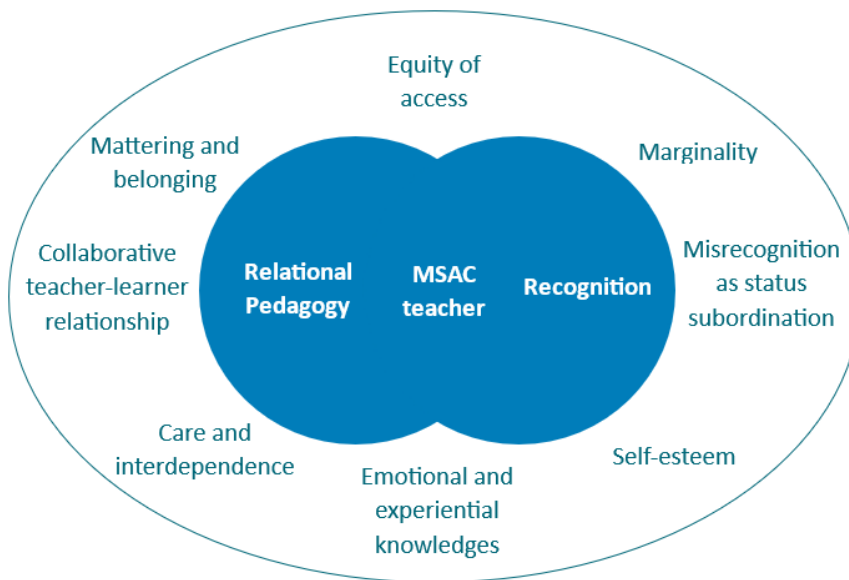
3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the main theoretical ideas that form the conceptual framework of this thesis and on which I will draw to interpret my research findings. The purpose of a conceptual framework is to help connect a study to other work within a broad field to inform interpretation and analysis (Casanave and Li, 2015). My conceptual framework draws on a number of related ideas and concepts that centre around the core idea of *relationality* which is a key element in MSAC teaching as discussed in the previous chapter. I consider concepts such as care (Tronto, 1993; Lynch et al., 2007; Noddings, 2013), relational pedagogy (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004; Murphy and Brown, 2012; Gravett, 2023), and 'belonging' and 'mattering' (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981; Schwartz, 2019; Gravett, 2023) to explore the importance of relationality in education, particularly from the perspective of the educator. I also include contrasting concepts within my conceptual framework, such as those of 'marginality' (Schlossberg, 1989) 'misrecognition' and 'status subordination' (Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2000) which offer a means of interpreting the experience of relational *disconnection* within the wider institution and to an extent also within the system. The concepts that make up my conceptual framework can be considered to be 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2019). In other words, they are broad background ideas that offer general directions along which I have carried out my analysis, rather than being prescriptive or definitive concepts defining what should be expected to be seen in this research.

Figure 3.1 visually presents my conceptual framework. The development and depiction of this framework by centring two main concepts - relational pedagogy and recognition - supported by a range of related concepts, was an emergent process informed by my data analysis which I describe in detail in the following methodology chapter. I identified the main themes from my research data by taking an inductive and thematic analytic

approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and features such as relationship, connection and recognition (or lack of) within my participants' experiences came across strongly on various levels; these are presented under three key themes in my three findings chapters. I discuss this in more detail in Section 4.6.4 in my methodology chapter where I describe the process involved in linking my data to theory to inform development of this conceptual framework.

Figure 3.1: Conceptual framework



Relational pedagogy is a broad term that brings together many of the facets of relational education literature. As a construct that speaks to many educational contexts, it is helpful as an organising concept for my research given the positioning of MSAC programmes at an intersection of different educational structures, cultures, traditions and pedagogies, as I have previously discussed. Its relevance for my study also lies in the fact that it facilitates an exploration of the teacher's experience in this educational space (Bovill, 2020) as it highlights the synergistic and symbiotic nature of the teacher-learner relationship as I will discuss in more detail throughout Section 3.3. It therefore acted as a lens through which I could usefully and explicitly consider the relational experience, and also the motivation, of my participants in the MSAC teaching context. However, relational pedagogy was not sufficient as a conceptual lens for fully exploring my participants' experiences. Recognition, along with its related ideas of 'misrecognition as

status subordination' (Fraser, 2000), 'self-esteem' (Honneth, 1995) and 'marginality' (von Braun and Gatzweiler, 2014) enabled an exploration of the extent to which my participants felt that their relation-centred teaching, and themselves as educators, were perceived and valued within their institutions. These latter concepts were included also as a way of illuminating the power flows that occur in terms of recognition specifically as they relate to social status in the higher education field. The concept of equity of access, as discussed in detail in Chapter Two, is an important contextualising element within this framework as it reminds us of the positioning of the teaching experiences of my participants within a specific policy and practice area within higher education. I included wider relation-related concepts such as 'care' (e.g. Noddings, 2013), 'collaborative teacher-learner relationship' (e.g. Freire, 1970), 'mattering' (e.g. Schwartz, 2019) and 'emotional and experiential knowledges' (e.g. Heron, 1996) within my conceptual framework as they support an understanding of the distinctive relational connection that is both required by and develops for MSAC teachers, working with adult learners in these teaching contexts. Therefore, my conceptual framework brings together a range of related concepts that I have used to explore and better understand the positioning and experiences of MSAC teachers in higher education.

I present the two core concepts as overlapping within the framework, with the MSAC teacher at the centre, to show that I have used both of these concepts together to develop a deeper understanding of the relational complexities and hierarchies that exist within higher education institutions with respect to MSAC teachers' experiences. Using both lenses facilitated a more rounded exploration of the experiences of MSAC teachers encompassing their experiences in the classroom, in the academic community and thus also within the wider institution. In presenting my conceptual framework in this way, I am not aiming to predict what happens in these teaching spaces, nor do I claim that there is a single truth that can be distilled or understood with respect to MSAC teachers' experiences by application of this framework. Rather my aim was to gain an insight into and an understanding of these teachers' experiences through the application of conceptual lenses that relate to relational connection. Therefore, the core of the diagram is deliberately shaded to eliminate a visible 'intersection' between relational pedagogy and recognition and I have put the teacher at the centre, demonstrating that,

for me, this is about understanding teachers' experiences, not about what is expected to be seen or experienced at that intersection. Using a range of theoretical and conceptual lenses to interpret the experiences of my participants directly links to my constructivist-interpretivist (Ponterotto, 2005) researcher positioning which I explain in more detail in Chapter Four. In constructing this conceptual framework, I have been informed by my own experiences and knowledges – both embodied and cognitive – gained through working with adult learners and educators, primarily in higher education and to a more limited extent in adult and community education, over many years. Thus, I have drawn on a range of literature which I believe offers diverse yet related lenses through which I can gain a deeper insight into and an understanding of the experiences of educators working within this particular educational context. Each of the key concepts presented, and the insight offered from related studies, offered a way for me to consider the meaning and relevance of relationality and recognition to the work of MSAC teachers in higher education.

The next section of this chapter maps the 'relational landscape' as it pertains to education more generally, highlighting different psychological, sociological and educational perspectives that have influenced thinking in this area. In exploring these bodies of scholarship, I illustrate how they connect with the concepts of relational pedagogy and recognition and why I believe they are relevant to highlight in my presentation of this relational landscape. I then go on to discuss relational pedagogy in detail which I will later use to understand how teaching and connecting relationally with their students positively impacts how MSAC teachers experience their work. Thereafter, I explore the concept of recognition which I will later use as a means of understanding how relationships are experienced by MSAC teachers, at both micro (personal) and macro (institutional) levels by connecting recognition of the 'other' within the classroom with the lack of visibility and perceived lack of legitimacy of these teaching roles within the institution. I will conclude the chapter by considering the interconnection between these main concepts to present a conceptual framework that helps me to interpret the experiences of this group of educators whose teaching is uniquely positioned within higher education.

3.2 Mapping the relational landscape

3.2.1 Overview

Relationality and human relationship can be said to be at both the heart and the foundation of effective education. As the title of Bingham and Sidorkin's (2004) book suggests, there is "no education without relation". Relationality in education can be described as the way in which educators and learners work, connect and interact together, and with their peers (Hickey and Riddle, 2021). Although both terms, 'relationship' and 'relationality', are at times used interchangeably in the literature, I acknowledge the differences between these two concepts. In my view, 'relationship' describes the way in which two or more people, things, or concepts are connected and thus describes the *how* or *why* a connection exists between things i.e. the way in which they are connected. 'Relationality' on the other hand refers more so to the *quality* or *intentionality* of a relationship or connection between people or things (Booth and Schwartz, 2012; Adams, 2018; Felten and Lambert, 2020) where connection is the "energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued" (Brown, 2021, p. 169). When considering relationality within educational relationships, Hickey and Riddle (2023a, p. 3) offer the view that the literature:

"derives two broad conceptualisations of relationality. The first we define in terms of declarations of orientations to the practice of teaching and learning, and the second as focussed on the affective dimensions of the experience of *being-in-relation*".

Again, the first conceptualisation suggests that relationality is about the intentionality and quality of the connection between teachers and learners and about how it is enacted, while the second conceptualisation focuses on how an individual experiences the educational relationship from a personal (social and emotional) perspective. I draw on both of these understandings of relationality in the discussion of my findings to highlight and understand the importance and value to MSAC teachers of being able to teach in a relational way and the impact that their relational experiences – inside and outside the classroom - have on them personally and professionally. The usefulness of drawing on both conceptualisations of relationality to understand MSAC teachers' experiences is that they emphasise the inextricable connection between the practice of teaching and its emotional and affective dimensions, even in the modern academy

which can often display a certain ambivalence towards the affective. To borrow from Nussbaum's (1995) discussions on care, it re-emphasises relationality in teaching as being a 'human capability' which meets a 'human need' i.e. it highlights the interdependence of individuals within the academy and the value of relationality in creating more effective and enjoyable teaching and learning experiences.

While relationality has no single definition with respect to its role or enactment in education, underpinning values such as care, empathy, respect, trust, inclusiveness, and kindness (Noddings, 1992; Clegg and Rowland, 2010; Booth and Schwartz, 2012; Murphy and Brown, 2012; Riley, 2013; Jordan and Schwartz, 2018; Kinchin, 2019; Rawle 2021; Bell, 2022; Gravett, 2023) have all been identified as being key components of a relational approach to education, and as underpinning a relational proficiency in teaching. However, Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) usefully remind us that relationality can be conceived of or experienced as 'good' or 'bad' i.e. there should not be an assumption that relationality inherently means something 'good' or that it leads to positive experiences.

Discussions on relationships in education are not new. They have a long history, dating as far back as ancient Greek philosophers when Socrates emphasized the importance of dialogical relationships in education for stimulating critical thinking and self-reflection (Elias and Merriam, 2005). In more recent times, Dewey (1916; 1938) also emphasised the social nature of education, arguing that deep learning can only really happen through interaction and dialogue between teacher and learner. From a sociological perspective, educationalists such as Freire (1970) have critiqued top-down 'transmission of knowledge' methods of teaching, advocating for the importance of dialogical, relational approaches particularly for the purpose of learning about and addressing inequalities in society. While these are not, and never have been, ubiquitous viewpoints on the importance of relational approaches to education, in more recent times the importance of educational relationships has been re-emphasised in discussions and writing on relational pedagogies in particular. In Section 3.3 I will discuss relational pedagogy in greater detail, and more specifically how educational relationships are framed therein, as well as some of the reasons for this.

Nowak-Lojewska et al. (2019, p. 159) suggest that “the understanding of relationships as fundamental to all educational processes can be seen to transcend traditional disciplinary borders”. This has proven to be the case as relationality and educational relationships have been theorised, explored and researched from a range of perspectives and disciplines, from such areas as theories of human development and emotional wellbeing within the field of psychology, to the impact of educational inclusion or exclusion in the sociological field. Relationality or relational education have also been explored or have been identified as being of critical importance or value, across all educational sectors including early childhood education (O’Toole and Hayes, 2020), primary and secondary education (Roorda et al., 2011; Teague, 2015; Engels et al., 2021), youth and community education (Kenny et al., 2022) and higher education (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014; Schwartz, 2019; Hagenauer et al., 2023; Gravett, 2023).

Relationality and relationship in education is a wide and rich topic with multiple potential strands and sub-themes worthy of exploration and discussion. However, reviewing all relevant scholarship, or all aspects of the relational landscape, is beyond the scope of my thesis. In the following sections I map out the relational landscape in education via the broad areas on which I have built my conceptual framework. What I have chosen to focus on within my conceptual framework is not meant to diminish or ignore the value that other strands or perspectives could offer to an understanding of MSAC teachers’ experiences, such as social psychology (e.g. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) bioecological model) or psychoanalytic approaches (e.g. Kirkwood’s (2003) ‘persons-in-relation’ concept) but rather to support my objective of rendering more visible the complex experiences of teachers in this space in a way that highlights how these may conflict at different levels of those experiences.

3.2.2 Care and caring in education

The concept of ‘care’ in education has its roots in the writing of feminist scholars such as Tronto (1993, 1998), Gilligan (2013), and Nussbaum (1995, 2013) while Nel Noddings (1992, 2006, 2012, 2013) is credited with bringing the idea of caring and relational approaches into the discourse of mainstream school education (Bovill, 2020). Tronto

(1998, p. 16) suggests that care “refers both to a mental disposition of concern and to actual practices that we engage in as a result of these concerns”. In other words, care involves an attitudinal disposition (e.g. to be caring) and/or an action or activity (e.g. performing acts of care). Both Gilligan’s (2013) and Tronto’s (1993) ethics of care place caring and relationship over logic and reason, starting from the premise that humans are inherently relational, responsive beings and that the fundamental human condition or nature is one of connectedness or interdependence. Care, therefore, can be suggested to fundamentally be a relational concept as it implies a “reaching out to something other than the self” (Tronto, 1993, p. 102) while Walker and Gleaves (2016, p. 66) offer the view that care, as a relational concept, takes many forms such as “human concern, moral responsibility, individual attentiveness and personal responsiveness”. Duffy (2019, p. 86) suggests that writers on care are “concerned that education has over emphasised the cognitive, logical over the emotional” (I discuss other-than-cognitive ways of knowing in Section 3.2.4) and thus wish to reset the balance in the broader consideration of care as a value within education. It is worthwhile noting here that a core element running throughout these considerations of care in education is the influence of feminism and the work of relevant authors on social justice and emotional ways of knowing (Nussbaum 1995; Noddings 2003; Lynch et al., 2007; Formenti and West, 2018). Therefore, it is valuable to consider its context with respect to educational relationships, and how ‘care’ may enhance the quality of these, and support the centrality of relationships in education and reciprocity between teacher and learner (Duffy, 2019).

Noddings (1992) has written extensively about care and caring relationships in education and suggests that care is the “bedrock of all successful education” (p. 27). Aligning with the view that care is a relational concept, Noddings’ consideration of caring in education is valuable for what she highlights with respect to the interdependent nature of educational relationships. Noddings describes a *caring relation* as “a connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for. In order for the relation to be properly called caring, *both parties* must contribute to it in characteristic ways” (ibid., p. 15) (my italics) and thus she considers ‘caring’ as “a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviours” (ibid, p. 17). Care

that supports learning, therefore, must be relational and requires a recognition of learners and a responsiveness to their needs (Anderson et al., 2020). Noddings acknowledges however that the interdependent caring relation in education, while perhaps one of mutuality, is not necessarily one of equality. From the perspective of the cared-for (i.e. the student), their role may simply be to show or acknowledge in some way that they have received the caring as a way of completing the caring relation.

Noddings contends that care is a necessary or natural trait of teachers and is a strong dispositional motivation for someone to become a teacher: “it is because they care that people go into teaching” (2010, p. 1). However, she distinguishes between ‘caring’, as an attitudinal disposition, and ‘caregiving’, as an activity, in education. In educational institutions, Noddings claims, we cannot necessarily “care-for directly, but ... can work toward establishing an environment in which caring-for can flourish” (Noddings, 2013, p. xi). This is about developing caring as a core attitude or value in and through education which in turn contributes to creating a positive educational environment for all involved. Smoot (2010) contends however that for teachers care as a disposition ultimately manifests as action, through their long hours and effort spent in supporting and encouraging students and that it is this care that underpins the relationality within the teaching and learning encounter: “the teacher’s care is the current that carries what passes between them” (ibid., p. xii) thus likening care to a connective energy.

Care in education has also been considered through an equality lens, specifically that of *affective equality*. The concept of affective equality recognises the importance of ‘love, care, solidarity’ (LCS) for human survival and flourishing and as a core part of social justice (Lynch et al., 2007; Grummell, 2017). It is an equally critical form of equality as those perhaps more familiar political, cultural and economic social systems equality contexts (Baker et al., 2009). Lynch et al. (2007) suggest that affective equality is about individuals having equal access to love, care and solidarity in different realms of society, including in education. It is also about the ‘burdens and benefits’ of love and care work being equally distributed amongst individuals and groups within society, including as it intersects with gender, race and ableism. Inequality in the affective domain in education thus arises when individuals are deprived of the LCS they need to develop as human

beings and when the burdens and benefits of LCS work are unequally distributed. Inequality in this domain may impact an individual's capacity to access important human goods, including an adequate livelihood, as well as their capacity to develop supportive, affective relations, and thus can impact educators in a variety of educational contexts. Affective inequality also arises when the contributions of care to the well-being of individuals and society more generally is not recognised. Lynch et al. (2009, p. 1) sum up the importance of LCS thus:

“Relations of love, care and solidarity help to establish a basic sense of importance, value and belonging, a sense of being appreciated, wanted and cared about” and thus denying someone the capacity to develop such relations, or the experience of engaging in them, is a “core dimension of affective inequality.”

The authors suggest that the recognition of care in education occurs primarily at curriculum level with respect to training for vocational or professional roles, or with respect to caring for the environment. However, by viewing care in education through a LCS lens, we can consider its import from a relational perspective. Grummell (2017, p. 3143) offers the view that LCS are “essential to the learning relationships and engagements that form the heart of education” and reminds us that “learning as a process remains inherently a relational, emotional and interdependent process. The quality of the learning experience is contingent on how educators and learners engage and relate with each other throughout the processes of learning” (ibid.). On the basis of these arguments that education is an interdependent process the quality of the teaching experience, I would suggest, is equally contingent on relational engagement and on the importance given to the ‘caring’ dimension of education. Thus, prioritising or enacting the value and/or action of ‘care’ in education, by creating a nurturing learning environment through emotional and social connection, necessitates a relational engagement and thus a reciprocity between teacher and learner. It is this fostering of interdependent meaningful connections between teachers and learners through values-based and/or action-based relational teaching approaches that underpins both care theories and relational pedagogy in education and highlights its potential for positively impacting *both* learning and teaching experiences. It is equally important to highlight however, that care-based and relational approaches in education are not universally considered to have positive impact, or to be easy to adopt, in all contexts. Counterpoint

views on these approaches signal that they may over-burden already busy educators, struggling within performative cultures (Schwartz, 2019; Anderson et al., 2020), that an over emphasis on these approaches may inadvertently perpetuate, rather than lessen, traditional power dynamics between teacher and learner (Walker-Gleaves, 2019), or that such approaches may detract from academic rigour (Beard et al., 2007). Nonetheless, in the context of MSAC teaching the interdependent nature of the teacher-learner relationship points towards a largely positive experiential impact, as I will illustrate later on in this thesis.

3.2.2.1 Care as a value in higher education teaching

While for a long time limited attention was given to ‘care’ in higher education teaching and learning relationships (Walker and Gleaves, 2016; Duffy, 2019), more recently it has been re-emphasised because of its importance to the student experience (e.g. Walker and Gleaves, 2016; Kinchin, 2019; McCune, 2021; Gravett and Winstone, 2022). With respect to teaching in higher education, different perspectives on the relevance and/or applicability of care are offered in the literature which merit consideration and reflection. One view is that presented by Walker and Gleaves (2016) who sought higher education teachers’ perspectives on ‘pedagogic care’ to support an understanding of how care is expressed and enacted in higher education teaching. The authors constructed a theoretical framework for the caring higher education teacher, whom they defined as being a teacher who privileges caring within their pedagogical practices. Their model integrated cognitive, emotional and relational aspects of teaching and, albeit not presented as a definitive paradigm of a caring teacher, is used to demonstrate teachers’ practices and principles (i.e. actions and dispositions) which “entwined to form coherent pictures of the caring teacher in higher education” (ibid., p73). Their findings identified four key elements of a caring higher education teacher including: the centrality of relationship, a compulsion to care, caring as resistance, and caring as ‘less than’. Of these:

“the central concept that appeared to stand behind all others together was that a caring teacher within higher education places ‘a relationship at the centre’ and the conceptual narrative was teachers’ enduring belief that caring could be enacted through particular forms of relationship and in turn, that it would lead ultimately to more effective learning environments than the ones currently validated within their institution” (ibid., p. 74).

The importance of 'a relationship at the centre' within Walker and Gleaves' model suggests that education can be a relational, interdependent process in which teachers prioritise connection, empathy and an interest in students' well-being. Their model also challenges traditional power dynamics in higher education teaching by emphasising the creation of more equitable, engaged and dialogical teaching and learning spaces. The authors suggested that this was a "significant finding considering that there is a dearth of research to link caring with learning outcomes of any kind within higher education" (ibid.) and suggested that this framework element reinforced thinking on the importance of connection, caring and relational approaches to pedagogy in creating effective learning environments in higher education. Walker and Gleaves' (2016) finding is interesting from the perspective that within a higher education context or culture, the expectation that teachers should or can demonstrate 'care' is contested. There are divergent views in the literature on the appropriateness, relevance, and indeed possibility (due to lack of time and resources), of enacting 'care' as a positive practice or value in higher education teaching. For example, in Hagenauer and Volet's (2014) examination of the teacher-student relationship (TSR) as it applied in higher education, the authors challenge us to consider the extent of university teachers' obligations to 'care' given that third-level students are expected to engage in autonomous and independent learning in an intellectually rigorous teaching and learning environment. Thus how 'care' should be defined in an adult-adult (albeit still hierarchical relationship (Haganaeur et al., 2023)) teaching and learning context is explored and whether this is different than in a child-adult teaching and learning context. These authors contend that there is no clear consensus in the literature on the extent to which 'care' should be demonstrated by higher education teachers. However, other studies suggest that strategies adopted by some higher education teachers to support student integration, such as peer tutoring, welcome sessions and informal meetings, could be considered to overlap with the 'care concept' as these strategies help to create supportive environments and positive opportunities for interaction between students and teachers (Lähteenoja and Pirttilä-Backman, 2005). The importance of higher education teachers creating supportive learning environments is also suggested to arise from the critical role they play in students' persistence and institutional commitment (Tinto, 1997). The

teachers' role in creating such environments for mature students in particular has already been discussed in Section 2.5.3, suggesting that prioritising a caring and relational teaching approach may also align with higher education's broader social justice and inclusion objectives.

Although scholars hold differing views on the feasibility and suitability of integrating 'care' into higher education teaching, the humanistic and relational approaches advocated by Noddings (2010, 2013) and Walker and Gleaves (2016) highlight its significance in fostering effective teaching and in enhancing students' well-being, engagement, and success. To link the relevance of care as a value and as a relational practice in higher education to teachers' experiences of teaching, it is valuable to note that Kinchin (2019) also highlights the importance of creating a working environment which recognises 'care' as a fundamental contributor to the wellbeing of the professional lives of higher education staff. Kinchin points out that "when managed appropriately, care is a two-way phenomenon" (ibid., p. 5). In this respect he reminds us that views that hold teaching to be a "linear causal interaction" (ibid., p. 7) do not acknowledge its inherent and normal messiness and that care within teaching fundamentally recognises the "relational notions of 'community' and 'dialogue'" (ibid., p. 9). The consideration of the role and value of 'care' in education therefore is valuable for what it helps us to consider about the importance of relationality in teaching and learning relationships in higher education, and particularly when working with adult learners in these environments. It is also valuable for what it tells us about the interdependence in the caring relation between teacher and learner. The perspective that I will explore later on is how the relation between teacher and students in an MSAC course impacts on or creates meaning in the teaching experience for the teacher.

3.2.3 Relationality within critical education approaches

Critical educationalists (e.g. Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2002, 2019; Biesta, 2009; Apple, 2013) argue that all education is political, and that it should have an emancipatory aim. In other words, the main purpose of critical education is considered to be to empower students to question societal norms, structures, processes and power

dynamics and to challenge and address these through their learning (Bovill, 2020). Relational approaches to education centre social and emotional connection for the purpose of creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment where students feel respected and valued. While critical and relational pedagogies do not normally interconnect in the literature, I am drawing here on critical education approaches to illuminate the importance of a dialogical and collaborative teacher-learner relationship in facilitating the teacher's awareness also of societal or institutional norms and also for supporting the creation of a sense of belonging for the teacher in these specific teaching contexts. A consideration of critical education approaches is helpful in these contexts by also illuminating the power dynamics in specific educational environments and institutional structures which may impact marginalised teachers, and not just students. It is understandings around the *process* of engaging in education that I am presenting here, more so than the purpose of that education. To that end, I have drawn on the work of two seminal educationalists in this tradition - Freire and Biesta – and highlight what we can learn from their work and their educational philosophies with respect to how and why relationality is important, at both micro (personal) and macro (systemic) levels of education.

3.2.3.1 Freire's dialogical approach

The Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, was a leading advocate of critical and liberatory pedagogy. Freire (1970) considered the goal of radical education or critical pedagogy to be emancipation from oppression for marginalised groups and that this could be achieved by engaging in dialogue, mutual learning and knowledge creation. For Freire, dialogue was an important element of the pedagogical process whereby *both* teachers and learners seek to learn and co-create knowledge through discussion. Freire strongly critiqued the 'banking' model of education (Shor and Freire, 1987), ubiquitous in many educational systems and at all levels of education. In this respect he deemed that in higher education, "the lecture-based, passive curriculum is not simply poor pedagogical practice. It is the teaching model most compatible with promoting the dominant authority in society and with disempowering students" (ibid., p. 10). In such teaching settings, the lecturer is in a 'powerful' hierarchical position, holding knowledge-based authority, offering little opportunity for students to participate directly through dialogue

and thus potentially stifling their critical thinking and capacity for agency in learning. In contrast Freire believed that teaching, including in higher education, should involve mutual communication, collaboration and learning, not mere transmission, and therefore necessitates a horizontal, rather than a vertical relationship between teacher and learner (Bhattacharya, 2008). He points out that a more democratic relationship between educator and learner, than would be typical of many traditional educational settings, is necessary for this process and outcome to unfold. In order to offer students a more democratic role in their own learning, according to Freire education should be both relational and dialogical (Freire, 1970).

For Freire, students' experiences are an important source of their own knowledge, therefore they should be provided with the opportunity, through dialogue, to draw on their experiences and on their own reality as a basis for their learning. By engaging in dialogue with the teacher, students are invited to be included in the knowledge creation process; they are not simply handed "a dead 'body of knowledge'" (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 4) where "the learning (has) already happened someplace else" (ibid, p. 7). Thus, both teacher and student can illuminate the object of study which is not 'owned' by the teacher. Although Freire (1970) does acknowledge that there exists a power imbalance between experiential knowledge and disciplinary knowledge within the academy in particular, he maintains that even in higher education it is possible to engage in a more dialogical form of education and that in fact such engagement is as critical for the *teacher's* own learning and growth, as it is for the student, and for rebalancing traditional hierarchical power dynamics in the educational relationship. In other words, the teacher learns also by engaging in dialogue with their students, with teachers understanding that they are *both* cognitive subjects and learners i.e. the liberating teacher is 'doing something' *with* their students, not *to* them. This participative approach offers both parties agency in the teaching and learning process.

"Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers ... The teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is ... taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn while being taught also teach." (Freire, 1970, p. 53)

While Freire's thinking and approach to education is commonly associated with radical or democratic education, it has much to share with respect to the role of relationship in education, and particularly in working with adult learners. Fundamentally, Freire believed that dialogue, which is an essential aspect of communication, is critical to the achievement of education, regardless of its aim. For Freire, "dialogue belongs to the nature of human beings as beings of communication" (ibid. p. 3) and therefore is part of our 'becoming' human. Dialogue, therefore, is a two-way process, but it is more than simply action or an educational process; it is a human, relational process: "dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it" (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 98). *Both* teacher and student can illuminate the object of study together through dialogue which necessitates a relational engagement. This approach to education and understanding of knowledge is typically at odds with the lecture approach that is dominant in higher education (ibid., Bovill, 2020). The dialogical educator brings existing knowledge to the table, however through discussion is open to 'relearning' such knowledge through a more democratic approach. This, in turn, facilitates a diminishing of traditional knowledge-based power hierarchies in the teacher-learner relationship through a more inclusive and participative approach. Ultimately, "for Freire all learning is relational, and knowledge is produced in interaction" (Bartlett, 2005, p. 346). In other words, Freire posits that teaching is a social activity whereby, through dialogical engagement, the teacher in turn becomes a student "in a relationship that is by itself informally educational" (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 30). This conception of the mutual and reciprocal nature of the teacher-learner relationship, and the openness to learning for both, highlights its importance to the teacher, as much as its importance to the student.

3.2.3.2 Biesta's concept of 'learnification'

While Freire critiqued the micro-processes of education within the higher education classroom for their absence of relationship in learning, in more recent years Biesta critiqued the more macro-processes of learning and acknowledged the clash that can manifest between the value of relationality in formal education and these systems' imperatives. Biesta (2009) highlights a shifting narrative over the years in educational policy with respect to the core purpose of education. He claims that educational policy

has moved more towards an individualistic understanding of learning, with a focus on measurement of educational outcomes for economic development and for educational league table rankings, over that of education for broader societal benefit and for personal development. This has resulted in a general shift away from the importance of relationship in educational processes towards an ethos of individualism (i.e. learning is seen as an individual, rather than a collective pursuit) and especially in higher education. This in turn has brought the values of care, connection and relationality within education into a clash with these individualistic system imperatives. In what he describes as the 'learnification' of education Biesta suggests that the value and values of the teacher are either forgotten or are certainly less prominent in this narrative and argues the case to bring "issues of value and purpose back into our discussions about education" (ibid., p. 36). He highlights how this clash manifests in making the distinction between learning and education, in that "'learning' is basically an *individualistic* concept ... (that) refers to what people, as individuals do ... (and) stands in stark contrast to the concept of 'education' which always implies a relationship" (ibid., pp. 38-39).

Biesta therefore places relationship and connection, and the 'relational quality' of these, as being of critical importance in the teaching and learning process, suggesting that these should hold greater importance than either the specific educational activities or the individuals in that relationship. He points out that "education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings" in which the parties involved in the educational relationship are "subjects of action and responsibility". (Biesta, 2013, p. 1). For Biesta communication, which is critical to any educational encounter, is not about transmission of information but is about participation, and he suggests therefore that it is in the interactive, communicative relational space between teacher and learner that learning takes place (Biesta, 2004).

3.2.3.3 Insights from critical education

Section 3.3 offers an in-depth exploration of relational pedagogy however it is useful here to begin to connect it to what we can learn from relational features of critical education. A critical education perspective embraces the understanding that to teach

others, particularly in a classroom setting, is to interconnect with individuals as unique beings. Dialogue and communication is an important feature of critical education approaches, as it is in relational education approaches (Gravett, 2023), albeit the purpose of engaging in that dialogue differs. In critical education dialogue is considered a tool for raising critical consciousness and co-creating knowledge (Freire 1970; Shor and Freire, 1987), whereas in relational education it suggested to be a tool for building trust and for creating supportive learning environments (Holloway and Alexandre, 2012; Bovill, 2020). However, in both approaches meaningful dialogue, underpinned by trust and mutual respect, requires a relational engagement between teacher and learner (Grummell, 2023). Dialogue in both of these approaches is also considered to be an important tool for facilitating a rebalancing of traditional power hierarchies in education by enhancing learners' agency and direct engagement in the educational relationship and in the co-creation of knowledge. Again, while the purpose of this differs in critical and relational education approaches – the former to facilitate an understanding and critique of society and the latter to facilitate social and emotional connection - the process of dialogue and direct engagement in both is fundamental to the mutuality of the teacher-learner relationship and thus to the teacher's experience of connection in teaching, as well as to the student's experience of connection, necessary to support a solid foundation for learning. It is the quality of connection together with the intention, within the teaching and learning relationship, that creates space for a mutual recognition of teacher and learner as human beings (Gravett, 2023) engaged in a co-created learning process, facilitated by ethos and values, but also by culture and physical context. The argument I make by drawing on my participants' experiences later on is that this connection and mutual recognition are as important for MSAC teachers in the contexts in which they teach, as they are for their students. However, while I have stated above that dialogue can facilitate a rebalancing of traditional power hierarchies in education, I do not contend that greater mutuality and recognition in a teacher-learner relationship implies an *equal* distribution of power, as power relations are inevitably unequal - to a greater or lesser extent - in any engagement between teachers and learners. What critical education approaches do however is facilitate a more collaborative and inclusive environment, supported by relational engagement and dialogue.

3.2.4 An uneasy place for emotions and alternative ways of knowing

Relationality in education requires a connection, not just with other people, but also with one's own emotions and feelings. This suggests that relationality is inherently emotional or as Felten (2017) puts it, emotions are always relational. Emotions arise from our connections with people, things and experiences and can be considered to be a form of knowledge (Sodhi, 2008). As teaching and learning involves a connection with others, we should attend to emotions in education and what we can learn from these, as well as attending specifically to emotions involved in those relationships which support teaching and learning (Felten, 2017; Schwartz, 2019). However, both emotions and alternative ways of knowing tend to be overlooked in much writing about teaching and learning in higher education (Beard et al., 2007; Bovill, 2020) and it is useful to consider why this is before delving more deeply into understanding relational pedagogy and its value as a concept applied to MSAC educators' experiences.

Universities have traditionally emphasised Cartesian cognitive rationality - the western belief in the split between thoughts and emotions or separation of mind and body (Hunt and West, 2006; Lynch et al., 2007). However, integrating multiple ways of knowing can enhance learning and recognising different ways of knowing is considered to be a core tenet in particular of adult education (Kasl and Yorks, 2016). Espousing a multi-dimensional view of knowledge can be considered to be a holistic approach to knowing (Heron, 1996) and ways of knowing that are beyond the cognitive and rational are suggested to include those that are "intuitive, imaginal, emotional, unconscious, embodied, and spiritual" (ibid, p. 4). Embodied knowledge, for example, can be described as knowledge which resides in the body (Michelson, 1998; Sodhi, 2008) and thus is strongly related to one's feelings and emotions, while an intuitive or unconscious knowledge is a knowledge which is known, understood or felt deeply by an individual (Dirkx et al., 2006). Experiential knowing can also be considered a form of embodied, personal knowing that is gained by "meeting and feeling the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing" (Heron, 1996, p. 39). It is thus a "direct, lived being-in-the-world" (ibid.) form of knowledge, developed through participation,

empathy and being attuned to others or to the energy of situations. Experiential knowledge is a form of knowledge *of*, however is also recognised to be knowledge *about* something which is gained through a process of lived experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). It is learning that is typically generated outside of educational institutions (Fenwick, 2003) and thus is “*embedded* in everyday practices, action and conversation” (Fenwick, 2008, p. 19). This places it in contrast to knowledge which is taught or ‘transferred’ through a formal educational curricular process, and which generally requires conscious cognitive activity.

The above forms of knowledge could be considered to be relational knowledges (Richardson, 2019) as they require, not just an awareness of one’s own feelings and emotions, but also an awareness of how this knowledge can facilitate connection with others through empathy (Kasl and Yorks, 2016) and thus how these knowledges can enhance relationships. The recognition of different forms of knowledge in the teaching and learning process thus requires recognising that there is a place for emotions and for relational connection. However, an individualistic possessive form of knowing is typically privileged in higher education over relational knowing (Richardson, 2019). This means that knowing *about* something is considered more valuable than knowing *with* and speaks to the dominant academic culture which privileges a rational form of knowing over an emotional form of knowing. Higher education could therefore be suggested to privilege a “knowledge-based curriculum” (Harland and Wald, 2018, p. 617) and the function of teaching in higher education can be considered as dissemination of that knowledge by subject experts (Marginson, 2011).

The importance and primacy of academic knowledge within higher education evokes Young and Muller’s (2013) concept of ‘powerful knowledge’ as a curriculum principle and as a critique of relativist educational approaches which emphasise the complexity and plurality of human experience as knowledge (Heyting, 2004). Powerful knowledge is defined as ‘specialised’ knowledge (developed by experts), distinguished by Young and Muller from ‘non-specialised’ knowledge (developed through everyday experience and thinking), which they suggest is context-limited. As specialised knowledge is systematically developed within academic disciplines through rigorous and shared

standards, rather than through individuals' personal experiences and contexts, it is considered to be universally accessible to all. This is the kind of knowledge which typically becomes defined as curriculum within the academy, i.e. knowledge which is:

“located in specialist communities that define their concepts, rules and practices, and the boundaries that distinguish them, define their objects and provide constraints that can be sources of innovation and creativity” (Young and Muller, 2013, p. 245).

The boundaries on specialised knowledge are set, for example, by expert groups or occupations, and through peer review and thus can be considered 'elitist' in the context of the academy. Such specialised academic knowledge is regarded as 'powerful' or 'transformative' knowledge because it facilitates learners to critically engage with complex ideas, thus it “frees those who have access to it and enables them to envisage alternative and new possibilities” (ibid., p. 245). The authors consider this vital knowledge in relation to the promotion of social justice as the “‘power’ in powerful knowledge is realised in what is done with that knowledge, that its purpose is social since it allows the holder to make a better contribution to society” (Harland and Wald, 2018, p. 615). Acquisition of such knowledge is considered by the authors to also enable learners to overcome social inequality, for example by facilitating access to valuable and higher-order jobs. Therefore, drawing on Young and Muller's arguments, 'specialised' or 'powerful' knowledge thus could be suggested to be a critical feature of higher education teaching, in order to fundamentally support the social justice aims of higher education.

The cognitive learning which is typically required to access this 'powerful knowledge' is about the mental processes involved in gaining knowledge and comprehension. It is ultimately about becoming a better learner and about understanding a subject at a deeper level, whereby the individual mind is primary, and relations are secondary (Gergen, 2009). It assumes that knowledge is an individual possession and does not recognise shared knowledge, interdependency, or other ways of knowing. The emphasis on Cartesian cognitive rationality was heightened as universities became redefined in terms of the market model under neoliberal ideologies and performativity (Lynch et al., 2007; Collini, 2020). This led to “unsettling tensions in our current assumptions about

the nature and role of higher education and its relation to wider society” (Collini, 2020, np). Lynch et al. (2007, p. 5) describe the impact on caring relations:

“Neoliberalism has deepened the disrespect for the relationally engaged, caring citizen that it has inherited from classical liberalism not only by devaluing the emotional work that has to be done to care but by validating consumption and possessive individualism as defining features of human identity.”

Thus, the role of higher education has ultimately come to be understood as being primarily for the purposes of servicing employment and the economy and for the development of autonomous and ‘rational’ citizens and thus “largely ignores the relational caring self” (Lynch et al., 2009, p. 17). Such an ideology situates knowledge firmly in the cognitive learning domain and leads to feelings and emotions in education being trivialised or even neglected entirely. It also rejects a place for ‘values’ in higher education which are considered to be tied to emotions as values and emotions are seen to be devoid of reason and objectivity. Thus, the place of emotion is rarely acknowledged in higher education teaching and may even be viewed with suspicion (Beard et al., 2007; hooks, 2003). This view is reflected in the “bloodless” language of student learning whereby “learning is conceptualized as a cognitive, transactional process” (Gravett, 2023, p. 8) which has to “do with processing information in various ways” (Brookfield, 2015, p. 55). Grummell et al. (2009a, p. 191) categorically critique learning as a transactional process as demonstrating a “profound indifference to the affective domain in formal education” which only intensified with “the glorification of performativity”. Lynch et al. (2007, p. 2) advocate that higher education has a role in preparing an individual “for relational life as an interdependent, caring and other-centred human being”. However, to develop relationally, one must engage relationally, and teaching is a relational process in which emotions and feelings also feature for teachers themselves (McCormack, 2009). Similarly, Formenti and West (2018, p. 62) consider education to be “profoundly relational, interactive, interdependent and auto/biographical”. However, they point out that in higher education the “conventional relationship in the academy is based on the passive learner who mirrors a very active and powerful educator/teacher” (ibid.).

Thus, critiques of the dominance of western rational thought in higher education abound. The cognitive, rationalistic view has long been rejected by many feminist scholars such as Nussbaum (1995, 2001) and Noddings (2012) who believe that there is an equal place for both reason and emotion in higher education and that therefore emotional ways of knowing – along with caring as a disposition - have a valid place in that domain. Miller and Stiver (1997, cited in Schwartz, 2019, p. 232) attributed the mind-body knowledge division to the gendering of our culture, “proposing that thinking is valued and seen as male and feeling is devalued and seen as female”. However, the authors pointed out that “all thoughts are accompanied by emotions and all emotions have a thought content” (ibid.). Thus, focusing on either one to the neglect of the other, they suggest, diminishes our ability to understand and act on our experiences. Knowing, and thus learning, therefore is a highly intersubjective process, involving emotion and relating. Taking cognisance of the role of emotions and emotional ways of knowing offers a more “inclusive view of knowledge” (Kirkwood, 2003, p. 190) whereby we come to know the world through our senses and feelings, through relation and interaction with other people, as well as through our intellect.

The importance of making space for the affective, as well as the cognitive, dimensions of education – for both teacher and learner – is highlighted by many writers (hooks 1994, 2003; Hargreaves, 1998; Beard et al., 2007; Brown and Murphy, 2012; Kirkwood, 2012; Murphy and Brown, 2012; Brookfield, 2015; Schwartz, 2019; Bovill, 2020; Gravett, 2023). For such writers, “learning is understood as something more messy, complex and situated” (Gravett, 2023, p. 8) involving emotions, passions and an embodied, relational pedagogy. Hunt and West (2006) suggest that this can be the case particularly for adult learning which can involve a deeply reflexive and meaning-making engagement with experience as knowing and thus can straddle both emotional and cognitive spaces. Unfortunately, the dominance of a knowledge-based teaching culture, over a practice- or values-based teaching culture in higher education can work against adopting relational and caring approaches to teaching. For example, while bell hooks (2003) considers higher education teaching to be both a service and a caring profession she points out that “in our society all caring professions are devalued” (p. 86) and goes on to offer the view that the primacy of ‘objective’ knowledge, as the dominant culture in

higher education, transmitted by the 'expert' teacher, often takes precedence over the quality of teaching relationships:

"Teachers who care, who serve their students, are usually at odds with the environments wherein we teach. More often than not, we work in institutions where knowledge has been structured to reinforce dominator culture" (ibid., p. 91).

The elements within Walker and Gleaves' (2016) framework of a caring higher education teacher, discussed in Section 3.2.2.1, of 'caring as resistance' and 'caring as less than' suggest that adopting caring or relational teaching practices may effectively be viewed as "constituting 'pedagogical dissent' ... in the face of strongly held assumptions about educational practice" (ibid., p. 74) and particularly in higher education where that knowledge-based culture generally holds sway. Clegg and Rowland (2010) also note the dominant knowledge-based culture in higher education suggesting that for many higher education teachers, their attachment to subject discipline effectively overrides any expectation of displaying 'caring behaviour' towards their students. The authors argue however that care, as exemplified by 'kindness' in teaching, and in higher education generally, is valued by students albeit that the "system does not value such acts as being virtuous in and of themselves" (ibid. p. 732). They argue that kindness cannot be "regulated and prescribed" (ibid., p. 733); in other words, it is something that is more personal and fundamental to relationships in higher education and cannot, and should not be, a 'performative' or 'professional obligation'.

There has long been a tension between the value attributed to the 'powerful' knowledge of the academy and the experiential knowledge of adult learners. Murphy and Fleming (2000, p. 81) suggest that typically "academia has been criticised for not recognising and valuing the significance of *experiential* knowledge ... (This) kind of knowledge gained by adults from their experiences in the world of work, family and travel, is the mainstay of adult education." This tension is posited by these authors to be a manifestation of "relations of power ... between the adult learner and the university" which in turn represents a "conflict of knowledge interests between adult and higher education" (ibid., p. 78). Although writing about the experiences of mature students in higher education, rather than about the experiences of educators of mature students, the authors' description of this being "an issue of access into higher education not only for

adults, but also for adult education” may have a ring of truth to it in the context of MSAC teachers’ experiences at the more macro level, as I will discuss further in Chapter Eight.

On the whole, this debate highlights issues related to power dynamics between teachers and learners and also questions the privileging of certain knowledge systems over others, particularly in higher education. However, where experiential, emotional and embodied knowledges are valued and recognised, a relational approach to education is required, which in turn facilitates a more egalitarian distribution of power within pedagogical relationships, although it is not a completely equal distribution. Recognising and welcoming the value of different forms of knowledge creates space for different perspectives and experiences in pedagogy and thus challenges the primacy of the traditional powerful knowledge of the academy. By prioritising mutual respect and collaborative learning over knowledge ‘transmission’, space is also created for diversity, inclusivity and the value of knowledge creation through collaborative learning.

3.3 Relational pedagogy

3.3.1 Origins of relational pedagogy

The concept of relational pedagogy is not new in educational literature and has been described as a “shared intent of (an) otherwise widely diverse group of writers” (Sidorkin, 2000, p. 1) from philosophers of ethics to feminist sociologists. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter so far, relationship and relationality have long been considered fundamental to ‘good’ education from a range of perspectives and disciplines. Relational pedagogy or adopting a relational approach to education has also been considered with regard to its applicability at all levels of education from early childhood care and education (O’Toole and Hayes, 2020), in schools (Hickey and Riddle, 2021, 2023a) and in higher education (Bovill, 2020; Felten and Lambert, 2020; Gravett, 2023). Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) were early proponents of relational pedagogy describing it as an emerging concept at the time, albeit not a new pedagogy as such. Their interest in relational pedagogy arose from their desire to understand “how interhuman relations affect and define teaching and learning” (p. 2) while Nel Noddings, who wrote the foreword to Bingham and Sidorkin’s book *No education without relation*,

was considered by the authors to be one of the first educational writers to have “put relational thinking into the mainstream of American educational theory” (ibid., p. 1) through her writings on ‘care’ and ‘caring’ in education. However, there is no one single definition of relational pedagogy and therefore no clear agreement as to how it should be defined (Noddings, 2004; Gravett, 2023), and thus it has alternatively been described as an educational philosophy (Noddings, 2004), an ontology (Bozalek et al., 2019; Gravett, 2023), a theoretical perspective (Ljungblad, 2021) and a pedagogical practice (Su and Wood, 2023).

Relational pedagogy’s philosophical and theoretical influences are considerable. Ljungblad (2021, p. 863) acknowledges that the ontological base of relational pedagogy rests on the idea that people “share a social living space with other people” (ibid.) and that the roots of relational pedagogy are derived from philosophers such as Levinas (1991), Arendt (1998), Mead (1934) and Buber (2011) who all emphasise the fundamental role of relationships and interconnectedness in human existence. Sidorkin (2000) and Gravett (2023) both acknowledge the influences on relational pedagogy of feminist sociological thinkers, such as Nel Noddings and Carol Gilligan, in their considerations of ‘care’ and relationships as being at the centre of education. In these various theoretical constructs of care, human relationships are taken to be the “primary building blocks of reality” (Sidorkin, 2000, p. 1). In applying this thinking to education, under a relational pedagogy relationships are therefore suggested to be the building blocks of learning as a “primacy of being” (Margonis, cited ibid.), as opposed to specific teaching practices being the building blocks of learning. Sidorkin suggests that the roots of relational ontology can be traced to Buber who established the primacy of relation for human existence, albeit initially through a limited ‘binary’ model of dialogical relation versus subject-object experiences. When applied to education, this model raises questions however about the achievability of meaningful dialogue or full mutuality, given the inevitable power asymmetry – be it existing to a greater or lesser extent - in any teacher-student relationship. Nonetheless, Sidorkin (2000) offers the view that these considerations offer a useful starting point to consider a more “nuanced taxonomy of relations” (p. 2) in pedagogy and ultimately suggests that understanding relations in classrooms requires *both* student and teacher insight.

Gravett (2023) also highlights the influences of a range of writers and thinkers on relational pedagogy including bell hooks' (1994) focus on connection in teaching, Dewey's (1938) experiential learning perspective on education as a social learning process, and Palmer's (1998) psychological perspective on the value of connectedness to self, as well as to students. Grummell (2023) similarly highlights feminist influences on relational pedagogy, such as Haraway's (1988) situated knowledge and critical education's dialogical influences (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1984), as well as also the influence of the ethics of care in education (Noddings, 1984; Nussbaum, 1995). These influences all advocate for dialogical and relational engagements between teacher and learner, while critical education's influence in particular emphasises the significance of relationships themselves as a fundamental element of the learning process as well as emphasising the importance of power in relationality (Grummell, 2023). According to Grummell (ibid., p. 2) relational pedagogy can therefore bring "a socio-political focus to the analysis of learning relationships and practices that, influenced by feminism and critical pedagogy, is oriented towards caring relations in education as sites of recognition, reciprocity and power, in and through education ... (thus seeing) learning as embedded in meaningful relationships." These influences all emphasise learning in a relational pedagogical approach as a social and connected practice rather than as an individualist or autonomous one, which is generally associated with a Western worldview of learning (Ljungblad, 2021; Gravett, 2023; Grummell, 2023).

All the above influences on relational pedagogy are valuable in offering an understanding of its foundations. Of note, Schwartz (2019) specifically presents Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) as "providing a theoretical foundation from which to understand the transformative potential of teaching as a relational practice" (p. 13). As a theory originally proposed by Jean Baker Miller (1986) which brings a feminist lens to traditional models of human development, it explicitly centres relationships as being important for human development (Booth and Schwartz, 2012) and thus as being "vital to any educational endeavor" (Schwartz, 2019, p. 13). RCT itself derives from relational theory in which mutual growth-producing or growth-fostering relationships are suggested to contain the five elements of "zest, knowledge, action, worth and desire for

more connection” (Schwartz and Holloway, 2012, p. 118). Relational theory is predicated on the basis that, regardless of role or power differentials, mutuality is still a core element of all relations and thus *all* parties to a relationship have the capacity to experience these five elements. As human beings we need connection with each other as a basic need, similar to food and air, thus placing relationships at the centre of our growth and our lives, not at the periphery, while disconnection occurs “when one person misunderstands, invalidates, excludes, humiliates, or injures the other person in some way” (Jordan, 2018, cited in Brown, 2021, p. 171). Relational theory subsequently became RCT whereby “the name reflected their clarification that relationships do not exist in isolation, but that “relationships may both represent and reproduce the cultures in which they are embedded”” (Jordan and Walker, 2004, cited in Schwartz and Holloway, 2012, p. 118). Or, as Brown (2021, p. 169) puts it “culture is viewed as an active agent in relational processes that shape human possibility”. RCT therefore expands the original relational theory to acknowledge the role of culture in the experience of the relationship (Schwartz, 2019). The insight this theory offers is valuable later on in considering the application of relational pedagogy in the dominant ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young and Muller, 2013) and performative cultures of higher education. If, as suggested above, relationships and cultures reinforce each other, it provokes a reflection on how the ethos and culture of MSACs support a relational engagement between teacher and learner, and how this differs from mainstream higher education teaching.

This brief overview of the origins of relational pedagogy demonstrates that there is no dominant influence, tradition or philosophy which has led to its conceptualisation. The shared ontological and epistemological grounds of the different strands of literature that I have presented in this chapter can be seen as underlying all relevant influences – and indeed these are also evident in the ‘relational landscape’ of education more generally. These relate to the fundamental precept that relationships and connections with other people are essential for human growth, personal and professional development, knowledge-creation and learning. The literature on care, critical education, and emotional ways of knowing that I have presented all challenge the dominant individualistic, hierarchical, and cognitive models of learning and ways of

knowing that have prevailed over time in higher education by emphasising a mutuality, reciprocity and interconnection in educational relationships and the value of one's own lived experience, as well as recognising and acknowledging the lived experience of others. These strands of literature also differ however, in respect of how they view the core purpose of education and thus of the purpose of the teacher-learner relationship. For example, the critical education tradition sees relationships as being important for facilitating a shared and developing understanding of systemic and societal power structures, and thus for transforming these. The importance of relationships within the 'care' literature highlights educational relationships more as a 'moral' obligation or responsibility rather than as a means of mutual personal growth, while such relationships can still have a hierarchical dimension, and thus a greater asymmetry of power than in critical or relational approaches. The concept of emotional knowledge in education centres emotions over relationships as the foundation for learning, albeit both acknowledge that learning happens in the relational and affective dimensions. The value of considering my participants' experiences through a relational pedagogy lens is that by centring relationships rather than content, purpose, or either teacher or learner alone, it highlights the recognitive and interdependent characteristic of the education relationship, and of emotional connection in teaching and learning in these teaching contexts. Applying this lens helps to illustrate the relevance of this pedagogical approach in higher education, supported by the insight offered by critical education into the value of dialogue and relational engagement in supporting teacher agency and learning.

3.3.2 Describing and 'doing' relational pedagogy

Delving a little deeper in order to understand this concept, Su and Wood (2023, p. 2) define relational pedagogy as "an intentional practice whereby classroom learning builds connections and positive relationships for learning purposes". Murphy and Brown (2012) describe it as a practice which puts an emphasis on inter-subjective relations between educators and learners. Ljungblad (2021, p. 863) states that relational pedagogy is "a theoretical perspective based on the concept of human beings as relational beings and teaching as relational processes. It is a relational perspective on teaching that places relationships between teachers and students at the centre of the

process". Adams' (2018, p. 2) study on relational pedagogy in higher education led her to define it as "the intentional practice of caring teachers interacting with students to build and sustain positive relationships that cognitively and emotionally support their students throughout their journeys together". For Sidorkin (2000, p. 1) it is a prompt to focus on the "need to start thinking in terms of being, or, rather of co-being", in relation with one's students, rather than thinking in terms of 'doing' i.e. it is about getting teachers to "pay attention to relations rather than behaviours" (ibid., p. 2). For Bovill (2020), adopting a relational pedagogy means putting relationships at the heart of teaching and emphasising the importance of developing meaningful connections between teachers and learners. This is done by keeping values of trust, respect and dialogue as part of the educational relationship. "A common thread of this broad trend is an assumption that education is a function of specific human relations, and not a function of certain behaviours" (Sidorkin, 2000, p. 1). This view suggests that for teachers and learners being "in relation" is as necessary for learning as it is for human development more generally and requires an "increased sensitivity to relationship" (Gergen, 2009, p. 241) as well as a recognition and acknowledgement that learning is a shared endeavour.

All of these considerations of relational pedagogy put relationships at the core of educational processes, affording relationship equal importance to content and process, and it could therefore be described as a concept which draws together the many and varied perspectives on the centrality of relationships in teaching and learning practices. However, while there is a clear coherence amongst the above perspectives and definitions, they also differ in that some focus primarily on the practices of relational teaching, underpinned by values of care, respect and trust (e.g. Murphy and Brown, 2012; Adams, 2018; Bovill, 2020; Su and Wood, 2023) while others (e.g. Sidorkin, 2000; Ljungblad, 2021) highlight relational pedagogy's ontological or epistemological base, seeing it as a commitment to way of *being* as much as a commitment to a way of *doing*. Given this range of perspectives therefore, it can be suggested that there is no one way to 'do' or 'practice' it. Rather, writers on relational pedagogy identify a range of features which exemplify this pedagogical approach such as co-constructing learning through dialogue (Stengel, 2004; Bovill, 2020; Hatt and Davidson, 2022), human connection and

empathy (Holloway and Alexandre, 2012), authenticity (Bovill, 2020), meeting individual students where they are at and acknowledging the value of their experiences (Romano, 2004; Hatt and Davidson, 2022), and adopting a more democratic or equal relationship between teacher and learner (Hickey et al., 2021). Riddle and Hickey (2022) suggest that relational pedagogy involves combining and centring an ethics of care with a critical and creative approach to pedagogy.

This pedagogical approach therefore mirrors many of the practices and features of adult education settings and pedagogies, which are “typically based on group relationships, collaborations and dynamics” (Barter and Grummell, 2020, p. 35). The question could validly be asked therefore, as to what makes relational pedagogy different to other pedagogical approaches, and particularly those more commonly used in adult education, or is it simply that all these pedagogies can be considered under the broad umbrella of relational pedagogies? This brings us to the argument that *intentionality* is a critical aspect of enacting a relational pedagogy (Adams, 2018) or as Bovill (2020, p. 68) alternatively puts it, that authenticity in the relationship is required – “it requires teachers to live and breathe a commitment to relationships and caring for students” thus suggesting that it is far more than a process or practice. For example, although Adams (2018) found that being a ‘caring’ teacher was a fundamental aspect of relational pedagogy, she contends that being caring is insufficient as relational *intentionality* is also necessary for enactment of relational pedagogy. In other words, it is a commitment to a way of being as much as to doing, an ontological and a practical commitment.

Effectively relational pedagogy combines knowledge and an awareness of appropriate teaching methods and strategies (pedagogy) with an awareness and attention to relationships (relational knowledge), combined together with subject or discipline knowledge. Albeit that many teaching approaches, pedagogies and theories highlight the importance of relationship in teaching and learning, what distinguishes relational pedagogy from other educational pedagogies is that it centralises the human relationship that is at the heart of educational exchanges (Ljungblad, 2021) in which neither party – teacher nor learner – dominates the educational process. This positions relational pedagogy differently to centring content or subject expertise as is often the

case in higher education teaching approaches, centring the learner as in many adult education pedagogies, or centring teaching objectives as in critical pedagogies. Gergen (2009) explains this interdependence another way. He states that that traditionally education is curriculum-centred, drawing on a teacher's knowledge base, or is learner-centred, focused on a learner's capabilities. However, "each of these traditions is typically focused on the bounded individual – *either* the teacher *or* the student. A relational orientation asks us to consider them together" (ibid., p. 247).

Smoot (2010, p. xi) describes this as the 'teaching triad' or "education triads: the teacher, the student, and that which passes between them" and suggests that this triad is "fundamentally a human relationship" (ibid., p. xii). This pedagogical approach therefore signifies that there is both a pedagogical and a social interdependence of both teacher and learner in the educational encounter (Pijanowski, 2004) and in turn acknowledges that learning involves both cognitive and affective elements (Murphy and Brown, 2012). Hickey and Riddle (2021, pp. 790-791) describe this education triad slightly differently, suggesting that there are three interconnected vectors implied in pedagogical relations:

"relations between students, relations between students and teachers, and relations between students, teachers and spaces of learning. The interactions between these three elements are iterative and are also suggestive of wider circles of relationality, such as relations that students and teachers have within the private contexts of the home, peer networks, and wider socioeconomic circumstances, which position students and teachers in particular ways. It is with these three fundamental relations that something indicative can be extrapolated in-the-moment regarding what it means to be pedagogically 'in-relation' and how learning proceeds as an outcome of the exchanges that students and teachers might then enact."

Although veering into the posthuman aspect of relational pedagogy, Gravett et al.'s (2022) consideration of the role of space in creating opportunities for connection demonstrated that the relational spaces that held meaning for teachers can support their own well-being as much as they support the well-being of their students. Their study highlighted the "affective and discursive encounters" within the interactions experienced between teachers, students and peers, in physical or online spaces, and which "surface(d) the (positive) emotions that characterise academic life: hope, joy, energy, and power" (ibid., p. 10).

“Our data have exposed the myriad of physical spaces and places where connections can occur and how such spaces offer ‘affective attunements’ (Gannon et al. 2019: 50), enabling joy, laughter, trust, hope, empowerment, and friendship to be felt. Such experiences offer sustenance, re-energising, and supporting teachers to continue with their work, as well as to learn. Our study offers value in identifying the importance of learning and teaching encounters as an integral aspect supporting teachers’ feelings of connection and well-being, and highlights the value of attending to learning spaces for educators, as well as for students” (ibid., p. 18).

Drawing on both frameworks above, I take the ‘space of learning’ to be the positioning of an MSAC in the higher education institution, a ‘space’ which is highly contextualised with respect to social and organisational positioning, and policy objectives at both institutional and national level. Therefore, space in this respect is an inextricable element of the pedagogical relationships within which MSAC teachers work. The frameworks also acknowledge a direct connection to those “wider circles of relationality” that are experienced by MSAC teachers, particularly within the institution.

Relational pedagogy therefore can be suggested to be enacted when teachers understand and support the experiences that students bring with them to the educational relationship and work to create a welcoming and safe environment for learning. Romano’s (2004) reflection on the importance of relations in education offers the perspective that creating space to get to know one’s students or “fostering a disposition that is sensitive to “reading” students so that a teacher might better reach them” (p. 153) is a critical element of relational teaching. She likens this pedagogical approach to a “literacy that *reads* students so that teachers might keep in touch with who their students are, so they might be responsive, and be conscious of those teachable moments that can unpredictably appear as quickly as they can disappear if a teacher remains unaware of them” (ibid, pp. 153-154). Being aware of one’s students as individuals ensures that “the thousands of moments in each teacher’s day when a word, a look, a gesture of encouragement, or a nod of acceptance moves a student toward growth” (ibid., p. 154) are not lost or rendered invisible in the daily grind of teaching and learning. These are the ‘micro moments’ of joy and relational teaching which Gravett (2023) also identifies as critical elements in the relational teaching process, and which

resonate closely with elements of connected teaching identified by Palmer (1998) and Schwartz (2019).

When applied to higher education Adams (2018, p. 9) suggests that “a relational pedagogical lens expands the view of teaching and learning in higher education beyond outcomes or proficiency to include the affective domain, the importance of relationships in higher education”. In other words, it does not replace traditional methods of teaching; rather it expands it in order that the teacher may see the whole student and so that they can acknowledge their own emotions, thoughts and feelings as part of the teaching and learning process. I offer the view that this is the core of what it means to enact a relational pedagogy – acknowledging and recognising the interdependence of both teacher and learner in the educational relationship, and welcoming the emotions, interests and personal stories (Bovill 2020) from both teacher and learner into the relationship as intersubjective processes which help to embed learning and growth for both parties.

3.3.3 The place and value of relational pedagogy in higher education

Higher education today is a complex educational environment for all parties engaged therein. As I have described throughout this thesis so far, HEIs today have changed significantly from the institutions that they were even thirty years ago, operating in ever more complex political, economic and global policies and structures. However, teaching in higher education, particularly at undergraduate level, is still dominated by the large lecture and the role of an academic is multi-faceted and often highly pressurised. Many teachers in higher education struggle with issues such as contract precarity and casualisation of labour as discussed in Section 2.3.2. Students themselves are engaging with their third-level studies in a highly digitalised, ‘self-service’ kind of environment and where increasingly, even for those who are studying on a full-time basis, their studies are something they fit around their working and/or caring lives and obligations. A common narrative with respect to the student experience today is one which presents many students as being under significant social, academic and financial pressure, with some struggling with mental health issues and consequently disengaging from university

life (Baldwin et al., 2020; Tight, 2020; Morgan, 2024). This macro level synopsis paints an admittedly grim picture of disconnection, stress and disengagement which, although not ubiquitous, could be said to be a concerning narrative about the student experience today. Yet teaching and learning – a highly relational activity - still remain at the core of what higher education is, or should be, about. This makes it imperative that we take time to consider the place and value of relational pedagogy in higher education.

Although the focus on relational pedagogy in educational literature is still relatively limited (Duffy, 2019), a number of research studies have identified the value of relational teaching and personal connections with staff more generally for higher education students (Pearce and Down, 2011; Bell, 2022; Gravett and Winstone, 2022). Creating an environment of connection is important because connection fosters a sense of belonging in higher education and of trust in relationships for students and gives them a sense of ‘mattering’ (Gravett and Winstone, 2022). Proponents of relational pedagogy in higher education also highlight its value and role in fostering effective teaching experiences (Bovill, 2020; Gravett, 2023) and the value of human connection in helping to create a sense of belonging, mattering, and wellbeing for teachers, as much as for students (Felten and Lambert, 2020). Studies on relationality in higher education (Pearce and Down, 2011; Adams, 2018; Bell, 2022; Gravett and Winstone, 2022; Su and Wood, 2023), and specifically in higher education from the teacher’s perspective albeit fewer in number (e.g. Graham et al., 1992; Gravett et al., 2022), offer an insight into its value and relevance. Graham et al.’s (1992) study of the relational constructs (competence, immediacy and humour) of a relational teaching approach emphasised that teaching is deeply relational, and not just transactional as it is often considered to be in higher education. Thus, a meaningful connection between teacher and learner is central to the educational experience and is as important for teachers as it is for students. The authors found that an ongoing interpersonal relationship between teacher and student can contribute to a personally rewarding and satisfying teaching experience and therefore that interpersonal competence is important to support mutual growth in the educational relationship. Gravett et al.’s (2022) study with higher education teachers explored how digital and physical spaces intersect with respect to teachers’ relational experiences, in a post-pandemic higher education environment. The authors hold the

view that teaching is about building connection and thus is fundamental to a teacher's sense of purpose and professional fulfilment. Based on their participants' responses, Gravett et al. suggest that intentionality and creativity in fostering relational engagement with students in an increasingly digitalised teaching and learning environment, are critical for enhancing positive experiences of teaching and for providing a counterbalance to the sense of disconnection that may result from engaging in digital spaces.

However, as discussed in 3.2.2.1 Walker and Gleaves (2016) posit that the place of relationality or of a relational approach to teaching in higher education is less clear than it is for earlier educational settings such as in primary or post-primary education. The reasons for this are both practical and cultural. For example, the way in which higher education teaching typically takes place, in large lecture theatres where "staff and students remain anonymous to each other" (Bovill, 2020, p. 43), and where the lecturer is seen as the authority figure, 'transferring' knowledge to students (Shor and Freire, 1987) is still predominant in much of undergraduate education, including in Irish higher education, partly due to the ever-increasing size of some undergraduate classes (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). Dr Marian McCarthy³⁶ puts it well in describing lecturing as a 'subset' of teaching:

"The problem with lecturing is firstly, it's just a subset of teaching. 'Teacher' is the richer word. It does not reach all of the students all of the time. Many students learn differently.... In a lot of delivery of knowledge, it was seen as just that – delivery. I did all the talking and you, as student, sat there ... in a hierarchical setting (lecture theatre) ... I as lecturer was set up to perform. The easiest thing in the world to represent knowledge that way – that of the lecturer. It was also the most economic. We could fill this lecture theatre with many students and one voice could tell them all how to think."

The size of undergraduate classes therefore tends to mitigate against a dialogical engagement between higher education teachers and students, as well as the fact that building deep connections and relationships within a higher education classroom simply takes time (Hagenaer and Volet, 2014; Bovill, 2020; Felten and Lambert, 2020). Time is

³⁶ From online video contribution to Digital Badge for Universal Design in Teaching and Learning, [CPD The Digital Badge - AHEAD](#)

something that many lecturers do not have either due to heavy teaching and research workloads or due to the fact that they may only get to engage with their students once or twice a week for short periods of time.

Higher education also operates within a culture of greater independence, with high levels of autonomy and self-responsibility for learning expected of students, as discussed in Section 3.2.4, in sharp contrast to the levels of teacher-student engagement and support which are common in primary and post-primary education. Therefore, it is suggested that “entrenched structures in HE work against relationship-rich education” (Felten and Lambert, 2020, p. 49). In addition, as the research mission in higher education tends to dominate and command a higher status than teaching, this is where many higher education teachers feel the need to prioritise their energies and their focus (Kinchin and Gravett, 2022). Thus, “institutional reward systems often do not value relational teaching or interactions with students outside the classroom” (Felten and Lambert, 2020, p. 49). Gravett and Winstone (2022) and Haganaeur and Volet (2014) also acknowledge the growing challenges posed by “the pressures of performativity” in higher education which can restrict teachers’ capacity to engage meaningfully with their students. These factors make developing more than superficial connections with learners in higher education classes challenging, although not impossible (Bovill, 2020; Gravett, 2023). Even as an advocate of relational and caring practices in higher education, hooks (2010, p. 66) acknowledges that:

“to teach in the setting of a large lecture, one has to work harder to make connection with listeners. This is especially the case in settings where the lights are dim and speaker and audience cannot see one another. The audience can be lulled into a passive trance where they listen but do not hear.”

hooks (1994, p. 160) also admits that “even the best, most engaged classroom can fail under the weight of too many people”. She suggests that the large lecture in higher education will only become less prevalent or less relevant “when we as a culture begin to be serious about teaching and learning” (hooks, 2010, p. 64). Noddings (2006, p. 343) suggests that “a good reason for promoting smaller classes is that teachers and students are more likely to form the kinds of relationship conducive to ‘making a difference’.” However, many authors acknowledge the challenges that higher education teachers

experience when teaching large lecture-based classes, particularly in trying to engage students more directly and in making their teaching in such settings as educationally effective as possible (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010; Brown, 2015; Race, 2015; Fry et al., 2020).

Given the strength of arguments encouraging a more relational approach in higher education, Felten and Lambert (2020) advocate for the development of a 'relationship-rich' higher education environment by making relationships a cultural priority and offer the view that this is critical, in particular, for undergraduate education. The authors suggest five key ways in which this could be done:

- Value students
- Value efforts put in by faculty and staff to relationship-building
- Value high-quality teaching
- Value webs of human interactions
- Value engagement over prestige

Intentionality in fostering a culture that allows relationships to flourish is key and thus developing structures and cultures which “serve the cause of allowing relationships to happen” (ibid, p. 60) is critical. One way of doing this is to make time and space for emotions and emotional ways of knowing, and by paying attention to the ‘emotional climate’ of the classroom (Beard et al., 2007). Although a higher education teaching and learning culture typically resists the place of emotion considering it “inappropriate, unscientific or not serious enough” (Bovill, 2020, p. 20), thus also implying that the value of engaging with the emotional climate of teaching and learning is typically not recognised as I have already discussed in Section 3.2.4, Beard et al.’s (2007, p. 249) data “showed the importance of the affective, the bodily and sociality in relationship to (students’) engagement with learning” and that acknowledging (recognising) their emotions – both positive and negative – within the classroom ultimately supports students’ learning.

The barriers described above however may seem insurmountable as higher education classes continue to increase in size, as challenges around student engagement remain

in a post-pandemic environment, and as higher education institutions continue to prioritise commercial and managerialist logics, including performance metrics such as international rankings (Lynch et al., 2012; Hazelkorn, 2015). Enacting a relational pedagogy in a higher education classroom, on the face of it may seem challenging, however it can include simple ideas such as setting a relational tone in initial conversations with students, even outside the classroom; learning students' names and something of their interests where this might be possible; valuing students' contributions in class and providing opportunities for discussion and questions; and sharing something of oneself with one's students (Gergen, 2009; Bovill, 2020; Felten and Lambert, 2020; Gravett, 2023). What is critical also is engaging students' emotions, and not just their minds, as part of the teaching and learning process in order to make material meaningful and relevant to their lives.

When the lens of relational pedagogy is applied to a higher education environment, it illuminates important questions about the hegemonic nature of 'expert' teaching and of the teaching relationship in that domain, some of which will be explored through my research findings. Gravett (2023, p. 1) suggests that educators are "inherently relational beings (who) ... experience a sense of self through relationships with and in relation to other people". She explores ways in which higher education teachers, in particular, can engage in meaningful connections with students and with their peers and suggests that "a focus on relationality fosters an understanding of oneself as existing within a broad web of entangled actors, reliant, interdependent and interconnected to one another" (ibid., p. 32). The primary focus of relational pedagogy is on human-to-human relations, however Gravett also argues for the need to look beyond the "human-to-human" aspect of relationships in higher education, extending her reflections through a posthuman lens to consider the importance also of 'matter' (space, tools, objects, materials) in teaching and academic spaces and experiences. She suggests that "agency is constituted in the (complex) entanglements of things" which ultimately "shape us and our learning, existing and operating" (ibid., p. 2). In other words, she considers the relations that higher education educators have with the broader material world as she believes that "to understand how we learn, we need to understand our relationships with each other, ourselves and crucially with the environments and materials that surround us" (ibid., p.

13). This posthuman approach does not deny the importance of human-to-human relations but rather extends it to recognise the influence of the world around us on our experience as educators. Related concepts such as ‘situated knowledge’ (Haraway, 1988), ‘intra-action’ and ‘mattering’ (Barad, 2003) are associated with posthumanist thinking on relational pedagogy (Gravett, 2023).

Gravett’s consideration of the importance of enacting relational pedagogies within higher education, through humanist and posthumanist lenses, offers a way to explore and identify how higher education teachers can value themselves and feel themselves in turn to be valued – and possibly be recognised - through their work and through their connections within and across institutions that have become increasingly managerialist in their day-to-day operations. Although my research is situated within the more traditional humanist / human-centred understanding of relational pedagogy, it is valuable to remain aware of its posthumanist dimension which suggests that the nature of ‘space’ and the spaces in which we teach and engage with one another may be considered a critical influence on the relational processes that unfold and thus on how teachers experience their work in higher education.

3.3.3.1 Relevance of relational pedagogy to the MSAC context

The previous section considered the value and importance of relational pedagogy as it applies specifically to the higher education environment. Adopting a relational approach across all aspects of higher education, including in student-faculty relationships, is suggested to support creation of a more meaningful student experience, potentially support retention and persistence, and enhance a sense of belonging for students (Felten et al., 2016; Felten and Lambert, 2020). Bovill (2020, p. viii) offers the view that relational pedagogy in higher education has the potential to “lead to more human and engaged forms of learning and teaching in higher education” which may ultimately help to challenge power relations and increase inclusivity of both teachers and learners. Centring human connection is particularly important in an era of increasing diversity in higher education as we “need to transcend the human instinct to relate to those similar to us” (Felten and Lambert, 2020, p. xi) so that we connect with students who may face barriers and inequities in attaining their educational aspirations. Enacting a relational

pedagogy in higher education may also help to counteract transactional perceptions of learning (Hatt and Davidson, 2022). Relational pedagogy is considered to be a growing field in response to neoliberal values (Gravett, 2023) and relationality can be seen therefore both as a counterpoint and a challenge to the dominant paradigm of individualism that pervades discussions on higher education and educational outcomes, demonstrating a shift towards connection and community, and towards growth and wellbeing for teachers.

I offer the view that relational pedagogy is highly relevant to the specific context in which MSAC teaching takes place. MSACs are designed to support the inclusion of under-represented students in higher education and thus speak directly to the higher education inclusivity agenda (Bovill, 2020). Developing a sense of belonging, inclusion and ‘mattering’ (Gravett, 2023) is critical for all students, but particularly for those who experience social and academic marginalisation within and from the academy. Relational pedagogy is a way to build an educational alliance that helps students to feel like they matter as it places relationships and connection, rather than content, at the heart of the educational process and emphasises the “social living space” (Ljungblad, 2021, p. 863) within which education happens. And when we are working with students who are typically less represented in the higher education student population, are less confident or have less social capital with which to navigate their way through the higher education landscape, their relationships with their peers, their teachers and support staff, are critical to the student experience, and to engagement and retention (Murray et al., 2020).

3.3.4 Mattering and belonging

A consideration solely of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of relational pedagogy is insufficient, however. We must also consider the ‘why’ of relational pedagogy and while this may be clearer with respect to the student experience, and matters of ‘quality’, as I have demonstrated throughout my thesis so far, relationality is a two-way street and thus, in theory, should offer mutual ‘reward’ or benefit.

The development of a safe and welcoming environment for students, and the micro moments of joy experienced by teachers in their interactions with students, can be suggested to be closely linked to the concept of ‘mattering’, a concept which has largely been studied with respect to student experience (Schwartz, 2019). Rosenberg and McCullough (1981, p. 165) are credited with empirically exploring the concept of ‘mattering’ through their research with adolescents, defining mattering as “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as ego-extension”. Schwartz (2019, p. 217) describes it simply as “to feel we have a place in others’ lives and our presence makes a difference to them” while Schieman and Taylor (2001, p. 469) consider that “individuals with a strong sense of mattering perceive that their actions are acknowledged and relevant in the lives of others”. Drawing on Rosenberg and McCullough’s research, Schwartz (2019, p. 219) considers how we may know that we ‘matter’ to others:

“Their research suggests we know we matter when we are the object of others’ attention, when we sense others care for us, and when others depend on us ... Feeling *important* to another person is a more powerful sense of mattering ... when we believe others care about our well-being, our progress, and our goals, we experience mattering.”

Schwartz describes mattering as about being “part of the social fabric”, as something that is essential to one’s well-being and as being the “opposite of passing through life fundamentally unnoticed by others” (ibid., p. 218). This suggests that an element of recognition is required in relational engagement if people matter to each other – to be noticed, one must be acknowledged and recognised. Gravett (2023, p. 1) defines mattering very simply as “how we feel we are valued by others” and states that “micro-interactions do and should matter; ... Individuals matter: their voices, experiences, preferences, thoughts, actions, connections and relationships – despite the prevalence of dominant discourses that might fail to listen” (ibid., p. 27). If someone experiences disconnection in some way, mattering can be achieved when they feel heard and responded to (Brown, 2021). It is closely related to the concepts of belonging and care and may be demonstrated by teachers being ‘present’ to their students and by going ‘above and beyond’: “Thus the student matters, and this gives the interaction a rich

relational quality that is less obvious when I am ‘just doing my job’” (Schwartz, 2019, p. 64). This requires ‘presence’ by all parties to the relationship:

“Presence in connection, even in a singular interaction, promotes growth ... presence is seen as a key ingredient for growth-fostering relationships. Presence conveys a basic level of acceptance, not necessarily agreement or alignment but more basic human receiving, a momentary commitment to *be with* the other. This acceptance communicates mattering or worth that then potentially helps the other feel less alone ...” (ibid., p. 67).

Given that relational pedagogy emphasises the interdependence of the teacher-learner relationship, ‘mattering’ is a useful conceptual tool to consider how teachers feel they matter, within the classroom setting with respect to their relationship with their students, and also within the wider institutional setting with respect to their relationship with their teaching peers and/or academic departments. I suggest therefore that mattering is equally important for teacher growth and wellbeing, to have that sense of belonging to a community, as teaching meets some of teachers’ needs, as human beings, for connection and respect. Schwartz considers teaching to be a profession which offers an opportunity to “find a place of mattering in the world” (ibid., p. 34) and recognises that the role of teacher, while prioritising student learning, is also about being open to change and self-growth through the teacher-learner relationship. Therefore ‘mattering’ is also a condition for “growth in relation” (Schwartz and Holloway, 2012). Reflecting on her own experiences as a teacher, Schwartz (2019, p. 131) realises that:

“some of my most memorable and motivating experiences as a teacher have been when I felt I mattered in the lives of students, I brought something important to their growth. When students take the time to tell us we have been helpful (and, even better, how we have been helpful), we are struck not only by their gratitude but also by the affirmation that we bring something significant to their lives.”

Schwartz claims, in turn, that “mattering confirms *belonging*” (ibid., p. 107), a concept which again is most often considered with respect to student belonging in higher education (e.g. Thomas, 2015; Gravett and Ajjawi, 2022). As with mattering, belonging can also be understood as a relational concept (Thomas, 2015). Achieving a sense of belonging in social relationships or within a community is essential to wellbeing, given that we are a social species and thus cannot survive without each other (Brown, 2021). Thus, a sense of belonging can be inferred from relationships and experiences and can

be experienced as a “feeling of being accepted, included, respected in, and contributing to a setting” (Walton and Brady, 2017, cited Brown, 2021, p. 165). Baumeister and Leary (1995) drew on a large body of empirical evidence from a variety of disciplines to develop the “belongingness hypothesis”, concluding that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation and that this need “entails that relationships are desired” (p. 500). Such relationships with others should ideally involve frequent interactions that are “affectively positive or pleasant” and that are marked by “stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future” (ibid.) and posited that the deprivation of belongingness may negatively impact a person’s health and happiness.

In Smoot’s (2010, p. xii) interviews with “great teachers” he found that “when they remember their first years of teaching, they realize that what they acquired over time was that sense of belonging in the classroom”. Felten and Lambert (2020, p. 19) describe belonging as a “basic human need that takes on heightened importance in certain contexts, such as when joining a new community, and for certain populations, particularly those who are marginalized”. They go on to state that research demonstrates that belonging ‘uncertainty’ is often experienced by minority faculty, including ‘adjunct faculty’ in general and that faculty and staff who doubt their belonging are less likely than their peers to build relationships with colleagues or with students. Therefore, although how teaching relationally can help higher education teachers to feel like they, themselves, also matter is only starting to be explored more explicitly in the literature, these concepts of mattering and belonging are highly relevant for the focus of my own research and will be considered later with respect to the experiences of MSAC teachers.

3.3.5 Is a relational pedagogy sufficient?

Throughout this chapter so far, I have presented a range of perspectives on how or why individual growth, learning and wellbeing – for teachers as much as for learners – is constituted via intersubjective relations. Relational pedagogy and engaging relationally with others necessitate, not just having a passing interest in who the other is, but an

acknowledgement and recognition of their place in the world, as well as in the interaction itself. For those who work in adult education, the relationship between teacher and learner is fundamental to this experience of recognition. For example, in examining the intersection between transformative learning and recognition, Fleming (2016, pp. 22-23) suggests that:

“teaching adults is a process of mutual recognition between teacher and learner. Teaching that is informed in this way has the potential to strengthen identity development. With the current emphasis on functional learning, competency and behavioural outcomes in education, and a neo-liberal inspired valorisation of the market as the ultimate supplier of all needs, these ideas take seriously the contribution of intersubjectivity as important for teaching, learning and transformation and as an antidote to dominant models. The motivation to engage in learning becomes less economic, functional and instrumental and more communicative, social and potentially transformative and emancipatory. This is achieved not just by an emphasis on critical reflection but on the always presupposed imperative of recognition.”

Fleming’s ideas provide food for thought in considering how teachers experience this mutual recognition. Because a relational approach to teaching is fundamental to teaching adults this is a natural space in which to experience recognition. In common parlance ‘recognition’ can be understood to be about being seen, acknowledged or identified by another or as an acknowledgement of one’s existence. It is usually understood in a positive way and can have both normative and psychological dimensions. From a psychological perspective it can be about how (positive) feedback from others helps us to see ourselves as valuable human beings. Thus, a lack of recognition may be perceived or experienced as not being seen or as being unacknowledged in one or more spheres of one’s life, thus may be experienced as negative and, at the extreme, may impact on one’s quality of life. From a socio-political perspective, recognition can be about acknowledging the status, achievements or rights of individuals or groups, for example from a cultural or legal perspective. Thus, the absence of recognition in this sphere may be interpreted as a form of social injustice.

However, MSACs operate within a complex socio-political and hierarchical higher education structure and culture. For higher education teachers, formal recognition usually comes in the form of status with respect to their place in the academic hierarchy, often symbolised by things such as contractual status, professional title, research

output, research grant awards, publications and so on, as well as recognition being received informally from students and colleagues. Therefore, within higher education, the potential sphere of recognition for teachers is significantly wider than that experienced in the classroom. As a result, in different social and educational contexts, we can see how different educators (and educational sectors) can have different levels of status and power. This in turn impacts on their relationality and on their capacity to be relational. For example, it could be assumed that precarious, occasional staff, unfortunately a pervasive phenomenon in higher education (O’Keefe and Courtois, 2015), have lower levels of status and power, and consequent lower levels of recognition, and thus potentially impacting on the wider relational experiences within their work. Considering the interconnection between relationality and recognition can contribute to a deeper understanding of the relational complexities and hierarchies within higher education teaching and thus of the positioning of MSACs within complex social and teaching and learning landscapes. I posit, therefore, that in higher education, relational pedagogy is insufficient as a lens through which to examine MSAC teachers’ experiences and I have included a consideration of recognition within my conceptual framework to facilitate a broader exploration of MSAC teachers’ experiences.

3.4 Recognition

In my review of relationality and its related concepts within education literature, the concept of ‘recognition’ is evident within various considerations and discussions. It is evident in such themes as mutuality in the educational relationship and co-creation of knowledge as teacher-student and student-teacher (Freire, 1970); in the consideration of care as an interdependent process and disposition (Tronto, 1993; Gilligan, 2013), and thus as a way of being ‘in relation’ (Noddings, 1992); in the importance of knowing and recognising the ‘inner self’ in order to know and recognise the ‘other’ through meaningful connection (Palmer, 1998); and recognition of the learner’s experience equating to recognition of the learner themselves (Knowles, 1990). Each of these considerations acknowledge that it is a two-way process and therefore that mutual recognition (as opposed to equality of recognition) of the ‘other’ within the process or encounter is critical for relationality to be present. Relationship is not possible without

recognition, although the extent or depth of recognition may vary; and even if full recognition is not possible, it is about the possibility of recognition being present in the relational encounter (hooks, 1994). This realisation led me to explore recognition as a concept and to examine aspects of recognition theories which could provide added depth to my analysis of MSAC teachers' experiences. By connecting and drawing on these two bodies of literature I aim to understand the importance of recognition, as well as relationality, and the interconnection between both within the MSAC teaching context.

Recognition as a concept in sociological theories and in theories of social justice emerged strongly in the 1990s in the work of authors such as Young (1990), Honneth (1995) and Fraser (2000). Honneth drew on German philosopher Hegel's work in considering recognition as an essential element for identity development and thus for achieving self-actualisation or self-esteem as a human being. Honneth thus connects recognition to experiences, feelings and to intersubjective relations between people. Alternative theories, such as those put forward by Young (1990) and Fraser (2000), focused on the role of recognition in a broader theory of social justice and argue that both redistribution (of wealth, resources, opportunities) and recognition (cultural acceptance and inclusion) are required to remedy injustice. Applying a lens of recognition to MSAC teachers' experiences by drawing on relevant concepts, in particular from Honneth's and Fraser's theories of recognition, can offer a complementary insight into the intersubjective relations – with both students and academic peers – experienced by my participants. Both perspectives on recognition have potential to explain how MSAC teachers report their experiences as they relate to relationality, in different aspects of their work. Exploring teachers' experiences through a recognition lens, and specifically how they experience their self-esteem as teachers and the esteem in which they perceive their teaching practices to be held more broadly within the institution, offers a window into the interconnection between relationality and recognition at the level of the individual as well as at institutional and systemic levels.

3.4.1 Honneth's solidarity / self-esteem concept

Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition is fundamentally based on the human struggle to be recognised by significant others. His model is considered to be an identity model of recognition in that it emphasises the importance of social relationships to the maintenance and development of a person's identity. Honneth's model thus focuses more on the psychological dimensions of recognition than on the principles of social justice. The identity model of recognition stems from the Hegelian idea that "identity is constituted dialogically, through a process of mutual recognition ... (and that) recognition from others is thus essential to the development of a sense of self" (Fraser, 2000, p. 109). Honneth (1997) posits therefore that our growth and development as humans, and thus our positive relationship with ourselves and our sense of identity, can only be achieved intersubjectively i.e. through receiving recognition and respect from other people. He refers to the:

"generalised insight that the moral quality of social relations cannot be measured solely in terms of the fair or just distribution of material goods; rather, our notion of justice is also very closely linked to how, and as what, subjects mutually recognise each other." (ibid., p. 17)

Honneth's framework draws on three main spheres of human recognition: love, law and solidarity and within these he outlines three levels of recognition: self-confidence, which is established in relationships of friendship and love, in a private sphere of recognition; self-respect, which is established by being recognised as a legally mature person in a community of rights, in a legal sphere of recognition; and self-esteem or social esteem which happens through receiving recognition at work, in a solidarity sphere of recognition. Lynch et al. (2020, p. 158) note with interest that, with the exception of Honneth's work, "academic debates about social justice, outside of feminist scholarship, do not generally define care relations (namely affective relations of love, care and solidarity) as key considerations". However, while each of Honneth's spheres of recognition is required to fulfil the possibility of identity formation, the third of these, as I use it with respect to participants' connection to an academic community and institution, is the most relevant for greater consideration with respect to my research.

"The third form of recognition happens through work and this experience of acknowledgement leads to self-esteem. Relationships of solidarity at work and other collaborative activities enhance self-esteem. Individuals become 'recognised as a person

whose capabilities are of constitutive value to a concrete community’” (Honneth 1997, p. 30, cited in Fleming, 2016, p. 15).

Self-esteem as a form of recognition exists when the value and contribution of individuals, or groups, are recognised within a community of solidarity. Honneth contends therefore that a lack or absence of social recognition for one’s abilities and achievements results in cracks in one’s self-esteem. This is experienced by individuals as disrespect which in turn provides an impetus for ‘struggle’ (the means by which individuals or groups strive for recognition) requiring remedies of respect in order to restore a successful relationship to their selves.

Such experiences of lack of recognition, personally or professionally, have been reported by teachers in education settings that could be considered as being on the ‘margins’ of the ‘mainstream’ education system. For example, teachers who work in adult and community education (McGlynn, 2012; O’Neill, 2015; Fitzsimons, 2017), in Youthreach programmes (Kenny et al., 2022) and early childhood education (Murphy, 2018). With respect to adult and community education this lack of recognition can arise with respect to the increasing professionalisation of the sector whereby adult and community educators who do not present with specific qualifications may experience their practice being labelled as “unprofessional” (Fitzsimons, 2017, p. 206). Fitzsimons and Dorman (2013, p. 53) posit that with respect to professionalisation and what makes community educators ‘credible’ in their roles is that:

“authority from above – conferred by a role we occupy or designation from a higher authority, (is held in greater esteem than) authority from below or around – conferred from those we work with in the respect or recognition they have for us, and authority from within – that which we give ourselves through self-confidence in the validity of our position.”

This suggests that effectively ‘external’ recognition, from those at a slightly greater remove, holds greater power with respect to how professional status is experienced and thus how it impacts on self-esteem. For example, community educators report experiencing a ‘second class status’ with respect to their work (McGlynn, 2012) or that, put another way, “a teacher has a status in society that tutors don’t have” (O’Neill, 2015,

p. 16) thus feeling that society sees their role as “trivial”. This demonstrates that a lack of recognition can impact on how, in these cases, educators experience self-esteem.

Recognition in academic life is normally associated with achievement in such areas as research grant awards, research outcomes, publications and journal statistics and these factors can be influential when it comes to reward processes in higher education (McCune, 2021). On the other hand, it has been suggested that the importance given to teaching in higher education reward and recognition policies, where these exist, has varied significantly (Hodson, 2009). However, ‘excellence in teaching’ awards are nowadays a key feature in Irish HEIs at national, institutional and sometimes at department level, and these aim to recognise individuals and/or teaching teams for outstanding, ‘quality’ teaching as well as to reaffirm the importance of teaching, learning and assessment as an important scholarly activity. Teaching ‘excellence’ may be judged on a broad range of factors such as innovation and creativity in curriculum design or teaching, linking teaching to research, demonstrating collegiality, using appropriate assessment methods and so on, and must be evidenced and validated. While student feedback often forms part of the award assessment, and factors such as demonstrating empathy and support for students may feature – both of which feature in relationality literature - these are only part of a large number of criteria by which ‘excellent’ teaching is judged. While I did not investigate the extent to which MSAC teachers have been nominated or shortlisted for teaching awards as part of my research, nor did I investigate my participants’ thoughts on these, I have noted their existence here as a demonstration of how external or public recognition for excellent or ‘effective’ teaching in higher education is usually awarded. Thus, I would argue that the reward culture within higher education is at odds with relational theorists’ views on personal fulfilment and I would agree with Jordan and Schwartz’s (2018, p. 26) contention that “relatedness and responsiveness to one another and the desire to engage in growthful relationships ... (is) overlooked in the prevailing cultural narrative” of individualism and individualistic education.

Applied to the MSAC teaching context, Honneth’s concept of self-esteem can throw light on the importance of intersubjective relations with respect to how MSAC educators

perceive recognition of their status and their practice as educators in higher education. In other words, it can help us to reflect on how or whether MSAC educators feel 'esteemed' in their roles, where this esteem is generated, and what this tells us about the place that MSAC teaching occupies in higher education.

3.4.2 Fraser's 'misrecognition as status subordination'

Nancy Fraser takes an alternative perspective on recognition, but one which nonetheless also has potential to offer insight into how MSAC teachers experience their work in higher education from an intersubjective relational perspective. Fraser (2000) argues against the dominant identity model of recognition, contending that this model ignores or displaces distributive injustice in struggles for recognition. Fraser proposes instead that recognition should be treated as a question of social status rather than as a question of identity: "what requires recognition is not group-specific identity, but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction" (p. 113). She suggests that such social interaction is "regulated by an institutionalized pattern of cultural value that constitutes some categories of social actors as normative and others as deficient or inferior" (ibid., p. 114).

Fraser proposes the concept of misrecognition as status subordination which "does not mean the depreciation and deformation of group identity, but social subordination – in the sense of being prevented from participating as a peer in social life" (ibid., p.113). The use of the word 'prevented' begs the question as to who or what is doing the preventing – individuals or peers; institutional, social or environmental structures, policies, practices or culture; or some combination of all of these factors? Fraser suggests that redress of this injustice still requires a politics of recognition, however not one that is reduced to a question of identity, but rather to overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as a full member of society. She offers the view that institutionalised patterns of cultural value may impact on individuals in such a way as to misrecognise and subordinate them i.e. treat them as deficient, inferior, excluded or invisible, or "as comparatively unworthy of esteem or respect" (ibid.). In other words, they are denied the status of a full partner in social interaction which in turn prevents

them from participating as peers. Redressing misrecognition thus requires actively replacing value patterns within institutions, such as the value placed on certain kinds of teaching or teaching contracts. The status model thus seeks “institutional remedies for institutionalized harms” (ibid., p. 116).

Baker et al. (2009, p. 154), in examining inequalities within the education system as experienced by students, suggest that:

“inequalities of respect and recognition ... are expressed in the educational system as degrees of inclusion or exclusion ... The culturally marginal are identified as ‘other’ and are treated as irrelevant and/or inferior as a status group. They are subjected to a cultural imperialism that render them either invisible or, if visible, subject to negative stereotyping or misrecognition.”

In the context of my own research with respect to MSACs in higher education, I suggest that this is the cultural value or status associated with being an academic, with academic discipline or research, or with ‘mainstream’ programmes in higher education, and the dominant culture within academia more generally that privileges ‘expert’ knowledge, research, and individualist and independent approaches to learning over relational teaching and interpersonal connection. To be misrecognised or to be denied recognition therefore can be experienced as “social condemnation and stigma” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 69) and can hinder, distort, or at the extreme, destroy a person’s relationship with themselves, their identity and/or their self-esteem (Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2000). Although Fraser’s status model of social justice encompasses both a recognition dimension and a distribution dimension, and proposes that both interact causally with each other, I draw specifically on the concept of misrecognition as status subordination for how it can help us understand how MSAC teachers experience their own personal status, and the status of their programmes, within their institutions. I will later use the concepts of self-esteem and misrecognition as status subordination to examine how MSAC teachers experience recognition with respect to the relationships they experience through their work. This will allow me to explore how misrecognition is manifested and enacted in terms of relationality and connection and what impact it has on the teachers from a personal and a professional perspective.

3.4.3 *Marginality*

A related concept to both relationality and recognition, is that of ‘marginality’ which I include briefly here for the additional perspective it can bring to both core concepts within my conceptual framework, and to facilitate a deeper understanding of my participants’ experiences through a contrapuntal lens. Just as relationality can be experienced as good or bad (Bingham and Sikorkin, 2004), or by its presence or absence, mattering and belonging (discussed in Section 3.3.4) should also be considered in the context of their absence in teaching and learning relationships. Schlossberg (1989) suggests that ‘marginality’ is the converse to ‘mattering’ and ‘belonging’; in other words, when we feel like we matter and belong, we don’t feel marginal. Although Schlossberg’s focus was on how students deal with the issues of mattering and marginality through their college experience and particularly those students in transition into a new experience, it is helpful to consider marginality as a concept for how it may inform our understanding of some aspects of MSAC teachers’ experiences.

‘Marginality’ is a widely used concept in literature on inequality, citizenship and civil rights, and development, and often intersects with concepts such as social exclusion and poverty (von Braun and Gatzweiler, 2014; Varghese and Kumar, 2022). It can refer to socio-economic marginality as well as to marginality with respect to individual or community location within geographic, political, social or cultural spaces, and may imply lower or ‘outsider’ status. Marginality within systems may be related to geographic or social distances, but also to technological and institutional infrastructure deficiencies (von Braun and Gatzweiler, 2014). To be marginal can mean to experience exclusion from the perspective of lacking the rights or resources to participate in “the normal relationships and activities available to most people in a society” (Varghese and Kumar, 2022, p. 28). At the extreme, it may result in feelings of invisibility (Brown, 2021, p. 175), defined as “a function of disconnection and dehumanization, where an individual or group’s humanity and relevance are unacknowledged, ignored and/or diminished in value or importance”.

Underpinning these understandings of marginality is the notion that “marginality is always relational and contextual. Marginality is about positioning within a given system of reference” (Bradatan and Craiutu, 2012, p. 724) and refers to where people are and what they have. In other words, the experience or position of marginality is often defined “in relation to a ‘centre’ or a ‘reference with a set of ideal values, processes and resources” (ibid., p. 24) and may be experienced objectively (e.g. geographic, socio-economic marginality) or subjectively (e.g. as feelings about being excluded or not valued within a community). Billson (2005, cited in Varghese and Kumar, 2022, p. 35) described social marginality as “the situation wherein the individual cannot participate in a positive reference group because of age, social constraints or hierarchically arranged occupational roles”. Academic discourse related to marginality in more recent times has arisen because of increased precarity and casualisation within teaching and academic contracts, resulting in marginality within educational institutions (Brown et al., 2010; Varghese and Kumar, 2022). Varghese and Kumar (2022, p. 29) suggest that marginality in this respect “throws light on the unequal distribution of power and resources and its combined impact on the subjective experience” while Von Braun and Gatzweiler (2014) posit that being marginal prevents individuals’ access to resources and opportunities, and hinders the development of personal capabilities, and thus of growth. Thus, marginality is relevant to note here from the perspective that both concepts of recognition and relationality require acknowledgement of the ‘other’, mutual participation and interconnection in the educational encounter and thus experiencing marginality and thus a lack of recognition may result in a status dilemma for the individual and/or impact their personal development.

3.5 Drawing my conceptual framework together

This chapter has presented a broad overview of the relational landscape in higher education and how relationality can be conceived in various ways. I presented understandings of relationality from sociological, critical education and care perspectives. I identified relational pedagogy as a broad concept which brings together many of the facets of relational education literature and explored this in greater depth to identify its application in supporting an understanding of my participants’

experiences. I also explored the concept of recognition, and related concepts of misrecognition and marginality, and draw on these to respond to the varied aspects of the experiences of MSAC teachers in the classroom and their experiences in the wider institution and academic community. Considering my participants' experiences by drawing on a diverse but partially overlapping set of ideas also offers a greater understanding of the broader and complex experiences of MSAC teachers than using either concept on its own.

Felten and Lambert (2020, p. 57) suggest that “there’s so much invisible work going on that is rooted in relationships with students. We need to find ways to tell the full story of faculty and staff work lives”. Themes and research findings evident within the broad-ranging literature signal that enacting a relational approach to education facilitates growth, learning and fulfilment – not just for learners, but increasingly also teacher wellbeing and satisfaction are considered. By putting relationship at the centre of the educational experience, relational pedagogy facilitates a focus on the *teacher’s* experience in this educational space (Bovill, 2020) and highlights the synergistic and symbiotic nature of the teacher-student relationship. It is a concept or pedagogy which transcends educational contexts, sectors and teacher-learner cohorts. Therefore, the value of using relational pedagogy as an organising concept in my own study lies in the fact that it provides a lens through which to explicitly consider the experience, and also the motivation, of the educator in this distinct teaching and learning relationship. More specifically, it allows me to explore what the relationship with their students means to MSAC teachers and helps me to explore how the ‘relational space’ within the MSAC enables the teachers in my research to grow and to expand their own learning about the world – about their students and their life contexts in which they have taken the step to engage in higher education. It offers a vehicle through which to understand the self-awareness and growth of teachers and how their relationships with their students underpin their own wellbeing and belonging in the classroom. As Schwartz (2019, p. 28) suggests “the key to growth-in-relation is that we expand each other’s world. ... Perhaps in teaching we expand each other’s learning space”. It also offers a bridge to considering the broader relational experiences of MSAC teachers in a more macro context and puts relationality or connection at the heart of my enquiry, rather than strategy, technique,

learning outcomes or impact. It facilitates a focus on the connective flow in my participants' experiences, inside and outside the classroom.

Relational theorists contend that we grow and develop through intersubjective relations and that fulfilment and learning comes actively through relationship and connection but not necessarily through the achievement of personal autonomy. The consideration of relational pedagogy as an intentional educational process draws attention to its importance for human development and growth in a mutually supportive co-relation. In other words, it is both inward and outward looking. Recognition theory argues that "the drive towards personal autonomy and self-realisation can only be achieved intersubjectively, through the process of recognition from significant others" (Murphy and Brown, 2012, p. 649) and that recognition is thereafter maintained intersubjectively. In other words, particularly under the identity models, recognition is essential to the development of a sense of self and thus is more focused on the individual's positive relationship with themselves. This brings recognition into the domain of self-esteem with a prevailing inward-looking focus. Therefore, while both concepts acknowledge the centrality of intersubjective relations for goal or outcome attainment, that goal or outcome is slightly different in each scenario. Using this conceptual framework, one of the questions I consider is, what manifests at the intersection of these key concepts in the context of my participants' experiences, and do these experiences differ when one focuses on the micro, meso and macro environments? I am therefore also exploring the intersection of relationality and recognition, where relationality is about the quality and intentionality of relationships, and recognition is about self-esteem and status as constituted through those relationships. My thesis offers the view that there is an interesting connection to be considered between relationality, and specifically relational pedagogy as it applies in the MSAC classroom, and recognition as it pertains to MSAC teachers' experiences, both inside and outside the classroom. I bring the ideas of relationality and recognition together to suggest that there is an important and mutually reinforcing connection between positive teacher-learner relationships and teacher self-esteem specifically in the context of MSAC teaching in higher education i.e. that one cannot have recognition without relationship and vice versa, and conversely that the absence of recognition or misrecognition occurs in the absence of relationship. This

latter point applies more so with respect to MSAC teachers' connections with the wider institution and in the context of their MSAC teaching as the main relationships or connections considered are those between MSAC teachers and their students, and between MSAC teachers and higher education colleagues. By drawing on the converse concept of misrecognition I can consider its impact on the relationality that MSAC teachers enact and experience through their day-to-day work. The effect of misrecognition on MSAC teachers is complex in the context in which they work as its impact lies both internally and externally. Ultimately, I use my conceptual framework to suggest that some of the intrinsic reward of being an MSAC teacher in this teaching and learning space arises at the intersection of relationality and recognition at the micro (individual) and meso (classroom) levels, but that extrinsic reward is largely absent in these experiences at the macro institutional or system level, in part due to misrecognition, marginality and the absence of relational connection. I posit that much of the reward of being an MSAC teacher, in these specific contexts, requires *both* relationality and recognition as presented in Figure 3.1 earlier in this chapter.

I posit therefore that relationality can be theorised in a unique way in light of the application of relevant recognition concepts to MSAC teachers' experiences and context. Their unique position in the higher education landscape brings the importance of relational pedagogy and its significance into sharp focus. The interconnection of these constructs can help to bring meaning to the process both of becoming and being an MSAC teacher, and at the same time can turn the spotlight from more frequently considered issues of adult learners' challenges and experiences of power, inequality and marginality in the higher education system, to the related challenges of teachers within this teaching context. I will consider the argument that recognition in the form of self-esteem for MSAC teachers is reinforced by positive relationships with their learners through their enactment of relational pedagogy, but that it manifests as misrecognition, in the form of status subordination, through their relationships (or absence of) with their peers in higher education. I will also suggest that the pedagogical culture of the MSAC classroom, with relationality at its core, can be likened to being a "pocket of resistance" (Finnegan, 2019) to neoliberal values within higher education.

3.6 Conclusion

The way in which pedagogy is enacted in the MSAC classroom could be viewed through any one of many theoretical or conceptual lenses, particularly those that are more typically considered to be synonymous with teaching adult learners e.g. critical pedagogy, transformative learning, engaged pedagogy, etc. However, I have chosen relational pedagogy as my primary pedagogical lens for how it facilitates me to reflect more deeply on the meaning and value to the teacher of these specific teaching and learning spaces in higher education. This chapter presents a conceptual framework for exploring MSAC teachers' experiences that helps us to consider the value of relational teaching and how MSAC educators are recognised, grow, and 'belong' in an academy that is driven by neoliberal values, managerialist practices and a prevailing culture of individualism. Using this conceptual framework emphasises the importance and value of relationality and belonging in the higher education system of today for all. It highlights an imperative to focus on relationality and relational approaches, not just for students but also for educators in working with marginalised student groups in higher education and presents a different way of "co-being" in higher education. It also emphasises a symbiosis in teaching relationships with adult learners in higher education through the 'dual pedagogical role' of co-creation of knowledge that is typically a defining characteristic of adult education (Ryan et al., 2009). In knowledge creation, there is growth and in intersubjective relations there is personal development and growth. This implies that there is a dual 'becoming' and growth whereas often the focus of the co-creation piece is on the co-creation of knowledge within the learning space. However, I argue that, drawing on relevant concepts of relationality and relational pedagogy, that there is also a co-becoming (or a parallel becoming (Kinchin 2021, cited in Kinchin and Gravett, 2022) and a 'growth-in-relation' for MSAC educators. Therefore, by exploring the intersection of these two broad concepts of recognition and relationality as they apply to MSAC teaching, they serve to highlight the importance and value to teachers of experiencing relational teaching in higher education, whereby a pedagogy of relation also becomes a pedagogy of recognition.

Chapter Four: Methodology

“Good research is not about good methods as much as it is about good thinking” (Stake 1995, p. 19).

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I set out my research philosophy, research design and methodology and explain how these align conceptually and philosophically with my research question and objectives, which have been set out in Chapter One of this thesis. This chapter describes my data collection and analysis approaches, outlines the strengths and limitations of my methodology, and also addresses fundamental research concerns such as ethics.

The broad aim of my research was to explore teachers’ experiences of their work on mature student access courses in Irish higher education institutions. My reasons for choosing this research topic have already been set out in detail in Chapter One, while the policy and practice contexts for this work have been set out in Chapter Two. As already highlighted, a number of studies have identified that access course teachers play a critical role in generating positive student experiences of such courses (Foster, 2008; Brosnan, 2013; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015). However, for the most part studies undertaken in an Irish context have investigated experiences of access courses from the students’ perspectives, rather than from the teachers’ perspectives. Stebbins (2001) suggests that where little is known about a subject, taking an open, exploratory approach allows the researcher to remain flexible and open-minded about what may emerge and about what sources may lead to the creation of knowledge. Therefore, my starting point for undertaking this research was very simply the following over-arching research question: *How do higher education teachers experience their work on a mature student access course?*

4.2 My epistemology

Identifying an appropriate research methodology is a critical part of the research process as it needs to be congruent, not only with the objectives of the proposed research itself

but also with the researcher's own ontology, epistemology and values. A research paradigm can be defined as a "set of interrelated assumptions about the social world, which provides a philosophical and conceptual framework for the organised study of that world" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 127). In other words, the research paradigm to which a researcher subscribes should present a cohesive philosophical and conceptual approach to their research, from their own ontological, epistemological and axiological beliefs and positions, through to their chosen methodology and presentation of findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Mertens (2012) suggests that paradigms are philosophical rather than methodological in their foundations, and that therefore it is the researcher's own view of the world that determines the chosen methodology, rather than the other way around. Others maintain the contrary, for example Cavaye (1996, cited in Krauss, 2005, p. 761) posits that the "methodology chosen (for research) depends on what one is trying to do rather than a commitment to a particular paradigm".

Therefore, in identifying and articulating my own philosophical position for this research, particularly as a novice researcher, I spent much time during the early months of the DHAЕ programme reflecting deeply on the nature of the world in which I was both working and studying. I reflected on what I wanted to achieve, as well as on what I understood 'reality' to be (my ontology) and how I believed that such reality could come to be known (my epistemology) with respect to my research objectives. This reflection was a vital part of the process for me in identifying an appropriate research approach. Although my professional qualifications background in accounting lent itself more naturally to a scientific 'facts and figures' tendency, the majority of my working life had been spent in education. Much of that time had been in supporting equity of access work, wherein I had witnessed the complexity and diversity of individuals' backgrounds, perspectives, life experiences and thus, their realities. My own beliefs and assumptions about the world were constantly evolving, and I acknowledged that the world as I experience and understand it is not necessarily the same as how others experience and understand it. This led me firmly to the understanding that when it comes to experience, no two individual's 'reality' can ever be the same and thus I needed to identify a research approach which would support me in exploring the complexity of personal experiences. Fundamentally, my research placed an inquiry into human experience at the heart of

the process, with my core research objective being to develop an ‘understanding’ of that experience rather than to identify an ‘explanation’ for that experience. Knowledge of human experience resides within individuals themselves and I believe that there is not – cannot be – one single universal reality when it comes to human experience. All such knowledge, filtered as it is through individuals’ personal biases, assumptions, lives, circumstances, values and experiences, as well as through my own as researcher, is therefore context-bound and subjective and cannot possibly reflect an objective reality (Hansen, 2004). My role as researcher in this process therefore was to engage with my participants in such a way that they would articulate and describe their own experiences in their own words and thus play a proactive role in the knowledge-creation process. This interaction would require trust, dialogue and reciprocity. Identifying an appropriate research design therefore was critical to ensure alignment and cohesion of my philosophy and of the research process itself.

While there is no universally agreed categorisation of research paradigms, Ponterotto (2005) draws on Guba and Lincoln’s work (1994, cited *ibid.*) to present four broad research paradigms – *positivism*, *postpositivism*, *constructivism-interpretivism* and *critical theory* (which he labels ‘*critical-ideological*’). These categorisations offered a useful starting point for me in naming my own ontological and epistemological positioning. Ponterotto suggests that both *positivism* and *postpositivism* adopt an ontological view of the world which suggests that there is an objective external reality, be it perfectly or imperfectly knowable, and that the primary goal of research within these paradigms is explanation and prediction of that reality. Working within these paradigms signifies that a researcher can develop an understanding or explanation of reality (i.e. they can create knowledge) by maintaining a relatively independent stance to their research participants and to the reality being investigated. Fundamentally the aim of a positivist approach is to explain and predict phenomena, typically using quantitative research methodologies. *Constructivist-interpretivist* and *critical-ideological* positions on the other hand subscribe to a view of the world which is primarily subjectively known and is therefore knowable only by those who experience their reality and/or in co-creation with others. However, while constructivism-interpretivism focuses on developing a co-constructed understanding of reality, a

critical-ideological paradigm focuses on transformation and emancipation of oppressed groups as the purpose of research, conceptualising reality also within “socially and historically constituted” (Ponterotto, 2005, p.130) power relations. While both paradigms use qualitative research methodologies, a critical-ideological paradigm is typically more methodologically pluralist in its approach, involving both qualitative *and* quantitative methods.

4.2.1 *Settling on a research paradigm*

Constructivism is a research paradigm which “maintains that individuals create or construct their own new understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already believe and the ideas, events, and activities with which they come into contact” (Ültanir, 2012, p. 195). One of the key ideas within constructivism therefore is the central role of the *individual* themselves in the creation of that knowledge (Hansen, 2004); in other words, knowledge is not something that is “out there” waiting to be ‘discovered’ (Schwandt, 1998). Therefore, this paradigm aligns with the view that there is no objective, independent “real world” which exists outside of human mental activity or language as we all play an active role in the everyday construction of our own knowledge.

Given the centrality of the individual to this knowledge creation process, this suggests that *both* researcher and participant play active roles in the creation of new knowledge. The experiences that are shared by participants are constructed as knowledge by them in dialogue with the researcher. Schwandt (1998, p. 243) suggests that the researcher subsequently constructs their own meaning from those conversations with participants:

“The act of inquiry begins with issues and/or concerns of participants and unfolds through a “dialectic” of iteration, analysis, critique, reiteration, reanalysis and so on that leads eventually to a joint (among inquirer and respondents) construction of a case (i.e., findings or outcomes). The joint constructions that issue from the activity of inquiry can be evaluated for their “fit” with the data and the information they encompass.”

This is where the term *interpretivism* within the broader paradigm comes into play as ultimately it is the researcher who *interprets* the experiences of participants, both through their own personal lens and through the lenses of their theoretical and

conceptual framework. An interpretation is also made by the reader of the research findings who in turn also constructs their own meaning of the text presented – “there are as many meanings as there are readers” (O’Leary, 1994, cited in Hansen, 2004, p. 133). Crabtree and Miller (1999, p. 10) offer *constructivist inquiry* as the term that should be used “because it is human constructions being studied and because it is constructions that the researcher is cocreating with the texts” and suggest that the use of the term “interpretive” within paradigms is confusing as it relates more to the choice of analytical method than to a paradigm. These experiences are also related via language which in and of itself is an interpretive act, both on the part of the participant and of the researcher.

However, as both of these aspects form key parts of my research approach, I choose to use the term ‘Constructivist-Interpretivist’ to describe my research approach as I believe that all aspects of this paradigm align with my approach in the context of researching human experience. My ontology (what I perceive reality to be) is one in which I acknowledge the existence of multiple, subjective realities which I believe can only become known and constructed through a dynamic interaction between myself and my co-participants (my epistemology). I believe that knowledge is context-bound, socially constructed and “embedded within historical and cultural stories, beliefs and practices” (Etherington, 2007, p. 599). Constructivism-interpretivism offers primacy to the voice of the participant, collecting rich data, and seeking to gain an insight into emotions, feelings, meanings and motivations. This perspective is the foundation stone upon which my approach to this research, and to my research design, was built, co-constructing meaning with my research participants through dialogue, reflection and interpretation (Creswell, 2003; Ponterotto, 2005).

4.3 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is usually concerned with investigating the complexity of human experiences for the purposes of understanding how people make sense of their lives or for understanding the meaning or knowledge that is constructed by people as a result of their interaction with the social world (Ponterotto, 2005; Higgs et al., 2009; Merriam, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Yazan, 2015). Krauss (2005, p. 764) suggests that the “goal

of a qualitative investigation is to understand the complex world of human experience and behaviour from the point of view of those involved in the situation of interest” and that the conceptualisation of the phenomenon under study, rather than being well-defined in advance of the research, emerges from the interaction between researcher and participant. This approach therefore requires *both* researcher and participant to be in relation with each other within the research process, rather than remaining as separate entities, as they would in positivist approaches.

Most writers agree that the term ‘qualitative research’ does not have a simple definition, nor can it be narrowed down to any single defining research method. Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 12) describe it as a “set of interpretive activities” which is typically “multi-method in focus”, while Higgs and Cherry (2009, p. 10) advocate using a range of different research activities within qualitative research for the reason that each practice used helps to make “the world visible in a different way”. While using a diversity of research methods is seen as both a strength and a necessity by advocates of qualitative research, critics suggest that such diversity can result in a lack of credibility in research findings (Higgs et al., 2009).

Qualitative research also differs significantly from more traditional quantitative (positivist) research, particularly on the researcher objectivity-subjectivity spectrum. The subjective positioning of the researcher within qualitative research is criticised by proponents of more traditional positivist approaches (Ponterotto, 2005), however advocates of qualitative research openly acknowledge that researcher subjectivity is an inevitable part of this kind of research. My decision to conduct my research within a qualitative framework reflects my belief that the core of this research lay in articulation of personal experience by my research participants themselves, thus placing their words and meanings at the heart of the research as a way of making the subjective world visible and recognising the knowledge and experience of my participants as central to interpreting and presenting those worlds.

4.3.1 *Taking an exploratory approach*

All research, very simply, *is* exploration as it involves examining a subject, or exploring an unfamiliar area – spatially or metaphorically – for the purposes of discovery, be the object of discovery known or unknown in advance. Creswell (2003, p. 22) suggests that qualitative research is useful in particular “when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine”. It is also useful when a topic is new, does not have much written on it or has not yet been examined with a particular sample (ibid.; Bodgan and Biklen, 1992). Exploration, Stebbins (2001) believes, is an appropriate approach to use when the researcher believes that there is something worth discovering within a “group, process, activity or situation” (p. 5), but doesn’t know what that something actually is yet, and suggests therefore that “*flexibility* in looking for data and *open-mindedness* about where to find them” (ibid.) is vital for effective exploration. In exploratory research therefore the researcher does not know what they will find, but starts out with a strong curiosity about some particular aspect of the world and seeks to discover something new (Davies, 2006). This close linking of qualitative research with exploratory research resonated with me given that there was limited existing research on my chosen area of study, and none that I could find in an Irish context.

While Stebbins (2001) advocates for an exploratory research approach to be taken where little is already known about a topic, he disagrees however that exploratory research is synonymous with qualitative research, contending that qualitative research is actually “a much broader idea that is subject to many different definitions” (ibid., p. 4). He suggests rather that the goal of exploratory research is theory-generation – inductively pulling theory from the data (also Davies, 2006) and that therefore “explorers are ... theorists, albeit highly empirical ones compared with their speculative cousins, who prefer their armchairs to fieldwork” (ibid., p. 52). For me, an exploratory research approach is driven by the extent of existing research on a topic whereas qualitative research aligns more with the focus and purpose of the research which is that of investigating human experience. Therefore, although they may be considered synonymous, they are complementary, and both are relevant approaches to my own research study.

Taking an exploratory approach to research is often associated with an emergent research design as the process of the study itself can then inform development of emerging research questions (Bodgan and Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 2003). Bogdan and Biklen (2002, p. 97) in particular posit that using free-flowing exploratory interviews early on in the process helps the researcher to get a “general understanding of a range of perspectives on a topic” but do suggest however, that decisions on narrowing the study should be made at a reasonably early point in the process for the reason that, if a study is kept too exploratory the data may end up being too diffuse to be able to interpret coherent meaning from it. In this kind of research, more focused research questions are expected to evolve and to ‘mature’ in the course of the study (Bodgan and Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 2003; Higgs et al., 2009; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Stebbins (2001) suggests that exploration is an ongoing process which unfolds across several studies and not just within individual studies thus countering the arguments made by some critics of weaknesses in sampling, validity and generalisability as these “tend to get corrected over the course of several exploratory studies” (ibid., p. 5). This is a process he refers to as “concatenation”, effectively a “chain” of studies (e.g. longitudinal), with those studies that are closer to the beginning of the chain being “wholly or predominantly exploratory in scope” (ibid., p. 10). Subsequently “as data accumulate across the chain of exploratory studies, the grounded theory emerging from them grows in detail, breadth, and validity” (ibid., p. 12). How then does one know when to stop exploring? According to Stebbins it is when researchers believe that no significant new ideas emerge and when “pressing confirmatory issues begin to dominate” (ibid., p. 8).

One of the main limitations of exploratory research is suggested to be that it produces hypothetical findings, rather than conclusive results (ibid.). Stebbins argues therefore that this approach limits the generalizability of findings from such a study. Nonetheless, he goes on to offer the view that “the degree of inconclusiveness in exploratory research is reduced when the sample is *highly representative* and *tentative generalizability* is possible” (ibid., p. 40). However, the goal of qualitative research, and particularly using

a case study approach as I have done, is not typically that of generalisability (Stake, 1995) i.e. the extent to which research findings may hold up in other settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). My interest in exploring teachers' experiences of mature student access courses has already been set out in detail in Chapter One of this thesis and my research focused on exploration for the purposes of discovery. I did not seek to understand pre-identified or already known experiences. Given the dearth of existing research on the topic, particularly in an Irish context, I used an exploratory approach to uncover both common narratives amongst the experiences of those who teach on mature student access courses, as well as to identify unique aspects of experiences – not for the purposes of trying to prove cause and effect according to similarities and differences between individuals or situations, but rather to allow the “truth” of individuals' own experiences to take centre-stage in the research process. My interview questions were kept open (see Appendix A) in order to facilitate this exploration and to allow for the broadest possible set of responses to emerge from the conversations. Therefore, my interview questions focused very much on asking respondents to “describe” their experiences, feelings and opinions in their own words.

I did not approach my research with a set agenda as to what I should focus on in relation to ‘experience’ i.e. I did not wish to limit participants' responses in any way; nor was my aim to generate theory. As Brown (2021, p. 168) was advised on commencing her own research: “You don't get to decide what this research is about – your participants do. You'll follow them where they go – not the other way around. This is based on their lived experiences, not the researcher's academic pet interests. Trust and follow what emerges from the data”. Taking this relatively open approach may appear akin to phenomenology, a research approach that is used to “understand phenomena in their own terms – to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself” (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). Thus, through phenomenology, the aim of the researcher is to gain “direct knowledge of the feelings and images of the research participant or subject so that the first conceptualization is as close to the experience as is technically possible” (ibid.), effectively seeking to understand inner experience. Phenomenology therefore focuses on describing the meaning of the lived experiences of particular phenomena (the “what” of the experience) and understanding the essence

of the phenomenon (the “how” of the experience) (Moustakas, 1994). This was not my intent in my research as I did not seek to immerse myself in my participants’ experiences and this would not have been possible in any event given the circumstances in which they were teaching at the time I was doing my fieldwork. I also did not seek to boundary or limit the kinds of experiences participants wished to relate or that I wanted to explore. Rather, as stated above, my interest was in identifying the different kinds of experiences related by my participants – these could have been inner and/or outer experiences - and as they described them in their own words, and what seemed to be important to my participants to share within these experiences. I explain my approach further in Section 4.4 when I describe taking an exploratory case study approach to my research.

4.3.2 Validity and reliability in qualitative research

Validity is a fundamental concept in quantitative research but is a more debated topic within qualitative research (Creswell, 2003). According to Flick (2009, p. 387) validity “can be summarised as a question of whether the researchers see what they think they see”. Essentially, it is a test of how well or accurately the research findings, as presented by the researcher, portray the meanings that research participants ascribed to their input. As has already been stated, qualitative research deals with human experiences and therefore with feelings, emotions and perceptions. The ‘measure’ of validity used in qualitative research, therefore, should be more about demonstrating congruence with the assumptions underlying the research goals and philosophies than about demonstrating an objectively measurable accuracy of findings (Creswell, 2003; Higgs et al., 2009; Merriam, 2009). Effectively, it is about enabling the reader to have confidence in the researcher’s interpretations of the research data.

The main way suggested to address the issue of validity in qualitative research is *triangulation*. This involves data collection by multiple methods (Merriam, 2009) and/or multiple data sources (Gilchrist and Williams, 1999). Stake (1998) suggests different ways in which qualitative research can be triangulated, including data source, investigator, theory and methods triangulation. I acknowledge that my research design

was relatively limited in its triangulation possibilities, other than by carrying out interviews with a number of participants in different settings. This approach would align, to some extent, with data source triangulation. However, this was a small-scale study carried out with participants in two HEIs in the midst of a pandemic and therefore the capacity was limited for broadening my research reach at the time. Merriam (1998, cited in Yazan, 2015, p. 147) suggests that if a researcher can provide the reader with sufficient rich detail within the findings “to show that the author’s conclusion ‘makes sense’”, then this may be sufficient in terms of achieving validity within qualitative research. This is what I have set out to do in my presentation of findings in Chapters Five to Seven of this thesis.

Another recommended way to address validity within qualitative research is to build into the research process an opportunity for participants to review and comment on the draft research findings. This practice is often used in case study research (Schwandt and Gates, 2018) and is also known as member-checking (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2009; Guest et al., 2012). I did this in January 2023 when I sent my three draft findings chapters to all my participants for review and comment, should they choose. Just two participants responded at the time to say that the findings resonated with them and that they confirmed some of their own assumptions around their work experiences. Offering “rich, thick description” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196) is another way to address validity as this allows the reader to personally connect with the research setting through description and shared experience and thus to validate for themselves the connection between the findings and the raw data. Again, I have tried to do this to the optimal extent possible within my three findings chapters.

Reliability as a key concept within ‘scientific’ research generally means that if the research were to be carried out at another time by a different researcher, using the exact same procedure, one should expect similar findings to emerge. However, Creswell (2003) and Braun and Clarke (2020, p. 7) suggest that reliability tends to play a minor role in qualitative research, being “illogical” from the perspective that in qualitative research knowledge is contextual and “researcher subjectivity is conceptualised as a resource for knowledge production”. Guest et al. (2012, p. 84) agree, contending that

validity in fact is a more relevant concept than reliability in qualitative research as the reality is that most qualitative studies are in fact “descriptive and are not designed to be replicated”. Likewise, Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p. 48) suggest that qualitative researchers tend to “view reliability as a fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study, rather than the literal consistency across different observations”. In other words, it is more about ensuring the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the data and being able to clearly separate participants’ statements from the researcher’s interpretation (Flick, 2009). One suggested way to generate reliability within qualitative research is to keep an ‘audit trail’ of operational procedures (Merriam, 2009; Guest et al., 2012) i.e. to “conduct research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder” (Yin, 2009, p. 45). I have therefore set out my research approach and process in as much detail as possible within this chapter to demonstrate my efforts to ensure that my research is as valid and reliable as possible.

4.4 Case study

A robust research design should connect purpose, research questions and data collection methods (Yazan, 2015). While writers on case studies do not agree on the specific definition of a case study i.e. whether it is a methodology, strategy, research design, or product (ibid.), case studies are often used in educational research in order to investigate a phenomenon or experience where the phenomenon is inextricably linked with the context within which it occurs (Stake, 1998; Yin, 2009, 2018). Stake describes this context as a ‘bounded system’ which facilitates a study of the experiences under investigation. Walton (1992, p. 121) equally suggests that cases “imply particularity – cases are situationally grounded, limited views of social life” and thus are more than a mere circumstance, event or occurrence. A case study therefore “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2018, p.15) i.e. an understanding of the case encompasses “important contextual conditions” (Yin, 2009, p. 18).

Stake (1995, 1998) considered case study a suitable approach to use when studying programmes or people, more so than events or processes and defines three types of case study: *intrinsic*, *collective* and *instrumental*. An intrinsic case study is one where the case itself is dominant, where the researcher wants to understand the essential characteristics of the case itself. An instrumental case study is one in which the issue being explored rather than the case itself, is dominant and initially seemed to align with my research focus of exploring teacher experiences rather than exploring the MSAC programmes themselves. However, an instrumental case study is typically used to explore a phenomenon or issue that is already known, or about which knowledge is available, which did not apply to my research focus, while a collective case study involves extensive study of several instrumental cases.

Yazan's analysis and comparison of three seminal case study methodologists (Stake, Yin and Merriam) points out that Merriam's and Stake's epistemological commitments with regard to case study research, align with constructivism, holding that "knowledge is constructed rather than discovered" (Stake, 1995, cited in Yazan, 2015, p. 137), by contrast to Yin's largely positivistic stance. However, Yin (2018) does also state that taking a relativist perspective, in which multiple realities are acknowledged, is also a valid approach in case study research, and particularly in *exploratory* case studies, which he distinguishes from *explanatory* and *descriptive* case studies. Much like exploratory research in general, exploratory case studies are used to explore topics or issues where little prior knowledge is available and are used to develop understanding and generate insights, rather than to reach definitive conclusions about a topic. Explanatory case studies typically seek to explain the causes behind a phenomenon while descriptive case studies usually set out to provide a detailed account of the characteristics of an identified phenomenon (Yin, 2009; 2018). MSACs have been offered in Irish higher education for over 20 years, but as I have already pointed out, little is known about how MSAC teachers experience their work. My research therefore involves an exploration of the experiences of MSAC teachers in two Irish HEIs. The phenomenon of interest in my research is the experience of teaching on a mature student access course in Irish higher education, while the context of the case study is the unique focus and nature of the

course itself, which in turn is shaped by broader educational policy and by institutional structures and culture (the 'bounded system').

4.4.1 Inviting MSAC teacher participants

Of the 23 publicly funded Irish HEIs, 13 institutions offered MSACs, within the definition used in this research, during the 2020/21 academic year³⁷. Using purposive sampling, a procedure which allows for the selection of sites and/or participants, prior to data collection, on the basis of their capacity to directly inform the research question and deemed particularly suitable for case study research (Ragin and Becker, 1992; Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2009), I identified two HEIs in which to carry out my research. These HEIs were chosen on the basis that the MSACs delivered in both were similarly 'positioned' i.e. delivery of these programmes came under the direct remit of the Access Service, rather than being based within a faculty or academic department. In addition, between both HEIs a range of MSACs were offered, both full-time and part-time. It was anticipated that the structural similarities in both sites might lend to presentation of a relatively cohesive (as opposed to generalisable) interpretation of teachers' experiences of delivering such courses. One HEI offered a full-time MSAC, while the second HEI offered both full-time and part-time courses. I was aware from my own professional experience that, for the most part, the potential participants in these HEIs were PhD students, post-doctoral researchers, part-time or "casual hours" staff, as opposed to being full-time academic staff. The contractual statuses of the teaching cohorts on these programmes from an employment perspective therefore was quite distinct in comparison to the contractual statuses typical of teaching teams across higher education more generally.

Small samples are generally advocated for qualitative research studies in order to enable the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena of interest through the collection of information-rich data (Bogdan and Biklen 1992; Gilchrist and Williams, 1999; Merriam, 2009). My aim therefore was to carry out between three to five interviews with MSAC teachers in each HEI. The invited research participants were

³⁷ <http://maturestudents.ie/>

teachers who were teaching on the MSACs in the 2020/21 academic year and who had at least one year's prior experience of teaching on the programme. As I had planned to conduct my fieldwork during the first semester of 2020/21, the requirement to have had at least one year's prior experience meant that potential participants would have had sufficient time teaching on the course to be in a position to reflect on and share these experiences. In hindsight, inviting teachers who were teaching in the current year only (as opposed to also inviting former teachers) was valuable given the significantly changed circumstances in which the MSAC programmes were being delivered in 2020/21 as participants were able to reflect on how online delivery had both positively and negatively impacted on their teaching experiences. On the downside, there were fewer potential participants in one HEI as a decision had been taken to reduce the number of subjects being offered on that MSAC for 2020/21 due to the logistical and financial challenges imposed by online delivery during Covid-19. In addition, staff changes during 2020/21 meant that some teachers who had taught on that MSAC for a number of years had left. Both of these factors thus limited the "pool" of potential participants for 2020/21 in that HEI.

An invitation to participate in this research (see Appendix B) was circulated to participants by a gatekeeper in each HEI a few weeks into the start of the academic year and participants were invited to participate on a self-selected basis. This approach was taken to minimise as much as possible any sense of obligation that participants, particularly in my own HEI, might feel to respond to the invitation. Participants responded directly to me to indicate their willingness to participate or if they wished to ask questions before deciding whether or not to participate. A reminder was also circulated in both HEIs a few weeks after the original invitation, with one also subsequently bringing the research invitation to the attention of MSAC teachers at a staff meeting later in the semester. I was mindful of the circumstances in which course delivery was taking place in 2020/21 as a result of the restrictions imposed by Covid-19 and was aware of the additional pressures that MSAC teachers were experiencing in this environment. To this end, I was conscious of wishing not to over-impose on the teachers themselves or on my own gate-keeper colleagues with respect to disseminating invitations to participate in my research. In normal circumstances it is likely that I would

have had an opportunity to attend a staff meeting in person in order to speak about my research, but this option was not open to me during the 2020/21 academic year. In the end five teachers from one HEI and four teachers from the second HEI responded to my invitation and all subsequently participated in interviews.

In inviting participants to engage in my research, I carefully considered the implications of researching within my own workplace. While one of my core objectives in carrying out this research was to engage in praxis, using practical research to inform my own work, I was conscious also of ethical issues such as protecting anonymity and confidentiality, as well as issues such as power, discussed in more detail in Section 4.7.1. However, my belief in the importance of praxis within practitioner research meant that I ultimately decided to reach out to potential participants within my own HEI while adopting a continuous and mindful approach to ethics throughout the process. I address this further in Section 4.7.

4.4.2 HEI descriptions³⁸

HEI-A is a regional university with a student population of approximately 19,000, of which 4.8% of new entrants were mature students in 2020/21³⁹. HEI-A offers a number of different access and foundation courses, either wholly itself or in partnership with other HEIs, and which are open to mature students:

- The **General Access Course** is a one-year full-time course that aims to provide disadvantaged students from diverse backgrounds with the opportunity to prepare, personally and academically, for a full-time undergraduate programme. No fees are charged for this course where applicants meet certain financial and personal conditions. Subjects offered are in the areas of Humanities, Science, Engineering and Business and the course also offers Academic Writing, Study Skills, Academic Technology and Career/College Guidance subjects. Upon completion and meeting certain grades, students can progress to full-time degree courses in HEI-A in relevant areas.

³⁸ All course titles in this section are anonymised

³⁹ <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/institutes-performance/system-performance-framework-dashboard/>

- **Foundation Studies Certificate in STEM OR Humanities** – these two courses are one-year, part-time (evening) courses and are jointly delivered by HEI-A and HEI-C, which is a regional Institute of Technology. These courses are open to mature students only (aged 22+) and fees are charged, with a reduced fee applicable for applicants who are unemployed. Progression is to full-time or part-time undergraduate courses in HEI-A or HEI-C. Academic subjects include Maths, Biology, Chemistry and Physics or Maths, Economics, Business Skills and Accountancy, while support modules for both courses include Academic Writing, Study Skills, Technology and Career/College Guidance.
- **Outreach access / foundation courses** are one-year, free, part-time daytime/evening programmes, delivered by HEI-A in three regional outreach centres. These courses are open to both mature students and school leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds and offer successful students the opportunity to progress to undergraduate studies in HEI-A or in an affiliate college.

These mature student access courses are offered through HEI-A's Access Service, the professional service unit which supports all under-represented student participation in the HEI. Around the time in which my fieldwork was undertaken, the student intake to access courses in the HEI was approximately 170 students per annum⁴⁰.

HEI-B is also a regional university with a student population of approximately 16,000, of which 3.6% of new entrants were mature students in 2020/21⁴¹. HEI-B offers one access course for mature students, the *Certificate for Adult Learner Access*. This is a one-year, full-time Level 5 university certificate which is designed to prepare mature students both academically and socially to transition into full-time undergraduate studies. HEI-B's MSAC offers electives in Humanities, Science and Engineering and is taught by a mix of part-time teachers, hourly-paid teachers, full-time academic staff, PhD students and

⁴⁰ <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/system-performance-data/institutional-profiles-dashboard-version/>

⁴¹ <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/institutes-performance/system-performance-framework-dashboard/>

post-doctoral students. Student intake to the programme is about 30 students per annum. HEI-B's MSAC is open to all applicants of mature student age (22+).

HEI-B's MSAC is also offered through its Access Service. During the academic year in which my fieldwork was undertaken (2020/21) the intake to the MSAC was 30 students and two elective streams were offered – Humanities and Science. Of the eleven teachers who delivered the programme that year, seven had also taught on the MSAC in the previous year or years and thus were potentially eligible to participate in the research.

4.4.3 Research participant profiles

The profile of participants provided in Figure 4.1 below is kept general in order to protect participants' anonymity as much as possible (a full individualised profile is held securely on Maynooth University IT server and is accessible only by me) but also, I hope, sufficiently detailed so that readers of this research get a broad sense of who my participants are.

Figure 4.1: Participant profile overview

Participants	HEI-A: Rowan, Charlie, Alex, Jody, Chris HEI-B: Leslie, Bailey, Sam, Sydney
Gender	Four men and five women
Age range	Mid-twenties to late sixties
Subjects taught	Study skills, Maths, Academic Technology, History, English literature, Philosophy, Economics, Physics, Biology
Years teaching on MSAC	Between one* and eleven years; approximate total experience between all participants was 51 years.
Experience of being a mature student	Six participants had accessed and participated in their undergraduate course as a mature student.
Contractual Status	Part-time teaching assistants, hourly casual staff, PhD students, post-doctoral researcher

**One participant had only just started teaching on their MSAC programme in 2020/21, as the invitation to participate in my research had been circulated to all teachers who were teaching in the 2020/21 academic year in one case site, regardless of length of service. Despite eligibility criteria to participate, this participant was enthusiastic to be part of the research and therefore I welcomed their participation.*

4.5 Interviews as a data collection method

Writers on case study research diverge in their opinions on the kinds of data that are most appropriate to collect in these contexts. Mixed methods, involving both quantitative and qualitative data collection, is advocated by some in order to facilitate as in-depth and complete an exploration of a case as possible (Higgs and Cherry, 2009; Yin, 2009; Schwandt and Gates, 2018). Stake (1998), on the other hand, suggests that, in line with an exploratory, constructivist approach to case study investigation, and particularly for instrumental case studies, collecting qualitative data alone is sufficient. Given that my purpose was to explore individuals' lived experiences within the bounded systems of MSACs, as opposed to programme outcomes, following Stake's line of reasoning I chose to gather only qualitative data for my research.

The main data collection methods associated with qualitative research are participant observation, interviews and documentary analysis (Stake, 1998; Schwandt and Gates, 2018) and using all three methods is considered important for the purposes of triangulation to enhance validity and credibility. I deemed that participant observation was not an appropriate method to use for this research, as it would not have offered any insight into teachers' own subjective experiences and would also have been unnecessarily intrusive. As it turns out, this data collection method would not have been possible in the traditional sense in any event due to restrictions imposed by Covid-19 during the fieldwork phase.

My original proposal had been to carry out some documentary analysis of institutional policies, HEI strategic plans and MSAC course evaluations (where these were available). Data gathered from such sources would have been used for the purposes of contextualising the operations of MSACs rather than for the purposes of gathering primary data to directly inform the research question. However, given the small-scale nature of this study and the need to protect confidentiality of participation, where formal evaluations of MSAC courses in the HEIs have been carried out, findings from these are incorporated into the relevant sections of the literature review in Chapter

Two. The broader policy and practice contexts for this work are also included in that chapter.

I also considered, but ultimately rejected, the idea of using focus groups as I believed that these would have offered limited opportunity to discuss individual experiences and would also have impinged on participant confidentiality, particularly should sensitive information emerge during conversations. Ultimately, despite the potential and perceived limitations posed by using just one primary data collection method, I suggest that in the context of my research aims and objectives, that interviews were the most appropriate method for me to use. In fact, Silverman (1993, cited in Mercer, 2007, p. 12) argues that “because accounts are context-bound, they cannot be verified by generating data from multiple sources. Triangulation seems to ‘assume that the truth exists only in the space where multiple Venn diagrams converge’ whereas ‘some of the truth may be found in the places in the diagram where the circles do not converge’”. This is the understanding of knowledge creation which I have adopted my research.

Interviews facilitate the co-construction of knowledge through conversation and the mutual exchange of ideas between researcher and participants (Merrill, 2001; Mann, 2016) and can encompass the “*hows* of people’s lives (the constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life) as well as the traditional *whats* (the activities of everyday life)” (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 646). Thompson (2000, p. 6, cited in Merrill et al., 2020, p. 167), writing on biographical interviews, explains that they are a way of “producing knowledge from the inside ... deriving from personal, particular and shared experience. Not in the pursuit of ultimate truth, but in the search for greater, more nuanced understanding”. ‘Truth’ is fundamentally a positivist concern and I was not seeking an “ultimate truth” by carrying out this research. The above description applies to all interviews in qualitative research, I would suggest, and thus makes interviews an appropriate method for exploring human experiences which become known through individuals’ own opinions, words and accounts (Merrill, 2001). Interviews also have a relational aspect which was especially important in a context such as my own research site, where both my participants and I were already known to each other and had ongoing interaction outside of the research. Focusing solely on interview as my data

collection method meant that I remained as true as possible to the core concept of relationality which ultimately emerged at the heart of my research findings.

I carried out one-to-one semi-structured interviews with participants, using a question schedule as a guide, in order to allow participants' own experiences and thoughts to drive the interview, but still within the framework of my overall research aims (Cohen et al., 2011). My interview guide (see Appendix A) was open enough to allow me to probe and explore particular issues which came up, where necessary. Prior to commencing my fieldwork, I conducted a 'pilot' interview with a colleague in my own HEI who had taught on the MSAC a few years prior. This gave me the opportunity to 'test' out my research questions from the perspective of how they would facilitate a flow of conversation, as well as to build my own confidence in carrying out and recording interviews online, using technology that was new to me. The feedback I received from my colleague was positive and enabled me to clarify the wording of a few questions before embarking on my fieldwork. While I had originally planned to hold the interviews in each HEI sequentially, and also to possibly tailor my interview guide as the interviews progressed, if particularly pertinent issues emerged during the initial interviews (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992), in reality I found that keeping to my original interview guide worked better as I felt that, due to my relatively small participant sample, this approach would offer me greater scope to explore and interpret patterns and themes from the data and to avoid the temptation to 'narrow down' my research question too soon.

All interviews for my research were carried out between October 2020 and January 2021. My aim was to maintain a conversational feel to the interviews, even though they were semi-structured, in order to facilitate an open, dialogic and reflective interaction with my participants. Being aware that MSAC teachers in both HEIs had varying contractual positions, ranging from 'casual' hourly-paid staff (who may have had other teaching responsibilities either within the same HEI or elsewhere), part-time or full-time academic staff assigned to teach on the programme, and PhD students, I was mindful of not over-imposing on participants' time and thus decided from the outset that I would only carry out a single interview with each participant. I also needed to be mindful that participants may have been experiencing increased personal and/or professional stress

and higher workloads due to remote working during the pandemic, as normal routines were severely disrupted. Lupton (2020) suggests that privacy matters are also of extreme importance in this kind of a situation, and particularly when one is likely to be “meeting” participants in their own homes. This is one of the reasons that I was mindful about not “pushing out” my invitation to participate in my research and therefore it is a strong possibility that the number of responses I received to my invitation was lower than it might have been under more normal working circumstances.

While I had originally intended to transcribe each interview myself, recommended as a “means of generating insights and hunches about what is going on in (my) data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 174), due to intense circumstances in which I was both working and studying during the initial part of the 2020/21 academic year, from a time-saving perspective I ultimately decided to use a piece of software called Otter.ai⁴² to complete each initial transcription. This software facilitated me to upload the Bandicam⁴³ audio files of my participants’ interviews and automatically transcribed them into text. While this transcription software did not offer 100% accuracy – for example accents, placenames and pauses were not always accurately transcribed – it did offer a reasonably good starting transcription which I then corrected by listening back a number of times to the relevant audio file. The fact that these transcribed files were not 100% accurate was a positive thing as it ensured that I spent time listening and re-listening not just to words, but also to tones and to silences within the recorded conversations. It also allowed me time and space to listen to and absorb the voice of the participant and to hear each individual’s voice in my head on subsequent readings of the written texts.

Within one to two weeks of each interview, the participant was offered a copy of the full transcription of our conversation to read through and correct, add to, or delete comments and participants were invited to make any changes to the scripts that they wished. A few participants chose to do this, with some making minor corrections for clarity, correcting words I had mis-heard, and in some cases making comments on the returned transcript to clarify what they were thinking or meant to say at the time. Most

⁴² <https://otter.ai/>

⁴³ <https://www.bandicam.com/>

came back to acknowledge that they were happy with the transcript and each person was reminded that they would also subsequently be invited, should they so wish, to read and comment on my draft findings when they became available. I also asked very brief follow-up questions of two or three participants – particular things that struck me about what they had said in their interviews or how they had phrased something – and each of these participants chose to respond briefly to my questions by email. All of these subsequent interactions facilitated an easy continued interaction with each of my participants, while at the same time I tried to remain conscious of not imposing on their time and their thoughts, beyond that which they had already gifted me.

On receipt of an email confirming changes to or satisfaction with the transcription, each interview was then anonymised with the anonymisation key held only on the secure server in Maynooth University. The final anonymised interview transcriptions were then used for my data analysis.

4.5.1 Online interviewing

The Covid-19 pandemic was a social event that disrupted the social order of the world (Lobe et al., 2020) and societal restrictions imposed meant that meeting my research participants in person was not possible. While I had not originally planned that my interviews would be conducted online, in hindsight this method of interviewing offered both advantages and disadvantages in terms of data collection. Face-to-face interviewing is still considered to be the “gold standard” (Krouwel et al., 2019, p. 2) in qualitative research, for reasons that it facilitates a more personal connection between researcher and participants, allowing both parties to observe facial expressions and body language while establishing rapport and trust in research relationships is considered a key element of qualitative research (Hine, 2005; Salmons, 2010; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; O’Connor and Madge, 2017). However, it is contended that this is still achievable to some extent via video-interviewing (Hanna and Mwale, 2017) and I had engaged in email exchanges with participants prior to the interviews to obtain signed consent forms which also helped to some extent in building an initial rapport with my participants. As I also had a pre-existing professional relationship with participants

from my own HEI, I felt that it was less necessary to “build a scaffold for developing trust” (James and Busher, 2006, p. 411) and that therefore this helped with establishing a comfortable online connection during the research interviews and also helped with open dialogue.

Fielding et al. (2017) raise the question as to whether conducting online interviews requires different ethical considerations than do face-to-face interviews. However, Eynon et al. (2017) and Salmons (2010) argue that the core ethical issues of confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and protection of data remain central regardless of whether research is conducted online or in person. Nonetheless, prior to inviting participants for interview I reviewed my ethics approval to determine whether any additional approval would be needed for online interviews, and I also reviewed BERA⁴⁴ guidelines on online interviewing. As I had only sought approval to audio-record interviews on my ethics application, I sourced screen-recording software (Bandicam) which enabled me to record the conversations with my participants while capturing a ‘blank’ corner of the computer screen, rather than recording a video image of the participant, all of which I explained to participants in advance of commencing any recordings.

Personally, I found that the online interviews, other than having to deal with very minor connectivity problems, still allowed for as close to a “face-to-face” experience as possible, as they facilitated a synchronous experience of both seeing and hearing participants in real time. I suggest that the rapid onset of the need for remote working, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, meant that participants in my study, given their line of work as teachers, were likely to be both more comfortable and practiced at online engagement as well as to have the technology and equipment to participate in the research in this way at the time of my fieldwork. The advantage of carrying out my interviews when I did (Semester One 2020/21) was that both myself and my participants all worked in higher education and by that stage had been working remotely for over six months and had become reasonably comfortable with conducting meetings online for

⁴⁴ <https://www.bera.ac.uk/>

our work. I was also aware that HEIs in Ireland were largely using the same approved software and therefore access to common software was not expected to pose a difficulty.

Interviews were carried out over Microsoft Teams, an internet-based video-call technology which was the standard technology approved for use by Maynooth University from a security point of view (although I carried out one interview over Zoom due to connectivity issues with Microsoft Teams on the day) and were audio-recorded using Bandicam. Only the formal part of each interview was recorded – the ‘pre-amble’ and ‘post-amble’ conversations were not. These were to ensure that technology was working and also to establish a rapport with the interviewee from the start as well as to offer the participant an opportunity to clarify any questions they might have had and to talk through the procedure – the same as I would have done had the interviews been in person – and offer time to ‘de-brief’ informally at the end of the interview. Although it is recommended to issue “instructions” or rules to participants with regard to online interviewing in advance (Lobe et al., 2020) I chose not to do so in order to limit any stress that participants might experience in interviewing online. I also chose not to do a ‘pre-session’ with each participant as I assumed that seven months into the pandemic participants would be reasonably comfortable using the technology for online meetings.

Amongst the advantages I found of doing online interviews was that it was cheaper (no travel costs) and more time efficient (likewise, no time was required for travel, particularly to meet participants in the non-local HEI) (Folkman Curasi, 2001; Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Hanna and Mwale, 2017; Krouwel et al., 2019). While I had originally intended to offer participants the option of meeting at a time and place that suited them, the option for physical ‘place’ was no longer open to us by the time I was engaged in my fieldwork. Therefore, in the event that any participant was not comfortable with doing a video-call, I offered everyone the alternative option of a telephone interview. This offered an extra degree of control over the research process to participants (Hanna, 2012). All participants, however, were comfortable with proceeding with video-interviews. I experienced the sense that as we were all based in our own homes (although due to my own connectivity problems, I conducted two interviews from my

workplace), as opposed to meeting in a formal or public location, participants were quite relaxed during the interviews which has also been found by other researchers (Salmons, 2010; Hanna, 2012; Hanna and Mwale, 2017; Krouwel et al., 2019). Privacy could be protected by the use of blurred or virtual backgrounds although only one participant chose to do this during the interviews. I used a headset to offer more privacy from my end and to visibly show participants that they could not be heard by anyone else during the interview. I did not use a virtual background as I wanted to remain as “open” and “real” as possible to my participants, whether I was based in my own home or in my office while doing the interview – yet not physically present in each other’s space which still allowed a sense of distance or non-invasion of personal space.

Interviews lasted for at a minimum 50 minutes and a maximum of 75 minutes. For the most part all interviews went quite smoothly with only a few very minor connectivity issues cropping up. Having addressed the potential for this to happen before I commenced recording each interview, my participant and I were able to pause and re-connect if necessary and I don’t believe that in any case the flow of an interview was overly disrupted. Overall, as an interviewer I felt the experience of online interviewing to be quite relaxed and informal feedback from participants at the end of each interview offered the same view.

4.6 Data analysis and coding

Creswell (2003, p. 190) describes the process of data analysis as “making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data”. It is an ongoing cyclical process, not a linear one (also Merriam, 2009), where the researcher continually dives into the data and then steps back again viewing, reviewing and reflecting on what they are hearing, seeing and interpreting from the data. Krauss (2005, pp. 763-764) suggests that “the unique work of qualitative research and data analysis in particular (is) to identify the contributors to an individual’s (or groups’) unique meaning.” This process, he implies, is a “highly intuitive activity” and thus qualitative data analysis can be a powerful transformative learning tool through its “ability to generate new levels and forms of

meaning, which can in turn transform perspectives and actions ... for understanding even seemingly mundane experiences” (ibid.). Data analysis involves different phases and tools and is a process which quite simply, requires time and attention to detail.

4.6.1 Thematic analysis

There are many ways in which one can ‘do’ qualitative data analysis. These include such approaches as grounded theory and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), approaches which typically search for themes or patterns in the data; “a lot of analysis is essentially thematic” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 80). As my research sought to keep an open, exploratory approach to identifying teachers’ experiences of their work on MSACs, I decided that taking a thematic analysis approach, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006; *see also* Clarke and Braun, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2020), would be appropriate in line with my inductive approach to distilling out findings from the data i.e. working from the “specific to the general” (Salmons, 2010, p. 43). Thematic analysis is considered a particularly appropriate approach for under-researched phenomena and coding categories are inductively derived directly from the data, rather than using a pre-set coding framework (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Braun and Clarke (2006) consider thematic analysis (TA) to be a qualitative analytic method in its own right and not just part of other analytic methods such as grounded theory. They suggest that the difference essentially is that other methods which seek patterns in the data are “theoretically bounded” (p. 80), whereas they suggest that TA can be applied independently of epistemology or theory i.e. it is applicable across a range of approaches in these frameworks thus offering “theoretical freedom” (ibid., p. 78) (but is not atheoretical) and thus is a very flexible analytic tool to use in qualitative research. They see this as one of its key advantages, but also advocate that clear methodological guidelines are recommended around its use in order to mitigate any general criticisms of qualitative research such as that “anything goes” (ibid., p. 78). They posit that a clear and proactive approach to identifying themes from qualitative data is essential so that identification of ‘emerging themes’ does not run the risk of being construed as a passive endeavour, one which denies the active (non-neutral) role of the

researcher in identifying themes and choosing which to further analyse and report on. This argument aligns well with a constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm as to believe that themes ‘reside in’ in the data, or are simply waiting to be ‘discovered’, denies the interpretive role of the researcher as well as the context within which the research is carried out.

Figure 4.2 takes us through the typical TA process. Although presented visually as linear, it is in fact a cyclical approach (Merriam, 2009) as previously mentioned. In Section 4.5 I have already described familiarising myself with and transcribing the data as per phase one. Further below I describe my coding process, searching for themes and refining these as per phases two to five of the TA process.

Figure 4.2: Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

(Source: Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) describe TA as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (which) minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail”. Effectively it is a search for ‘common threads’ of ideas or themes across an interview or set of interviews (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and thus is a “purely qualitative, detailed, and nuanced account of data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, cited *ibid.*, p. 400). Thus, a theme “captures something important about data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within

the data set” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In other words, the researcher is attempting to tell a story about the data which relates to the research question or questions (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Clarke and Braun’s (2018, p. 107) more recent writings on TA advocate strongly that this is a “fully qualitative” approach that is:

“underpinned by a distinctly qualitative research philosophy that emphasises, for example, researcher subjectivity as a resource (rather than a problem to be managed), the importance of reflexivity and the situated and contextual nature of meaning. Kidder and Fine (1987) dubbed this orientation ‘Big Q’ qualitative – qualitative research conducted within a qualitative paradigm.”

Braun and Clarke (2020, p. 2) now refer to this approach as *reflexive* TA (see Braun and Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2019; Terry and Hayfield, 2020) which “emphasises the importance of the researcher’s subjectivity as analytic resource, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation”.

TA is a process which involves comparing pieces of coded data in an effort to ‘induce’ themes and sub-themes that can tell us something important about participants’ experiences. As with any qualitative data analysis approach, thematic analysis is an iterative, rather than a linear, process involving coding, writing, theorising and reading and which starts early on during the data collection process i.e. data collection and analysis are concurrent processes (Attride-Stirling, 2016). The qualitative and mixed methods data analysis software tool, MAXQDA⁴⁵, was hugely helpful to me for keeping my data organised as it enabled me to store, code and organise my data as I progressed through my fieldwork. This process necessitated many hours of both listening and re-listening to interviews and reading and re-reading transcripts to understand, not just descriptions and activities, but also emotions, feelings and behaviours of the participants. It also allowed me to more easily compare pieces of data that I judged to belong to a particular theme to get to the common feature of that theme (ibid.).

4.6.2 Data coding

Coding of data is a critical step in the thematic analysis process. It is described as a:

⁴⁵ <https://www.maxqda.com/>

“process of organizing the material into “chunks” before bringing meaning to those “chunks” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 171). It involves taking text data or pictures, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labelling those categories with a term, often a term based in the actual language of the participant.” (Creswell, 2003, p. 92)

While some writers recommend a focused approach to coding data in thematic analysis and thus only coding according to the “object of analysis” (Attride-Stirling, 2016, p. 393), others recommend a more open, inductive approach (Creswell, 2003; Saldaña, 2013). As my research was exploratory and as I did not have preconceived concepts or ideas that I was seeking out in my data, my approach to coding and theme development was thus very much an open one or an “organic” one “with quality coding resulting from depth of engagement” (‘Big Q TA’)” (Clarke and Braun, 2018, p. 108; Braun and Clarke, 2020). It required time, headspace and data immersion to gain greater insight into the data as coding is “neither a quick nor an easy process. Time and space (with the data) help develop the nuanced analyses that reflexive TA can deliver, producing rich, complex, non-obvious themes that could never have been anticipated in advance of analysis” (Braun and Clarke, 2020, p. 5). This inductive analysis of data means that concepts or hypotheses emerge from the “bottom-up” rather than being pre-set or driven by theory (Bodgan and Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 2009) and ultimately means that the findings themes within my research are data-driven (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Bodgan and Biklen (1992) suggest developing coding categories early on by jotting down notes on potential categories as you go through your initial data. This was a practice I engaged in initially as I listened back to my interviews and also as part also of my field notes and analytic memos (see Section 4.6.2.1). As my approach to interviews had been relatively open and exploratory, I applied both open and simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2013) initially to my data as I was not searching for pre-assigned constructs, concepts or theories, and thus tried to remain open to “all possible theoretical directions indicated by (my) readings of the data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 100). Open coding is a process of breaking the data into segments of text, assigning it to categories and analysing it, so that key themes may ultimately be identified (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). This initial stage often has a more descriptive focus to coding. Simultaneous coding refers to “the

application of two or more different codes to a single qualitative datum” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 80) which may result when a data segment’s content suggests multiple meanings – potentially being both descriptive and inferential with regard to its meaning (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This approach was valuable from an exploratory perspective as it allowed me to reflect deeply on the data and to consider it from multiple perspectives as I progressed through the coding process, as well as to remain open to new ideas that occurred to me over time, thus allowing me to take a data-driven, rather than a theory-driven approach to coding. While Saldaña (2013) offers the view that simultaneous coding can suggest indecisiveness on the part of the researcher and a lack of clear purpose, my goal was to immerse myself in the interview texts and to interpret different aspects of the data for myself, acknowledging that different parts of the data could have multiple meanings and be interpreted in different ways. From this perspective, I was looking and listening for, not just descriptions, but also processes, emotions, values, and personal meanings and understandings within the data and thus this warranted an open, simultaneous approach. My approach could also be described as akin to “eclectic coding”, deemed appropriate as “an initial, exploratory technique with qualitative data; when a variety of processes or phenomena are to be discerned from the data; or when combined First Cycle coding methods will serve the research study’s questions and goals” (ibid., p. 189).

I started the coding process when my first three interviews were completed. I undertook the initial stage of open coding by reading carefully through each transcript line by line, annotating and highlighting key phrases or sentences that seemed important or relevant. I assigned codes to these pieces of text, depending on its features. In the example in Figure 4.3, in exploring how one participant came to teach on the MSAC in their institution, the response illustrated that they had good support from their academic department (assigned a code “support from academic department”) and also was a point in the text that referenced the fact that they had been a mature student (assigned a code “teacher as mature student”). Another example from that interview related to how that participant felt about teaching on the MSAC in the early days to which I assigned initial codes that captured both the extent of the participant’s experience of teaching prior to the MSAC (“beginning teacher”) and their feelings about

teaching (“feeling nervous”). I kept this phase of coding very open and did not concern myself too much about how a code should be worded for succinctness and without deciding at this early stage whether or not it may ultimately be important to my final data analysis. What was more important was intuiting for myself what might be relevant within any particular piece of the data, how the code may describe what the data was about or how it may describe or capture what I was interpreting within the data.

Figure 4.3: Examples of open and simultaneous coding

L: They were very encouraging of anything that I did. Any time I stood up and I was always seemed to be picked to say something. If, you know, I was the one they’d ask, you know, to make some, to make comments. And I was often the student that initiated the discussion in the class.

Support from academic
department
Teacher as mature student

R: Yeah, yeah. Oh, my God. Totally different environment. But we’ll get to that anyway. Okay. Okay. Okay. And can you remember what the first semester was like teaching on the Mature Student Access course?

L: I was absolutely terrified.

Beginning teacher
Feeling nervous

I completed this early coding phase on Word documents for the first three transcripts - the extract above shows the sections of text on the left and the associated early codes on the right. I developed an initial list of 183 non-categorised open codes from the first three interviews (see Appendix G) and applied this to subsequent transcripts. While valuable in ensuring that I remained close to my data, and helpful in my initial exploration of the data, I already felt that by coding all interview transcripts in this manual way it would make refining codes and data analysis quite challenging. I decided to use the data analysis software tool, MAXQDA, (referenced in Section 4.6.1.) to store my data and to help me to organise and code it more efficiently and flexibly. An advantage of using MAXQDA, rather than the more traditional approach of paper and highlighter, was that it allowed me to upload my anonymised transcripts and to engage in the coding and data categorising process in one place (as well as being more environmentally friendly!)

Figure 4.4: Transcript documents in MAXQDA with total number of coded segments

Documents	1078
HEI-A interviews	568
Chris	99
Jody	97
Alex	94
Charlie	108
Rowan	170
HEI-B interviews	510
Sydney	115
Sam	120
Bailey	124
Leslie	151

MAXQDA was also very helpful for undertaking simultaneous coding (see Figure 4.5) as well as for refining codes as I progressed through my analysis, as changes that I made to codes or code names were automatically applied by the software across all transcripts. It facilitated easy merging of codes into one another, easy access to coded text and viewing relevant extracts from one or more transcripts by highlighting just one code or set of codes at time etc.

Figure 4.5: Extract from transcript showing simultaneous coding

..Familiarising with m ..Part of MSAC team/	40	R: Mm hmm. Yeah, like, I think so, thinking back on it. Again, I remember those first couple of physics lectures. And again, not to get too technical but yeah, just in terms of the level that I went in teaching it at and the pace and all that I felt, I felt I had that from the go ... Yeah, like I said similar, similar to just the informality of it I think, the coffees and the meetings, I think that, that creates a nice atmosphere of, I can go to people if I'm having trouble or yeah.
..Part of MSAC team/	41	I: Yeah. Okay. Okay. And is that, is that important for you as a teacher, that you have that connection to other colleagues, or, you know, even to myself, or, you know, doesn't have to be myself as course coordinator, if it was somebody else, you know?
..MS circumstances/e	42	R: Yeah, like, I think on a day-to-day level, but also I think teaching vulnerable students it's good to know that you can immediately check in with somebody either above you or like, just one of the tutors. Yeah.
..Managing studen ..Tailoring to needs Empathy, awarene:	43	I: Yeah. Okay. Okay. Good stuff, that's true. Em, and ... like, you're, you're talking about vulnerable students there and, you know, you've alluded to the fact that you had challenging, maybe circumstances, yourself growing up and coming into college. And I'm not asking you to go into any detail at all now Sydney, you don't have say anything you're not comfortable with. But I'm just wondering, you know, given that you seem to pick up on that fairly early on, with regard to these students, was there anything in your own experiences as a student, anything in particular that I suppose shaped your approach then to teaching students on the access course?
	44	R: Ooh ... Yeah, like I think, like, I think it's even our last meeting with [Tutor 1], like the words that come up when we talk about the students are fear and anxiety. Both. Yeah, both, both from the, both from the things that I still have from growing up and also doing a very difficult science undergrad. Yeah, I think, I think that stood me really well. In terms of I think that's the main thing that I've developed as a teacher say outside of this going forward, is yeah, just meeting people where they're at. And understanding as a student that fear of, like, being asked something in a lecture, or being asked to derive something, and the lecturer stands there for 15 minutes and stares at the class while they derive something. Yeah, it's even experiences like that. But yeah, I think, God, yeah, I haven't really thought about it from that perspective. But say, yeah, like I was an access student, I got a scholarship into undergrad and then managed to get the grant. But even with the grant alone, I probably wouldn't have been able to stay. So even that stress of kind of ... knowing that you need to do well to stay and that you're kind of dependent on doing well and that level of vulnerability, I think would, probably why I connected with a lot of them as well.

Another advantage of using MAXQDA was that it facilitated easy extraction and collation of similarly coded segments for analysis, without impacting the master transcript. Figure 4.6 below shows an extract of segments coded as 'good rapport / more equal

relationship’ under a final primary code category of ‘relationship / connection with students’.

Figure 4.6: ‘Good rapport / more equal relationship’ code segments

Code: Relationship / connection with students > Good rapport / more equal rel 28 coded segments (from 8 documents, 2 document groups)

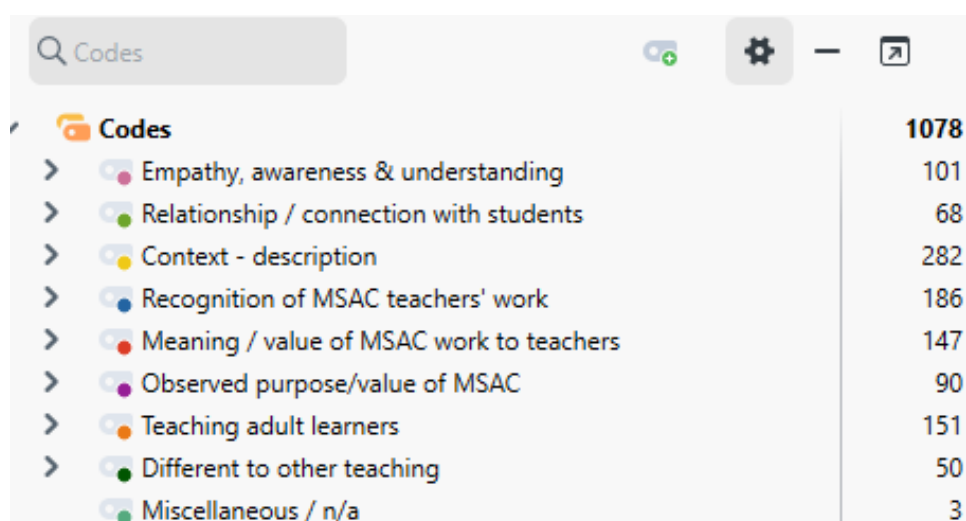
R: No, no, it's an interesting question actually, it is an interesting question. Because there, I mean, we could have the possibility that that might happen. I suppose I would love to have the same type of, you know, relaxed, as well, you know relaxed environment where people feel comfortable asking questions without feeling, yeah judged. I think most often that's the reason why people don't ask questions like, I don't want to be, I don't want people to think I'm stupid or this kind of thing. Yeah, yeah. I suppose that that is definitely the ... one of my, my goals if I ever, you know, I'm teaching live would be great. Yeah, I think I'd love it. I think it'd be even better to be honest. It was, it was very, you know, it felt limited. And especially, you know, it's nice to interact with the people that you interact with. But the people who struggle you just don't know. You just don't know so that's really where the limitations are.

Document ...	Docum...	Code	Begi...	End	Preview	Weight score	Created by	Area	Coverage %
HEI-A intervi...	Alex	Relations...	202	203	Cos many of them have superb di...	0	Rhona McCo...	1680	3.12
HEI-B intervi...	Sydney	Relations...	143	143	As regards auras, I think you hit th...	0	Rhona McCo...	325	0.57
HEI-A intervi...	Jody	Relations...	121	121	R: No, no, it's an interesting questi...	0	Rhona McCo...	942	2.11
HEI-B intervi...	Leslie	Relations...	105	105	And now I'm using the [LCM com...	0	Rhona McCo...	649	1.08
HEI-A intervi...	Rowan	Relations...	103	104	They have the best craic, d'you kn...	0	Rhona McCo...	93	0.14
HEI-A intervi...	Rowan	Relations...	102	102	I like the interaction with them ... I ...	0	Rhona McCo...	167	0.26
HEI-B intervi...	Leslie	Relations...	95	95	I mean, I had a man a few years ag...	0	Rhona McCo...	887	1.48
HEI-B intervi...	Sam	Relations...	84	84	I think the best teachers are peopl...	0	Rhona McCo...	480	0.79
HEI-A intervi...	Jody	Relations...	73	73	I really did. Yeah. It kind of, you kn...	0	Rhona McCo...	255	0.57
HEI-A intervi...	Chris	Relations...	70	72	Another strange thing that actual...	0	Rhona McCo...	583	1.28

As I progressed with coding, where I identified a new idea or concept potentially worth exploring in a subsequent transcript, I assigned a new code to that piece of data and worked back over previously coded transcripts to see if similar data might also be found there. I also started organising my codes into code categories which were groups of codes that reflected similar ideas or concepts. This process also helped me to start reflecting on possible themes that I could identify from my data. This resulted in an interim list of 242 open codes grouped into potential 23 code categories (see Appendix H). However, as I became more immersed in and familiar with the data, and more confident in the coding process, I realised that working with a list of 242 codes across 23 code categories was unmanageable. As I started to more clearly interpret what was important in my data with respect to my participants’ experiences, I merged codes that overlapped in meaning. For example, codes 59 to 63 in Appendix H became ‘positive student feedback’ under the category ‘Recognition of MSAC teachers’ work’ in my final code system (see Appendix I). I also refined many codes to more succinct words or phrases which, for me, captured the essence of the meaning of a piece of data. For example, “awareness of course before started teaching on it” became “prior awareness of MSAC” and identifying and collating data associated with this code informed data analysis under one of my final themes, *Teaching below the radar*.

It is important to state that developing a final code list and code categories (or families) was not a linear process, nor was it a case of simply ‘collapsing’ similar codes into stand-alone discrete codes as many pieces of data intersected across each other. In hindsight, I would say that my initial approach to coding my data was *too* open, however this approach ensured that I stayed immersed in my data, helping me to constantly reflect on what was important therein. This assisted me in bringing coherence to the process until sufficient data had been gathered to enable me to generate meaningful codes, and ultimately identify important themes, patterns and categories. In the end developing my final code system was a lengthy process, was highly iterative and was ongoing while I was also engaging with exploring thematic mapping as per phases three and four of the TA process (and which I address further in Section 4.6.3).

Figure 4.7: Code families in MAXQDA



The screenshot shows the MAXQDA interface with a search bar at the top labeled 'Codes'. Below it, a list of code families is displayed, each with a colored circular icon and a frequency count. The total count for all families is 1078.

Code Family	Frequency
Empathy, awareness & understanding	101
Relationship / connection with students	68
Context - description	282
Recognition of MSAC teachers' work	186
Meaning / value of MSAC work to teachers	147
Observed purpose/value of MSAC	90
Teaching adult learners	151
Different to other teaching	50
Miscellaneous / n/a	3
Total	1078

My final set of colour-coded nine ‘code families’ within MAXQDA is shown in Figure 4.7, while the final code system of 72 codes across these families, and which was applied to each of my transcripts in MAXQDA, is given in Appendix I. It also shows the frequency with which these codes appear across the full dataset.

4.6.2.1 Field texts and analytic memos

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) describe field texts as descriptive and reflective notes taken by the researcher on all aspects of the research process. The use of field texts is advocated for their contribution towards researcher reflexivity (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000) as a practice which allows the researcher to occasionally 'step out' of the research in order to take a more 'objective' view of the data and the research experience, and for the researcher to maintain awareness of how they may be influenced by the data. In other words, field notes can help to limit, rather than to completely eliminate, researcher bias. While I had been keeping a reflective diary from the commencement of my doctorate, the practice of writing field notes was a critical one for me particularly from the point at which I commenced my interviews, as I found that this practice helped me to maintain an open and honest conversation with myself about my positioning within the research, as well as offering me an opportunity to start teasing through analytic ideas and concepts that were coming to mind as I progressed through the interviews (Creswell, 2003).

The concept of 'analytic memo-ing' is also given to this practice (Creswell, 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 2008) and I found that at times I wrote reflectively on my own thoughts and feelings about my conversations with participants, while at other times I tried out ideas and concepts in a reflective written form, choosing one or two key things from an idea on which to reflect and make sense of. I chose to keep all of these writings in one file rather than separately as, for me, all writings and notes during this process – whether analytic, or reflective or both – were helping me to 'dance' with the data, to deep dive and then hover above, to try to both see and feel, through the written word, what I was slowly, over time, interpreting from these conversations. (I have included an example of my own field texts in Appendix M). The use of field notes and analytic memos is also seen as a key part of the thematic analysis process (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992) as these allow the researcher to start 'testing out' potential themes they are interpreting from the data, even at a very early stage. Given that qualitative research is considered to involve a degree of intuition (Krauss, 2005; Streb, 2012), writing field notes and analytic memos help to ensure that I captured thoughts, however fleeting, at the time they occurred to me. The value of field notes is also relevant with respect to the

trustworthiness of my study by offering auditable evidence of the process I undertook with respect to reflecting on and analysing my data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

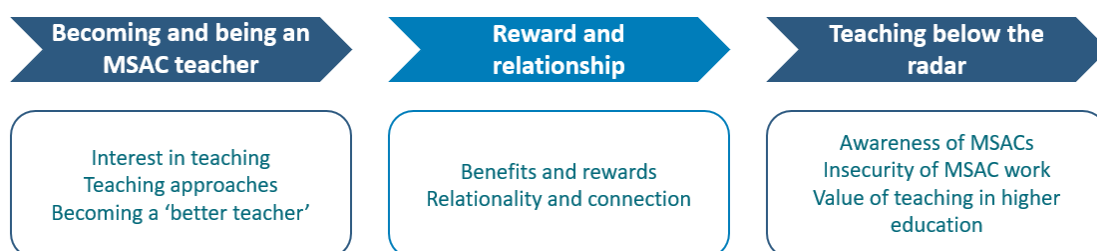
4.6.3 Finalising themes

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82) suggest that an important question to address in terms of coding is: what counts as a pattern/theme, or what 'size' does a theme need to be? This is a question of prevalence, in terms both of space within each data item and of prevalence across the entire data set". However, this prevalence does not equate directly to either frequency or size within data sets. The relevance of a theme that is given prevalence by the researcher may be a function of the researcher's own interpretation, judgement and decision-making about what themes to address which are emerging from the data, again in keeping with an interpretivist paradigm, while "the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (ibid.). It can be determined by "patterns of shared meaning, united by a central-concept or idea ... We like to think of themes as stories – stories we tell about our data" (Braun and Clarke, 2020, p. 14).

It is advocated that drawing thematic maps is helpful in phases three to five of the TA process as a way of visually presenting codes, themes (even tentative) and the relationships between these (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I tried out different ways of categorising codes and developing thematic maps, before I had finished my coding process and creating my final code system. A traditional approach to developing a tentative thematic map early on involved manually printing and cutting out codes on separate pieces of paper and assembling these under possible themes, shown in Appendix K. I also tried a more technical approach using a graphics tool in MAXQDA to create a 'map' or network of different codes and code categories, as my coding evolved, drawing also on specific quotations within the text to support a visual construction of a potential thematic diagram, as demonstrated in Appendix J. This part of the TA process was an important step for me in creating initial links between codes and code categories and to start inductively identifying potential themes from my data. Appendices J and K

show that some of my early inductive themes included ‘Marginal work’, ‘Professional Identity’, ‘In between’ culture’, and ‘Adult education culture and values’. These also showed that the core concept of ‘relationship’ was potentially going to be highly relevant to my data analysis. A later thematic map (Appendix L) shows that I was getting closer to what would be my final themes. My core focus in this draft map centres around ‘The value of access teaching in HE’, while three main themes are evolving as ‘Becoming and being a teacher’, ‘Adult education ethos’ and ‘Teaching below the radar’. The map also shows the key areas of findings for discussion that I felt were related to that theme. I found this iterative process useful in enabling me to start the deeper process of reflection on and interpretation of my data, helping me to identify underlying patterns, ultimately to be analysed and interpreted using my conceptual framework. Creswell (2003, p. 193) recommends that “themes are the ones that appear as major findings in qualitative studies and are stated under separate headings in the findings sections of studies. They should display multiple perspectives from individuals and be supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence.” Thus, in chapters five to seven of this thesis I present my research findings under three final macro themes, developed after many iterations and much reflection, and which are summarised in Figure 4.8.

Figure 4.8: Summary of macro themes



The themes effectively map the professional and emotional landscapes that my participants journey through from initially becoming involved in teaching on an MSAC, to full engagement in a highly relational educational endeavour, to the view beyond the classroom which, for some participants, is shrouded in an absence of connection. The findings chapters reflect phases five and six of the thematic analysis process - defining and naming themes and producing the report - which is followed through into Chapter

Eight, where I discuss the relevance of my findings, drawing on the different elements of my conceptual framework to do so.

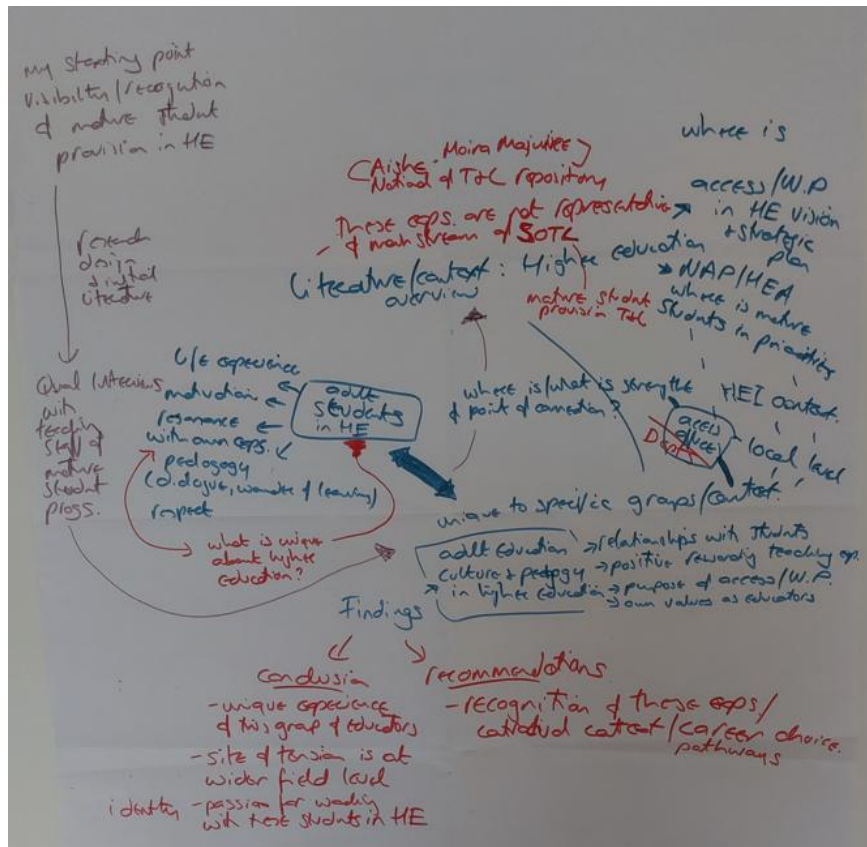
4.6.4 Connecting data to theory

It is common in research that a researcher's theoretical framework informs their research design, data collection and analysis, and thus is often formed before a research project commences (Ravitch et al., 2016). However, in thematic analysis it is recommended that a review of literature in the early stages of the research process is kept to a minimum, in order to allow the researcher to remain as open as possible to interpretation of the data, to allow themes to evolve inductively, and thus to minimise the possibility of researcher bias or influence with regard to what they are looking for (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is the approach I adopted, opting to complete the bulk of my literature review and exploration of theories and concepts which could inform development of my conceptual framework (explained in detail in Chapter Three), *after* I had completed my fieldwork and initial data coding. I maintained an inductive approach to this part of the process, working with my research supervisor to map a possible way forward with my thesis by identifying and exploring possible theories and concepts which could potentially support my data analysis. Figure 4.9 demonstrates an early exploration of some of the key concepts and variables that were emerging from my data (e.g. adult students in higher education; adult education culture and pedagogy; the visibility of mature student provision in higher education) and possible sources of literature (e.g. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; higher education; equity of access literature).

I identified 'relationship' as being a core feature that featured across all aspects of my participants' experiences and perspectives and that led me to consider how the relation between MSAC teacher and mature student, within these teaching contexts, compared with that of the relation / connection between MSAC teacher and the wider institution. This prompted me to explore literature on relationality in education in general (e.g. hooks, 2010) and the relational aspects of higher education pedagogy (e.g. Felten and Lambert, 2020) which in turn led me to relational pedagogy (e.g. Bingham and Sidorkin,

2004; Gravett, 2023), considering how it might apply in the context of teaching adult learners for the purposes of equity of access in a higher education setting.

Figure 4.9: Starting to connect data to theory and literature



These considerations of literature also led me to explore elements of adult education theory such as andragogy (Knowles et al., 2015) which was connected to related experiences of reward in teaching, and elements of recognition theory such as self-esteem (Honneth, 1995) and misrecognition (Fraser, 2000) which were connected to issues I identified in the data around visibility of this work and of the teachers themselves in higher education. I explored these latter concepts also as a way of illuminating the power flows that occur in terms of recognition specifically as they relate to social status in the higher education field, rather than as they relate to identity and I was able to apply them at a more micro level with respect to my participants' experiences. I also considered drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) work on recognition and on power struggles in a field between different forms of capital. However, I felt that his theory applied better at a more macro level, and would not have enabled me to bring the relational aspect of these educators to the fore. In addition, one of the tentative

themes that I had identified in the early stages was ‘adult educator identity and values’, for which I carried out some initial exploration of theories of professional identity development (Trede et al., 2012). However, this did not ultimately emerge as being one of the key themes or concepts within my research and therefore this concept is not included in my final conceptual framework.

Therefore, the ideas and concepts that supported my final analysis and discussion, and which made up my conceptual framework (see Figure 3.1 in the previous chapter) was drawn from a range of theorists. Ultimately as outlined above, by developing my conceptual framework simultaneously with adopting an inductive approach to data analysis, I found that theories and concepts with a relational and pedagogical focus resonated with me when analysing participants’ experiences and supported my interpretation of these experiences.

4.7 Ethical considerations

4.7.1 Reflexivity

Ethical issues need to be carefully addressed in any research study and particularly when carrying out research with human participants. Such issues include those of power and participant vulnerability, and reflexivity is therefore considered to be an integral element of any ethically-conducted qualitative research study (Flick, 2009). Reflexivity is defined as a:

tool whereby we can include our “selves” at any stage, making transparent the values and beliefs we hold that almost certainly influence the research process and its outcomes...so that our work can be understood, not only in terms of *what* we have discovered, but *how* we have discovered it. (Etherington, 2007, p. 601)

In effect, reflexivity involved adding another, more complex, layer to the reflective element of my research in that it required me to continually consider how my own personal perspective and experiences were influencing the data collection, my interaction with participants and my interpretation of the data. Using the subjective voice (“I”) throughout, rather than the objective or passive voice, is one way in which reflexivity can be achieved (Etherington, 2007) as is providing insight into how the knowledge is produced through the research process (Kirpitchenko and Voloder, 2014).

To this end, I have described in as much detail as possible in this chapter, the research process I have undertaken and, where relevant, my own reflective thoughts on the process and on my interactions with my participants.

Reflexivity in my own research context required me to be highly cognisant of my professional position throughout the process and the impact that this may have had on my interaction with my participants, as researcher. As course director of an MSAC for example, I worked closely with some of my research participants, with line management responsibility for some, at least up to the time my fieldwork was carried out. This meant that I was in an indisputable position of power whereby colleagues may have perceived that they were obliged to participate in my research or to respond in a way that aligned with my expectations. I was also mindful of my privileged position as a full-time, tenured employee, along with being financially supported by my employer to undertake this doctoral programme, which was vastly different to that of many of my participants who were either full-time PhD students or part-time or 'casual' staff. While the issue of power arises for all researchers regardless of whether or not they know their participants - as Salmons (2010, p. 55) suggests: "the question ... is not whether the researcher has power - but how this power is used" - as a manager, being cognisant of the power dynamics and potential power imbalances was a critical element of my ethical approach (addressed further below) right throughout this research process. In this respect, one of the dilemmas I faced was in issuing invitations to colleagues in my own institution to participate in my research. While I had direct access to potential participants, I set myself at a 'remove' from this part of the process by requesting my own line manager, who was not well known to my teaching colleagues, to issue the invitations on my behalf. I was also careful not to discuss my intended topic of research with any of my MSAC teaching colleagues prior to the invitations being issued.

Etherington also suggests that reflexivity, if carried out with integrity, can bring to light power relations between researcher and participants. As I observed above, this element of power is inherent in my role as researcher, whether I am working with people I know or not, as I ultimately 'own' this research. It was important therefore that I alleviated the potential challenges of 'power differentials' as much as possible, and particularly

with respect to participants with whom I worked or for whom I had direct line management responsibility. As already stated, I ensured not to approach any of my potential participants directly with regard to participating in my research. In addition, by taking an exploratory approach from the outset and by inviting my research participants to lead the direction of the research through 'naming' their own experiences in response to open and general questioning, rather than using more directive questioning, I did not impose my own assumptions or expectations on what my participants' experiences might be. It was important that my participants had the agency to decide to participate, to decide what they wanted to share and how they wished to frame their own experiences of their work. By keeping my research questioning open and exploratory and being guided by my participants' responses, along with acknowledging and recognising that I was not a teacher myself, was therefore a way in which I felt that some of the potential challenges of the power dynamics in the research relationship could be mitigated.

By also presenting my own positioning within this research, as I have done in Chapter One and as I address it in the following section, my interest in this topic from a professional standpoint, and how my values and beliefs may have influenced my interpretation of the research findings, I have aimed to name the imbalance of power, perceived or actual, that exists between myself and my research participants. Taking a reflexive approach as part of "the intentional and systematic inquiry into one's own practice" (Dinkelman, 2003, p. 8) is essential in practitioner-based research. This is the philosophy which underpins the DHAE programme, the ultimate aim of which is to foster transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) within a democratic engagement with peers, colleagues and research participants.

4.7.2 Insider and outsider

Researchers may be positioned as either 'insiders' or 'outsiders' in relation to their participants (Bridges, 2001; Toy-Cronin, 2018). However, it is not always easy to delineate this positioning with respect to a research group and researchers may therefore simultaneously occupy both positions with respect to their research, shifting

along a continuum, acknowledging the “complexity, fluidity and multidimensional nature of positioning relative to participants” (Toy-Cronin, 2018, p. 466). Of note, Razavi (1992, cited in Bridges, 2001, p. 372) contends that simply “by virtue of being a researcher, one is rarely a complete insider anywhere”. Insider-research occurs “where the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting” (Rooney, 2005, p. 6, cited in Hardiman, 2012, p. 74). It is also defined as “those who choose to study a group to which they belong” (Unluer, 2012, p. 1) or those who use their own workplaces as research settings (Toy-Cronin, 2018). With respect to my own research, I could therefore be considered to be an insider-researcher to the extent that I undertook some of my fieldwork in my own workplace. Some of the advantages of insider research in this regard are identified as having a greater familiarity with and understanding of organisational culture, having a more natural flow of social interaction with participants and knowing how best to approach people (Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002; Mercer, 2007). For me certainly, there were advantages to “insiderness” from the point of view that I had reasonably ready ‘access’ to participants and because I had already developed a positive rapport with some of my potential participants through my day-to-day work. However, Mercer describes conducting insider research as “wielding a double-edged sword” (ibid., p. 7) in that these advantages can be counterbalanced on the other side by potential myopia, not asking the ‘hard questions’, and having pre-conceived ideas, ingrained assumptions and biases.

Bodgan and Biklen (1992, p. 61) suggest that ‘novice’ researchers, in particular, should not carry out research in their own setting due to the significant challenge of transitioning from “your old self to your researcher self” while Costley et al. (2010, p. 6) invite us to consider that a “lack of impartiality (and) a vested interest in certain results being achieved” may negatively influence researching within one’s own work setting or result in “unconsciously making wrong assumptions about the research process” (Unluer, 2012, p. 1). There are also potentially greater challenges with maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, both during and after research, as well as issues of power to consider. Smyth and Holian (2008, p. 39) suggest that:

“to conduct credible research-from-within involves an explicit awareness of the possible effects of perceived bias on data collection and analysis, as well as ethical issues related

to the anonymity of the organisation and individual participants. It also involves the influence of the researcher's organisational role on coercion, compliance and access to privileged information. These issues need to be considered and addressed at each and every stage of the research."

In the previous section, I have already addressed how I aimed to ensure that participants did not feel obliged to participate in my research as a result of my professional position. I was also cognisant of sensitivities around the issues of confidentiality and anonymity in researching within my own workplace as one of my core reasons for undertaking this research was to engage in praxis. This is defined by Higgs et al. (2009, p. 4) as "a form of practice that is ethically informed, committed, and guided by critical reflection of practice traditions and one's own practice". My professional role at the time of embarking on this research ultimately "influenced my choice of research topic, the scope of my study, access to informants, the collection and analysis of data, and the maintenance of research rigor" (Breen, 2007, p. 165). In order to engage in praxis, I needed to explore my work setting through the eyes, ears and voices of those with whom I work, as well as through my own. This was a significant part of my decision to undertake a doctoral programme. The nature of doctoral programmes, which are frequently engaged in on a part-time basis while the researcher is working, is such that often doctoral students carry out research within their own workplace, resulting in an increase in "the amount of small-scale practitioner research in education" (Mercer, 2007, p. 2). Insider-research is therefore an inevitable aspect of engaging in a professional doctorate programme. I hope that by engaging in reflexivity throughout my research I have mitigated the challenges associated with asymmetrical power relations within this process, as much as possible.

However, reflecting on my positioning as researcher within the 'insider-outsider continuum' (Eppley, 2006, cited in Kirpitchenko and Voloder, 2014, p. 5), other than the connection to my own workplace, I am also clearly an 'outsider' with respect to my research. I am not, and have never been, a teacher and therefore cannot claim to share or understand the experiences of teachers in the classroom i.e. I am not a member of that 'social group'. My role also changed during the course of my research, which resulted in me moving into a more senior leadership position in my professional area

and this put me even more firmly into an 'outsider' position within my research, particularly within my own workplace. Being an outsider can have advantages of bringing a fresh perspective to a research exploration or topic, and lessening potential biases that familiarity with participants' experiences might bring, however also may have challenges with regard to gaining access to participants and building trust (Bridges, 2001). Fortunately, these latter challenges were not something I felt that I experienced, other than the access challenges that Covid presented with regard to connecting with participants.

My outsider researcher status, as well as my insider-outsider professional status, forced me to reflect deeply on the appropriateness of carrying out research on others' experiences and especially within my own workplace given the asymmetrical power relationships involved. I could not assume that participants thought the same way that I did, nor that they would not feel some pressure, even subconsciously, to respond to my questions in a certain way. It was based on this reflection, and advice from my research supervisor, that I kept my research questions and approach quite open in order to allow my participants' own thoughts, opinions and experiences to emerge from the research. For example, even though I knew that most of my potential participants were not full-time, tenured employees, and may have expected that their working conditions impacted negatively on aspects of their teaching experiences as has been reported elsewhere (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019), I did not ask direct questions about my participants' contractual statuses or about how they felt about their working conditions. Such a line of questioning may have been triggering for some participants, and/or participants may have felt that they could not be honest in their responses, particularly given my own professional position. Therefore, I sought to overcome these potential challenges and biases by keeping my exploration open, by adopting a relational engagement with my participants and by taking a reflexive approach throughout the process. My aim was that my research philosophy would remain congruent with the kind of research I wanted to undertake as part of this learning journey. Merton (1972, cited in Kirpitchenko and Voloder, 2014, p. 5) suggests that "neither 'insiders' nor 'outsiders' have privileged access to more valid knowledge about a group, but rather that different positions produce different kinds of knowledge and that neither can be said to occupy a

higher status in terms of ‘objectivity’, ‘subjectivity’ or ‘authenticity’.” This understanding aligns with my epistemological and ontological view that there is no single knowledge ‘truth’ out there with respect to experience, but rather that such knowledge is understood, created and interpreted in a relational encounter between myself and my participants, regardless of my insider and/or outsider researcher status.

4.7.3 Ethics protocol

Etherington (2007) addresses the issue of conducting ethical research particularly where relationships with research participants already exist. She highlights the centrality of key concepts such as: informed consent – “the right to information concerning the purposes, processes and outcomes of the study” (p. 601); autonomy – offering participants the right to withdraw at any stage of the research; and confidentiality – protecting the right to privacy of participants and offering a promise of not doing any harm. Therefore, adhering to Maynooth University’s Ethics Research Policy⁴⁶, my ethics protocol included the use of information sheets and consent forms to inform my participants on the objectives and purpose of the research (see Appendices B, C and D). Within these, my participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the research process at any stage, up to finalisation of the research findings and were assured of confidentiality, within the limits to which this was possible to guarantee. Participants’ anonymity is also protected by my use of pseudonyms in the presentation of these research findings as well as by generalising participants’ overall profiles.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a detailed account of my research design which is underpinned by my alignment with a constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm. I carried out this research as an exploratory case study, engaging in one-to-one interviews with nine participants. The decision to carry out a qualitative study was influenced by the overall aim of my research which was to gain an understanding of the lived

⁴⁶ Available:

<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document//Maynooth%20University%20%20Research%20Ethics%20Policy%20%28Updated%20March%202020%29.pdf>

experiences of MSAC teachers in higher education. The study has yielded rich data which are presented in the following three chapters.

I have also presented ethical considerations and acknowledged my own positionality within this research. Limitations of this research are articulated in Section 9.4, in my concluding chapter. Ultimately, I believe that my research paradigm and approach mirror the conceptual framework which scaffolds this research with relationality at its core, and also mirror the core elements of my research findings.

Chapter Five: Becoming and being an MSAC teacher

“This is ‘seat of the pants stuff’ with mature students; you have to know what you are talking about because they will challenge you, they have every right to challenge you.” (Leslie)

5.1 Introduction

In chapter two I outlined that foundation and access courses are informed by national and institutional access policy and are underpinned by strong social justice and inclusion agendas. Such courses are designed to offer a foundational level of academic knowledge and skill, as well as socio-cultural support, to ‘non-traditional’ students to support their successful progression to third-level education (Murphy, 2009; Leech et al., 2016; O’Sullivan et al., 2019). The value to students of participating in these courses has been reported to arise not just from the learning capacities they develop through their engagement in academic activities, but also from the socio-cultural ‘capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) students accumulate by getting the opportunity to ‘demystify’ higher education and to build their learning capacities and support networks before progressing to undergraduate studies (Busher et al., 2015b). Access and foundation course teachers have a critical role to play in supporting these students and therefore it is relevant to consider who teaches on these courses, what their motivations are for doing so and the approaches they take to fulfilling these course objectives and priorities.

This chapter presents findings and analysis under the theme of ‘Becoming and being an MSAC teacher’. This theme explores my participants’ interest in teaching and specifically how and why they became involved in teaching on a mature student access course in their HEI. The theme also explores participants’ descriptions of their teaching approaches in the MSAC classroom, and the findings suggest how the pedagogical practices employed by participants align with those of adult education more generally.

5.2 Participants’ interest in teaching

An overall profile of the teachers who participated in this research has already been presented in Chapter Four. However, it is useful to remind ourselves here of who my participants are and what they teach. The participants in this research teach a range of

subjects on the mature student access courses including economics, maths, science, information technology (IT), study skills, English literature and philosophy. The length of time participants had been teaching on an MSAC ranged from one year to eleven years at the time the interviews were carried out. All participants had qualified with a minimum of either an undergraduate degree or postgraduate qualification in their discipline by the time they started teaching on an MSAC. Three participants were in the process of studying for a PhD, while three others had already completed their PhD studies at the time of the research interview.

All names of participants below are pseudonyms, and the names of the higher education institutions are anonymised.

5.2.1 Teaching experience prior to the MSAC

The majority of the participants had undertaken some teaching in their HEI before starting to teach on an MSAC and for many, this teaching experience had been gained through teaching tutorials or labs on undergraduate courses as PhD students. For example, both Chris and Jody were PhD students and had already done some undergraduate teaching in their HEI.

“...I had, at that point, like, some teaching experience because I taught tutorials, I’d done a bit of lecturing on my subject...” (Chris)

“...I started out in my first year PhD doing demonstrations in undergraduate labs...” (Jody)

Charlie was also “used to teaching undergraduate students” by the time he started teaching on the MSAC and likewise Sydney had taught on undergraduate courses before she started teaching on the MSAC in her HEI.

“I’d done a lot of TA’ing [Teaching Assistant], so labs and tutorials for Physics and Chemistry, I would have been brought into both of those.” (Sydney)

For some participants, their prior experience of teaching had been in settings other than in tertiary education. For example, both Sam and Rowan were qualified second-level teachers and had taught in secondary schools.

"I taught in a DEIS school, secondary school for a number of years after I qualified as a secondary school teacher." (Sam)

"Yeah, em, I had, through my education diploma, had worked in schools, I'd been teaching. My subjects for education were actually German and IT. Because I had done a degree in German. ... And I had taught German in secondary schools." (Rowan)

Other participants such as Alex and Bailey had prior experience of teaching adult learners on community-based adult education programmes, or on part-time courses in higher education. Alex suggested that he seemed to gravitate towards roles in which "if there was any potential for teaching in it, I'd normally, I'd find it, whatever I was doing" with the result that:

"I've done all sorts of teaching over those intervening years ... that 30 plus year span included a lot of teaching, training, adult education, all sorts of stuff like that." (Alex)

"It also gave me an awful lot of experience working with adults. Because the [name of programme], I did two [name of programme], they were all adults. A lot of the language teaching was adults ... So it was terrific experience really dealing with adults." (Bailey)

Therefore, participants had varying degrees of teaching experience before starting to teach on the MSAC. Only three participants had experience of teaching adult learners in various contexts. Given that the MSACs in this study are wholly located and delivered in higher education, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the participants had been PhD students or had recently completed a PhD in their HEI when they started teaching on the MSAC, as this would have positioned them to become aware of the MSAC teaching opportunity when it arose.

5.2.2 Motivations to teach

Participants expressed a range of motivations for taking up teaching roles and responsibilities, whether that was on the MSAC or on other courses in their HEI, or elsewhere. Unsurprisingly perhaps for some of the PhD students engagement in teaching duties was a requirement as part of their PhD research programme. For others, teaching in their HEI presented an opportunity to earn some money while they were a full-time research student. Teaching tutorials and labs on undergraduate programmes as a postgraduate research student is common practice in higher education in Ireland (Noonan, 2020) and further afield (Harland and Plangger, 2004) and is frequently an

obligatory element of a funded research student's postgraduate studies. For example, Chris' initial introduction to teaching in her HEI was a commitment as part of a Masters programme that she had been enrolled on:

"I got ... a scholarship and part of that was that I had to teach for two hours of tutorials per week." (Chris)

However, interestingly she shared that in her very first tutorial, although she felt "petrified" about standing up to teach

"I just walked in and like almost, this strange thing happened where ... this teacher personality, that'd clearly been suppressed for many years, emerged." (Chris)

Similarly, Sydney had been obliged to teach as part of her doctoral programme when she had been a PhD student:

"In [NAME of HEI] it's [teaching] more of a formal obligation as part of doing a PhD. So, once you're, once you're in the [NAME] or [NAME] department as a PhD student you get teaching hours assigned to you." (Sydney)

However, Sydney acknowledged that she had always had an interest in teaching as a career. She had included teaching as one of her CAO choices when she had been a Leaving Certificate student and explains that:

"I like explaining things to people. I was a debater and a public speaker for years. So maybe I like standing up in front of people and explaining things. So maybe that's it. (laughs) ... It's always been at the back of my mind." (Sydney)

Similarly other participants stated that they had long been interested in teaching as a career or that teaching was a role for which they felt they had a natural gravitation or attraction.

"I've always loved teaching ... I've done all sorts of teaching over those intervening years between falling out of college and coming back." (Alex)

"I had always had in my head for some reason that I would be suited to teaching. I remember admiring my primary school teachers particularly, quite a lot, a couple of them, one in particular. Even as a young kid, I remember considering that this might be a good job, you know?" (Sam)

"I always wanted to be a teacher, always, always." (Bailey)

"I like teaching, basically, I like being in front of a class and I have a, I seem to be good at working with people that are struggling in some way." (Chris)

On the other hand, Leslie was inspired to try teaching because she had encountered positive role models when she had been a mature student doing her degree.

“When I came back as a mature student I was interested in research. But having the experience of ... observing the way people taught on the evening degree, I thought “I could do that!” (Leslie)

Jody expressed a similar sentiment with respect to considering teaching as a career because of her own positive experience of teaching on the MSAC.

“It’s actually like a career path that I have never thought about before, you know, getting into teaching. I would love to stay in research ... But I am considering as well, a possibility, the possibility of having like a Plan B for a career in teaching ... I don’t think I would have had the opportunity [to teach] if I wasn’t doing my PhD.” (Jody)

What these findings show is that many of the participants in this study had already developed or expressed an interest in teaching either as a potential career choice or as a more general opportunity to gain work experience, and/or had had some form of teaching experience, before starting to teach on the MSAC in their HEI.

5.2.3 Getting involved with the MSAC

It was notable from our conversations that most of the participants hadn’t known about the MSAC in their HEI prior to becoming aware of the teaching opportunity on the course and this aspect of the findings will be addressed further in Chapter Seven. For most of my participants the MSAC teaching opportunity came to their attention from their PhD peers or other HEI colleagues. As these teaching posts are not full-time positions, but rather offer ‘teaching hours’ by subject, the Access Services that run the courses tend to recruit by word of mouth or with the help of their academic department contacts. As PhD students or graduates at the time of becoming involved with the MSAC, participants’ main connections within their HEI would have been with their own academic departments. Leslie had been encouraged to apply by the person in her department who taught the module before her, as had Bailey, and both had been PhD students, or were just finishing their PhDs, at the time. Likewise for Sydney:

“So it was [PhD student 1] who brought me in. [PhD student 1] was in my research group so she was the physics tutor before me.” (Sydney)

Sam hadn't thought that there was a way to teach adults in higher education "without going down the academia route" (i.e. without doing a PhD), suggestive of a commonly held assumption that any teaching role in higher education requires a PhD qualification. Jody was the only participant who had first-hand knowledge and experience of the MSAC in her HEI as she had completed the course before progressing to her degree programme and she had actively sought out an opportunity to teach on the course when she subsequently became a PhD student.

"It actually kind of happened by chance, because I'm still in touch with the mature student officer in [NAME of HEI], we're, you know, in friendly terms. And I actually, I was teaching undergraduate, I was teaching biology to undergraduate, and I really enjoyed that. And so I actually contacted her asking if there was any opening in the access course, and, and so yeah, I did, I did an interview and all that stuff." (Jody)

Jody's motivation for doing this was as much to "give back" to others with respect to the opportunity that she herself had been offered at the time she was a mature access student, and to the benefit she felt she had gained from doing the course, as it was to earn money while she was completing her PhD. This was important to her:

"It was kind of, you know, it was momentous for me because I felt like I came full circle in a way, you know. As a personal experience it was amazing. I loved every second of it. ... So yeah, I did the course myself 10 years ago, before my journey through studying biology. And then I went on to do my undergraduate, etc, etc until now." (Jody)

For many of the other participants who were PhD students in their HEI at the time they started teaching on the MSAC, the teaching hours on offer were a way for them to supplement their income and/or to gain additional or alternative teaching experience in a university. For example, Charlie's motivation in applying for an MSAC teaching post was for both financial and personal development reasons.

"I saw there was an ad for the access course and said, sure look, I'll apply and give it a go. I wanted to get more teaching experience and the pay was also quite good so that was another motivating factor. But yeah, I had practice with public speaking and all this kind of stuff and said I want to do more teaching". (Charlie)

Another motivating factor for participants to teach on an MSAC was that it offered them an opportunity to share their passion for their subject with others:

"I started out in my first year PhD doing demonstrations in undergraduate labs. And then progressed because I kind of enjoyed it. I do really like teaching biology because I love biology. And it's very satisfying when you see students that get passionate about it as

well ... I've had four or five people there to say 'Yeah, no, I think I'm gonna do biology', I was like 'yes!!' ... It's nice just to infuse the same passion that I have and see it in other people." (Jody)

"Like I just want every group, every year to just go and become scientists and just love seeing that happen." (Sydney)

"I love English. So being given the opportunity to offer other people that love of the books, of the thought around the books. That's what I like best about it, being able to ... I would do it for nothing. I probably shouldn't say that on a recording! (laughs) But I just love giving them, allowing them to have that knowledge" (Leslie)

Despite participants' general lack of awareness of the MSAC, for some such as Sydney and Chris, once they did become aware of the programme, the ethos and purpose of the MSAC resonated with their own personal or professional values as educators and that in itself was an additional motivating factor for them to start teaching on the course.

"I had a tough time of it growing up. I like helping people. I like seeing, helping people out of difficult situations. And I think especially with the mature students and people, students in direct provision coming through the sanctuary system. Yeah, like I think, I think I'm more of an empath than I give myself credit for. And I think just the helping people side of it really drew me to it as well." (Sydney)

"I did know a couple of people that had taught on the course over the years, and I know people that had done the course. So, I just applied for the job. I was quite anxious to get it actually. I liked the idea of it to be honest, I liked the idea of teaching access. ... It was the idea of teaching people that were finding another way into education that, you know, from the non-traditional students, as they say. That's what appealed to me." (Chris)

Therefore, regardless of motivation for teaching on the MSAC, it was largely through word of mouth and personal connections that participants became aware of these teaching opportunities. What these findings also reveal is that whether the MSAC teaching opportunity was taken up by the participants for reasons of financial need, personal interest, or personal or professional development, the opportunity was seen to be a positive one, and a motivating factor in and of itself. It is relevant to note here that, unlike many participants' experiences of teaching on undergraduate courses, there was no obligation associated with MSAC teaching and therefore taking up the teaching opportunity was entirely the participants' own choice and was guided by their own personal motivations and interests.

5.3 Teaching approaches in the MSAC classroom

“Most teachers see their job as extending well beyond teaching, they regard themselves as educators concerned to foster personal growth.” (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 2018, p. 43)

Regardless of the length of time they had been teaching on their MSAC, or their original motivation for taking up the MSAC teaching opportunity, all participants in this study demonstrated a good awareness of the purposes and ethos of a mature student access course, citing objectives such as informing students’ decisions on progression to undergraduate studies, supporting students’ retention in higher education through building a foundational academic knowledge and skill base, developing students’ self-confidence and independence through supporting their acculturation to a third-level environment, and creating supportive learning communities. This section will consider the approaches the participants took to supporting their learners in meeting these varied course objectives.

5.3.1 *Preparing for standards required at undergraduate level*

Participants recognised that their role as MSAC teachers was as much to ensure that their learners understood what to expect in terms of presumed prior knowledge and that they met the standards required of them to progress to undergraduate studies, as it was to build their learners’ confidence in returning to formal education. Practical MSAC subjects such as IT skills, maths and science focus on building that foundational level of knowledge and skill and participants who teach these subjects clearly acknowledge that their goal is to ensure their students know and can attain the standards required of them in their first year of undergraduate education.

“I love to see them in first year labs and to be told they’re getting good lab marks because one of the things I do drill into them is ‘here’s how to get full marks in your first-year lab reports’.” (Sydney)

“With maths there’s a minimum requirement. You know, grade C on your honours leaving cert, to even be sat there in the room [at undergraduate level]. So that knowledge is assumed [by lecturers] right from day one. So the initial bar is higher than it is in other subjects for all SEIT [Science, Engineering, Information Technology] courses. So I’m in an unusual situation of having a very clear mission brief, as it were.... Some of the material I cover is laying the groundwork for the future ... I know this because I teach

them [undergraduate students] in first year and second year, I know what they struggle with.” (Alex)

Rowan, who teaches technology tools in IT, uses an interesting turn of phrase in describing his teaching goal in preparing students for first year which is to ensure that they are ‘savvy’ by the time they start their degree course. In this respect his aim is to ensure that his MSAC students have sufficient foundational skills to confidently engage in an increasingly digitally supported undergraduate learning environment so they can “go out and they know where to find anything that they need”. Rowan’s overarching teaching goal aligns as much with the ‘acculturation’ purpose of an MSAC as well as with increasing his learners’ confidence to participate in a new educational environment.

“From my perspective I would try and prepare them as much as possible for first year. So that is kind of the overarching goal in my teaching is to get them savvy for when they head off into the big bad world.” (Rowan)

In Rowan’s view his students are better prepared than the “mainstream matures” because of completing the MSAC and when he hears that his former students have the skills and confidence to help younger students in their first year “that’s when I go, ‘yes, this is perfect, this is what the course is all about.’”

Leslie is aware of the dual purpose of the MSAC also and acknowledges that she would be doing her students a disservice if she did not uphold the standards required within her discipline at undergraduate level, regardless of her desire to encourage her students and build their confidence. Therefore, she has to be mindful of both of these objectives simultaneously.

“Sometimes you feel so badly, because you still have to follow the guidelines laid down by the department and you can’t, you know, say ‘Well, I’m going to give him an ‘A’ for effort’ because it’s not going to, well it’s not going to help him when he actually goes into the day stream [undergraduate] and is one of 200 students and they’re just ticking boxes and, you know, marking his essay without having that individual knowledge of who this human being is ... I don’t feel I can. I feel that I have to follow the guidelines laid down by the university. Because if I turn a student out to the [NAME] department in first year who isn’t capable of writing correctly, they’re going to give him a really hard time, and he’s not going to thank me.” (Leslie)

Bailey also understands the importance for her MSAC students of having that foundational level of knowledge and skill in her subject, even though “they’re really not

going to see the benefit until next year when they go in with that confidence.” The fact that her work is enabling MSAC students to meet the standards required within an academic department when they progress on is acknowledged by a colleague:

“The person said that the lecturer, who I know, commented that their [MSAC student] referencing was very good, and they said oh, it’s because I taught them. And then that individual met me after and said, “wow, I don’t know what you’re doing, but they’re picking it up anyway.” And to me, that was terrific, you know. I said, ‘right, I must be doing something okay’. Yeah, that such a big head would say something, you know? So, anyway, I was happy about that.” (Bailey)

Therefore, MSAC teachers are cognisant of the importance of ensuring that their students understand and meet the standards required of them in undergraduate education. However, as will become evident throughout the rest of this chapter participants also clearly recognised the role of an MSAC teacher as extending beyond their core pedagogical remit of developing their learners’ capacity to engage with new skills, and new bodies of knowledge and ways of thinking.

5.3.2 Awareness of students’ motivations, circumstances and experiences

“On those rare occasions when we actually talk about our work with other teachers, it is not only the subjects we teach but also the stories of the students and their lives that captivate us”. (Daloz, 2019, p. 11)

High levels of motivation to engage in learning has been found to be a feature of mature students’ engagement in higher education (Reay, 2003; Staunton, 2008; Fleming, 2010; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a; Kearns, 2017) and the participants in this study similarly recognised that their students were often highly motivated to participate in education.

“Often there’s a great thirst for knowledge ... I suppose if I had to pick one thing that I thought was a common characteristic among mature students was, it would be that, you know, thirst for knowledge and thirst to learn.” (Chris)

“... the mature students in general have been fantastic ... they’re really jumping at the opportunity to improve. Improve themselves isn’t really the right word is it, but they really want to get the opportunity to go into university, I think. And it’s been great.” (Charlie)

“For the most part they’re, they’re very, quite positive people. That, maybe that’s why they were able to make the decision to go back to education. Don’t you have to be a very positive optimistic person to make that decision?” (Sam)

“They’re also that bit older, that bit more mature. They’ve, you know, they’re also usually a bit more motivated. So many of the ‘immature’ students really don’t know why they’re there. They’re just there because it’s what you do.” (Alex)

An interesting perspective on some MSAC students’ motivation, is that this motivation can sometimes take expression in the classroom as frustration depending on the person’s individual circumstances and experiences. This was Chris’ experience as she learns to work with and support her students in the classroom.

“Often they are people who should have been educated earlier, d’you know? That becomes apparent and there’s a frustration around that, d’you know, that’s something that I kind of see. So people that maybe haven’t lived up to their potential in some way, shape or form.” (Chris)

While Leslie doesn’t highlight this specifically as a frustration for her students, nonetheless she is cognisant of a sense for some of her students of possibly having ‘missed out’ on opportunities in their lives and sees this as a motivating factor for them to succeed on an MSAC.

“You have another cohort of older people – often women – that are doing this because it’s something they missed, they feel they missed. And for them it’s extremely important that they do well and they usually try very hard and usually succeed.” (Leslie)

As a teacher, having knowledge of who one’s learners are has been identified as a critical starting point for knowing how best to teach in different educational settings (Daloz, 1986; Jephcote et al., 2008). Access and widening participation students typically have quite a diverse profile (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a; Leech et al., 2016; Kearns, 2017; Strauss and Hunter, 2018; O’Sullivan et al., 2019; Busher and James, 2020) and MSAC students are no exception. MSAC learners come from a wide variety of backgrounds and bring a diversity of life experiences with them into the classroom. Participants in this study demonstrated a strong awareness of the broad range of life experiences and circumstances experienced by their students and particularly the growing number of mature students coming from other countries.

“So we have asylum seekers, people from traveller backgrounds, all kinds of stuff. So literally nearly every walk of life at that point.” (Charlie)

“You would have maybe significantly more people who don’t have English as a first language.” (Bailey)

The educational starting points of MSAC students were also acknowledged by participants to vary significantly. Two contrasting circumstances experienced by participants are related by Charlie and Alex.

“The mature students, literally I’m having to teach them how to use a calculator and work from there. But because they’re putting so much work in from the start, they’ll nearly have a slingshot, they’ll start to, really start to move ahead then in second semester.” (Charlie)

“I mean, it’s an incredibly mixed group ... There was a guy five years ago who’d been in the second year of an engineering degree in [Name of country] ... but he didn’t have an educational piece of paper recognised by the Irish education system, so he had to do access to an engineering degree. I mean, he could have taught the course I was teaching! He was quite possibly a better mathematician than me. Right the way down to people who left school at 14 ... and who could be barely numerate ... So you’ve got this complete spectrum.” (Alex)

Alex’s and Charlie’s responses suggest that they are cognisant of the range of prior educational experiences with which their learners can present in the classroom. From my own professional experience, I would posit that the particular situation highlighted by Alex is arising more frequently as growing numbers of adult learners who have immigrated to Ireland, or who have come as asylum seekers or refugees, participate on MSACs. It also highlights the challenge that some of these students experience in accessing undergraduate education without being able to provide certified evidence of their own prior qualifications. The impact of this is that these students must participate in pre-entry courses such as MSACs so that they can access higher education in Ireland, as has been found by Croke (2023). As highlighted later in this chapter, such situations can be challenging for teachers when teaching a set curriculum to students who have such a broad spectrum of prior educational experiences.

Participants also demonstrate respect for their students’ knowledge and personal experiences. Chris, for example, acknowledges that educational ‘success’ is only one form of success for individuals and that learners bring experiential knowledge with them into the classroom, while Alex admits that many of his students have better skills than he does in other subjects.

“... sometimes people come into access and they’ve had success in some other form, in a non-academic enterprise, or whatever.” [Chris]

“Many of them have superb digital skills. Way better than mine!” (Alex)

What these observations are highlighting is that these MSAC teachers recognise and acknowledge their students’ motivations, experiences and achievements in other aspects of their lives and encourage them to share that knowledge and experience. Success in the educational realm is something which has been found to resonate strongly for mature students (Dolan, 2008; Bruen, 2014; Kearns, 2017) and these MSAC teachers demonstrate a sensitivity to that motivation also in working with their students.

Participants acknowledged that the broad range of MSAC students’ prior knowledge, life circumstances and experiences make MSAC teaching quite challenging in terms of keeping all learners engaged. This ‘broad spectrum’ of learners has already been highlighted by Alex and he points out that this can make his teaching particularly challenging, given that he has to teach to a set curriculum.

“It is the most challenging [teaching] because of that spread, that huge spread in aptitude, ability, background, all the rest of it ... you’ve got this complete spectrum. So it’s quite hard to not bore one end of the spectrum rigid, whilst utterly not baffling the other end of the spectrum.” (Alex)

Chris also talks about being aware of the need to “balance the needs of all the students in the classroom” while Rowan takes an approach of ‘levelling the playing field’ in the classroom as a key part of his strategy in order to try to manage this spread of ability and diversity of experience. His approach was to ‘test the waters’ for his first few semesters teaching on the course in order to find out what his students “actual needs were.” However, he was also cognisant of older learners who had “never turned on a computer” and he had to “make everything understandable for them and give it to them in little bits and pieces.”

“So what you have to do, all these different student types and learning types, you have to try and create, design the course in such a way that you level the playing field for all of them.” (Rowan)

The importance of getting to know and recognise their students as individuals, with differing educational needs, and to believe in and encourage their students' abilities, was articulated by some participants as an important aspect of their MSAC work as it also informed their teaching approaches.

"I think in access, as I understand it for myself, having some sort of knowledge of each student is important ... because I very much teach by seeing who's with me still." (Chris)

"Trying to personalise things a little bit more, you know, learning a little bit more about the individual habits. ... So there is a personal connection that you build up with people, definitely, over the course of the year. And you can see where people are struggling and people have different times in the year that maybe stuff is getting in the way of their life and you just have to, you know, understand that too and adjust." (Charlie)

"We really see the student, we look at their experiences from a student-centred perspective, while academia will be harsher, tougher. They'll say 'there's only so much we can do for you guys and you just got to step up to the mark yourselves. If you don't, it's sink or swim.' While we will think every student has the ability to swim. We push that, you know?" (Rowan)

Participants also demonstrated a sensitivity to students' personal circumstances and the need to be cognisant of these to facilitate their learners' active participation in the course. Learners' home circumstances were recognised as often having an impact on their ability to fully engage in the MSAC, particularly during Covid:

"There's one lady she's got three kids at the moment, and she finds it difficult to turn on her microphone because she's looking after kids trying to do the meeting at the same time." (Charlie)

"... direct provision, if we're talking about that it's difficult to get a quiet space to yourself. So, it's all these things that ... when you're teaching an undergraduate course maybe you don't have to think of as much." (Charlie)

Charlie's observations are important in that he points out that he does not necessarily have the same level of awareness of individual learners' circumstances when teaching undergraduate courses. One can surmise that this is because of the large size of many undergraduate courses which limits teachers' capacity to get to know their students. However, when teaching on an access course it is critical that teachers get to know their learners on a personal level in order that they can more effectively support their transition to higher education. This awareness is also relevant when shifting one's

perspective from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach. Charlie, again, suggests that he has a strong awareness of this need to adopt a learner-centred approach in his teaching.

"If you don't then you can start thinking, nearly blaming it on the students which is not the right way to do it. But that might have been the old teaching habits ... You say, I teach it one way and the students can't do it, it's their fault, which isn't the right way at all." (Charlie)

Having an awareness of who one's students are, as well as some awareness of the kinds of life and educational experiences they may have had, is critical for teachers from the perspective of knowing what kinds of teaching strategies and approaches are appropriate to adopt. Regardless of their length of time teaching on an MSAC, participants' responses illustrate that they had a strong awareness of who their students were. This in turn led some participants to develop a greater awareness of broader social justice issues and of the importance and value of access initiatives in supporting a broader equality of opportunity agenda. Rowan acknowledges that there can be "high rates of personal life problems" amongst the students in his class, while for Chris:

"It's made me understand more ways in which people, disadvantaged people are disadvantaged, d'you know? So, like, it's made me more sensitive to people and the difficulties that they're bringing with them, and the strengths that they bring with them also, d'you know." (Chris)

The participants' capacity to get to know their students more personally is facilitated by the small size of MSAC courses, and the capacity to teach more interactively than could typically be facilitated on undergraduate programmes. Sydney also spoke about how, in some cases, it changed her perspective on how she regarded her students in other teaching contexts and how, in turn, she approached her teaching as a result.

"It changes your perspective when you, like, walk into a new classroom. Like, if I started, if I walked into a tutorial now, like I used to as a PhD student, you have a better understanding of, like, everybody has a background and everybody has a story and everybody's coming at this from a different perspective. For me, it's definitely changed that idea of walking into 200 faceless students in a big lecture. It does make you think, no, there are 200 people." (Sydney)

Sydney also talked about finding 'common ground' with her students which helped her to 'forge a bond' (Merrill, 2001) and talk openly with them:

"Maybe it's an age thing, obviously, again like just being of a similar age, or most of them being older than myself, it's just easier to talk before and after lectures and kind of be on common ground. But yeah, everybody was just always so open about if they were struggling or if they were loving it." (Sydney)

This section highlighted my participants' strong awareness of the importance of knowing their learners as individuals, and their acknowledgement of the diversity of their learners' life circumstances, educational experiences and cultural backgrounds. This diversity in the MSAC classroom is reported by my participants to be both challenging and motivating and offers them a different teaching experience to what they would normally have on undergraduate courses. Some participants reported that the opportunity to get to know their learners more personally broadened their understanding and awareness of equality of opportunity issues in higher education and of the value of access initiatives such as the MSAC.

5.3.3 Peer learning and support

Fleming and Finnegan (2011a) found that academic and emotional peer support was very important to non-traditional student success in higher education, including for mature students. Creating a supportive environment on an MSAC is important to the learner experience and is seen by my participants as being a core part of their teaching responsibility. One way they do this is by making a proactive effort to ensure that peer learning and support is a feature of their approach, and some participants highlight where this differs to teaching on undergraduate programmes:

"Once they've all teamed up I only really have to make sure that one of each team has got it. Because if one of each team has got it, the rest of them will have it soon, you know, they all support each other ... One of them might get one thing but somebody else will get something else. So we really encourage them to support each other, to peer learn, study buddies. So that's much more prevalent in access than it is in undergraduate teaching." (Alex)

"The first strategy I do is get them helping each other. So I say to them at the start 'I'm not the one that's going to help you this year, don't count on me. It's you guys who are going to be helping each other ... And it's you guys that will push each other, not us tutors. Us tutors, we'll just give you the material and we'll say 'here's the material, if you have any questions on it, you know, I can help you a bit with it. But I would prefer if you guys help each other with the material.' And they do that, it's amazing! They then just form their groups and they work together." (Rowan)

"We start off with...something soft, making sure to recap what we did the last week and then go really slowly, make sure everybody is all on the same page, and make it a joint effort, we're all in the group all together." (Charlie)

Sydney's own experience as a student on a difficult undergraduate course was that of "everybody teaching each other" as it was a course that "you need other people to get through". This meant that she had experienced the need to work with others to break down "some very, very complicated science concepts" and this was an approach which she was able to bring into her own classroom later as a teacher, encouraging her students to work together and support each other.

"I think something that keeps them all going is even, like I said, seeing one or two people get it, you know, in a classroom setting. And they'd be like 'okay, right, five other people have gotten it, I'll get there'." (Sydney)

Peer learning and collaborative support is an important aspect of the ethos of access courses. Some of the participants above have demonstrated an awareness that encouraging a peer supported approach can also involve themselves as teachers as part of that learning group and indicates an approach of adopting a more equal relationship between teacher and learner in the classroom than one might typically find on undergraduate courses.

5.3.4 Active student participation

"As far as I was concerned, they were adults, and they and I were having a conversation." (Leslie)

Participants highlighted that for the most part their learners were actively engaged in the classroom experience, and that this was encouraged and welcomed by them. Active participation was facilitated by encouraging their students to ask questions for clarification or understanding, engaging in exploration of a subject through conversation, or by relating the subject or concept to students' personal experiences and realities in order to create a bridge to learning. Active participation of their students is observed by my participants to be a noticeable feature of working with adult learners compared to teaching younger students.

"With adult learners the interaction is different. Because the younger ones probably wouldn't have the confidence to challenge somebody who's standing in front of them as Dr Somebody or other. Whereas older people don't mind, you know?" (Chris)

"... sometimes school leavers, especially in the first semester, are a bit afraid to talk because in secondary school it can be seen as nearly a bad thing to be speaking to the teacher. I don't know if that's maybe something I've noticed, while the mature students definitely aren't afraid to voice their opinions. Which is great because you need that conversation in the room too." (Charlie)

"They always have much better critical thinking ... maybe it's just the age and the not being focused on the 'is this in the exam?' kind of attitude of other students ... The critical thinking was so much higher that the classes were more engaging. Yeah, and the, just the, in a good way, the constant asking of questions ... It's just the worst thing about being a teacher in higher education is teaching to a room that doesn't talk to you. And this course is always the opposite. It's just constant feedback, constant questions and I'm placing it in a real-world context that you, you want to do in your day-to-day other teaching and you don't get to." (Sydney)

Charlie proactively encourages his MSAC students to ask questions as he has noticed that "once they start asking questions ... then they'll start to relax." For participants like Jody, who had been a mature student herself, her response suggested that she understood and welcomed this level of interaction with her students and felt that sharing her own experiences with her students helped to forge this bond of understanding and respect for each other.

"They're super interested, they ask questions and they don't feel as, you know, they don't feel as intimidated as a live lecture ... And, you know, they can identify with me, and I can identify with them because I have been them and they know that I have been them. So, it's kind of like this really nice exchange." (Jody)

However, this kind of participation can also make teaching challenging at times. In Chris' experience, she taught mature students whom she would have categorised as "difficult", who "questioned me endlessly ... (implying) that I wasn't explaining things correctly." Having experienced being a mature student herself however, she understood that such situations could arise from older learners having their "world-view challenged" and thus she could empathise with how her students were presenting. Leslie adopts a slightly different approach in working with a more resistant student in one of her classes by drawing on her personal enthusiasm for her subject to persuade a student to engage in the work required.

"I had a man a few years ago ... who came into the class and said to me "I've never read a book in my life". Now, I mean, he seemed almost proud of that. And I said to him, "we'll see by the end of this." ... I took out [the book] and I said to him, "do you see this book? If you haven't read this" – and I could see him starting to bristle – I said, "if you haven't read this by my first lecture on it, by my second lecture on it, you'll want to have read it!" (laughs) ... And he came to me afterwards and he said "you're right! ... That's the first full novel I've ever read in my life." (Leslie)

Therefore, active student participation, while seeming challenging at times, is supported and encouraged on these courses by my participants and this is also facilitated because of the kind of relationship which develops between the teacher and learner in this teaching context. This will be explored further in the next chapter.

5.3.5 *Dealing with learner anxiety*

"Teachers of adults do well to recognise the anxiety experienced by many beginning students. It is often masked as bravado or scorn. But underneath often lies a deep uncertainty – about the ability to succeed 'late in life', about losing face before other students or teachers half their age ... knowing it for the fear it is, we can act to relieve it gently rather than attempting to overcome or deny it." (Daloz, 1986, p. 81)

Along with the high levels of motivation observed amongst their students, my participants recognise also the high levels of anxiety that often come with being an adult learner and have developed teaching strategies to help learners deal with their anxiety in a supportive way. One of the reasons offered for why mature students experience such anxiety is because they don't know what is expected of them in higher education (Murphy and Fleming, 2000). For some of my participants that awareness of learner anxiety seems to have developed because of their own experiences as learners, while for others this awareness developed gradually through their experience of teaching on the MSAC itself, through getting to know their students and the contexts in which they had decided to return to education. Participants' recognition of the need to encourage their students and help them to build their self-confidence was evident as the quotes below highlight.

"I entertain them. And if people are laughing, they're relaxed and if they're relaxed they're receptive. And then when you can get, once you've got them all good and relaxed, then you hit them with it, whatever it is. The little idea, the key germ of whatever it is you're trying to get over ... It's something I learned from one of the lecturers when I was going through as an undergrad ...he had this sort of comic persona ... it was very

effective, especially at getting through to the weaker students. So I just borrowed his pedagogy.” (Alex)

“I think it’s even our last meeting with [MSAC teacher], like the words that come up when we talk about the students are fear and anxiety.... In terms of, I think that’s the main thing that I’ve developed as a teacher say outside of this going forward is, yeah, just meeting people where they’re at.” (Sydney)

“What I immediately learned is that (pause) I could probably have guessed this myself anyway, that levels of anxiety are high and that a big part of my job would be to put these people at ease. Because let’s face it, these are people who were coming back largely to education after a long absence. And so yeah, I learned quickly that, you know, reassurance and you know, engendering a sense of calm and everything is okay, everything’s going to be okay, was a huge part of the job.” (Sam)

“And anxiety can be, you know, if one person beside you is anxious then the next person can be a little bit and then it stems from there. So that was a steep learning curve, but also a good learning experience at the same time and it’s taking everything a lot slower. Setting up maybe a safe space first instead of just setting up a traditional lecture...” (Charlie)

“I always say to them, in terms of getting rid of the fear, I’d open with ‘you’re not here to know this, you’re here to see this. And you’re here to lower your fear when you see these things next year and to get more of an understanding.’ And I think things like that gives them a bit of breathing space ... So I suppose encouraging it is a big part of it as well.” (Sydney)

What I have underlined within these quotes are the pedagogical qualities and strategies demonstrated by my participants that I feel are specific to building their learners’ confidence and to helping them to deal with their anxiety around learning. Strategies include adopting performative elements to teaching such as being entertaining (Alex), meeting learners where they are at (Sydney), setting up safe physical spaces for students (Charlie) and proactively engendering a sense of calm for learners in the classroom (Sam). These strategies and approaches are important to support learners’ positive engagement with their learning and to support their transition into becoming third-level students.

Sydney also is encouraging her students to think about her subject, to explore it and to ask questions about it, rather than to simply know it. She is demonstrating not just her approach to dealing with students’ anxiety but also the need to encourage critical

thinking skills in her students. She does this because “they won’t get to do that next year in a 200-person” class. Sydney’s response suggests that she is providing a way for learners to navigate their own way through their educational experience, but that she also recognises the important facilitative role of the teacher in guiding their learners. This signifies a recognition of the expectation that higher education students will work reasonably independently and autonomously, yet at the same time an acknowledgment of her role as MSAC teacher in helping to bridge that transitional space for learners between anxiety and independence.

In many cases the teachers reported drawing on their own personal experiences as a student – either how they themselves felt and coped, or recognising what their own lecturers did that they found effective – to inform the strategies they adopted to support their MSAC students in engaging in the work and in dealing with the levels of anxiety that they were aware their students were experiencing.

5.3.6 Understanding, empathy and recognition

Responses suggest that most of the participants in this study demonstrated high levels of empathy with and understanding of their MSAC students. Some of that empathy and understanding arises from the teachers’ own experiences as students and some of it unfolds in the teaching relationship. Empathy quite simply is being able to understand what someone is feeling. Brown (2021, p. 122) describes this as not needing to feel the *same* feeling in the moment, but rather about being able to “reach back into our own experience ... so we can understand and connect”. Previous studies indicate that it is critical for non-traditional students in particular that their experiences are not dismissed as irrelevant or that they are not treated in an off-hand way as this could cause students to “deeply question their capacity and suitability for the course” (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a, p.12). For Chris and Sydney, for example, their own life experiences enabled them to relate at a personal level to many of their MSAC learners’ experiences:

“I didn’t go to college [as a school leaver] because of socioeconomic reasons, d’you know? ... For me, being a student, going back to college as a mature student was this big adventure where I discovered that I was an intelligent person, d’you know? I didn’t know that when I went into my degree ... So, often that has been, you know, I understand that when I sit in front of mature students. I understand that there’s a life also, you know,

that it's not the 20 something party lifestyle that they're living, d'you know, I understand that. And I understand that they're serious people, that they want ... you know, mature students have a, you know, they have a view of the world, you know, so they bring that with them ... So I understand that it's difficult to be challenged. It's difficult to have your worldview challenged." (Chris)

"I think, again, as an access student, like, I had a tough time of it growing up. I like helping people. I like seeing, helping people out of difficult situations. And I think especially with the mature students and people, students in direct provision coming through the sanctuary system." (Sydney)

For Leslie, Bailey and Jody, it was more their own experiences of returning to education as mature students, and remembering feelings of anxiety, pride or passion, that enabled them to empathise with what their learners were experiencing.

"... I'm also aware of the level of pride that you get as a mature student when you achieve these things. Each one of those steps, I mean, I achieved my degree and then I achieved my masters and what can I do now, then I achieved my PhD. All of these things are achievements and I know how well, how good I felt. And I want these students to make all those steps to get all that." (Leslie)

"It's nice just to infuse that same passion that I have and see it in other people. And especially because they are mature students, you know, and I think that they can see that I, if I did it then they can do it. I hope that is, you know, my message. Because I'm, you know, I'm not really that special, I'm not super intelligent or anything. I just worked hard, for sure. But it's perfectly doable if somebody wants to do it." (Jody)

"I think too, in the back of our minds, I think most of us that teach, we know, because we've been through it, we know what they're going to face. So if you can equip them in any way it's helpful, you know?" (Bailey)

"I think that's the main thing that I've developed as a teacher say outside of this going forward is, yeah, just meeting people where they are at. And understanding as a student that fear of like, being asked something in a lecture, or being asked to derive something and the lecturer stands there for 15 minutes and stares at the class while they derive something. Yeah, it's even experiences like that." (Sydney)

What seems to be emerging here is a strong sense that for many of my participants their own personal experiences as students – mostly, but not exclusively as mature students – have enabled them to empathise with their students' life circumstances, anxieties and ambitions. It is not necessarily about having a 'shared experience' in all instances and this sense of empathy and understanding evolved differently for other participants.

Charlie acknowledged that it was only really through teaching rather than personal experience, by working directly with the MSAC students, that he felt he developed the ability to truly empathise with his learners and to understand what pedagogical approaches were most appropriate when teaching adult learners from diverse backgrounds.

“It’s one thing to be told something and then I guess, the other thing is to experience it, you know. So you can be told people are anxious and to take it calmly but you don’t really know what that is until you experience it first-hand. Because (pause) it’s something that I don’t have experience of personally. But, you know, it helps then with empathy and realizing what other people are going through in these situations. So I think you can be told a lot and you can be given whatever training but until you really get in there, that’s the only real learning experience.” (Charlie)

“You, you have to, as I said earlier, be very empathetic and put people at ease and be cognisant in everything that you do that you have an audience that is worried that they’re not going to get things...I think the best teachers are the people who have a lot of empathy. And I think the people who have the most empathy are the people who have had hard times mentally themselves.” (Sam)

Busher et al. (2015a, p. 136) found that AHE “tutors’ commitment to ‘second chance learning’ seemed to reflect, in part, their biographies and their recognition of the disempowerment experienced by economically disadvantaged AHE students.” There are many different aspects of their students’ experiences to which MSAC teachers can relate and which help them to build a sense of empathy with and understanding of their students. For most participants it was some aspect of their own personal life or educational experiences that gave them an awareness of what their MSAC students may be experiencing and the perceptions their students bring with them into the learning relationship. This awareness in turn seems to have enabled them to build a meaningful connection with their students. The sentiments expressed above signify a recognition of students as individuals, with individual life circumstances, and the need to adopt a learner-centred approach in teaching.

5.4 Becoming a ‘better teacher’

It was clear that some of my participants, particularly those who could be described as “beginning” teachers (McIntyre and Hobson, 2016), including participants who started their teaching journeys as PhD students, recognised that the experience of teaching

adult learners presented them with a unique opportunity to develop and hone their teaching skills. This was described in quite definitive terms by Sydney as a “game changer” for her personally as a teacher, as she makes a direct connection between the fact that she was teaching adult learners who had been out of formal education for some time and the need to be cognisant of how she explained and delivered her module material.

“... it completely and utterly makes you better at explaining things like at the most fundamental level to take, and again, what’s fun about these students is it’s not only the content that I’m delivering but it would be random science questions (laughs) ... So, it would be like ‘Sydney, do you know anything about quantum mechanics?’ Or ‘do you know anything about black holes?’ ... So, it’s even testing that level of ‘Oh God, can I explain this to somebody who isn’t close to it or who doesn’t have the background?’ Yeah, no, there’s no question. If there was a way for every single PhD student to teach this course for a semester, I’d get them to do it. I think it makes you a better teacher, I think it makes you a better scientist, like 100%.” (Sydney)

To illustrate her point, she gave a concrete example of actively trying different ways of explaining a science concept in class.

“And even last year, I remember explaining one of the hardest parts in the chemistry. And they’re all staring at me. And I was like, right, let’s try a completely different two sentences to explain this. And literally the whole room, like in a TV show, they were all like “Aaaaahhhhhhhh! Now we all get it!” (laughs) And then now that’s how I teach that chemistry now, the second way.” (Sydney)

Chris also expresses a similar sentiment with respect to her experience of teaching adult learners who are not reticent about asking questions or about challenging her as a teacher, as previously highlighted.

“I have become a better teacher, and I wasn’t a bad teacher anyway d’you know? But like this has made me an infinitely better teacher because now I don’t think that there is anything that anyone could throw at me, that I couldn’t somehow deal with in the moment, d’you know?” (Chris)

Sydney suggested that being a new teacher in higher education and not already having been ‘socialised’ into the higher education teaching system, was probably a good thing before she started out from the point of view that her experiences on the MSAC enabled her to develop good teaching skills and practices from the outset.

“Sometimes I think the, not the lack of teaching experience, but the lack of going through the teaching system experience, I think would help in empathising with the students and

not having to unlearn as much of your own habits in teaching complicated things. Yeah, and I think that's why, yeah, cos when I came in I was very like 'oh, this is great that PhD students are doing that. I wonder why other courses don't do that?' But yeah, I think it's almost, yeah, the less you have to 'unlearn' the better it is for everybody". (Sydney)

Sydney's perspective highlights what she sees as an opportunity to develop 'good' teaching skills by teaching adult learners on a pre-entry programme before becoming immersed in the higher education 'teaching system'. Her perspective also suggests that there is something 'different' about these programmes, sitting as they do outside of mainstream academic structures. Her comment that all PhD students should be offered this kind of teaching opportunity is an interesting and insightful one, presumably made to contrast with her personal experiences of teaching undergraduate classes. It also illustrates that good teaching is a strong value that she personally holds, which was evident earlier in this chapter. Sydney also points out that she now uses similar relational techniques with smaller undergraduate classes:

"in terms of just being chatty, like and yeah, again, before and after (classes) feeling people out, feeling people as they come in early. And like leaving them alone if they don't have anything to say".

The size and nature of MSAC courses means that they are much smaller than most undergraduate classes and that therefore the teacher has more direct engagement with their students. Both Sydney and Chris see this as a positive aspect of their teaching experience as both feel that this has helped them to become 'better teachers' as a result.

5.4.1 Autonomy and responsibility

A particular feature of MSAC teaching that was highlighted by some participants was the level of responsibility that MSAC teachers are assigned. Participants, particularly those who were PhD students, reported that MSAC teaching often requires them to take on a broader range of responsibilities than is typically expected for other higher education teaching they may do e.g. for tutorials or as laboratory assistants, and that they have more autonomy and flexibility in their MSAC work.

"We get good notes coming in as a tutor, but I think we all developed them recently a lot. So we'd the labs and the tutorials, and then all the corrections, I suppose, would be something we wouldn't have to do outside of this ... Exam paper design was a great one.

That's a great skill that I've developed ... And going into the exams and being the lecturer who walks up and down was a big moment for me! (laughs)" (Sydney)

"The material that I teach undergrads is set. So, you know, I am given the slides and I am repeating a script in a way. Whereas I had to really put all of the course together for this year. So yeah, I, you know, I was able to kind of put my spin on things if you want. So, I enjoyed it more." (Jody)

"I do get a lot of emails, prepping, preparation work; we have meetings, all that kind of stuff. So, there is a lot of stuff that goes on behind the scenes rather than just the two hours of teaching ... Now that I'm on the other side I realise just how much work all the other lecturers have going on, that teaching really is only a small enough part of their world." (Charlie)

This greater level of responsibility, while challenging, seems to result in more enjoyment of the work. However, for courses such as that taught by Alex much of the material was already available when he took over.

"I didn't have to design the material because there were enough people doing it... So, all the notes, the material, everything, I was just delivering a pre-set programme." (Alex)

On the other hand, Alex felt the burden of responsibility in a different way from the perspective of needing to deliver a large amount of content over a reasonably short period of time.

"...in 22 evening classes. That's all I've got – 22 sessions (to) get them to the point where they don't sit there on day one, in lecture one of physics going 'what the XXXX is that?'" (Alex)

The level of responsibility given to access course teachers was identified by both Charlie and Sydney, who were in the early stages of their academic careers, as being potentially valuable when it comes to pursuing other job opportunities in higher education.

"It shows that I've delivered, designed and delivered a full teaching course, which is not something that you do usually. So, if I was going to look at academia or teaching ... (it) would help in that situation." (Charlie)

"But now, like, getting the job offer...Yeah, it's invaluable. You don't, you don't get formal teaching experience as a PhD student ... For me it was invaluable to even, I think I've had two [interviews since phd] ... just the skills that you can say that you have as a teacher and as a module coordinator. I got to give a masterclass to a Nobel laureate last year on teaching. And I drew a lot on what I've done with the [MSAC] students ... And I don't think I would have done that if I didn't have this background, or could even, for want of a better word, like, test that out in some of the lectures." (Sydney)

Because the MSACs sit outside academic departments, this may influence the level of autonomy given to MSAC teachers to deliver their courses and, as Sydney highlights above, to try different teaching approaches in class. The extent to which MSAC teachers benefit from either internal or external academic oversight was not explored in this research. As will also be seen in Chapter Seven, the hourly rate of pay offered for MSAC teaching is deemed by some participants to be superior to that offered for other teaching in these HEIs. In that respect, it may be expected that MSAC teachers take full responsibility for teaching their subjects from preparation through to examination. Regardless, the level of autonomy and responsibility is recognised by participants as being beneficial to them in terms of building their experience of teaching for a higher education context.

5.5 Summary of ‘Becoming and being a MSAC teacher’

The findings in this theme explored my participants’ general interest in teaching, how they became involved in MSAC teaching specifically, the kinds of teaching strategies they adopted in the MSAC classroom, and the knock-on benefits to the development of their teaching skills and to their own growing self-confidence as teachers. The findings suggest that, for the most part, participants became involved in MSAC teaching through circumstance as opposed to by design but that their reflections highlight positive attitudes and opinions towards their MSAC teaching experiences as well as the alignment of this work with their personal values and their own motivations to teach.

My participants’ experiences point towards an awareness of the need to occupy two different spaces as MSAC teachers – one which acknowledges learners’ different educational and personal starting points and which recognises learners as individuals, balanced with the aim of ensuring that their students meet the formal standards and learning outcome requirements of these programmes in order to progress successfully to undergraduate studies. The participants’ approaches and experiences resonate with the multiple purposes of foundation and access courses, being about confidence-building and encouragement, as well as about skill development and knowledge sharing. Given the nature and purpose of these programmes, these teachers’ experiences

indicated their awareness of the need to bring a particular ethos and pedagogy to the classroom, to recognise their students as individuals, with varied life histories, experiences, and educational achievements, and therefore of the need to support their students' learning and engagement with appropriate teaching strategies.

MSAC teachers need to be able to teach with empathy and understanding. All the participants in this study acknowledged that a large part of what they do is about encouragement and confidence-building, aspects of the teacher-learner relationship that are acknowledged to be core to adult education pedagogical approaches (Knowles, 1990; Merriam and Brockett, 1997; Brookfield, 2015) while sharing disciplinary knowledge is critical to higher education pedagogy (Murphy and Fleming, 2000; Marginson, 2011). This recognition and acknowledgement of learners' commitment, motivation and prior educational and life experiences is an essential part of teaching on MSACs. The experiences of the participants in this study suggest that they "teach in ways which are tailored to the perceived needs of a particular group" (Entwistle and Walker, 2000, p. 344) which involves an understanding of how students learn and an understanding of how students experience this specific learning environment. Many of my participants have gained this understanding as a result of their own life and educational experiences.

Chapter Six: Reward and relationship

*"It's insanely rewarding to know that you're making some kind of difference to people."
(Sydney)*

6.1 Introduction

The majority of studies that have been undertaken on access courses have explored the value of such programmes to participating students (e.g. Johnston et al., 2012; Busher et al., 2015a; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Marshall, 2016; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017; Busher and James, 2020). Fewer studies have explored the meaning or value of these programmes to the teachers who teach on them. Within these however (e.g. Jones, 2006; Busher et al., 2015a), positive experiences of working with mature students on access courses were identified, along with descriptions of the work being 'fun' and 'rewarding'. Some general course evaluations or studies (e.g. Brosnan, 2013; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017) also reported access course teachers describing their work as 'rewarding'. Knowles et al. (2015) describe the satisfaction for adult educators of experiencing "releasing rewards" over "controlling rewards", which suggests a positive emotional and relational engagement when teaching adult learners. To that end, it is valuable to explore in greater depth whether or how my participants described experiencing reward and/or job satisfaction from their work, and particularly given that participants only engaged with their MSAC teaching for, at most, a few hours each week.

This theme explores findings from my interviews that highlight aspects of participants' MSAC teaching experiences that they considered to be rewarding or enjoyable. Participants in this study spoke about many different aspects of their teaching experiences, both personal and professional; the majority of their experiences were described in positive terms, although rewards were not necessarily experienced universally or similarly by all participants. The theme also highlights the distinctly relation-centred nature of MSAC teaching and how this aspect of their work, or their relational approach to working with their students, impacts from a reward and/or job satisfaction perspective.

6.2 Benefits and rewards

6.2.1 Confidence and self-belief

Increased confidence and self-belief are frequently highlighted by learners as positive outcomes of participating in access courses (Brosnan, 2013; Busher et al., 2015a; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; James et al., 2016; Busher and James, 2020). Interestingly, some of my participants also reported experiencing an increased level of confidence and self-belief in themselves as teachers arising from their work on these courses. For some participants this was a general increase in confidence that could be expected to happen as someone becomes more comfortable and familiar with their work.

"... it's made me a lot more comfortable in front of people You're standing up in front of people for two hours teaching and I usually wouldn't be happy talking for that period of time." (Charlie)

For teachers like Jody, the opportunity that teaching on the MSAC presented to her, as well as the feedback that she received from students with respect to her teaching, awakened an interest in teaching which she hadn't previously considered. In turn, she now feels a sense of having a broader range of career options being open to her.

"The fact that I have really started considering teaching as a viable career option, is something that I have never really considered before. And I mean this at a deeply personal level. I always thought of myself as a do-er, not as a teacher. And so, it was kind of like a revelation for me. When, when people come back to me said "Do you know, you're actually good at teaching", because some of the students have said (that) to me. I said, 'Guys, you know, this is my first time so, you know be patient with me and let me know whatever you don't understand', all this kind of stuff. So, so some of them have come back to me said, 'No, you're actually quite good at it'. And that was really a first, that was such a first." (Jody)

For some participants, beyond receiving positive feedback from students or feeling more confident in their own teaching skills, an awareness of doing something of value, of contributing to creating positive experiences in their students' lives contributes to their own sense of self-worth and achievement in their work.

"It gives me a great sense of self-belief and achievement. It makes me feel good about myself, which is important, given where I've come from in my younger days. And, yeah, everything I do in [NAME of HEI] makes me feel that way to be honest ... It just feels good to be doing good." (Sam)

"Yeah, it's just, and again all this sounds very cheesy, but it's been a very cheesy experience. Again, like going from them coming into the interview and seeing them in undergrad labs, like, it's like having a child and seeing them do well I imagine! (laughs) It's that, yeah, I love, I love having the opportunity to give people that experience of understanding science and maths and not being scared of it before they go into undergrad." (Sydney)

The feedback from and connection with students is important to Sam with respect to his own self-belief, even more so than the results his students achieve:

"The results are very good the last three years from the students that have worked under me. And yet it's what they say and how they make me feel ... that matters more than the actual numbers, which is odd." (Sam)

This in turn contributes to a growing realisation of his own self-worth as a teacher.

"What I'm saying is that, I suppose, well apart from the early years [of teaching] when I was useless, 'cos everyone is (laughs), but I always knew I was a good teacher, but now I value that. Whereas, you know, when I was teaching in [Name of school] even though I was doing a very, very good job in a very difficult environment, I didn't really value that, you know? I didn't see that that was an achievement, if you know what I'm saying. Whereas now I value it." (Sam)

This is a powerful statement from Sam regarding how he feels about himself as a teacher, and possibly even more so because he was a qualified secondary school teacher with good teaching experience behind him. His perspective appears to speak to the fact that having a connection with his learners and getting feedback from them with respect to how they feel about his teaching and about their experiences and achievements is important for him personally. For Sam, developing a connection with adult learners on a more personal level is easier to achieve than it is with second-level students and this connection, and the resulting self-belief, is what he suggests makes him feel more of a teacher than do his students' academic results.

6.2.2 Job satisfaction

There was a strong sense from my participants that this work offers them a high level of job satisfaction and how this was defined or experienced varied for different individuals. For participants such as Chris and Sydney, some of their job satisfaction comes from a very intrinsic motivation, in terms of how their MSAC work resonates with their own personal values or experiences, knowing that they are supporting learners who are or

have experienced challenging life circumstances. This in turn motivates them to continue teaching on the programme year after year. Their accounts signify that they are connecting the reward of their teaching experience to the contribution they make to fulfilling the core purpose of the programme and ultimately to the positive impact it has on the lives of their learners.

“There’s a bit of a high out of it or something that you just realise that, you know, you have actually done something useful. So that’s very satisfying. You know, that’s job satisfaction isn’t it, that elusive thing and access gives you that, d’you know? And there’s no question about it, I could do this for years and I would still get that because every year it’s a different group, d’you know?” (Chris)

“Being any part of a course like this that facilitates people who at least 50% of them come from objectively shitty situations and being any contributor to changing their lives or making that better, I think... Very cheesy but very much true and very much why I have stuck with it. Like, it’s selfish, but it’s insanely rewarding to know that you’re making some kind of difference to people.” (Sydney)

Sydney had earlier offered the view that all PhD students should get the opportunity to teach on an MSAC as her experience was that it was very beneficial with respect to developing her teaching skills. It is interesting that Sydney describes herself as feeling ‘selfish’ that she stayed teaching on the course for several years, rather than passing the responsibility on to the next PhD student after she had qualified. This feeling of ‘selfishness’ comes from wanting to hold on to experiencing that level of job satisfaction each year from knowing that she has contributed to improving her students’ lives in some small way through her teaching. This suggests that Sydney does not get that same level of job satisfaction from her other teaching experiences in her HEI.

Chris describes job satisfaction as being an ‘elusive’ feeling and that she gets that from MSAC teaching. She also feels that she would not lose that sense of job satisfaction over time as she recognises that each MSAC class is different, acknowledging again both the individuality and diversity of learners who participate in these courses. This experience may also illustrate a feeling of ‘sameness’ when teaching undergraduate classes or less visibility of student diversity therein. For Chris the personal reward and satisfaction she experiences from this work was so strong that if she felt she had a choice she would make a full-time career out of ‘access teaching’.

"I've heard people say this to access before and this was definitely my experience. Like, obviously, I'm thinking about a career, like, I'm a [name of profession] ... that was my plan when I went into access, when I started teaching access. But then, within a few years, and I'm not the only one that I've heard saying this, I was thinking, 'I love this'. This is what I want to do. I, you know, so there's part of me that would be completely like, obviously the contracts are not up to much. But if they were, if they were, I would seriously consider working in this, you know, for the rest of my working life, or for the foreseeable future. Because I just really like it." (Chris)

Sam also experiences a strong sense of job satisfaction from his MSAC teaching from the perspective that he simply enjoys this kind of work, and this is what brings him back to teach the course year after year. He also alludes to the 'elusiveness' of experiencing a real sense of job satisfaction from work.

"My attitude to work is basically this: Can I make a living in a way that I'm happy to get up in the morning? ... The dream is to have a job that you can't wait to get up the next morning. Very few people, very few people achieve that, right? So I, I'm looking at the spectrum between that and a realistic goal of being like 'yeah, I don't mind getting up tomorrow, this job is fine'. And what I do in the access course features quite highly on that spectrum in the sense that I've never dreaded for a minute or been resistant to going in and doing the job, you know. As we've already discussed, like, I actually quite enjoy it. So that's why I come back. Because it's very hard to make a living in this world doing something you enjoy. Simple as that." (Sam)

Sam is making a very clear connection here between the need to make a living and the desire to do that in a way that offers him a high level of job satisfaction and he identifies that the MSAC gives him an opportunity to do just that. Again, the fact that he is teaching adult learners rather than younger students seems to be a key element in engendering this sense of job satisfaction. However, Sam can also clearly see the value and purpose of the MSAC and suggests that his involvement with the course as a teacher has, in turn, given him a sense of purpose and belonging, which feels good.

"I think a lot of the things that go on at third level in academia, sometimes you wonder, what is the purpose of this, you know? Why has this been funded? What, what are you doing? What is, what is the point, right? But from, from early on when I started doing this job, it was obvious what the point was. There is a point to this. And it's a very good point. It's, it's a worthwhile certificate. It has ... it achieves the goals that ... it achieves its, you know, purpose. And it's worth funding. So, yeah, it's, it's, it's good to be part of something like that, you know." (Sam)

Charlie and Jody also describe their teaching experience as being very ‘rewarding’ and, as with Sam above, other participants also used the word ‘fun’ or ‘enjoyable’ to describe their experience of MSAC teaching.

“Oh, it is rewarding. Like, I felt sad at the end of second semester, first year. I was like, oh, you’d got used to everyone on a first name basis, you’re saying hello to everybody and you understand what’s going on in their life. And you’re like, ‘oh, these people are gone now. We’ve got the new group coming in now in September.’ So that was the first time that I’d actually experienced something like that too ... I’d love to keep it going for at least another year, maybe two years, we’ll see how it goes. And yeah, it’s been a rewarding experience, definitely. And yeah, it’s been good fun.” (Charlie)

“I always thought of teaching as a really thankless job. I’m not sure why. (laughs) And it is a lot of work, because it is a lot of work. But it’s very, very rewarding.” (Jody)

“I’ve managed to find something I love doing, that I seem to be reasonably good at doing and somebody’s willing to pay me to do it. So I mean, why wouldn’t I? So it’s, it’s an enjoyable, you know I’m one of the very lucky people and if you work at something you love doing then you don’t really work.” (Alex)

“I like the interaction with them. I like, you know, it’s almost having, it’s like having a bit of fun.” (Rowan)

Albeit that MSAC teaching is not a full-time role and is reported to be challenging at times, there is a sense from participants that this teaching is quite enjoyable, and participants rate it highly in terms of job satisfaction when compared with their other work or teaching experiences. These experiences suggest that much of this enjoyment stems from the fact that their students are adult learners as this makes it easier for them to develop a real connection with their students and have fun while teaching. This will be explored further in Section 6.3.

6.2.3 Observing learner growth and transformation

“As well as a knowledge of content-understanding of concepts and their relationship to the real world – the learning outcome that I came to value most was an awareness of learning itself as a transformative agent, a means of redefining an individual’s relationship with the world and thus fundamentally altering both that individual and his or her world”. (Entwistle and Walker 2000, p. 349)

Participants described witnessing instances of both ‘in the moment’ learner growth and transformation in the classroom, and observing their students’ growing self-confidence

and abilities over time, which also contributed to their experiences of job satisfaction and reward. Alex and Sydney describe the instances of 'in class' moments as 'light bulb moments' which are important motivational aspects of this work for them.

"I've learned to be good at reading people's faces while I'm, you know, as you're teaching you're looking at the sea of faces. Who gets it, who doesn't get it? Who's sat there like that [demonstrates puzzled face] and who's sat there like that [demonstrates "aha!" face]? You know, it just, a lot of the time it's more subtle than that. But there's that glow, for me, this is the reward of a teacher is to be actually looking into somebody's eyes when they get it. And you can see that all of a sudden it's gone 'click'! Something, something's fallen into place. I get a lot of that on access ... The light bulb moment ... It's a nice warm fuzzy glow. You know it's, it's the job satisfaction of the thing ... It's what gets me out of bed in the morning sort of thing." (Alex)

"It's seeing somebody 'get it'. It's my favourite thing. It's them coming in, seeing the slide and freaking out and then 20 minutes later doing it themselves and figuring it out. It's that, it's that facial expression is just why I'm gonna teach for the rest of my life. I just, or the story I told there where they all went "aaaaahhhhhhh.....!" at the same time and 'got it'. Yeah, that's, I'd do that forever." (Sydney)

Sydney goes on to say that she feels pride for her students when they experience these light bulb moments for themselves: "they have their own pride that they've done it outside of me" and that this is what gives her the greatest pleasure. Likewise, for Chris and Charlie, their sense of job satisfaction also comes with being able to observe their learners' personal growth and transformation over time. Seeing a transformation in their students is incredibly rewarding, in terms of what their students can do or in terms of how their students feel about themselves and their abilities.

"I love to see people become, realise, like I remember in that first year actually, one of my students, who was a very shy woman, got a first in this topic and she cried when I told her, d'you know? So that's obviously, you know, there's always tears in access. So that's obviously a very satisfying experience to have, to be there for somebody realising that about themselves." (Chris)

"Yeah, I think seeing them improve would be the biggest one [source of satisfaction]. For somebody, again, I keep bringing it up but to me, it's such a basic thing of never using a calculator and not being able to use a calculator and going from that to doing fairly difficult mechanics questions. So, you know it's, I think that's great." (Charlie)

Sam and Bailey also express a strong sense of satisfaction with seeing their students develop their skills and knowledge and ultimately progress onwards, and note that they can noticeably see a positive change in their learners.

"So, it's the personal side of it, as I said, that I enjoy the most, you know. Taking someone who hates maths and is scared of me and scared of the subject and scared of the book and seeing them progress, actually physically seeing them progress to someone who's confident and happy and successful. And I've seen a lot of that over the last three years and it's been great." (Sam)

"I like teaching and I like, I like people, most of them (laughs). I guess I just like teaching, you know. You get a great satisfaction out of seeing improvement and you get a great satisfaction in people moving on." (Bailey)

What is interesting to note here is that being able to observe their learners' positive progression in a very visible and tangible way by seeing them become confident and progress to undergraduate studies appears to have a bigger impact on my participants in terms of their job satisfaction than do their students' academic success. The capacity to be able to 'make a difference' to their learners and thus to be witness to these moments of transformation and growth is suggested to be facilitated by the ethos of the course itself, the learners that participate on the course, and the connection that develops between teachers and learners. Again, this will be explored further in Section 6.3.

6.2.4 "Anti-teaching"

Sydney offers a very powerful comment on her MSAC teaching experience when she describes it as being like "anti-teaching".

"I think anybody who knows about it [the course] immediately warms to it. I think that's, it has an aura ... The personal rewards of going through it are great. Yeah, and I think all the students being genuine is like, and I think I've heard other tutors say that as well, like, it's literally a break from your other teaching. It's like 'anti-teaching' in terms of, you know, as a PhD student if you have your normal tutorials and your two hours of mature student teaching, you look forward to those two hours because they're a break from the other teaching that you're doing." (Sydney)

Sydney describes MSAC teaching as being like a 'break from your other teaching' implying that teaching undergraduate classes is not as enjoyable an experience for her as her MSAC teaching. This perspective encapsulates many of the feelings already described above by other participants with respect to enjoyment, reward and satisfaction. While not stated directly why this is, there are different factors which could be posited to contribute to the strong sense of enjoyment that participants experience

from MSAC teaching. Amongst these is that MSAC teachers have greater opportunity to observe their students' progression and enjoyment of learning than they do on undergraduate programmes. I suggest that this is both to do with the smaller size of the classes and the fact that MSAC students are adult learners, thus creating the conditions and opportunity for teachers to engage more directly with their learners.

For Sam, the impact of his MSAC teaching experiences was also profound, however in a different way. He expresses that he had reached a place where he was no longer enjoying second-level teaching and therefore had become a 'reluctant teacher'. Teaching on the MSAC effectively restored his faith and confidence in his own ability to teach and restored his enjoyment in his chosen career.

"This experience over the last few years has really made me love the job [teaching] for the first time, you know, because, I suppose when I first got into it, and certainly when I was doing it full-time at second-level, I was, you know, I was good at the job but I was a reluctant teacher in a way because I just didn't enjoy it. It was, I found it very, very tiring, quite boring. Not boring, but unstimulating because it was the same every year. And I suppose I didn't really appreciate the side of it we're talking about now ... I didn't realise, 'oh, I actually made a difference to these people'". (Sam)

He subsequently goes on to say that this is partly because the "performance in a mature student class is far more relaxed and you can be far more yourself ... you're playing yourself almost, you know, which is a lot less tiring".

These observations by both Sydney and Sam are striking because they imply that other teaching that they do, or have done, is not as enjoyable, or that the enjoyment of that teaching does not last, and both of these participants had revealed that they had been interested in teaching as a career from an early age. These experiences and feelings are personal to these participants and therefore it cannot be suggested that this would be the case for anyone else in a teaching position. However, while their other teaching experiences are distinctly different from each other – undergraduate and second-level teaching – the sentiments expressed by Sydney and Sam indicate that there is something about MSAC teaching which distinguishes it from more general and mainstream teaching experiences in a positive way.

6.2.5 Receiving student feedback

“To matter is to feel we have a place in others’ lives and our presence makes a difference to them” (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981, cited Schwartz, 2019, p. 217).

All of my participants gave examples of positive feedback that they had received from their students with respect to their teaching and their experience on the course more broadly. This feedback means a lot to the teachers and is reinforcement for them of the positive work that they are doing and of the value of MSAC participation to their students.

“Oh yeah, it’s great to get ‘thank yous’ and like, if I look through the emails they’re saying ‘thank you so much’ you know, this kind of stuff.” (Charlie)

“Yeah, to get the feedback ... ‘I’m a mature student, I hadn’t used the computer ever in my life before I started the access course. And now other students, young kids, are asking me to help them, you know, with their projects and assignments and how to use the tools and everything’, you know? So that’s when I go ‘yes, this is perfect, you know, this is what the course is all about.” (Rowan)

“It’s a real boost to the confidence because you know you’ve helped someone. And you know that they have enough respect for you to stop and talk to you, which means that you must have made some kind of positive impression on them in the time you spent together. And, you know, they often say nice things that, you know, the thing I hear most often is ‘you made me like maths, you know, which is a big achievement! (laughs)” (Sam)

“They’re always so lovely. I just remember even, that year, like at the end of their lab reports they’d write little notes being like ‘thank you for being such a great teacher’, ‘thank you for helping’, like coming up to Christmas. And it’s just, you know, you don’t get that from undergraduate students.” (Sydney)

“On the last night that I was teaching, you know, everybody was so nice and saying such nice things that I saved the whole chat, because everybody was just so sweet to me. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I honestly, I was so moved. Yeah, it was just incredible. Like, such an affirming experience.” (Jody)

These experiences infer that receiving direct and positive feedback from students is appreciated by my participants just as much as observing their students’ progress, growth and achievements. These experiences speak to the personal and direct connection that participants were able to develop with their MSAC students as receiving this feedback is an indication of the informal and friendly relationships that develop between students and teachers.

6.3 Relationality and connection

“Education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings” (Biesta, 2013, p. 1)

In adult education the kind of teacher-learner relationship that unfolds is suggested to be critical to a successful learning experience for adult learners (Johnston et al., 2015). What is less explored however, is how teachers experience this relationship for themselves and particularly in the context of MSACs. This section will highlight and explore the more explicit relational aspects of the teaching experience (already a clear thread throughout their related experiences so far) which emerged from conversations with my participants and what having a meaningful connection with their learners meant to them, professionally and personally.

The nature and size of MSAC classes offers teachers the ability to interact at a more personal level with their students than would be possible in large undergraduate classes. Therefore, class size is important in facilitating a level of personal relationship to be created between teachers and students:

“It’s also a smallish group and I meet them for two to three hours, usually I physically meet them for two to three hours a week for 12 weeks a semester, over two semesters. So there’s a whole relationship built up over the course.” (Alex)

“Teaching on the access course is much more personal. You know who these people are, you know them well ... you know who they are even from just observing them you get an understanding of, you know, what this person wants out of this course.” (Leslie)

“Some of the classes that I taught at undergrad level there’s a hundred students in them. You can’t get to know people when there’s a hundred students...You only know them as a number really, as a student number ... So you do have that interaction with the access, because the numbers are quite manageable.” (Bailey)

Many of my participants acknowledged that they experienced their relationship with their MSAC students as one in which they treated each other much more as equals compared to other kinds of teacher-learner relationships they had experienced. This is described by Johnston et al. (2015, p. 40) as having an egalitarianism and respect in the relationship between higher education teaching staff and adult learners and one in which there is “an absence of hierarchies” that might otherwise be found or displayed

in higher education teaching. Sydney highlights this from the perspective of how she works with her students in the classroom while Alex highlights this from a more social perspective:

“There’s just a great connection between the group and the tutor because it’s such, I think it’s much more of a joint endeavour than normal teaching. And there’s like this understanding that you and them are working together to help them. So I think there’s always an instant click, I think, that I’ve had with every group. It’s just everybody knows why they’re there. And there’s a bit more, yeah, a nice ethos in the room.” (Sydney)

“With the other teaching I do in the [Name of academic dept] it’s much bigger groups, it’s usually only for an hour, there’s usually only 10 of them per semester. So you don’t build up the same relationship, you know. There’s a whole social element to the access classes that isn’t really there in the undergraduate teaching.” (Alex)

This was also experienced by Sam in terms of how he interacted with his learners in the classroom.

“It’s a relationship of equals and there’s a, there’s a real camaraderie there as well. And there’s more, there’s you know, everyone’s at ease with each other for the most part and I can just kind of, I can have a laugh while also, you know, doing some good teaching.” (Sam)

For Sam, this is more to do with not having a duty of care to adult learners in the same way that he may have with younger students in school and thus being able to be more at ease when teaching his learners.

“I have a duty of care to an adult class in the sense that I feel the responsibility to help them to do well very keenly. But I don’t have to mind them. You know, I’m not ‘in loco parentis’ in an adult class. Whereas when I’m with kids, I also feel the responsibility to take care of them very keenly. Now, we’ve already discussed it, I do try and take care of an adult class to some extent in that I try to ease their anxiety, but it’s different. I don’t have to mind them ... I can walk in as an equal and I don’t have to be a parental figure.” (Sam)

Sam is highlighting that the teacher-learner relationship experienced on an MSAC is quite different to that which is typically experienced in a second-level school, particularly from a ‘care’ perspective and highlights the difference in a teaching context between ‘caring about’ and ‘caring for’ when working with adult learners versus younger students (Noddings, 1992; Tronto, 1998). There is a recognition that there is greater equality in the MSAC teacher-student relationship, partly because both teacher and learner recognise each other as adults, but also because of the ethos of the programme

itself and the capacity it offers to both teacher and learner to develop that relationship due to the smaller class size (as per Alex's comment). This in turn results in my participants having a more enjoyable teaching experience. By and large, the participants described the teacher-student relationship as being one of mutual respect and understanding and is one which underpinned their positive conceptions of their work.

All the participants articulated generally positive sentiments with respect to the relationship they build up with their students. Many of the teachers intimated that the fact that they were teaching adults meant that they were able to develop a good rapport and thus their teaching experience was ultimately more enjoyable because of this relationship.

"My preference is for teaching adults. Simply because, as a result of what we've just discussed, being able to be more at ease and having that additional layer of responsibility stripped away. It's a lot less sapping and a lot more enjoyable." (Sam)

"I would definitely prefer the adults... I do. I prefer the adults when they come in, they're somewhat more committed. A lot of the younger ones aren't. They, they're here, but they're not really present if you know what I mean." (Bailey)

Alex points out that in conversations he has had with academic colleagues about their experiences of being a third level teacher, it was generally agreed that they enjoyed having mature students in their classes, so this preference for teaching adult learners wasn't necessarily unique to MSAC classes.

"What you do on the first day you walk into that lecture theatre for the first lecture in a course with a new group, nearly everybody will say they scan the sea of faces for the mature students ... Because they know the mature students will turn up, will attend, will ask questions, will study, will do the assignments, and will probably pass." (Alex)

Sydney describes it as being "on common ground" with her students.

"it's just easier to talk before and after lectures and kind of be on common ground. But yeah, everybody was just always so open about if they were struggling or if they were loving it."

Sydney also identified her ability to connect with MSAC students as in part arising from her own personal experiences of "having a hard time of it growing up" and also "doing a very difficult science undergrad". She talks of the importance for her of receiving financial support to stay in college and acknowledged the

“stress of kind of knowing that you need to do well to stay and that you’re kind of dependent on doing well and that level of vulnerability I would think (is) probably why I connected with a lot of them as well.”

This observation by Sydney suggests that she recognises elements of her own personal experiences in her students and that this recognition is important in allowing that connection and relationship to grow and evolve.

Further evidence of the personal connection that can develop between MSAC students and teachers during the course of a one-year programme was indicated in some of the examples given by my participants of that fact that this connection did not necessarily dissipate after the programme had ended. Rowan states that “your relationship with them goes on.”

“I’m constantly in touch with them, d’you know, they email me asking me for this or that and I’m always there for them. Yeah, so that’s another thing. Another philosophy I have is to be there for them even afterwards, d’you know?” (Rowan)

“I suppose, through being in [NAME of HEI] and being, like, teaching as a TA to see them come through every year. I love to see them in first year labs and to be told they’re getting good lab marks ... Yeah, even seeing them around or even like, it sounds silly but day-to-day, like walking into a lab to talk to another TA and just seeing them there during the experiment is just a nice check-in and they’re all great for waving and catching up.” (Sydney)

“I have met a number of them as they go forward and I’ve been approached to supervise final year projects from some of the students that have gone through my hands earlier ... I’m always delighted to hear from them again. It’s nice to see them. What’s really nice is to see how they’ve changed.” (Leslie)

“They’d still look for your advice because you were their first advisor.” (Leslie)

These experiences resonate with Finnegan’s and Fleming’s (2011a) findings that when a tutor or staff member shows faith or interest in a non-traditional student’s ability, it can be integral to the student’s progression and success in higher education, noting that, for students, “the relationship with the significant other was seen as particularly important even if the learner was no longer in contact with the person” (ibid., p. 8).

What is emerging from this theme is the sense that the relationship or connection that develops between teacher and learner in this teaching context facilitates the creation of a depth of meaning and value for teachers in the teaching experience. Given that the contact time most teachers have on these courses is quite limited over the course of the year (e.g. two to three hours a week), the experiences and feelings related by the teachers with respect to these relationships are notably positive. While this is not necessarily unique in many education settings, it could be suggested that this kind of relational teaching experience is reasonably unique in higher education, particularly when compared with teaching on large undergraduate programmes, and as has been identified by some of my participants.

6.3.1 *Impact of Covid*

“Covid-19 has pushed aside some of the heartwarming, relational positives for teaching and replaced them with stress, increased demands, and worry about student safety.” (Jones and Kessler 2020, p. 2)

The interviews for this research took place during the first twelve months of the Covid-19 pandemic when HEIs, like most other educational institutions, were still engaged in emergency remote teaching. Therefore, it was relevant to explore what impact Covid had on my participants’ experiences of MSAC teaching in the context of changing “their spatial and relational interactions into a computer or phone screen” (Bennett et al., 2022, p. 1663). While not all participants reported experiencing the online teaching environment to be negative, most did express the fact that online teaching had a negative impact on their capacity to develop the same kinds of relationships and interactions with their students that would normally be possible in a face-to-face class.

“The only thing I find hard is that sometimes when you’re saying something, was it just the referencing comes to mind because it seems to be hard for people to grasp, and you could be in a classroom and you’d have people looking at you with the ‘deer in the headlight’ look. So you know, so I just have to keep asking them, ‘are you with me?’ ... I’m doing the best I can. I think they have been terrific. Really terrific.” (Bailey)

“(Sighs) I have to say, I was challenged by that because my, I think my strength as a teacher is being able to interact with human beings and being able to build relationships. And that has been, of course, decimated ... So I haven’t seen a lot of my students apart from in a brief minute or two interaction at a feedback session. Because I don’t see them on the screen, I don’t see their faces ... So mostly they’re either, I hear their voices or they

interact with me in the chat. So it took me a lot longer to get an idea of who they were.”
(Chris)

“Tiring is what I’d say. So this semester is very tiring doing the online lectures. When you don’t get, when you can’t see people’s faces it becomes very difficult. Getting instantaneous feedback is difficult as well. If you say something in a lecture and then somebody just goes ‘why?’, that’s great, that’s something to bounce off. If it’s just a text box that’s not really, you know, that doesn’t do the same.” (Charlie)

The quotes above highlight how teaching online impacted my participants’ ability to be able to identify when individual students were struggling, with participants acknowledging the value of being able to read students’ faces when they are in a physical classroom. This resulted in some frustration being experienced by participants in terms of not getting that same feeling of being able to bring students along with them in an online environment as they would experience in a face-to-face class.

Connection and seeing students succeed is more important to many of the participants than covering course content and is also identified as being important for their enjoyment of their work.

“I think there’s less, kind of, ‘in the moment’ reward from it, like personally, in terms of, yeah, like seeing them ‘get it’ ... It really was the human aspect. I think the content is fine. But I think, like we said, sometimes the content is secondary.” (Sydney)

“What I enjoy the most? Well, I suppose it’s been taken away from me in the last, in the last eight months hasn’t it? The interaction with the students is the best bit. And it’s a shame. But I think I’ve done the best I can in that environment. We’ve maintained interaction to some extent but, yeah, it’s been far less enjoyable because you’re just talking to a screen and it’s very impersonal.” (Sam)

“But yeah, even like dragging out, trying to get them to post like ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in a chat box is just (sighs) ... yeah, yeah ... Like I said, so much of why I like it and why I do it is to see them grow and start to enjoy it and start to understand and to see those little moments and to not even see them at all, is just yeah, is difficult.” (Sydney)

Jody described her online teaching experience as being like “talking to yourself” and she missed “a lot of the spark of teaching live.” Likewise for Alex:

“Usually, I physically meet them two to three hours a week for 12 weeks a semester, over two semesters. So, there’s a whole relationship built up over the course. Now that is strange this year, that relationship is not the same this year ... (I am) missing that visual connection. It’s really, it’s been really hard for me.” (Alex)

There is an element of disappointment and frustration emerging from these descriptions with participants expressing the fact that their MSAC teaching became less enjoyable as a consequence of having to teach online. Participants describe a teaching environment which has to some extent been depersonalised and which creates a distance between them and their students in which it is difficult to maintain the same level of engagement as before. It also engenders feelings of uncertainty for the teachers as to the effectiveness of their work as they are less sure of how their students are coping in an online environment due to the absence of the visual and non-verbal cues that would normally be evident in a physical classroom. Jody points out that “the people who struggle you just don’t know”, while Sydney states that “that’s been tough ... not getting their feedback even if they’re struggling, or only if they’re very much struggling.” Participants therefore reported experiencing the online teaching environment as being uncomfortable, tiring, less enjoyable and to some extent less effective with respect to their ability to be able to give their learners the level of support that they would normally be able to offer.

In order to try to maintain some level of personal interaction with their students, many of the MSAC teachers opted to emulate face-to-face classes online as best they could, rather than going with a ‘flipped classroom’ approach i.e. recording their lectures and meeting students online afterwards to discuss the lecture content.

“I was encouraged to use a flipped classroom approach at the start, and I just don’t see how that would work. So, I tried it for the first week and then I gave my students an option between flipped classroom or me just kind of delivering the lecture and having a discussion afterwards, like what I would do in a normal classroom and they like, unanimously chose that option, which meant I wouldn’t be recording separate content for them.” (Chris)

“I deliberately didn’t record them. Because for me, I don’t record my lectures when I’m in university. I put Powerpoints up and they’ll have to manage. If they don’t want to come to class or can’t come to class they’ll have to look at the Powerpoints but they can ask me, you know. So, I kind of did that deliberately. I did that deliberately. Because I just felt that it was more realistic, you know, and I’m sticking to that now ... it’s a live lecture for heaven’s sake, it’s the same basically. And they, I find they are interrupting me, and they are asking questions.” (Bailey)

“And that’s another thing, you know, I liked to do my lectures live. I didn’t really want to record them because I wanted them to have the opportunity to ask questions. I think that’s very important.” (Jody)

These comments demonstrate the importance to my participants of creating opportunities to directly engage with their learners in the online environment – both from the point of view of being better able to support their students, and for their own enjoyment of their work. The capacity for the teachers to accommodate this approach could be suggested to be supported by the fact that MSAC classes are significantly smaller than many undergraduate classes. The teachers recognised the inherent distance that exists in an online teaching environment and sought to bridge that distance by maintaining a level of personal connection in their classes by doing ‘live’ lectures. This indicates that the MSAC teachers continued to adopt a relational and participatory approach to their teaching as best they could in an effort to remain true to the values and ethos of the course.

On the upside, some of the participants identified aspects of their online MSAC teaching which allowed them to develop different teaching approaches and skills. For example, Sydney was able to do lab simulations which worked well in teaching students how to do a lab report. She also identified the benefits of being able to record her live online lectures so that they were available for students afterwards and using quizzes which “I’m always going to do for everything I do for the rest of forever, is just mini quizzes after each lecture” for the opportunity that these gave students to reflect on what they had learned in each class. Bailey and Leslie identified that their own IT skills had improved considerably as a result of having to teach online while Jody suggested that if students feel intimidated “I think online delivery makes it easier for somebody to just type a question without feeling judged.”

Jody also found that students still proactively engaged in her classes, and they discussed interesting and important topics. She offers the view that this was down to the fact that these were adult learners who were comfortable engaging in discussion with their teacher and again, the small size of the class made holding an online discussion much easier. Notably Jody observes:

"If I were to choose between teaching online mature students or teaching live undergraduates, I would pick the online mature students ... they are super interested, they ask questions."

Regardless of the benefits or challenges experienced in online teaching, participants' responses illustrate that they remained mindful of their students' personal circumstances recognising that some students were not necessarily able to engage fully in an online environment. Therefore, they sought not to place unrealistic demands on their students and maintained a concern for their students' welfare and a respect for their personal circumstances.

"I like, from the off I was like, I'm not going to make them turn on their cameras. You know, again, we have people in direct provision, I don't want to say that people have to have their cameras on. But then that meant that nobody has their cameras on." (Sydney)

"... if they don't if they're not able to, or they're not willing or not able to participate with the microphone or camera, that's okay, too." (Charlie)

This section demonstrates that participants did everything they could to uphold the values and ethos of the MSAC programmes and their learner-centred teaching practices in an online environment. It also highlights the importance and value to the participants of maintaining the relational aspect of their teaching in an online teaching space. The experiences of these MSAC teachers during Covid therefore has possibly highlighted more strongly how important and valuable the relational element of MSAC teaching is, not just for students but also for the teachers' own enjoyment and feeling of fulfilment in their work. It is also indicative of the strong values and level of commitment that MSAC teachers bring to this work.

6.4 Summary of 'Reward and relationship'

"I think it's fairly obvious I like teaching it. I get a sense of satisfaction out of it. If I stop getting a sense of satisfaction out of it, I won't do it anymore. I do it because I love it. That's why I do it." (Leslie)

This theme explored findings from my research which related to the interconnected aspects of reward and relationship that participants shared with respect to their MSAC teaching experiences. There is a strong theme of relationality and connection emerging from these findings and the depth of positive and impactful feeling which arises as a

result of their MSAC teaching experiences was also strongly evident amongst participants in this study. The positive experiences related led to what could be described as intrinsic and intangible rewards, expressed as high levels of job satisfaction and enjoyment, growing confidence and belief in oneself as a teacher, and the joy of observing the growth and transformation of their students. These positive experiences could be suggested to be partly related to the ethos and purpose of the MSAC courses which resonate with participants' own personal and professional values.

It is also clear that there is a real strength of feeling expressed around the connection and relationship that my participants develop in working with their MSAC learners. This sense of connection and relationship seems to have developed for all participants despite the fact that they only work with these learners over a short period of time. The fact that they are working with their learners in small class sizes undoubtedly has a significant positive impact on their ability to develop that closer connection. As their learners are adults, participants' responses suggest that they can work with them and relate to them on a more equal basis and while they care about their learners, they do not have to care 'for them' as might be the case when teaching younger students. They can have fun with their learners while still doing good work; their classes are interactive, and my participants report getting significant pleasure in seeing their students succeed and progress on to undergraduate education. The importance of this relationship and connection to the teachers themselves is also evident when they describe their experiences of teaching online during Covid. The contrast provided by this depersonalised environment makes the importance and value of relationality within the 'normal' teaching experience even more evident.

Chapter Seven: Teaching below the radar

“I have a funny feeling some of them don’t even know it exists, you know, or it’s very low on the radar.” (Bailey)

7.1 Introduction

This theme explores my participants’ perceptions of the level of awareness of their teaching work more generally within their HEI. ‘Radar’ in this context refers to the broader awareness and visibility of MSAC courses within the institution and therefore to their perceived status of access courses. The ‘radar’ also marks the point at which the visibility and recognition of the MSAC teachers themselves as teaching staff within the institution is called into question.

The theme of ‘teaching below the radar’ presents mixed perspectives from participants and so I will consider this theme from two standpoints. Firstly, participants’ impressions of the visibility of the MSAC within their own institution encompassing both their own perception of the programme’s visibility and how they experience wider institutional awareness of the programme. The second interrelated perspective presents how teachers experience the visibility of their MSAC teaching roles within the institution and is connected to issues such as contractual status and organisational belonging. In these respects, this theme explores findings that relate to how my participants experience working relationships more broadly within the institution both with respect to their own status and that of the MSAC programme itself.

7.2 Awareness of mature student access courses

7.2.1 Participants’ own awareness of MSAC

In Chapter Two I introduced access courses and the positioning of access work more generally in Irish higher education. While national policy advocates that equity of access and participation requires a ‘whole of institution’ (HEA, 2015) as well as a ‘whole of system’ (HEA, 2022a) approach, HEIs are mandated to provide dedicated services to support the participation of under-represented students. The institutional location of

access course provision as a pre-entry or transition support to these students, varies from institution to institution. However, in the HEIs in which my research was carried out these courses are fully within the responsibility of professional services i.e. Access Services and not academic departments. Participants who teach on the access courses within this study include PhD students, 'casual' (i.e. hourly-paid) teachers, staff with part-time teaching contracts and one full-time post-doctoral researcher, who had originally started teaching on the MSAC as a PhD student. All but one of the participants had themselves been a student in the HEI in which they were now teaching and of these, six of the nine participants had returned to education as a mature student in their HEI.

As outlined in Chapter Five, some of the participants had heard of the MSAC before they started teaching on the course, but others had not been aware of it until the opportunity to teach on it came to their attention, primarily via word of mouth from academic colleagues or PhD student peers. Of the six participants who had entered higher education as mature students in their HEIs, only one (Jody) had been aware of the MSAC as an access route at the time they took up their degree place and that was because she had completed the course herself. Of the other participants who had been mature students, some suggested that they probably wouldn't have needed to do an access course as they had felt ready to commence a degree at the time or because the MSAC was not being delivered at the time they had started their third-level studies. Nonetheless, most participants expressed surprise that they had not been aware of the course when they had been a mature student or that they only became aware of it when they met other mature students on their degree who had come through that route.

"I came back as a mature student and I came the normal mature student route which was to go straight into Semester One. But I didn't know that there was a preparation course for a year before you start Semester One." (Rowan)

"I still had all my O and A level certificates and things like that. So I had you know, I didn't need Access. Plus I had a background in various mathematical/computer activities ... I certainly noticed that when I started, there was this well-bonded group of mutually supportive mature students who'd all come through the access course." (Alex)

"I had come into the university myself through the evening degree programme ... and at that point I was not aware that there was an access course ... it wasn't on my radar anyway." (Leslie)

There was a similar lack of awareness amongst MSAC teachers who had not studied as mature students. Sam had been aware that mature student places were offered in his HEI to adult learners, however he had not been aware of the mature student access course, while Sydney “hadn’t heard of the mature student side” of Access Service supports. Charlie stated that:

“I didn’t fully know how involved the access course is in [NAME of HEI] and how many people it does look after.” (Charlie)

This has often been my own experience of working with mature students in higher education, having met many mature students in first year who wish that they had completed an MSAC before taking up their place on a degree course. Not all prospective mature students will seek guidance or advice from the Mature Student Office or Access Service, or from other institutional or external advisory services before they apply for third-level education, and so they may not become aware of the availability of a preparatory course which could support them in their transition to higher education. This is borne out by the lack of prior awareness of the MSACs amongst most of the participants in this study who had been mature students themselves. Although we cannot infer that these participants had not sought guidance or advice prior to starting their studies, there is merit in reflecting on what can be inferred more generally from this experience of the status of MSACs within these HEIs. This will be addressed further in my discussion chapter.

7.2.2 Participants’ awareness of an ‘access agenda’

Participants were invited to comment on their awareness of institutional and national strategic priorities around equity of access to higher education in the context of how they perceived their own professional contribution to equity of access objectives through their MSAC teaching. Some of my participants suggested a tentative awareness, at most, of a ‘higher’ access agenda within which their MSAC teaching was positioned. Comments such as those offered by Bailey and Charlie demonstrate this limited awareness.

“I really don’t believe I have ever perceived what I do as a ‘contribution’ to an ‘access agenda’. Similarly, the idea of my work as part of a ‘bigger picture’ is not something that

I have ever thought about. For me, I am just teaching a subject and most of the time the fact that I am working with mature students does not really cross my mind.” (Bailey)

“So, I guess if you’re talking about trying to get more under-represented groups, that’s really what the access course is. So, I’m helping these people get in. So that would be my role. So, if you want to go bigger, it would be like helping society and stuff like that, but I don’t really see it, you know, that much? No, it’s just, I’m there, helping people out. (Charlie)

For Bailey and Charlie, the primary focus of their MSAC work was their roles as teachers in supporting their students to engage in education, as opposed to being concerned with how their work contributed to a higher education access agenda or to institutional strategy. On the other hand, Chris and Sam articulated a clearer awareness of how their MSAC teaching contributed to broader equality agendas.

“... I can tell you that equality is the guiding principle of our times, and this [the MSAC] is one of our biggest efforts towards equality. ... It’s really important work to bring the under-represented into third level. I think it’s one of the most important things we do as a society to be honest.” (Chris)

“Let’s face it, we’re also contributing to the retention of students that may otherwise not make it to third level ... So, we’re kind of, we’re doing a bit for, you know I’m a big believer in equality of opportunity, you know, we’re striking a blow for that as well.” (Sam)

What is interesting here is that both Chris and Sam had had experience of socio-economic disadvantage, albeit in different contexts. Chris admitted that she had not been able to afford to attend college after her Leaving Certificate and thus did not attend “for socio-economic reasons” and therefore could be suggested to be more attuned to the importance of equality of opportunity initiatives in higher education. Sam had taught in a second level DEIS⁴⁷ school and therefore may have had more of an awareness of the challenges that students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds experience in progressing to higher education. There is an element here of recognising the struggles of others or of having a shared culture or experience with students which may lend itself to their broader awareness of the value and importance of equity of access work. In fact, Chris’ own espoused commitment to equality of opportunity in higher education goes so far as for her to offer the view that if it were financially viable, supporting under-

⁴⁷ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) - <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/4018ea-deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/#>

represented students to access higher education through her teaching work is something that she would proactively choose as a career.

“Because yeah I would. Why wouldn’t I ...? Really, I would love to do that. And you can do that in the UK ... So, I don’t see why it is here ... [the MSAC] is one of our biggest efforts towards equality. And yet it is treated in a completely different way.” (Chris)

This work clearly resonates strongly with Chris’ personal values both as a human being and as a teacher. She alludes to the education system in the UK (as presented in Chapter Two) in which access courses are mainstreamed and formally recognised such that they offer viable and recognised professional teaching opportunities. In general, however, participants’ awareness of the contribution of their MSAC teaching to an ‘access agenda’ seems to rest primarily at the level of working ‘on the ground’ with their students, through facilitating increased student confidence and ultimately contributing to student retention, as outlined in Chapter Five.

7.2.3 Academic colleagues’ awareness of MSAC

Participants were invited to offer their views on how they perceived the extent of academic colleagues’ awareness of the MSAC and of its broader purpose. The sense that is shared by participants is that there is in fact a low level of awareness amongst academic staff in both HEIs of these courses, although it cannot be suggested that this is universal across all staff or departments.

“I know myself there’s been Heads [of departments] there that don’t even know about it ... I don’t think it’s on anybody’s radar in officialdom of the department ... I have to say I don’t think it’s on anybody’s radar. Now, that’s just my own personal experience.” (Bailey)

Bailey’s comment is interesting as she also expressed that she was unclear who had originally ‘approved’ her to teach on the MSAC when she had just completed her PhD, possibly indicating that her assumption at the time was that all teaching in her subject was assigned and approved by the academic department in which she had been undertaking her PhD. However, over time her perception changed, and she subsequently related an experience of meeting an administrator from her original academic department who:

"... said to me, 'are you still here'? (laughs) And I said to myself, 'right, they haven't got a, they have no idea. (laughs)'" (Bailey)

Bailey is expressing a tangible experience of MSAC teaching being both positioned and considered as distinctly separate from an academic department and a lack of awareness – bordering on an invisibility – amongst academic colleagues of her role as an MSAC teacher as well as of the course itself. As a 'casual hours' teacher this disconnect might be expected particularly as, over time, her only teaching in this institution was on the MSAC and thus her employment contract was solely with the institution's Access Service.

By virtue of the fact that they are engaged in research programmes, PhD students have more direct connections with academic departments and the experiences of those participants in both HEIs indicate that there was some awareness amongst their research supervisors or academic colleagues of the MSAC. However, that awareness came primarily from the fact that their academic colleagues knew these participants were doing some teaching hours on the course, rather than there necessarily being any practical connection between the academic department and the course itself. Other than that, there appeared to be little interest amongst academic staff in the MSAC or in the experience or teaching opportunity it offered the participant.

"If you're talking about my supervisors, they know I'm teaching this, they're happy out that I'm doing this ... I don't know if there'd be that much more integration beyond that." (Charlie)

"I think it's actually been the last couple of weeks since I've said that I'm leaving (laughs) that the recognition has started to be said. Yeah, like I said, because I've stayed in [NAME of HEI] I suppose it's been recognized, like through them acknowledging that I have this experience and that it's a strength of mine. And I think people are aware of that. Yeah, since saying that I'm handing it over there's been a lot of higher ups being like ... 'I haven't had to worry about this in years. What's this again?' (laughs) So from that perspective there's been an acknowledgement of, of me handling it and me not having to annoy anybody else with any problems!" (Sydney)

"In terms of, you know, for having worked for the students, then I'm absolutely delighted to have, to have done it. Yeah, yeah, no, I don't think [NAME of HEI] recognizes really, a lot of the work that's done in there. I don't know." (Jody)

The views expressed by each of these participants differ to some degree. Charlie reveals that there is little integration or connection between his MSAC teaching and his other teaching and research work within his department. Sydney's situation is slightly different as her module was 'owned' by an academic department in her HEI, albeit taught by PhD students. Her experience suggests that because she proactively took responsibility for teaching and co-ordinating the MSAC module in her HEI, her academic colleagues didn't have to worry or think about the programme, to the extent that they almost forgot about it. Jody's perception as a relatively new PhD student, albeit as someone who had completed the MSAC themselves, was that colleagues in the wider institution didn't recognise or acknowledge much of the work done by Access Services or on the MSAC.

Other participants experienced a sense of the MSAC being disconnected from academic departments, not just for themselves as teachers but for their students. Rowan expressed the view that he would have welcomed greater integration between his MSAC work and academic departments from the perspective that he wanted to offer the best experience that he possibly could to his students.

"Yeah, there wouldn't be that much contact in those kinds of ways, between me and the academic world. So I wouldn't, I wouldn't get ... which would be great if I did, you know, get pinged by the science department, or pinged by the IT department, or by the social sciences department, and go 'hey Rowan, you've brought about 20, a cohort of 20 mature students along their journey into year one, and we're teaching them now and they're saying, you know, that the access course really helped them. And they're now helping the other students who are lost. We really think it's great what you're doing, keep up the good work. Could you maybe perhaps, integrate a bit of this, this, this into your teaching?' And I would look at it and go, 'absolutely, thank you, because like, you know, I'm hearing something that you guys need for the first time'. And I would gladly put it into the teaching so as to prepare them for whatever it is that the arts department wants us to push in the access course, or the science department." (Rowan)

Rowan suggests that part of the reason for this lack of connection between the MSAC and academic departments was down to organisational structures and the fact that responsibility for delivery of the course lay with the Access Service and not with an academic department.

"It's down to that structures is the main thing ... All academics are under high pressure and the last thing that they have time for now is something like this. And it would be

good for building in the long term, but tutors or academic lecturers, they kind of need everything what's now important, you know that [the MSAC] wouldn't be something on the top of their list." (Rowan)

Rowan understands the significant workloads that are placed on academic staff in higher education and perceives therefore that they don't have time "for something like this", which is suggestive of his opinion that courses like the MSAC are ascribed a different status or priority within assigned academic teaching responsibilities. Although this is only one perspective, it is one which merits reflection as it has been posited that equity of access is – or should be – "everybody's business" (HEA, 2015) in higher education. If academic staff don't 'have time', or are not allocated time, to engage in teaching which goes to the heart of equality, diversity and inclusion, it begs the question as to how access and widening participation as national and institutional priorities are truly considered.

Charlie gives a little more insight into how this perspective on access courses may have become ingrained when he states that:

"access course students had a tougher time a few years ago, where they weren't being seen as full students. But I think they have really improved all that. They've got their student numbers. They can access the support schemes in [NAME of HEI]. So, in that case I think [NAME of HEI] does see the strength in the access course."

This suggestion that access course students had not been seen as "full students" in the past in that HEI is indicative of the legacy status of the course within the HEI of which the teachers themselves are navigating with respect to their own recognition of the value of this work. Alex adds to this view with his frank opinion on how he perceives the status of access work and teaching within his HEI.

"Well, on one level, if it's, there would certainly be some thread of well, if it isn't in one of the schools, it's not [NAME of HEI]. That the whole Access Office thing is a bit of an adjunct. It's not central to the core mission. That, there would certainly be a thread of that. But at the same time most lecturers want more mature students, they like mature students ... How deep that goes within [NAME of HEI], I'm not sure. There's certainly sections of [NAME of HEI] that would feel it passionately. And there's other sections I think are probably quite indifferent, not even, it's just not a factor. Rather than being opposed, it's more apathetic." (Alex)

Alex's comments are worth noting as being a part-time staff member he also teaches on undergraduate courses and therefore has a stronger connection to an academic department than some of my other participants. His comments relate more to his perception of the status of access work as opposed to the level of awareness of access work or of the MSAC within his HEI, although one could posit that these elements are interrelated. Again, the positioning of the MSACs within Access Services as opposed to within faculties in both HEIs could be suggested to mean that the courses don't generally feature highly on the 'radar' of faculties or academic department staff. This positioning also seems to result in limited opportunities for many of the MSAC teachers to interact with academic colleagues unless they were engaged in other teaching within the institution or unless they were PhD students enrolled in an academic department.

It is also interesting to note how a few participants report that they themselves, and their MSAC teaching, are perceived by academic colleagues particularly with regard to expectations that they should have "moved on" in the academic world.

"I wouldn't even say we're considered ... as evidenced by [academic colleague's] reaction when she said "Oh, you're still here?" (laughs), you know? "You still doing that access thing?"" (Bailey)

"...this woman I know that teaches on XXXX, I said to her that I was teaching access, and she went "awww" (pitying tone) ... Because like, it's almost like an admission of failure in certain circles, isn't it, because I'm not lecturing ... it's a bit of a crisis ... a bit of dissonance in me around that, d'you know what I mean? So, in one way I can't wait to get out of access but it's got nothing to do with my job in access. It's to do with the fact that I should be doing something else now ... But I feel that something I would like to do is undervalued and therefore I can't do it." (Chris)

The comments above imply that MSAC teaching is perceived by some academic staff merely as a 'stepping-stone' to more highly regarded academic teaching work. Chris' comment above resonates with the sense of being perceived as a "second-class citizen" (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019) with respect to the status of access teaching work amongst academic colleagues within her HEI. This creates a tension in her, not just with regard to her own personal situation but also with respect to how she perceives access work more generally is regarded within her HEI, particularly when she herself expresses such a strong personal commitment to the core principles of equality of opportunity in higher

education. Equally, the comment made to Bailey that she was still doing “that access thing” implies a dismissive perception of MSAC teaching and that perhaps this teaching work should only be allocated to early career academics i.e. that it does not merit consideration as a valid teaching role for full-time academic staff or lecturers.

7.3 Insecurity of MSAC teaching work

As previously highlighted, the contractual status of the participants in this study varied. Participants included three PhD students, four ‘casual’ (i.e. hourly-paid) teachers, one staff member with a part-time teaching contract and one full-time post-doctoral researcher, who had started teaching on the MSAC when they had been a PhD student. Some of the participants, who are now part-time or casual staff, were initially recruited to teach on the MSAC as PhD students themselves and because they wanted to continue teaching on the course they transitioned to casual hours or part-time teaching staff contracts.

“I started in [gives year]. I was doing the PhD at the time, and a lot of PhDs were, are being recruited as tutors to the access course, to teach the various subjects that they’re experts in.” (Rowan)

“The access job, I kind of know in other universities, very often you know ... it changes per PhD candidate. I suppose perhaps we’re the unusual ones because we’re all finished and maybe there’s this perception that we’re all hanging on, you know, kind of a thing.” (Bailey)

Bailey, who had been teaching in her institution for a number of years both initially as a PhD student and subsequently as a casual hours’ staff member, alluded to changing teaching structures and the after-effects of the financial crisis of 2007 as the reason for fewer teaching opportunities being available around the time she started teaching on the MSAC.

“I literally fell into university teaching. Because at that time the system was different. There was a lot of teaching available and ... it was just different. There weren’t so many TAs [teaching assistants] at the time. They [academics] got say, PhD students and even Masters students to do it [teaching]. So that’s how we got into it. And then when the crash came all that changed. So, there was no teaching left and they combined everything ... people [academics] had to do it themselves more.” (Bailey)

While it was not explicitly explored with my participants, the fact that some of them started their teaching on the MSAC as either PhD students or as recent PhD graduates teaching casual hours, and having developed an ‘attachment’ to the course, this may have been an influencing factor in their transition into ‘casual hours’ contract positions to continue their MSAC teaching. In other words, to continue doing work that they enjoyed and which, in some cases, resonated with their personal values, and/or their commitment to equality, the only option open to them was to accept casual hours’ teaching contracts with Access Services. Bailey suggests that there may be a perception that an MSAC teacher in this position is ‘hanging on’ and thus, by implication, is either denying teaching opportunities to future PhD students or, as other aspects of her experience have illustrated, has not been successful in moving on to more highly regarded lecturing work in higher education, suggesting that ‘success’ in the academic sphere is still regarded as a linear process (Kinchin and Gravett, 2022).

7.3.1 Pay and contracts

7.3.1.1 Casual and part-time staff

There was greater consensus across the board amongst the part-time and casual hours teachers with respect to how they felt about their pay and status, with many (but not all) expressing dissatisfaction with their contractual positions and conditions although this dissatisfaction was expressed differently by the participants. For some it arose from the perspective of wanting to be able to contribute more of what they consider to be valuable work but being precluded from doing so because of the HEI’s recruitment policies and the limit on the number of casual or part-time teaching hours that any one individual can undertake. These policies were perceived to have a knock-on impact on their desire to attain secure and sustainable work and their right to make a living doing something that they enjoy.

“We’re all kind of part-timers, 150 hours max is allowed for the course, for the teaching, we won’t get much more than that ... So, the way I have to do it is, I have to continue doing it as a kind of part-time side job and working a day job at the same time. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to survive.” (Rowan)

“If I was full-time ... I would give up ... my daytime job. And I would dedicate more time, more time to writing proper curriculum, proper syllabi, thinking about activities and

events that we could bring into the course, connecting with all the departments ... all those things that I would really like to do. I just, I can't do it with the position I have at the moment, the part-time position." (Rowan)

"The Access Office is under pressure. And this is completely obvious to everybody and it's not something that the Access Office are hiding. So then, we are replaceable. So, you get a really good access teacher and they, they're never going to get to progress at that or to, you know, unless they accept these working conditions. Which I know people that have done that until they've retired. But, you know, that's, you know, it's so ... I have felt at times that I, you know, because now I occupy this strange position where I teach on three courses. I'm kind of, it would be hard to replace me if I was to disappear tomorrow. But I still don't feel particularly valued because I don't think that they're in a position to particularly value me, d'you know ... I don't understand why access is treated in this separate way. Because actually, it's more difficult than teaching undergraduates. And yet, it seems to be like, that's not apparent in your paycheck, is it?" (Chris)

There is much food for thought in what Chris has shared above. There is a suggestion that Access Services themselves, who are charged with leading on this core work in higher education, find it difficult to make the case for resources and are stymied by institutional HR policies from embedding this critical work to the extent that is necessary. Chris is also offering the view that the rates of pay offered for access course teaching do not reflect the level of challenge and responsibility that goes with this work and interestingly she suggests that it is actually "more difficult than teaching undergraduates". The autonomy and responsibility given to MSAC teachers that was highlighted in the previous chapter gives some indication as to why this might be so, as do the challenges associated with teaching diverse student cohorts as highlighted in Chapter Five. The bottom-line impact on pay could also be to do with the limits imposed on casual hours teaching. However, Alex expresses a similar sentiment with respect to remuneration for teaching more generally.

"You don't teach for the money. It's not why you teach. If it is why you are teaching, I have pity for you. Because you are not getting very much, you're not getting all that much of it!" (Alex)

The participants' own personal circumstances and life stage also influence how they feel about being on a casual hours' contract. Bailey admits that although being on a casual hours' contract makes her feel somewhat invisible and is perceived to be inferior to academic colleagues, it doesn't bother her as enjoying her work is far more important to her at this point in her working life. It could be inferred that, unlike some of the

younger MSAC teachers, Bailey's personal circumstances are such that she is not wholly reliant on the income she earns from her MSAC teaching.

"... Like this hourly contract stuff ... cos you're just not even considered. You're so below the radar, it's not even funny. But like, that doesn't bother me, but it might bother someone who is younger, but that doesn't faze me at all, you know? But maybe if I was younger and more ambitious it might. But it doesn't bother me, you know, I'm happy out. You know, we are not, absolutely not considered ... We're not the same level. Just even from a salary point of view." (Bailey)

Sam also experiences this insecurity and lack of opportunity to make a sustainable living from MSAC teaching but given his life stage and personal circumstances, he expresses experiencing contractual and financial insecurity more keenly than Bailey does. For Sam, the lack of security also has a direct impact on his perception of himself as a 'successful adult' and on his self-esteem but yet he questions whether he would be prepared to give it up to do work which he might find less enjoyable.

"I've continually secured more work, more hours over time but it's all on a casual basis. There's no financial security. And I'm left with the decision of, you know, do I go pursue a full-time job in an Institute of Technology where I might be less happy than I am now. What choice do I have? My skills are not valued." (Sam)

"I don't think it impacts in how I value myself as a teacher necessarily. It probably impacts how I see myself as a successful adult, you know, in the sense that, I suppose like anyone else I'm trying to kind of continually improve my circumstances, you know. So, in that sense it's a bit of a blow to the self-worth and the self-image.... It doesn't impact my sense of self-worth as a teacher. It's just a bit, it leaves one in limbo to a certain extent from a security standpoint." (Sam)

For Leslie, who is older than some of the part-time teachers, working on a casual hours contract is not necessarily experienced as a personal difficulty but is expressed as a frustration more generally with the system and the impact these recruitment policies have on teaching colleagues more broadly across the institution. She equates these challenging conditions to the experiences of people seeking work during recession times to imply the personal impact that precarious contracts and casualisation of labour in higher education can have on colleagues.

"I think that [NAME of HEI] as an institution doesn't appreciate the amount of work that they give to adjunct lecturers without giving them any sense of security...It always kind of reminds me as the new semester starts off, you know, back in the 1930s during the Depression, when a man would come out to a gate of a factory and say "you, you

and you come in, and all the rest of you go home". It's exactly the same for the adjunct lecturers, everybody's standing there with bated breath, waiting to know will they get a couple of hours that'll pay them." (Leslie)

Participants' responses with respect to their contractual status and earning capacity suggest that how individuals experience a particular situation can depend on their own lived realities and individual circumstances. However, all suggest that the casual contractual nature of the work impacts their visibility and for some, their capacity to earn a living doing something that they enjoy and as a result jars deeply with their personal values.

7.3.1.2 PhD students' perspectives

For the PhD student participants in this research, their primary occupation was that of full-time research student. While they needed to earn money to support themselves while studying full-time, they did not experience the same level of contractual insecurity as some of the casual hours' teachers did. In this respect the PhD student participants valued the opportunity offered by the MSAC to earn some money for their work.

"... the pay is very good for the access course ... so I know it's a lot more work for the access course. But I'm also willing, I know I'm able to, I'm willing to put in the extra bit of time. And when you balance things out like that, then I prefer the access course by a decent margin." (Charlie)

However, some of these participants spoke about more general practices within their HEIs around the use of PhD students to do unpaid teaching work on undergraduate courses.

"I don't get paid for a good part of my time that I'm doing in the [subject] lab ... There's quite a backlash at the moment ... So if you've been told that you can work a maximum of 50 hours unpaid per semester, does that mean that you have to do 50 hours a semester? And that becomes the philosophical question here." (Charlie)

"It's a bit controversial! I know in other universities you get paid to do teaching assistant hours. In [NAME of HEI] it's more of a formal obligation as part of doing a PhD. So once you're in the ... [Name] department as a PhD student you get teaching hours assigned to you." (Sydney)

"It's because I'm a PhD student and I feel, you know, that very often we really are taking the very brunt of everything ... We got this email early this year saying that we were supposed to do our teaching contribution, 120 hours, unpaid ... So basically, that

depends on department by department, school by school ... Some of them pay you, some of them don't pay you. I have a lot of resentment towards [NAME of HEI] for this, and I am one of the lucky ones who gets paid. But I still find that [NAME of HEI] is not the institution that I would like it to be." (Jody)

Jody goes on to describe her HEI as "this big beast" which makes her feel "completely irrelevant" as a teaching PhD student. Therefore, although PhD students teach and study within a different institutional context than part-time or casual hours MSAC teachers, the issue of their teaching contribution being valued by the HEI did likewise arise, albeit from a different perspective. This perspective offers insight into the broader context as to how teaching, both at undergraduate level as well as on MSACs, is valued within these HEIs more generally.

7.3.1.3 Impact on personal values and commitment to access work

For some of the participants the insecurity associated with the casual employment contracts and/or with the broader institutional commitment to access teaching seemed to jar with their own personal commitment to their MSAC work and was described as stifling their desire to make a greater contribution to working with under-represented students in higher education.

"Within a few years ... I was thinking, I love this. This is what I want to do ... Obviously the contracts are not up to much. But if they were...I would seriously consider working in this, you know, for the rest of my working life or for the foreseeable future...So sometimes I think I would just prefer to do this, but it's not ... something that you can do financially." (Chris)

"I mean the work is very fulfilling and rewarding and it's ... not something I would ever really want to stop doing. It's the only problem is the, is that side of it" [lack of financial and contractual security]. (Sam)

"My job for the access course pays me – I know it's a typical complaint of most people – XXX quid a month, d'you know. So I'm doing it as a side thing. If it could be a full-time job then I could dedicate more time, I could add more quality to my teaching, you know. With XXX quid a month, only from September to May, and then I'm on the dole during the summer. That's what it is. There's no way of getting a permanent position ... You have a constant feeling the part-time job, that it's like, it's like swimming in a swimming pool but the water is only like one foot high. You know, you can try and swim in it, but you'll never be able to really swim in it. You'd love it to be six foot high, the water level, so you can properly swim, you know." (Rowan)

This statement by Rowan is a powerful one. He is expressing frustration with the fact that he can't quite get a foothold in his institution, not just with respect to his career, but also with respect to his MSAC teaching in order to really do a 'deep dive' (to stay with the swimming analogy!) with this work and thus to offer the best support that he possibly can to his students. Again, this reveals a deep personal commitment to access work by a teacher who effectively experiences the opposite of that commitment from their HEI with respect to their own role.

7.3.2 Recognition and belonging

The insecurity of MSAC teaching is not only portrayed from a financial or contractual perspective but it also feeds into how participants feel about their professional and/or socio-emotional connections with their HEIs. Given the perceived lack of awareness within the wider institution of the MSACs and thus of the MSAC teachers' roles, it is perhaps not surprising that the work the participants do in supporting adult learner access to higher education is not felt by them to be acknowledged (financially or otherwise) by the wider institution, beyond the acknowledgement experienced at a more local level, or from their students as demonstrated in Chapter Six.

"My skills are not valued. Well, they are by [names MS Officer]. And they are by the students ... but, you know, but by the edifice, by the way the edifice works, you know. No, not valued. It's very, it's very disheartening." (Sam)

"I have to be honest and say I don't believe [NAME of HEI], the institution, perceives my work as a contribution at all. I really don't think [NAME of HEI] knows anything about what I do but I think that is just the way it is." (Bailey)

Participants suggest that this lack of recognition also extends to access work more generally.

"In terms of, you know, for having worked for the students, then I'm absolutely delighted to have, to have done it. Yeah, yeah, no, I don't think [NAME of HEI] recognises really a lot of the work that's done in there." (Jody)

"I know that [names Head of Access Service] here goes begging for money every year. (laughs) I mean, there's a complete sort of mismatch between the attitude of access, of promoting access and this national framework and everything and the reality of it on the ground anyway." (Chris)

For many MSAC teachers however, there was a sense of being supported and appreciated by the Access Service with whom they work directly. This may speak to some extent to the values and ethos which underpin the work of access staff in higher education (Finnegan and Fleming, 2011b). This connection with or appreciation by Access Service staff in turn helps to create some sense of belonging for participants within the institution, despite feeling removed from academic departments and the wider institution.

"The Access Office, the upper office, is so appreciative of our work, you know? They really love what we do with the students and they, you know, they trust us ... But it has to be a two-way process. If we as tutors don't feel appreciated, heard and informed then our own trust battery begins to discharge." (Rowan)

"I feel part of the Access Programme, the mature student access certificate, that's it ... I'm actually quite happy ... I feel like I'm not alone. That if something happens in the class or something happens to a student, I actually have someplace to go. Just to, you know, talk it over. And I think that's brilliant." (Bailey)

"I actually think the Access Programme has more, appreciates its employees more than the actual [NAME of HEI] appreciates its employees. I feel more appreciated working for the Access Programme than I do working for the university itself." (Leslie)

"I do feel like I belong to some extent in that, as I said, you know, the people I work with and work for, I feel part of something there, you know ... I do feel part of a certain community." (Sam)

"I think teaching vulnerable students it's good to know that you can immediately check in with somebody above you or like, just one of the tutors." (Sydney)

"So yesterday we just had our meeting there, our full tutor meeting with the coordinators of the access course in [NAME of HEI] too. So people could raise problems there if they wanted to." (Charlie)

Rowan describes the access course as like operating in a "bit of a bubble" in his HEI as "because the Access course is a high trust endeavour this builds the foundation of our culture". However, he goes on to state that never had an academic department thanked him for his work or advised him what they would like him to teach on the course. He feels that inter-departmental communication is not part of the higher education culture more generally: "it doesn't really happen in university; we're a bit silo-ish."

It could be suggested that the dissatisfaction experienced by MSAC teachers with respect to the lack of institutional recognition of or connection with their work is as much a direct result of the impact of policies around recruitment as it is to do with institutional recognition of access work more generally. It may also be indicative of some of the constraints under which Access Services are operating within these HEIs. However, my experience is that Access Services have an important role to play in supporting MSAC teachers in their work and this contrasts with how teachers report their sense of belonging more generally within the institution. Even for those who started their life in their HEI as part of an academic department, either as a student, or as a teacher, and who have now “side-stepped” [Bailey] into access work, they report feeling quite separate from faculty (staff).

“I feel to be a bit on the fringes. So, to answer your question, no, I don’t really feel part of the faculty. I feel exactly what I am – adjunct to the faculty.” (Leslie)

“I do feel like I belong to some extent in that, as I said, you know, the people I work with and work for, I feel part of something there, you know ... But, yeah, I mean, it’s hard to feel like you belong. I hate to harp back on it when you’re, you know ... when you’re a casual staff member. It’s difficult, you know?” (Sam)

“I feel part of the access programme, the mature student access certificate. That’s all.” (Bailey)

These experiences and feelings may imply that an assumption is held by some participants that all teaching in higher education resides with or is supported by academic departments. For some participants however, the casual nature of their MSAC work suits their own personal circumstances indicating that they don’t, in fact, want to belong to an academic department and all that goes with that responsibility and culture.

“I think the academic world is extremely competitive, you know. And maybe if I had come to it when I was young I would be in that. But by the time I got to it I had a life outside college...I do think there’s a lot of pressure on people competing for jobs ... and publishing and all that. And I was in the kind of a nice position I could step away from, I didn’t need that. I wasn’t interested. I’m not that type. And so I didn’t want to get involved and I didn’t want to be pulled into it either. So, it [MSAC teaching] suited me, you know?” (Bailey)

“They [the faculty] give me adjunct work, which works out fine for me and works out fine for them. I don’t actually want to be the module leader of 200 students, and you know,

get emails from them every day to find out whether they can have an extension on their essays. I don't need that. I'm happy with the adjunct work.” (Leslie)

“I suppose maybe I never had a drive to become a university teacher. I kind of, I fell into it, and quite happily fell into it. ... I'm not gonna, I'm not a cutthroat person, I just want to do the job, come in and do it and that's it. I think there's a lot of pressure on people for jobs. But we don't have that in Access.” (Bailey)

Although Bailey's sense of belonging originally lay with her academic department as a PhD student, this shifted over time to developing a stronger connection with the Access Service through her MSAC teaching work. She articulated her move to access as “sidestepping” but “never regretted [this for] one minute”. In a similar vein to working-class adult learners in a study by Merrill (2015, p. 1865) who had “observed the middle-class world at university and did not want to embrace it”, having observed the ‘mainstream’ academic communities and culture, both Bailey and Leslie expressed a lack of interest or inclination to be a part of the academic world. For these participants, both of whom are at a later life and career stage than other participants, the MSAC is in fact considered by them to be a *preferred* teaching role in higher education rather than teaching within the more pressurised and competitive academic world. From this perspective then, the organisational separation of access and academic teaching seems to work to their advantage.

7.4 Value of teaching in higher education

Teaching in higher education is only one element of an academic's broader responsibilities which also include research and research student supervision. However, excellence in teaching and learning is a core system objective for higher education (Loxley et al., 2017; HEA, 2023b) and this focus has been supported by the establishment of HEI Centres of Excellence for Teaching and Learning whose role is to encourage and facilitate excellence in teaching and learning practices, research and innovation. Nonetheless, a few of my participants expressed dissatisfaction with how they thought teaching in general – not specifically their own teaching – is valued in higher education.

“I think most people would say this, like, the best scientists are bad teachers. So why do we make our best scientists teach our undergraduate students ... It really depends on the person, and I think that's the danger of it. You can luck out and get a lecturer who also loves teaching. But that's because of them. And it's not because they've been given this

job. Yeah, like, if I was to re-shape everything, yeah, like you should have, you should have lecturers who teach and you should have lecturers who do science, and you can have positions that do both if somebody wants to do that. But yeah, it's like, 'no, it's two hours out of my week that I can't do science, and I can't write papers and I can't ...', you know? I think that's the attitude a lot of people have." (Sydney)

"You asked, 'do I feel like a higher education teacher? And does that exist?' It doesn't exist and that's the problem. I am one – and I believe there should be more of me – more people employed at third level specifically for teaching. But there aren't. It isn't valued ... I feel strongly about this that, you know, what goes into an international university league table? Research. Teaching is not part, and it's very difficult to make part of the algorithm anyway. But within individual universities that has created a situation where teaching is simply not a priority ... I think there should be space for professional teachers in higher level. Do I think that some academics should also do teaching qualifications of some kind? Maybe. I think there's a large percentage of academics who are very poor teachers. That's been my experience. I know that's probably a controversial thing to say. But I think it's been the experience of a lot of our former students as well, those who've gone through the Cert. Many of them who I meet comment on the fact that I was right to warn them, that they wouldn't have a teacher anymore." (Sam)

Both Sam and Sydney expressed the strongest views with respect to how teaching is valued in higher education, and it is perhaps no coincidence that Sam was a qualified teacher and Sydney had considered doing a teaching degree. For these participants the 'skill' and core values of teaching in higher education are extremely important. Because of their work with MSAC students they see and experience the value of "brass tacks teaching" (Sam) in higher education, as opposed to the standard pedagogical form of lecturing which is suggested to be inflexible and unresponsive to students (Murphy and Fleming, 2000) and they naturally make a distinction between teaching and academic work, including that of lecturing. Sydney also offers the view that many academic staff see teaching as "the thing on the side that you do in order to be able to do ... the research", indicating that research is held in higher esteem and value. Sam similarly suggests that one of the reasons that teaching in higher education receives lower priority is down to the competition for global rankings through research and publications and that this in turn impacts on how Access Services can recruit teachers to teach on their access courses.

"Well, I do think the main driver of it is that universities are under a lot of pressure to improve their ranking, you know, and those rankings are formulated with reference to research success, as far as I know. I'm open to correction on that. And I think that has

driven, particularly Irish universities who are not well funded, either by the student body or by the State, to, you know, prioritise teaching even less and prioritise research even more because they're looking to bring in foreign students and the way to do that is to feature highly on these tables, right?" (Sam)

Alex also clearly considers that there is a difference in the two types of work when he describes his work as being “not an academic career, it’s a teaching career.” However, he also admitted that even with respect to the MSAC, there was very little initial preparation or support offered: “like all third level teaching, I was just given my whip and my chair and off I went.” Chris experienced something similar in that she was “thrown in at the deep end” and felt like she was “on the back foot in moments on that first semester” when she started teaching on the MSAC.

The question of whether the participants in this study could access support from their Centres for Teaching and Learning in the same way as full-time faculty staff members wasn’t explored in these interviews. However, my own personal experience as an access practitioner suggests that while MSAC teachers could access such support, any supports offered would most likely have to be undertaken or pursued in their own time, rather than as a supported professional development opportunity given their contractual status.

While the views expressed above are not necessarily shared universally or even as strongly amongst the participants in this study, nonetheless such views merit consideration in the context of how MSAC teachers experience their work, as teaching is at the heart of what each of these participants does. My participants’ responses illustrate that there is a space created in these HEIs by MSACs which facilitates a “brass tacks” form of teaching and, as the previous findings’ chapters have shown, these are teaching opportunities that are highly valued – and indeed enjoyed – by the participants in this study. To that end the ‘space’ which teaching (as opposed to lecturing) occupies in higher education could be suggested to have a bearing on MSAC teachers’ experiences of recognition and belonging. These are issues which will be considered in more depth in the next chapter.

7.5 Summary of ‘Teaching below the radar’

This theme presented and considered findings from my research which relate to the broader awareness of access work in these HEIs, from the perspective of those who teach on mature student access courses, and thus of their own visibility as teachers within their HEI. The findings signified that there appears to be a relatively low level of broader awareness of these courses within the HEI which is suggested to be a result of their positioning within Access Services and outside of academic departments. The findings also suggest that this positioning has affected the kinds of employment contracts and conditions that can be offered to MSAC teachers, although the impact of these conditions on the teachers themselves depends on whether they are part-time staff or PhD students, and also on their own personal life circumstances. While such employment conditions in higher education are not unique to access course teachers, I suggest that, combined with the perceived status of this teaching, these conditions have an impact on some of the participants’ self-perception, self-esteem and on the desire for many of them to engage with this kind of work at greater depth and for longer periods of time.

What does emerge strongly from this theme is that the resonance and meaning of this work for these participants is very strong, so much so that if ‘access teaching’ could offer a sustainable work opportunity some of these teachers would choose it in preference to a traditional academic career. However, given the positioning of these courses outside of academic departments in these HEIs, this is not an option that is open to my participants. This theme therefore resonates to some extent with previous studies’ findings (Fleming 2010; Brosnan, 2013) that ‘access work’, and particularly ‘access teaching’, is managed and delivered separately from mainstream higher education teaching.

The impact and relevance of these findings, together with the findings under the previous two themes, will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Eight: Discussion

“Relations are not just important – they are central to the entire enterprise of education.” (Sidorkin, 2023, p. 1)

8.1 Introduction

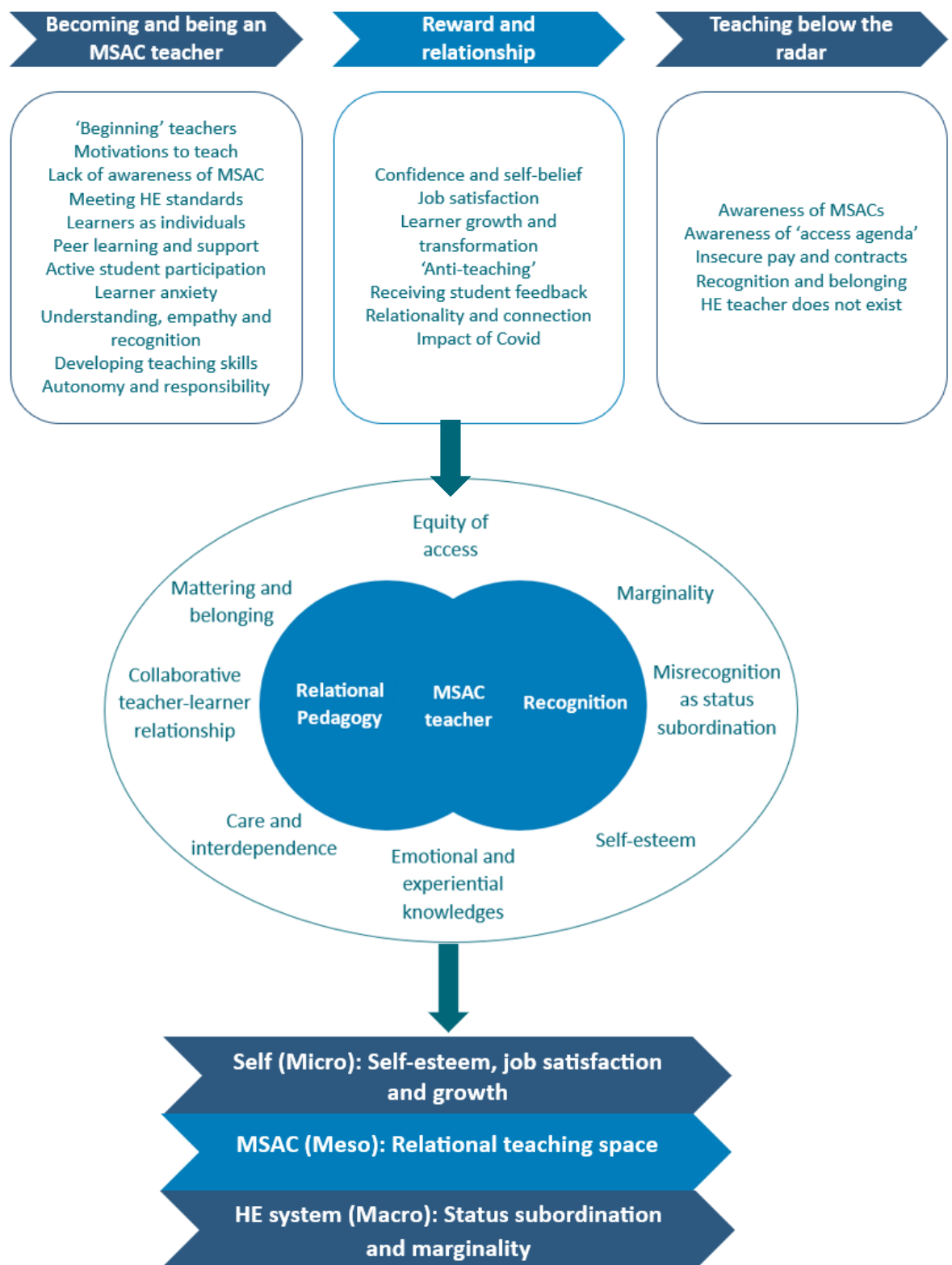
The previous three chapters presented my research findings on the experiences of teachers of mature student access courses (MSACs) in two Irish HEIs. My interest in exploring this topic arose from my years of observing the positive and impactful relationships which developed between MSAC teachers and their students in the course of their work. I was also cognisant of the unique and somewhat ambiguous positioning of the MSAC within my own institution, whereby responsibility for delivery and management of the programme lay with a professional service as opposed to with an academic department, along with its designation as a ‘pre-entry’ course to undergraduate education positioning it at a programme level which is more typically within the remit of further and adult education. The experiences of MSAC teachers were explored through a thematic analysis of interviews which I carried out with nine participants in two HEIs and my findings were presented in the preceding three chapters under the themes of ‘being and becoming an MSAC teacher’, ‘relationship and reward’, and ‘teaching below the radar’.

An important dynamic within this thesis is the interface of adult and higher education pedagogies and values, and thus the interface of two different sets of relational and disciplinary practices and priorities in education. Adult education is an area of education which has a clear theoretical and philosophical basis for relation-centred education and my research aims to contribute to an understanding of a teaching experience which effectively resides at this interface, exploring a distinctly relational teaching space, within a hegemonic academic culture of ‘powerful’ knowledge (Young and Muller, 2013), and of managerial and performative values in higher education (Lynch et al., 2012; Giroux, 2015). A key focus of this chapter therefore lies in exploring the intersection of these spaces in the context of my participants’ experiences and I consider and explore new learning within this realm.

As set out in my three findings chapters, my participants' accounts of their MSAC experiences offer us an insight into the informal pathways to becoming an MSAC teacher, as well as into participants' teaching approaches on these courses, informed in many cases by their own experiences as students. The findings also offer an insight into the distinctly relational nature of this teaching, into the formative impact of their MSAC experiences on the educators, both professionally and personally, illuminating their values and identities as educators in the process. The findings also highlight the marginal positioning of these programmes within the HEIs and the related impact on how these teaching roles are recognised and valued within the higher education system.

Figure 8.1 overleaf offers a reminder of the core themes and subthemes arising from my research and demonstrates how, on applying my conceptual framework to these findings, I present my understanding of how MSAC teachers experience their work at micro, meso and macro levels of engagement within these teaching contexts. At the micro level, both relational engagement and mutual recognition between teacher and learner can support teachers' positive personal experiences of this work; at the meso level by virtue of that relational connection, MSACs as programmes may be experienced as distinctly relational teaching spaces; while at the macro level i.e. with respect to connection with the institution more widely, by virtue of the structural and hierarchical positioning of this work MSAC teachers may experience a sense of marginality and a lack of recognition. I will ultimately highlight how this research helps us to understand the distinct value that teaching on MSAC courses holds for these educators, vis-à-vis how this work is positioned and perceived within higher education more generally. I acknowledge however that this discussion has been challenging to write as so many of my findings and theoretical concepts are interconnected. Thus delineating 'boundaries' around the different aspects of my discussion in order to identify the main areas of import, much like trying to describe and interpret lived experience, is not straightforward and I appreciate the reader's patience with any areas of overlap.

Figure 8.1: Reflecting on research findings through conceptual lenses



8.2 Characteristics of an MSAC teaching space

As highlighted in Chapter Two, there is no formal policy or framework governing the delivery of access courses (including MSACs) in Ireland, nor is the role of ‘access course teacher’ formally recognised within the Irish education system. The MSACs included in my study are located within higher education and are taught by a mix of part-time, casual (i.e. hourly-paid) teachers, PhD students, and postdoctoral researchers. These teachers have all been recruited largely through word of mouth by the Access Services that are responsible for managing and delivering these courses. My findings suggest that a formal teaching qualification is not required to teach on an MSAC in either HEI. However similar to many teaching roles in higher education a postgraduate qualification, demonstrating knowledge of one’s specialist subject, does appear to be required, as all participants had a minimum of a Masters qualification and most also either had a PhD or were studying for a PhD. In addition, the majority of my participants had already gained some teaching experience across a range of educational settings, including secondary schools, adult education and higher education. However, despite this ‘looseness’ associated with the role of access course teacher in Irish higher education and with the status of access courses more generally as previously discussed in Section 2.4.3, in this part of my discussion I will draw on my findings and on relevant literature to consider the significance and implications of the distinctive characteristics of MSAC teaching and how these align with features of relational pedagogy. I will also consider these characteristics with respect to how teaching at the interface of higher and adult education is experienced by MSAC teachers.

8.2.1 *Teaching in a ‘border country’*

Access courses have both instrumental (content / goal oriented) purposes and affective (personal development / relational) dimensions (Fleming, 2010; Busher et al., 2015a; O’Sullivan et al., 2019). They are designed to facilitate learners’ personal growth, to encourage relationship development, not just with peers and teachers but also with the institution, and to help learners to familiarise themselves with an academic environment; thus, teachers aim for their students to achieve a baseline of knowledge, skill and academic competence in order to successfully progress to undergraduate

education. A core objective of MSACs is also to increase learners' self-confidence with respect to their engagement in education, as a lack of self-belief is frequently identified as a barrier that is experienced by mature students returning to higher education (Staunton, 2008; Fleming et al., 2017b; Kearns, 2017). As MSAC students are typically 'second chance' learners (Scanlon, 2009; Busher et al., 2014) MSAC teachers need subject expertise, but also to be able to teach in a way that helps to build their learners' confidence. My findings illustrate that the role of the MSAC teacher requires an understanding not just of the '*what*' of education, in terms of knowledge, skill or academic competence, but that MSAC teachers also need to understand the '*how*' in order to support the '*why*' of these programmes. This is done by adopting a relational pedagogy which build relationships that *both* cognitively and emotionally support students (Adams, 2018).

Firstly, with respect to the importance of the '*what*', my participants acknowledged that they were required to teach to pre-defined curricula and standards. For example, Alex described himself as having a "clear mission brief" with respect to his subject's curriculum and learning outcomes, while Rowan recognised that his students needed to be IT "savvy" when moving on to first year. Leslie's awareness of the '*what*' is indicated in her acknowledgment of the need to uphold the essay writing standards required by an academic department – "I feel I have to follow the guidelines laid down by the university" – and that this overrode her desire to boost a student's confidence by giving them a higher mark than was deserved for an assessment. These examples suggest that the importance of the '*what*' of MSAC programmes, in terms of subject content and academic standards, is upheld strongly by my participants. However, for these teachers subject content and standards do not supersede the importance of adopting a relational pedagogy in working with their students i.e. the '*how*' of teaching these courses. My participants' experiences signified that they had a strong awareness also of the importance of using appropriate teaching and learning methodologies, described throughout Section 5.3, and of engaging relationally with their students so that they could create supportive learning environments and help their students to build positive learner identities. My participants adopted learner-centred and relational approaches to teaching such as encouraging peer learning and small group work (Rowan), using

comedy to help their learners to relax and thus manage their anxiety (Alex), physically setting up classrooms as “safe spaces” (Charlie), welcoming questions and conversation in the classroom (Sydney, Jody and Bailey) and connecting the curriculum to aspects of their learners’ lives and/or to current affairs (Jody, Leslie). These are examples of combining an ethics of care with critical and creative approaches to pedagogy, suggested by Riddle and Hickey (2022) to be a key feature of relational pedagogy, as well as being examples of deliberately developing human connection in the classroom (Holloway and Alexandre, 2012). Similar teaching approaches and strategies have been identified in other research studies on access courses or with non-traditional students (Murphy, 2009; Busher et al., 2015a; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017) and such approaches are also posited to be deeply embedded in adult education pedagogies and philosophies (Murphy, 2009; Merriam and Bierema, 2014) as outlined earlier in Section 2.6.

The ‘*how*’ of these programmes is closely connected to the ‘*why*’. When teaching adult learners, the ‘*why*’ of education is often suggested to include the aim of removing emotional blocks to learning by instilling self-confidence and helping students to realize personal growth. These are aims which are suggested to typically be at the core of an adult education tutor’s role (Elias and Merriam, 2005; O’Neill, 2015) and when working with adult learners in any setting adopting an ‘informal and friendly’ relational approach, which is highly learner-centred, is advocated as this helps educators to establish a rapport with their learners (Jarvis, 1987; Brookfield, 2015; Knowles et al., 2015; Bowl, 2017) and helps learners to build their confidence. This relational approach in turn supports the learning process (Knowles et al., 2015) and thus the ‘*what*’ of the educational endeavour. An awareness of helping learners to manage their anxiety and build their confidence as being a critical aspect of their teaching role is illustrated by my participants. For example, for Charlie “the access is a lot more about encouragement” and this is also the ‘breathing space’ and lowering of students’ fear that Sydney describes and Sam’s recognition of the need to ‘engender a sense of calm’ for his students. This is pointed out by my participants as being just as important, if not more so, than teaching course content and is achieved through the ‘*how*’ of relational engagement. Therefore, the teaching strategies that MSAC teachers adopt could be said

to be specific to building their learners' confidence and to supporting their educational transition recognising that, from a relational pedagogical perspective, education results from relationships and not necessarily from behaviours (Sidorkin, 2000). My participants suggest that it is important for them to learn how these purposes co-exist together in these educational contexts and to learn where the balance lies at different times between prioritising a learner-centred, relational approach with their students, and prioritising the 'powerful knowledge' (Young and Muller 2013) of the academy. Fundamentally, the ways in which the MSAC teachers engage with their students ensure that their students can progress with confidence to higher education, with a strong foundation of knowledge, skills and competence, thus meeting both instrumental and affective purposes of these courses.

Therefore, by adopting teaching approaches that focus on the interaction between teacher and learner and thus "build(ing) connections and positive relationships for learning purposes" (Su and Wood, 2023, p. 2), my participants could be said to privilege a relational pedagogy over a knowledge-based one in MSAC teaching. More generally speaking, privileging a relational pedagogy can be challenging to do in a higher education system which places greater emphasis on self-directed and independent learning and disciplinary knowledge (Hagenaer and Volet, 2014; Duffy, 2019) as I have discussed in Chapter Three. However, again MSACs are designed for specific purposes and for adult learners as non-traditional students in higher education. As Finnegan and Fleming (2011b) point out, it is one thing to be qualified in one's discipline and another to be qualified to teach it. And it is "yet another level of understanding to have a well worked out pedagogical position and practice about teaching ... non-traditional students" (ibid., p. 17). These authors suggest that dominant discourses around knowledge in higher education can negatively impact work with non-traditional students in that:

"Disciplinary knowledge affects how teaching staff view non-traditional students. There is a strong tendency to foreground disciplinary criteria and career interests in describing work as teachers. Belief in the self-evident value of a discipline is often combined with a deficit model of non-traditional students" (ibid., p. 18).

Therefore, when working with non-traditional students, such as mature students, in higher education Loxley et al. (2017c, p. 249) offer the view that working in a highly supportive and relational way is critical because:

“[These students] come to higher education with high expectations and a passion for learning but also memories of dissatisfying and even awful prior experiences in compulsory education. Responding to this particular cluster of hopes and fears takes pedagogical tact, time and space and in [a] highly bureaucratic, marketized and creaking HE system these things are often in short supply.”

By the very nature of MSACs, this ‘pedagogical tact, time and space’ can be provided by my participants through a relational engagement with their students. While it may not have been the overriding motivation for all of my participants’ initial involvement in their MSAC, many of them demonstrated an understanding of the ‘*why*’ of their MSAC work in terms of supporting equity of access and inclusion objectives (e.g. Chris and Sam). Therefore, when we layer the core purpose of these programmes (the ‘*why*’) over the ‘*how*’ and the ‘*what*’, it suggests to a greater extent why they exist within a ‘border country’ (Hunt and West, 2006) between adult and higher education – a distinct educational space of differing philosophies, pedagogies and knowledges - or at this junction of ‘powerful learning environments’ (Johnston et al., 2012) in supporting non-traditional students’ engagement in higher education. My participants’ experiences of teaching in this ‘border country’ signify an ethos of relationship and connection that is at the core of their teaching processes (Ljungblad, 2021; Su and Wood, 2023) and also indicate their awareness of the need to adopt a mix of both adult and higher education teaching practices, approaches and knowledges in these highly contextualised teaching and learning spaces.

8.2.2 Space for multiple knowledges

The previous section focused on how relational pedagogical approaches support fulfilment of multiple educational purposes in these teaching contexts. In this section I discuss different forms of knowledge as a characteristic of the MSAC teaching space, and I also highlight how these relate to features of relational pedagogy. On the one hand my findings suggest that recruitment for these teaching roles follows higher education expectations in terms of disciplinary knowledge, which is necessary given their

fundamental purpose to support students' access to undergraduate education, and thus their access to the 'powerful' and 'transformative' knowledge' (Young and Muller, 2013) of the academy. On the other hand, the fact that many of the participants in this study had been mature students themselves could illustrate that experiential knowledge (Heron, 1996; Fenwick, 2003), as in experience of having been a mature student or adult learner, and thus the values, understanding and insight that comes with that experience, is also valued for these roles (although I do not suggest that experiential knowledge is an *essential* criterion). This would be reflective to some extent of practices in the FET and adult education sectors where there tends to be more of a 'practitioner emphasis' amongst teachers i.e. FET teachers have "high levels of vocational and experiential knowledge as practitioners rather than formal teaching or other academic qualifications" (Grummell and Murray, 2015, p. 438).

As discussed in Section 3.2.4, understandings of knowledge generation and acquisition in higher education are suggested to be underpinned by the concepts of Cartesian cognitive rationality (Hunt and West, 2006; Lynch et al., 2007) and the importance of 'powerful', disciplinary knowledge (Young and Muller, 2013). Such understandings of knowledge are differentiated from experiential knowledge as they assume that knowledge is objectively 'out there', as opposed to experience which is commonly considered to be a wholly subjective 'reality'. However, it is important also to consider and understand how people *interpret* these realities as even the 'objective' reality of powerful knowledge may be subjectively interpreted through experience (e.g. under critical realism and interpretivist paradigms (Ponterotto, 2005)). This is what MSAC educators demonstrate through their pedagogical capacities to explain and educate, as while all of the participants in my research could be posited to have acquired such 'powerful' knowledge through their own third-level studies, their experiences suggest that they draw on more than just disciplinary or curricular knowledge to teach content and concepts. As I have already discussed in Section 8.2.1, understanding of the '*how*' and the '*why*' of teaching MSAC is as important as the '*what*' and many of my participants revealed through our conversations that they gained knowledge of the '*how*' and the '*why*' from their own experiences of being a student. Considerations of the importance of making space for experiential knowledge in an educational setting

usually focus on the knowledge that students bring into the classroom, and particularly in discussions around adult education pedagogies (e.g. Freire, 1970; Brookfield, 2015; Bowl, 2017) and my participants indicated that they recognised and valued their students' experiences as important contributions to learning within their classrooms, highlighted by Romano (2004) and by Hatt and Davidson (2002) as being an important feature of a relational pedagogy. However, my participants also articulated the value of recognising and drawing on their *own* personal experiences as a means of connecting with their students thus also, in turn, supporting their relational pedagogy. These included their own experiential knowledge of the higher education system and their knowledge gained from life experiences, as well as their embodied knowledge (Michelson, 1998; Sodhi, 2008) of what it *feels* like to be a mature student engaging with those powerful knowledges and systems.

Although only two of the MSAC teachers (Alex and Bailey) interviewed for my research had had previous significant experience of teaching adult learners, it is notable that six of the nine participants (Leslie, Alex, Bailey, Jody, Rowan and Chris) had direct experience of returning to higher education as a mature student. Such experiences are invaluable for MSAC teachers as they can directly relate to their students' struggles, anxieties, and challenges when returning to higher education, as identified in previous research (e.g. Healy et al., 2001; Staunton, 2008; Kearns, 2017) discussed in Chapter Two. Although I did not explore my participants' feelings or experiences of having been a mature student themselves my findings signified that, for those who had been, their own life and educational experiences in turn enabled them to adopt a relational pedagogy by connecting on an emotional level with their students through empathy and their capacity to be authentic (Holloway and Alexandre 2012; Bovill, 2020). Some MSAC teachers such as Chris who "didn't go to college because of socioeconomic reasons", and Sydney who had "a tough time of it growing up", identified that their own life experiences when they were younger influenced their perspectives on the importance and value of a course such as the MSAC and meant that they were energetically 'drawn' to the course when the teaching opportunity came their way. It was a motivation for them to teach, however their awareness of the value of their own experiences and being able to tap into the knowledge gained from these experiences also enabled them to

support their learners in overcoming similar challenges. Similar findings have been reported with respect to AHE course tutors' experiences who "seemed to empathise with their students who were 'second chance' learners, because they had similar experiences themselves" (Busher et al., 2015a, p. 128).

Therefore, in these teaching contexts, while it can be suggested that it is valuable for MSAC teachers to understand what it is to be a learner, it is also valuable to specifically understand what it is to be a mature student and that this, in turn, supports a relational pedagogy through connection, empathy and authenticity. For example, Leslie displays a profound awareness of how it feels to do well as a mature student - "I'm also aware of the level of pride that you get as a mature student when you achieve these things. ... I know how well, how good I felt. And I want these students to make all those steps to get all that" - while Jody wants to infuse her students with the same passion that she has. The inner emotions and feelings these teachers tap into with respect to what it actually *feels* like to be a mature student suggests that they draw on their embodied knowledge (Michelson, 1998; Sodhi, 2008) which in turn enables them to relate authentically to their students' experiences. Thus, I suggest that there is a value, although not a necessity, in having *been* a mature student and of having experienced and felt similar hopes, fears and anxieties (e.g. Sydney deeply understood the fear of being asked a question in class) which facilitates MSAC teachers to relate to their students in a very human and relational way. This knowledge evokes an authenticity in their teaching which is a key feature of a relational pedagogy (Bovill, 2020). What is relevant to note in this discussion is the 'added value' of different knowledges in this teaching context and what these can bring to the MSAC teaching and learning experience. However, these are not *necessary* knowledges as I will discuss further in Section 8.2.3 when discussing teachers' values, beliefs and dispositions.

On the basis of my participants' profiles, it could be posited that teachers whose personal experiences and biographies in some ways mirror those of their learners (Brookfield, 1995; Merrill and West, 2009; Merrill, 2020) and "their struggle to achieve success" (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011b, p. 18) are preferred for these roles. There is also a "depth and richness" (O'Neill, 2015, p. 504) indicated in some of my participants' life

experiences which has fed into their journeys to becoming MSAC teachers and into their teaching. Thus, some of my participants see themselves as role models for their learners (Harland and Plangger, 2004) and their recognition of their students' struggles which emanates from their own personal experiences supports relational engagement in their teaching. This was an important motivator in particular for Jody who had completed the MSAC herself and wanted to show others that it is possible to achieve their dream of becoming a student: "...if I did it, then they can do it." Similar sentiments were also expressed by Bailey and Leslie who had both returned to education as mature students and could therefore empathise with their students' fears, hopes and barriers to learning. My participants demonstrated a capacity to reflect on and to recognise their own emotions around being a mature student and to recognise the value of this knowledge in informing their teaching approaches and in their engagement with their students. As Palmer (1998, p. 2) says: "when I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are ... (and) when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well". Therefore, having the capacity to tap into one's own embodied and experiential knowledges can be suggested to be a valuable supporting factor for adopting a relational pedagogy on these courses.

Brookfield (1995, p. 49) offers the view that there can be an autobiographical connection between how we teach and how we ourselves were taught:

"We may espouse philosophies of teaching that we have learned from formal study, but the most significant and most deeply embedded influences that operate on us are the images, models, and conceptions of teaching derived from our own experiences as learners ... We try to avoid reproducing the humiliations that were visited on us as learners. We attempt to replicate the things our own teachers did that affirmed or inspired us as learners."

Brookfield's views offer one perspective into how and why some educators 'find their way' to MSAC teaching and why they teach in the ways that they do. As discussed in Section 3.2.4, the dominant academic culture privileges a rational, cognitive form of knowing over an emotional and embodied form of knowing (Lynch et al., 2009) and feelings and emotions in higher education are often trivialised or neglected. However, while academic and disciplinary knowledges are clearly necessary in order to be able to teach MSAC students, my participants also indicated that they understood the value of

reflecting on their own experiences as learners when it came to teaching their students. Many of my participants brought their own personal experiences to bear on how they worked with their learners, including how they were (or would have liked to have been) taught as students themselves (Harland and Plangger, 2004; Noonan, 2020). For example, Alex ‘borrowed pedagogy’ from one of his lecturers who had used comedy in class as a way of connecting with their students and making them feel at ease and which was an approach that had made him personally feel more comfortable as a learner. Sydney drew on her own experience of the value of working with peers to learn difficult concepts, to encourage her MSAC students to work together to do the same. This drawing on experiential knowledge came from a mix of personal insight (Jody), observation (Alex and Leslie), and reflection (Sydney) and could be suggested to be ways in which my participants prioritised a relational ‘co-being’ (Sidorkin, 2000) with their students, through tapping into that deeper understanding of what it means to be a student.

Another aspect of experiential knowledge that is evident in my participants’ experiences is that of having knowledge of the higher education system and curriculum. Multiple studies (e.g. Murphy and Fleming, 2000; Dolan, 2008; Bruen, 2014) have identified the challenges that mature students experience on navigating higher education and adjusting to the language of the academy, particularly during the key transitional first year of undergraduate studies. Thus, being in a position to share systemic knowledge that has been gained via lived experience can be a valuable support for non-traditional students such as those who participate on MSACs and which has also been reported elsewhere to be valuable in teaching students in higher education more generally (Harland and Plangger, 2004; Noonan 2020). Such knowledge could be considered to be “embodied capital” (Bourdieu, 1986), which is a form of ‘cultural capital’ i.e. the knowledge or skills that one acquires from one’s habitus such as how to navigate the higher education system or understanding the ‘language’ of the system. This is also experiential and embodied knowledge *of* (Fenwick, 2008) even more so than being knowledge *about* (which can be learned in any event from student handbooks or websites) as it also encompasses the emotions that one may experience when engaging with the system (e.g. fear, frustration, excitement, confusion). In my own research

context this is teachers' knowledge of the system which has been gained through their day-to-day engagement with that system. It can be argued of course that any teacher in higher education has such knowledge having engaged with the system themselves as learners. However, what is key in relational engagement with students is recognising the value and importance of sharing that knowledge with their learners, thus acknowledging the cognitive *and* emotional support that students need (Adams, 2018) in these contexts.

My own professional experience has been that the value of having flexibility, autonomy and professional insight cannot be underestimated when it comes to recruiting teachers to work with non-traditional students in higher education. That flexibility and autonomy has enabled me to recruit many MSAC teachers who bring both disciplinary knowledge and the experience of being an adult learner or a mature student to their work with MSAC students. This mix of knowledges is evident in my research as there are different aspects of my participants' own experiences and values which feed into them becoming educators, and which also specifically feed into them becoming teachers of mature students. However, until undertaking this research I had not fully reflected on the meaning of such knowledge or comprehended how it can both inform MSAC teachers' work and their personal experiences of MSAC teaching. In the context of MSAC teaching and given the broad profile of participants in this study, this alternative view of knowledge and the value of an experience-based pedagogy which is often at the heart of adult education pedagogies, and thus a relational one, could therefore be suggested to be equally as important as 'powerful knowledge' when it comes to teaching returning adult learners in higher education.

8.2.3 Beliefs, values and dispositions

My conversations with my participants revealed that it was not just their academic knowledge and personal experiences that guided their MSAC teaching practices, but also their beliefs and values. Despite the fact that only one participant (Jody) proactively sought out MSAC teaching, most participants expressed their motivation for their students to have the opportunity to progress to higher education. Sam is a "big believer

in equality of opportunity” while Chris believes that MSAC courses represent one of higher education’s “biggest efforts towards equality.” Similar to access course teachers in other settings (Jones, 2006; Brosnan, 2013; Busher et al., 2015a) some of my participants demonstrated a motivation to teach which was driven or underpinned by a commitment to ‘second-chance’ learning (e.g. Jody, Chris, Leslie) or by a ‘moral’ imperative (Busher et al., 2015a), recognising the value of these courses in offering an important route into higher education for non-traditional learners. It is interesting to note that in a study of the work and life experiences of mature students in higher education Fleming et al. (2010, p. 116) found that, on completion of their undergraduate degrees, many “chose careers that they perceive to be more meaningful”, including work in education or continuing with their studies. Or as O’Neill (2015, p. 173) reflects “maybe there is something in that idea that mature students tend to gravitate to occupations which supported their own access routes to education” that can be applied to my participants’ decisions to take up these opportunities to teach MSAC students.

Fleming and Finnegan (2011a) point out that time and space are required for learning relationships to develop, and particularly for adult learners. While relationality within teaching is not unique or exclusive to teaching adult learners, it has been suggested to be an important factor in supporting non-traditional students, including mature students, to overcome feelings of marginalisation. Such feelings can significantly impact students’ decisions to either stay or leave their course, and ultimately their sense of belonging in higher education (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a; Pearce and Down, 2011). I suggest that many participants in my research intentionally invoke a relational pedagogy in order to create the kinds of spaces needed for their learners to prepare for and succeed in undergraduate education, as adult learners. Intentionality in this respect is a commitment to a way of being with their learners, as much as it is a commitment to a way of teaching (Sidorkin, 2000; Adams, 2018). This is illustrated in, for example, Sydney’s approach of always trying to speak with her students informally before class, and in Leslie’s approach of inviting her students to share their own research and learning with the class. During Covid, Bailey made the intentional decision to always deliver live classes so that she could maintain that relational connection directly with her students (and vice versa). Alex’s decision to use a comedic pedagogical approach for the purposes

of alleviating his students' anxiety is also an example of intentionality in relational engagement. For many of my participants, being able to develop a relational connection with their students resulted from their own self-understanding and of the experiences they themselves had as mature students as they can relate to the struggles, fears and challenges that their students experience. MSAC teachers also recognise their learners as individuals, acknowledge the diverse range of life circumstances that their learners experience and thus try to meet their learners 'where they are at', a key dimension also of a relational pedagogy (Romano, 2004; Hatt and Davidson, 2022). This recognition strengthened some participants' awareness of the social justice dimensions of this work and thus ultimately can be suggested to have strengthened their core values and beliefs with respect to access teaching (similar to findings in Jones, 2006). For some participants, this learning and recognition has carried over into their other teaching contexts. Sydney expressed this clearly in that she no longer sees "200 faceless students" in her undergraduate classes as a result of her experience working with MSAC students. Participants also recognise the growing ethnic and cultural diversity in their classes, which can bring its own challenges in terms of aligning learning needs and styles with teaching to a set curriculum (Merriam and Bierema, 2014). Despite the challenges this diversity brings however, the MSAC teachers in this study accepted and embraced this in their teaching and responded to it in their pedagogy.

Teachers' dispositions and attitudes are considered to be important for building supportive and successful learning environments for students, including for second-chance or non-traditional students (Elias and Bierama, 2005; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a). Key amongst these attitudes is understanding one's learners by engaging with them empathically (James et al., 2016). MSAC teachers could be suggested to do this by "engaging fully in the unfolding relationship" (Gair, 2012, p. 140) so that they can perceive their students' lived experiences and thus empathically understand their learners' feelings around engaging in education (Brown, 2021). Fleming and Finnegan (2011a, p. 12) suggest that this is "the burden of recognition in pedagogy" whereby learners' lived experiences need to be acknowledged and understood by teachers in order to authentically support their students' sense of belonging in higher education. This 'burden' could be suggested as such because it requires an element of emotional

labour (Hargreaves, 1998) from teachers in getting to know students' stories and lived experiences. However, a sense of emotional labour was not strongly evident in my participants' accounts. Rather, they demonstrated strong empathic connections (Holloway and Alexandre, 2012) with their students and an understanding and awareness of the challenges they faced in their lives and in engaging in education. Being able to empathise when teaching adult learners is suggested to be valuable to create an environment where learners can excel, but also for the teachers themselves so that they can create a space which allows them to connect at a more personal level with their learners. For some this empathy developed because of the feeling of having a 'shared experience', whereby aspects of their own lives were similar to those of their students – such as not being able to afford college as a younger student (Chris) or availing of the support of an Access Service to participate in higher education (Sydney). However, while I have offered the view that experience of being a mature student is valuable experience to have as an MSAC teacher, I do not suggest that it is a necessary one in order to demonstrate empathy. For example, Charlie acknowledged that he did not have shared or similar experiences as his MSAC students, yet he demonstrated a willingness and also an intentionality to engage in those 'unfolding relationships' (Gair, 2012) with his learners. Kasl and Yorks (2016, p. 4) acknowledge that significant diversity in life experiences can generate obstacles that thwart the potential for shared learning through dialogue in education but suggest that empathy "opens pathways between different worlds". This seemed to be the case for many of my participants as by engaging empathically with their students this allowed them to connect relationally which in turn supported their growing understanding of the underlying purpose of MSACs and thus of the social justice dimension of this work.

Empathy is closely related to the concept of 'care' in education and the effectiveness of adult learners' learning is suggested to be predicated on the creation of caring learning environments (Jones and Kessler, 2020). Care can be considered to be an attitudinal disposition of concern and a relational concept (Noddings, 1992; Tronto, 1993, 1998). Being caring in a learning relationship involves having a genuine openness to who another person is and the situation in which they find themselves (Noddings, 1992) i.e. it is a "reaching out to something other than the self" (Tronto, 1993, p. 102), and has

been suggested to be a dispositional motivation for someone to become a teacher (Noddings, 2010). My findings indicate that MSAC educators create and nurture supportive and caring learning environments for their students and thus their teacher-learner relationships could be characterised as caring relationships, as care underpins their relational intention (Smoot 2010; Murphy and Brown, 2012; Bovill, 2020). While my participants themselves did not articulate this in so many words with respect to their *own* experience of their MSAC work, the care and compassion they articulated for their learners was evident. For example, Sam implies that “softness” is a necessary trait in adult educators and that he sees that amongst the MSAC teachers in his own institution – “you have to be the type of person who looks at other people and sees the anxiety or sees the pain and want to make it better.” This implies a necessity to engage in a caring relationship with one’s learners, although as Sam points out another time, this is not about caring *for* but caring *about* one’s students, or as Daloz (1986, p. 14) describes it, adopting a “caring stance”. Therefore, this illustrates caring within MSAC teaching as an ‘attitudinal disposition’ as opposed to ‘performing acts of care’ (Tronto 1998; Lynch et al., 2019) and is closely tied to being able to empathise with learners’ experiences and feelings. Again, this suggests that a relational intention is evident in my participants’ attitudes towards their MSAC teaching.

Student feedback on access courses more generally reveals that their teachers engage in important dimensions of care and commitment which are fundamental to social justice and to an inclusive educational ethos (Busher et al., 2014). Likewise, my participants pay strong attention to the affective dimensions of their students’ learning and display a high degree of care towards their students. However, as I previously pointed out, the sense of care and support as invisible or unrecognised ‘emotional labour’ (Hargreaves, 1998), or as ‘affective inequality’ (Lynch et al., 2007; Grummell, 2017), although somewhat present, is not as strongly evident in my research as it has been reported elsewhere including by teachers in other marginalised education settings, for example, teachers in further education (Jephcote et al., 2008), adult literacy (SOLAS, 2000) or Youthreach programmes (Kenny et al., 2022). While ‘caring’ can be suggested to be an element of this work for MSAC teachers, as has been expressed in particular by Sam this is more so to the extent that my participants care quite deeply *about* their

students, and about their success rather than “attending to students’ personal problems” (Jephcote et al., 2008, p. 166) highlighting an ethics of care as being a feature of these relational approaches to teaching (Riddle and Hickey, 2022). It is also possible of course, that to some extent the lesser sense of care as emotional labour for these teachers is because the Access Service in each HEI plays a key role in providing that level of socio-emotional and pastoral support to students, in recognition of the fact that these MSAC teachers are part-time or casually employed staff and thus are less available to support these students outside of the classroom. Nonetheless, caring for or about one’s students is suggested to be ‘at odds with’ the prevailing performative culture in higher education (hooks, 2003). This is not to imply that teachers in higher education do not care, however as discussed in Section 3.2.2.1, literature has shown that higher education in general is ambivalent about the extent to which teachers should, or can, care about their students (Hagenaeur and Volet, 2014). I offer the view however that my participants buck this trend to some extent within the MSAC teaching space. They care by teaching well (Giroux, 2015), drawing on disciplinary knowledge and by adopting a relational pedagogy, which is underpinned by their beliefs, values and dispositions, as well as by their own experiential knowledge. Their experiences suggest that it is possible, within this particular space within higher education, to respond to a performative culture by contributing directly to equity of access objectives within their institutions (albeit in many cases not necessarily with primary intent to do so), as well as to maintain a caring and relational ethos in their teaching. Fundamentally my participants’ core belief systems and understanding of the purposes of these courses appears to inform the approaches they adopt thus creating these valued and valuable relation-centred teaching spaces.

8.2.4 Section summary

The experiences of the participants in this research showcase a group of educators with a distinct set of values and practices within their teaching which is deeply embedded within the context in which it takes place. Participants are acutely aware of the need to create supportive learning environments for their learners, many of whom have experienced, and will continue to experience, a range of barriers to participating in

higher education. MSAC teachers demonstrate a strong awareness of the need to develop a rapport with their learners, the need to allay their learners' feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, and to get to know their learners as individuals. They also demonstrate a strong commitment to disciplinary knowledge and standards. Therefore, the 'border country' (Hunt and West, 2006) of this teaching space effectively occupies two different dimensions – a pedagogical dimension and a social justice dimension. For my participants, the need to hold both adult and higher education pedagogies, and thus relational and disciplinary knowledges, as equally important in supporting their learners' engagement with education indicates a complex pedagogical space which requires a high level of commitment, understanding and insight. From a social justice perspective, by blending pedagogies and knowledges these teachers can be suggested to open a pathway to higher education by providing access simultaneously to both disciplinary knowledge and self-confidence for their learners, thus supporting a positive engagement in education for those who have been traditionally furthest removed from it.

I posit that relationality fundamentally underpins my participants' teaching approaches and ethos in working with MSAC students. Relational pedagogy emphasises the *intentionality* in the practices employed by teachers to build connection with their learners and to develop positive relationships for learning purposes (Adams, 2018; Su and Wood, 2023). Embracing a relational pedagogy therefore means that it is the relationship which is at the heart of the educational process i.e. that teaching is neither teacher-centred, nor learner-centred, nor content-centred. While all of these elements are critical to the educational process, the emphasis within relational pedagogy is on human relations rather than on the educational processes themselves (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004). My findings suggest that my participants hold relationality both as an orientation and as an attitudinal disposition (Hickey and Riddle, 2023a) within their teaching, in terms of their intentionality in connecting on a personal level with their learners through their teaching approaches, and in terms of their connection to their own emotions, feelings and awareness of their own personal growth through working 'in relation' with their students. My participants can be suggested to demonstrate 'pedagogical tact' (Loxley et al., 2017c) within the MSAC space, and the nature of the

space itself and of their learners offers them the time to navigate the boundaries and interfaces across these pedagogies with their students. I offer the view that the findings suggest that participants can only truly navigate the 'border country' (Hunt and West, 2006) that is an MSAC by drawing on different forms of knowledge and by having a commitment to second-chance learning and to the social justice purposes of these courses, whether that commitment already existed as a core personal value, or whether it evolved through their engagement with the programme itself and thus with these students.

These findings also indicate that my participants hold values and beliefs such as the value of education in supporting the social inclusion of learners and thus in the capacity of education to transform learners' lives (O'Neill, 2015; Finnegan and Grummell, 2020). Their values and practices such as care and empathy, as well as their relational and responsive approaches to their learners, are values and approaches which are often acknowledged to facilitate relational connection (Holloway and Alexandre, 2012; Brown, 2021) which in turn underpins the social justice ethos of adult educators' work (Bowl, 2017). Although I don't suggest that such beliefs and values are unique to adult educators or to MSAC teachers within higher education, these findings resonate with Bowl's description of adult education work more generally as being like a career with a social mission and being "values driven". These commitments imply not just a commitment to second-chance learning but also, almost by default, a commitment to a relational engagement with their students i.e. a commitment to a relational way of being (Sidorkin, 2000; Ljungblad, 2021). The import of this will become more evident in Section 8.4 when I explore how my participants' experiences reflect the status of this work within their HEIs.

8.3 A relational teaching and learning space

8.3.1 Learning and becoming 'in relation'

Students may join an MSAC without having knowledge of a particular subject or not having studied a subject for a long time. Coupled with an anxiety or lack of confidence that is often typical of adult learners (Staunton, 2008; Fleming et al., 2017b), being alert

to when learners are struggling and finding alternative ways to teach challenging concepts is an essential part of the work of an MSAC teacher. Some of my participants were relatively new to teaching and could be suggested to be open to learning about the 'craft' of teaching and to receiving both direct and indirect feedback from their learners. Sydney's example of the "ahhhhhh..." moment for learners in her classroom was a pivotal learning opportunity for her as a teacher and demonstrated her openness and alertness to the value of such moments (Entwhistle and Walker, 2000). This also demonstrated her responsiveness and ability to 'read' her students which ultimately became a teachable moment for both students and teacher (Romano 2004). Other participants, such as Alex and Bailey, described seeing the 'light bulb' moment in class, whereby the reaction of their students offered them instantaneous feedback with respect to their teaching, which is suggestive of 'reflecting in action' (Schön, 2016), while Chris felt that learning to cope with challenging questions 'on the spot' from her students had made her a better teacher. MSAC teachers in these instances are demonstrating a sensitivity to their relationships with their students (Gergen, 2009) which in turn is necessary for learning as well as for human development, and in these instances, occurs for both teacher and students.

Seeing teaching as an opportunity to learn from students' responses and thus to gain new insights into one's subject and how to teach it, along with a growing confidence in one's identity as teacher, has been identified in other studies particularly for those, such as postgraduate students, who are new to higher education teaching (Harland and Plangger, 2004; Noonan, 2020). Sydney expressed the view that her MSAC teaching experience made her a 'better teacher' while participants such as Sam and Charlie reported experiencing increased self-confidence and self-belief in themselves as teachers as a result of their experiences. These examples suggest a level of awareness amongst participants of what makes them better teachers and that they recognise that they are also learners in this process. These experiences illustrate a reflection on practice, both 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action' (Schön, 2016) with respect to the impact of their teaching approaches on their learners but also with respect to the impact of their learners' responses on the development of their own teaching skills. In this respect their experiences indicate my participants' openness also to co-creating

knowledge about the *processes* of teaching and learning through dialogue with their students (hooks, 2003), in a situation whereby the teacher is learner, and the learner is teacher (Freire, 1970). In turn, these experiences and relationships work directly to build participants' self-confidence in themselves as teachers, and thus positively impacting on their self-esteem, which is ultimately critical to their growing identity as teachers (Honneth, 1995). It also speaks to the assertion that educators are fundamentally relational beings and how they "experience a sense of self through relationships with and in relation to other people" (Schwartz, 2019, p. 1) as well as how teachers and learners "expand each other's learning space" (ibid, p. 28). MSACs have offered a teaching space in which some of my participants have expanded their learning and in which they have flourished (Schwandt, 2005). This effectively is the mutual or reciprocal growth dimension of engaging in a relational pedagogy (Gravett, 2023).

Sam's experience, whilst a singular personal experience within my research, is valuable to consider in greater depth as it offers an interesting example of how relational engagement can lead to teachers feeling valued in their work and thus in turn valuing themselves and is useful to reflect on from the perspective of how teachers and learners grow in relation with each other. Sam felt that he had been a good post-primary school teacher, albeit a "reluctant" one, and didn't fully value himself as a teacher before starting to teach mature students on the MSAC. He identifies the opportunity to connect relationally with MSAC students, and to thus receive "feedback", as contributing to him valuing what he does to a much greater extent than before. He states that "it is what they say and how they make me feel ... that matters more than the actual numbers" (i.e. the students' academic results). It is interesting in considering this statement by Sam that it is the affective outcome (his feelings about himself) that he acknowledges as being more important to him than the instrumental outcome (his students' results), which in turn allows him to connect with his own sense of self. The fact that he finds this 'odd' suggests that in his previous experiences of teaching getting good results were what most mattered to him as a teacher whereas with the MSAC he feels that his presence and relationship make a personal difference to his students and that these are more important than course content. This 'mattering' (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981) that Sam expresses, whereby he feels like he has a place in his students' lives

(Schwartz, 2019) and which is experienced relationally, in turn seems to allow him to grow 'in relation with' his learners (Schwartz and Holloway 2012).

Merriam and Bierama (2014) identify the important role that adult educators can play in removing emotional blocks to learning for their learners. For Sam, it seems that the experience of teaching on an MSAC removed his own emotional block to teaching in that he had become a "reluctant teacher" while teaching in post-primary school. Hickey and Riddle (2021, p. 9) suggest that it is within interactions and relations with others, through a relational pedagogy, that some teachers come to recognise themselves as teachers, acknowledging their own capability and expertise and that this happens "... at the interface of beings-in-relation". In recognising himself as a good teacher through teaching 'in relation with' his students, Sam could be said to be bringing his unconscious emotional dimensions of his relationships with his students to the surface, reflecting on what is happening inside himself (Palmer, 1998). His experiences reveal that he engages with his feelings about his work and his interactions with his students and thus moves beyond the more cognitive dimensions of the activity of teaching. This is suggestive of an expansion of his own 'sense of self' (Hunt and West, 2006). This experience is similar to that of AHE access course tutors who were reported to have found that their identities, far from being fixed, were constructed through discourses with individuals, groups and within social structures (Busher et al., 2015a). hooks (1994, p. 135) also suggests that this affirmation of 'being' a teacher happens "through the transaction of being with other people in the classroom". Again, this is the important mutual growth dimension of a relational pedagogy (Gravett, 2023) which distinguishes it from other pedagogical approaches.

The connection between relationality and recognition, within this growth-in-relation, becomes evident when we consider how Honneth's (1995) identity model of recognition applies in examining this experience more deeply. Under the 'solidarity' sphere of recognition, which typically occurs at work, self-esteem as a form of recognition occurs when an individual's contribution is recognised by others and this recognition is achieved intersubjectively. Thus, recognition is related to experience, feelings and to intersubjective relations between people, much as it appears to be experienced by Sam.

Sam himself offers the view that it is because he is teaching adults rather than younger students, and thus can engage with them relationally and on a more equal basis than he could with students in a school setting, his awareness and belief in his own value as a teacher grow. What is interesting to highlight in this example is that although this form of recognition occurs in a work setting, recognition has occurred through relational engagement between teacher and learner and not through engagement with colleagues or teaching peers. In these marginal teaching spaces this reveals to an even greater extent the importance *for the teacher* of connection in the teaching and learning relationship.

In her seminal work, *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994, p. 7) encourages us to engage in a relational form of teaching where students are seen “in their particularity as individuals ... and interacted with according to their needs”. hooks considers that a teacher’s capacity to generate excitement about learning is integrally linked with their interest in their learners, and in the teacher’s willingness, not just to see and acknowledge the presence of their learners, but to engage them as active co-creators in the learning process and to recognise and value that engagement. As a result, for hooks this creates a genuine ‘community of learners’ in the classroom in which “excitement is generated through collective effort” (ibid., p. 8) and therefore suggests that students have a role and responsibility also to play in creating positive classroom dynamics. MSAC teachers encourage and welcome student participation in class through conversation (e.g. Charlie, Leslie) while Sydney expresses the view that mature students have better critical thinking than younger students and thus MSAC classes, for her, are more engaging than undergraduate classes. This dialogical and engaged approach is a key aspect of relational pedagogy (Stengel, 2004; Bovill 2020). This practice is also what hooks terms an ‘engaged pedagogy’ in which the *teacher’s* own well-being and “care of the soul” (ibid., p. 16) is emphasised, as an “engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process” (ibid., p. 21). hooks is suggesting that taking an intentional relational approach to teaching can ultimately support the teacher’s own well-being, and enhance the satisfaction and excitement they get from teaching their students, and this can be seen within the experiences related by

my participants. Learning to be a teacher in this way can result in personal or transformative growth (Mezirow, 1997) and the experiences related by my participants suggest that an MSAC teaching experience is a process of growth and transformative change. Again, Sam is a strong case in point here, as are Sydney and Chris who both express the view that they have become 'better teachers' as a result of their MSAC teaching, while Jody's eyes have been opened to the genuine possibility of teaching as a career – "I always thought of myself as a do-er, not as a teacher and so, it was kind of like a revelation for me". Sydney also recognised that the MSAC relationships of learning supported her learning in her academic discipline – "it makes you a better scientist, like 100%". It is worth highlighting however that, while growth-in-relation could be said to be experienced by many participants it was not necessarily a universal one, nor was it experienced in a transformative way by all participants. For Sam who was an experienced teacher, this growth was related to his self-esteem, while for Sydney, Jody and Chris who had less experience of teaching it related more so to the development of their teaching skills. For Alex who was also an experienced teacher, it was more to do with realising and embracing the responsibility for ensuring that his students were adequately prepared for first year in a technical subject over a relatively short period of time.

The key point I am making is that this change or growth for these teachers is happening 'in relation with' their students. My participants are learning to be educators, or are learning to be educators in this particular context, and acknowledge that this is a process of 'becoming' or 'co-being' (Sidorkin 2000) in contrast to the expectation of being an 'expert' higher education teacher (hooks, 2003) from the outset. It is through the process of teaching, and of engaging with their learners, that this learning happens, and this growth can be experienced as personal and transformational, affective as well as instrumental. However, growth-in-relation was not a constant process or experience for participants, nor was it universally experienced as I have pointed out above, and there were also challenges experienced in these learning relationships which impacted on teachers' growth and self-confidence, evident in particular during the emergency remote teaching period. These challenges and experiences are discussed in Section 8.3.4.

8.3.2 *Making teaching spaces ‘habitable’*

The recognition and prioritisation of relationships within education, through a relational pedagogy, has been suggested to be fundamental to creating a positive and supportive learning environment for learners (e.g. hooks, 1994; Sidorkin, 2000; Gravett, 2023). It can also offer a more meaningful and inclusive experience for higher education teachers (Bovill, 2020; Gravett and Winstone, 2022) and relational pedagogy can thus support “making spaces habitable for oneself as a teacher”⁴⁸. One of the questions I have reflected on with respect to my findings is: what are the specific conditions or qualities of MSACs that lend themselves to that relational engagement and which ultimately contribute to teachers’ enjoyment of this work?

Large class teaching in higher education presents many challenges to a relational engagement between teacher and students and these challenges have been well documented (hooks, 2003; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010; Felten and Lambert, 2020). MSAC classes are distinctly different to undergraduate classes as small class size is critical to how access courses are taught (Murphy, 2009). It is notable that a number of my participants (e.g. Bailey, Leslie, Sydney) expressed that they cannot know or see clearly the impact that their teaching has on their undergraduate students because of the absence of connection in these large classes and thus small class size was highlighted by my participants as a key factor in their ability to connect relationally with their MSAC students. The size of classes, teaching schedules and expectations at undergraduate level, as well as the “dependence on large-scale teaching methods” (Loxley et al., 2017c, p. 251) make the adoption of interactive, relational and dialogical teaching approaches very difficult at undergraduate level. The fact that MSAC teachers can engage on a personal level with their students enhances their enjoyment of this work and thus lends to a feeling that MSAC teaching is somewhat of a ‘refuge’, for some, from the demands and impersonal nature of their undergraduate teaching. This, in turn, contributes to making the MSAC a ‘habitable’ teaching space. In some respects, this could be suggested to be a turning on its head of the power dynamics within higher education in that the

⁴⁸ Comment in online chat at Relational Pedagogy and Relation Centered Education Network webinar, 25 October 2023, Maynooth University

smaller, less visible, and less ‘powerful’ teaching associated with MSACs in fact offers a more powerfully positive experience to teachers than does undergraduate teaching.

Sydney used the word “aura” to describe what she explains as the “connective energy” that she feels when she teaches her students, and indeed when she works with other tutors, to work towards a common goal on the MSAC. She also describes this energy as something positive which “draws people into the atmosphere of the course”. This, I suggest, is what Sidorkin (2023) means when he describes the invisible “dark matter” of relational connection, and thus it is worth reflecting on what Sydney’s description can tell us more generally about how teaching as a relational activity is – or can be – experienced. Schwartz (2019, pp. 237-238) states that:

“we lack language for the space between, the energy between ... There is something essential about learning in connection as different from learning alone. When we learn together, we share not only the content of our disciplines but also the energy and emotion of the learning moment.”

Thus, teaching can be suggested to be a space in which energy is shared between human beings; “sharing space with anyone else means sharing energy – literally” (Nagoski and Nagoski, 2019, p. 137). Similarly, Knowles et al. (2015) describe teaching as a social system and as a system of human energy while Ljungblad (2021, p. 863) writes of the “social living space” within which education happens. All of these descriptions evoke a sense of a ‘space between’ that is far from a void, but rather is one in which an invisible yet powerful energy is created ‘in relationship’ between people. Teaching as an ‘energetic’ space resonates with the experience that Sydney had described and the relational experience between teachers and learners lends to the MSAC being like its own unique ‘social system’ within the large, complex systems and structures of higher education institutions (the ‘edifice’ as described by Sam, or the ‘beast’ according to Jody). Therefore, these findings reveal that MSACs offer an opportunity to educators to engage with students in a significantly different way than they can do when teaching on undergraduate courses. Sydney also uses the term “anti-teaching” to describe how she felt about her MSAC experience and describes it as feeling like a “break” from her other teaching (even though many participants feel that this work is more difficult than undergraduate teaching). “Anti-teaching” is an interesting oxymoron and invites

reflection on how the experience of teaching in higher education more generally contrasts with MSAC teaching. The thread that is running through this discussion is that, on the whole, the MSAC teachers I spoke with say that this teaching is an enjoyable, rewarding and engaging occupation. There is also the sense within my participants' responses that this is how teaching "should be" i.e. relational at its core (Ljungblad, 2021; Su and Wood, 2023). This description of "anti-teaching" therefore invokes a sense of the importance to my participants of feeling positive about teaching as an occupation or activity and there are different aspects of MSAC teaching which likely lend themselves to this. One element of this is that it provided participants with greater freedom to try out different teaching techniques and strategies, and to be more open and creative in the classroom. For example, Sydney talks about being able to try out different ways of explaining a complex concept. She expresses that this is the kind of teaching she *wants* to do in her undergraduate classes but can't and thus welcomes the opportunity to engage in this relational way of teaching in her MSAC classes.

This description of MSAC teaching being like 'anti-teaching' also provokes a reflection as to whether these courses demand the same level of performativity and accountability as other teaching responsibilities in higher education (Lynch et al., 2007; Grummell et al., 2009b). Ball (2003, p. 215) suggests that performativity condemns educators to "live an existence of calculation" which in turn can lead to "ontological insecurity" whereby educators constantly question their worth and performance. My research however does not create a picture of demoralised staff, struggling with an audit culture, with performative and managerial practices and what this means for their sense of self-worth as educators. In contrast to other studies on access courses (e.g. Busher et al., 2015a; Strauss and Hunter, 2018), or experiences related by those working in adult and community education (e.g. O'Neill, 2015), there is no real sense of the pressures of performativity or of a rigid audit culture impacting on MSAC educators in this way. Although MSAC teaching happens in higher education, Ball's (2003) description of the impact of managerialism in education as "the struggle for the soul of the teacher" did not come to the fore in my participants' accounts of their MSAC classroom experiences. My own professional experience suggests that access courses in Ireland, unlike AHE courses in the UK, are not necessarily "scrutinized by the gaze (Foucault, 1977) of more

senior members of a college's organisational hierarchy" (Busher et al., 2015a, p. 136) to ensure they adhere to national policy or to justify their contribution to student recruitment and retention targets. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case in that these MSAC teachers largely enjoy this work and did not report experiencing stress with respect to achieving specified programme outcomes or results, other than altruistically wanting students to achieve the best for themselves. From experience, I would suggest that, because MSAC courses sit outside of the main academic (teaching) structures of these institutions and that Access Services take responsibility for those more performative elements of these courses where these may exist, this could contribute to my participants' differing experiences in these contexts. On the one hand this emphasises the separation of these teachers from mainstream higher education even further; however, on the other hand, it supports an 'ontological security' (Ball, 2003) in their work, given the lack of externally imposed performative pressure. It also emphasises the relationality within the teaching and learning dynamic that works as a positive technology of power (Foucault, 1977) in these settings, thus diminishing or overriding the more ubiquitous performative power dynamics that are found in most of higher education teaching.

MSAC teachers' experiences in this respect present a contrast to those of higher education teachers more generally (and globally) with respect to their experiences of managerialism and its associated performativity measures (Lynch et al., 2009; Kalfa and Taksa, 2015; Kenny, 2017) as well as contrasting with the experiences of teachers in other education sectors such as further education and training, and in adult and community education (Grummell and Murray, 2015; Glanton, 2023). The absence of this pressure from 'business norms' such as efficiency and productivity, which can negatively impact the relationship between teacher and student (Schwandt, 2005), is another way in which MSACs may be regarded as operating in a "bit of a bubble" (Alex) within higher education. In this sense, I offer the view that MSAC teachers experience a freedom similar to that experienced by adult educators more generally to "work outside the more rigid structures of formal educational institutions" (Bowl, 2017, p. 6) or that their work is experienced as a 'pocket of resistance' (Finnegan, 2019) to neoliberal values. This work instead privileges relational learning in community and the 'public good' role of

higher education and thus - perhaps quietly – challenges, or presents an alternative to, the dominance of the more traditional power dynamics within higher education. The Access Services ‘holding’ of these courses in a ‘bubble’ within these institutions and protecting teachers – intentionally or otherwise – from institutional performative pressures, possibly also lends to the maintenance of these MSAC spaces as “‘pockets of care’ - the places and spaces where we find care to enable us to keep caring” (O’Connell, 2023, p. 162). It could also be suggested that MSAC teachers are exercising agency in their teaching by choosing to adopt strategies and practices that are to some extent “at odds” with teaching approaches that are more commonly found in higher education and particularly in large undergraduate classes. Sam demonstrated an awareness of the challenges and different approaches to teaching at undergraduate level when he ‘warned’ his students that they “wouldn’t have a teacher anymore” once they progressed onwards. Thus, the feelings of enjoyment associated with this kind of teaching could be an interesting and positive consequence of the fact that these courses operate on the periphery of higher education, as discussed in Section 8.4, highlighting even further the relational contrast between MSAC and undergraduate teaching.

Interestingly, what is notable in my research is that other than the younger PhD students or graduates, some participants (e.g. Leslie, Sydney, Sam) expressed a distinct lack of desire to be an academic or to progress into the academic world. Thus, it could be said that they are not “beholden to corporate interests, career building, and the insular discourses that accompany specialized scholarship” (Giroux, 2014b, p. 17). Some of my participants strongly identified as teachers, rather than as academics, albeit they were teaching in a higher education institution. This is a form of authenticity in relational pedagogy (Bovill, 2020) or a ‘belonging to self’ (Brown, 2021). Similarly bell hooks (1994, p. 132) in conversation with Ron Schapp in *Teaching to Transgress* admits that “the way I teach has been fundamentally structured by the fact that I never wanted to be an academic” while Ron states that:

“We talked about the difference between seeing the title of professor or university teacher or even just teacher itself as a mere professional bridge like lawyer or doctor, a term that within our own working-class communities brought prestige or significance to who we already were. But as teachers I think our emphasis has, over the years, been to affirm who we are through the transaction of being with other people in the classroom

and achieving something there. Not just relaying information or stating things, but *working with people*" (ibid., p. 135) (*my italics*)

It could be inferred that it is a preference to teach 'in relation' and to 'work with people', rather than to be an academic with all that entails, that motivates many of my participants. Smoot (2010, p. xii) identified that a commonality amongst 'great teachers' "is that they all regard teaching not just as a job but as a calling, a combination of serious purpose and sacred commitment to that purpose ... The teachers with whom I talked love their work, using words like "passion" and "joy"". Gravett and Ajjawi (2022, p. 1389) suggest that students may actively choose not to belong – that they participate "'outside the bubble' of dominant university communities" - and that space should be acknowledged and accepted for such students in higher education. Similar could be said of these MSAC teachers as some actively choose not to fully participate in the 'academic world'. My participants have found a space in higher education in which they can teach in a relational way and through which they are intrinsically motivated. McCune (2021, p. 21) states that "what we value and what we choose to do is in close and constant interplay with who we are" and this speaks to how many of my participants see themselves as teachers and not necessarily as academics, and how they embrace this authenticity (Bovill, 2020) in their teaching work and relational choices. This is an agency which can be seen as situated in their own experiences and not in themselves as individuals (Kinchin and Gravett, 2022) and thus allows them to "reclaim a sense of agency over what kind of teacher (they) aspired to be" (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 597). Thus, MSAC teaching becomes more than 'just' a teaching experience and in many ways becomes quite a holistic experience and is primarily a positive one. I would suggest that for some of my participants, given the part-time and 'marginal' nature of their work, their relational connections with their students become all the more valuable in making their teaching spaces 'habitable' and to make them feel like they matter (Schwartz, 2019; Brown, 2021). These findings therefore highlight the systemic complexity within which my research, and this kind of teaching, is located and also highlight the underlying structural power dynamics of a 'powerful knowledge' (Young and Muller, 2013) and research-dominant teaching environment.

8.3.3 A place for emotions

The enjoyment experienced by my participants from their MSAC teaching arises from different aspects of their work. Some of this enjoyment manifests as ‘micro-moments’ of joy and connection (Gravett, 2023), for example the ‘light bulb’ moments described by Alex and Sydney and which Alex describes as bringing a “nice warm fuzzy glow”. Or Chris’ student who cried when they received a high mark in their assessment – “there’s always tears in Access” – and thus it is very satisfying for Chris to be there for someone when they are realising something positive about themselves. Sydney experienced this during the “ahhhh ...” moment in class, when her students collectively understood the concept that she was teaching at the time. In this instance she both expanded her own learning as a teacher and her joy of teaching as a person. Such moments resonate with Daloz’s (2019, p. 11) description of “the magic moment(s) when a class glows with a fresh insight” and he suggests that, for many teachers, this fundamentally is what teaching is about and is what makes it such a rewarding endeavour. hooks (2010, p. 21) also describes something similar for teachers who embrace an engaged pedagogy observing that they can “fully celebrate the moments where everything clicks and collective learning is taking place”. When this happens, hooks posits that learning and growth takes place also for the teacher “expanding both heart and mind” (ibid., p. 22). These micro moments experienced by my participants not only arise because of the connection they have with their learners, but they in turn also strengthen that connection, with their learners and with themselves. This brings us back to the contention that learning involves both ‘hearts and minds’ (Nussbaum, 1995; hooks, 2010) where both cognitive and emotional knowledges grow and expand, and that academic life has an integral emotional dimension (Gravett, 2023).

Such micro moments and micro interactions are suggested to be critical to building connections between teachers and learners and to making individuals – including teachers - feel like they matter and belong (Schwartz, 2019; Gravett, 2023). Thus, they are important to consider for their impact on the individual, moving consideration of the value of such teaching and learning spaces “away from metrics and towards mattering” (Gravett, 2023, p. 150) i.e. away from a focus on performativity and towards a focus on

the relational and emotional. Again, this experience was exemplified by Sam who realised that how his interactions with his students made him feel ultimately became more important to him than the results he achieved. Chris describes feeling ‘a bit of a high’ in realising that she has ‘actually done something useful’ while what matters to Sydney is the ‘cheesy’ and ‘rewarding’ feeling that she is making a difference to people. The teachers in my study feel like they matter when they experience such moments, and it is the *attention* and *intention* that is given to these moments that is important as it is a way of attending to the individual outside of the course content. Gannon et al. (2019, p.49) suggest that such moments offer insight into “how our bodies ... are saturated with affects and emotions” thus reflecting the “affective and emotional nature of academic life” (Gravett, 2023, p. 86). Given that emotions have been observed to occupy an ‘uneasy’ place in higher education teaching (hooks, 2003; Beard et al., 2007) as I have previously discussed in Section 3.2.4, these experiences highlight a space within higher education which attends to the value and importance of emotions and emotional connection. It does this by recognising embodied and emotional knowledges, not just with respect to their value to MSAC teachers in relating to their students, but also in facilitating a deeper connection for my participants to their own roles and identities as teachers.

Job satisfaction, in the sense of feeling ‘reward’ for their work, is also experienced by my participants. Aspects of this reward arise from observing the personal growth and transformation of their learners – as Sam describes it, seeing his students go from “being scared” of his subject to becoming confident and successful learners. Sydney likens the feeling to that of being a parent seeing their child succeed. It is experienced as a pride, not in her own achievements as a teacher, but as a pride in her students, which in turn contributes to her own sense of self-worth as a teacher. This is the pleasure of teaching which comes from seeing students grow, succeed and develop their self-confidence and which is suggested to be a significant source of job satisfaction for teachers more generally (Knowles et al., 2015; Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 2018). It has also been identified as being important to access course teachers more specifically (Busher et al., 2015a; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015). Knowles et al. (2015, p. 247) describe this kind of job satisfaction as “getting rewards from releasing students” which are much more

satisfying than rewards received from “controlling students”, and which can only be achieved through an authentic relational engagement. In an Irish context, Brosnan’s (2013, p. 163) study offered that academic staff who were teaching on MSACs also considered their work to be “rewarding” and “see a tangible return on time investment” as they observe their students’ progress, both in terms of their increasing confidence and their academic progression. While her study did observe a commitment amongst the academic staff to MSAC teaching, the “return on investment” description for engaging in this work is interesting given its performative connotations. Such performative connotations were not evident in my own study as discussed in Section 8.3.2 as the reward of MSAC teaching was described by most of my participants in affective and personal terms, rather than in performative or instrumental terms.

A number of my participants used the highly emotive word “love” to describe how they feel about their MSAC work (Alex, Chris, Leslie and Sam). hooks (2003, p. 127) suggests that:

“when we speak of love and teaching, the connections that matter most are the relationship between teacher and subject taught, and the teacher-student relationship. When as professors we care deeply about our subject matter, when we profess to love what we teach and the process of teaching, that declaration of emotional connection tends to be viewed favorably by administrators and colleagues.”

However, the opportunity to love or to fully enjoy what one works at on a day-to-day basis is not something that everyone can take for granted. Chris considers job satisfaction to be an “elusive” life outcome, implying that she hasn’t yet reached where she would like to be with respect to her own job satisfaction while Sydney muses: “Are we conditioned to think that our job shouldn’t make us happy?” Teaching is a profession in which it is suggested that there are more frequent reports of stress compared to other occupational groups (Shackleton et al., 2019). For example, with respect to teaching in post-primary education, we often hear talk of “burn out” (Shackleton et al., 2019; O’Neill, 2020; Burke et al., 2022) including with respect to experiences during the pandemic (Burke and Dempsey, 2021a, 2021b). In higher education, burnout and stress have also been identified as issues for teaching staff (Barkhuizen et al., 2013; Teles et al., 2020) including for part-time and casual higher education teaching staff due to the

effects of precarious work (Holborow and O'Sullivan, 2017; IFUT, 2023). While I cannot account for other work responsibilities my participants may have had outside of their MSAC teaching, a sense of burnout or stress being directly related to their MSAC work was not evident in their accounts despite the precarious employment status of some of my participants. Equally, unlike the PhD students in Harland and Plangger's (2004) study there was no sense from my participants that they would lose their enjoyment of this work when it became repetitive. In fact, what makes the high level of job satisfaction experienced by my participants even more notable is the fact that for most participants their MSAC classes represented, at most, two or three teaching hours each week and sometimes only for one semester, with their students changing on an annual basis. The employment conditions for most of these teachers effectively *preclude* extensive engagement with their students other than within the classroom, yet the relational connection that developed and the high levels of job satisfaction reported were noticeable. Significantly, most participants, including the PhD students, expressed the view that they wanted to continue with this work with some, such as Chris and Rowan, strongly suggesting that if this kind of teaching - "access education" (Forster et al., 2022) - were financially viable, they would choose to make a career out of it. This illustrates that the job satisfaction and reward experienced as a result of a relational teaching experience is more appreciated and valuable to these teachers than the prestige associated with more mainstream higher education teaching. Interestingly, similar sentiments have been expressed by many who teach in adult and community education (Bowl 2017) and in Youthreach programmes (Kenny et al., 2022), education sectors which equally have a relational ethos at their core, and which could also be described as marginal teaching spaces.

Job satisfaction is also felt by my participants as contributing in some way to "doing good" for society. The connection that MSAC teachers developed with their learners on these courses enabled them to get to know their learners' stories and thus to develop an awareness of the challenges that some learners experience in accessing and participating in education. This connection in turn developed participants' awareness of, and in some cases further commitment to, inclusion and social justice and thus many developed a sense of this teaching as offering an opportunity to contribute to "changing

lives” (Sydney) and thus it “feels good to be doing good” (Sam). Participants experience a strong sense of achievement from this work because of that underlying ethos of commitment to social justice and inclusion and in some cases, expressed quite strongly by Sam for example, value themselves even more as teachers as a result. In Busher et al.’s (2015a, p. 134) study it was similarly found that some AHE tutors engaged in this work from a moral perspective and the complexity of this work “had a noticeable impact on tutors’ personal lives”. This was from the perspective that some AHE tutors expressed gratitude for being able to be a part of positive change in students’ lives, both from observing students’ personal growth and transformation and also from the feeling of contributing in a positive and more general way to the social justice and inclusion objectives of education. Brosnan (2013, p. 163) found academic and professional staff in higher education to be deeply committed to adult access work “with most of the work emerging through a grassroots approach”. Similarly, in community education McGlynn (2012, p. 123) found that educators experienced a sense of achievement in working with groups in peripheral settings, finding their work to be meaningful in “connecting personal development with social development” and concluded that “community educators make meaning through their practice” (ibid., p. 125). This meaning-making through practice for my participants stemmed from the direct impact that they could see, and indeed feel, that their teaching had on their students’ lives, and related much less so for most of my participants to how their work contributed to institutional or national policy objectives around equity of access or social inclusion. Although six of my participants also teach undergraduate classes, which are undoubtedly much more diverse today in terms of student profile, the challenges faced by individual students are largely ‘invisible’ to them in these large classes. It is the relational connection that the small MSAC classes facilitates that directly supports their understanding of their students’ lives and thus of the contribution that their teaching makes at a more personal level. This understanding also contributes to the high level of job satisfaction that they experience from that perspective of ‘making a difference’, expressed as feeling “a bit of a high” (Chris) and as being “insanely rewarding” (Sydney). This also reinforces the importance of having a respect for the contexts of learners’ lives and thus meeting them where they are at, through a relational pedagogical approach (Romano, 2004; Hatt and Davidson, 2022).

8.3.4 *Pedagogy within a pandemic*

“Covid-19 caused a massive disruption to how well teachers saw themselves as relational caring teachers” (Foreman-Brown et al., 2023, p. 21).

While my research does not centre the impact of the pandemic on teachers’ experiences, Covid-19 unavoidably became part of this story. Reflections by educators in adult education and in higher education on the impact of Covid-19 on the teaching and learning space highlight the importance of the positive relationship and rapport already built up between teachers and learners pre-Covid in supporting the maintenance of those same relationships in an online environment (e.g. Jones and Kessler, 2020; Hawthorne-Steele et al., 2021; Kenny et al., 2021). Others suggested that the pandemic offered an opportunity for educators to refocus on relationships with learners (Roll and Ventresca, 2020; Foreman-Brown, 2023). Both learners and educators found online engagement during Covid challenging, missing the “direct engagement and relational aspects of being together” (Barter and Grummell, 2020, p. 35). It is interesting that Covid offered this opportunity to turn the spotlight on educators’ experiences as much as on those of students – perhaps because the educator was also experiencing a ‘disorientation’ in terms of their pedagogy and the quality of their relationship with students. While adult, FE and community educators were invited to share their experiences of Covid (e.g. Barter and Grummell, 2020; Spours et al., 2022; Corbett et al., 2023), as were educators in other sectors, including higher education (e.g. Flynn and Noonan, 2020; Ní Fhloinn and Fitzmaurice, 2021; Foreman-Brown et al., 2023), I am not aware of access course teachers being invited to formally do so, other than through my own research. However, I suggest that my findings resonate strongly with the experiences of teachers in these other areas of education.

The impact of Covid-19 and the shift to emergency remote teaching was related quite distinctly by my participants. However, my participants’ accounts of their teaching experiences, both before and during Covid, indicate that relationality and connection were already core to their work as MSAC teachers. Covid-19 significantly impacted the *quality* of the interactions between my participants and their students, and I offer the view that this was therefore experienced by them more as ‘missed relationships’ (Jones

and Kessler, 2020; Fitzmaurice and Ní Fhloinn, 2021), rather than, as suggested by Roll and Ventresca (2020), as an opportunity to “refocus on relationships”. Many of my participants related feeling disheartened by the lower levels of connection that they experienced with their learners in an online environment, and all sought to mirror in-person teaching approaches online. This is similar to findings in studies carried out in other educational sectors during the pandemic, from schools, to Youthreach, to adult literacy (e.g. Burke and Dempsey, 2021a; Kenny et al., 2022; Grummell, 2022). This was done not only to support their students in the best way possible but also to try to continue to teach in a way that was both engaging and enjoyable for themselves. For example, Sam suggests that for him “the interaction with the students is the best bit” of his MSAC teaching experience and he missed that profoundly in online teaching.

Teaching during the pandemic was also experienced by most of my participants as tiring and uncomfortable and led to them feeling uncertain about their capacity to adequately support their learners in the online space, similar to findings in other studies (e.g. Van Bergen and Daniel, 2022). They related missing the ‘light bulb moments’ as their students, and more importantly their students’ struggles, became more ‘invisible’ to them in an online setting. The absence of visual clues as to their students’ progress was a universal experience for teachers across a range of education settings (e.g. Bennett et al., 2020; Flynn and Noonan, 2020; Cullinane et al., 2021). Thus, online teaching created an “uncomfortable distance” (Kovacs et al., 2021, p. 7555) between my participants and their students and, as a result, they felt more isolated, and constricted in their movements (Veazey Brooks et al., 2021). An experience of such an unnatural situation was described by Alex who shared that he is normally quite expressive and likes to walk around in his class, and thus he felt very confined by having to sit in front of a computer screen to teach. The experiences of online teaching during Covid thus highlighted even further the importance for my participants of experiencing meaningful interaction and connection with their students. It also re-emphasised the importance of the teacher-student relationship for the teacher’s own emotional well-being (Van Bergen and Daniel, 2022). Again, this is particularly noteworthy in the MSAC context given that my participants are all either part-time or ‘casual’ teaching staff or PhD students and thus, for many, their teaching hours and opportunity to engage with students was limited in

any event. Despite these limited opportunities for engagement in more normal teaching circumstances, they still felt the absence of connection very strongly in that move to emergency remote teaching (ERT).

Foreman-Brown et al.'s (2023) study on how the shift to ERT affected the ways in which relationality shifted in higher education teaching suggested that "through re-imagining their teacher identity in an online space, teachers maintained their focus on relational practices and developing connection" (p. 22). Their study also found that relational pedagogies, amongst other skills, enabled teachers to adapt more effectively to the rapid shift to ERT. Kovacs et al. (2021, p. 7564) capture the importance of connection for both the teacher and the learner when they found that the "nostalgia for the classroom" experienced by teachers and students in their study demonstrated:

"... that it is not merely "interaction" in the broad sense of the term that counts, but a more indefinable quality of relationship in which learner *and* teacher sense the psychological presence of the other, their availability and connectedness."

The tenets of relational pedagogy suggest that "face-to-face interaction between teachers and students is the point of departure for understanding educational relationships. This gap, or *the in-between*, is the space where education takes place" (Ljungblad, 2021, p. 864) and space, as I have already discussed, is where that energetic connection is created. This contention implies that in fact, although face-to-face interaction in physical spaces is preferable for developing relationships, education actually happens in the (quality of the) space between the teacher and learner. My research did not set out to explore the efficacy of MSAC teachers' work in an online space, however my findings illustrate that Covid-19 saw a negative shift in the capacity of MSAC teachers to maintain the relational element of the teaching experience. The impact of the pandemic thus served to highlight to an even greater extent the importance that a relational pedagogy holds for my participants, and particularly on a personal level with respect to their job satisfaction and enjoyment. While concern over the efficacy of their teaching was expressed, it was the personal impact of reduced enjoyment of their work which was most evident in our conversations.

8.3.5 Section summary

On the whole, my findings illustrate that MSAC teachers experienced high levels of job satisfaction and enjoyment from their work on these courses and much of this arose from their engagement and connection with their learners. In an environment where there is a high reliance on part-time and casual teaching staff it could be suggested that it is important for such teachers' well-being and enjoyment of their work that the opportunity to engage in a relational way with their students gives them that positive experience. Job satisfaction is described by Sam and Alex to be the thing that gets them "out of bed in the morning" and is something they experience from their MSAC teaching. My findings demonstrate that the creation of these relational teaching and learning spaces ultimately results in a rewarding and enjoyable teaching experience for my participants. For most of them, the rewards experienced are intrinsic and intangible, more so than material, and are expressed within the affective dimension of their experiences as job satisfaction and enjoyment of their work, made possible through relational engagement.

While I did not set out originally to explore relationality as a core concept in my research, my research findings have pointed to the centrality of this concept across all aspects of my participants' experiences. Relational pedagogy provides a lens through which to explicitly consider the experience, and also the motivation, of the educator in the teaching and learning relationship. Considering how and indeed why teachers teach in a relational way allows us to explore higher education teacher or lecturer satisfaction and potentially also performance (e.g. O'Toole, 2015). The significance of relational teaching within an MSAC is that it highlights the challenges that normative pedagogical higher education cultures and practices present to those for whom teaching may be more important to them than research or prestige. It also highlights what the relationship with their students means to MSAC teachers and how the 'relational space' within the MSAC enables these teachers to grow and to expand their own learning about the world – about their students and the life contexts in which they have taken the step to engage in higher education. The lens of relational pedagogy highlights the self-awareness and growth of teachers and how their relationships with their students

underpin their own wellbeing and belonging in higher education, and not just those of their students. Ultimately, teaching relationally can be said to help MSAC teachers to feel like they, themselves, matter (Schwartz, 2019) as professionals.

8.4 Status of access teaching

“To be in the margin is to be part of the whole, but outside the main body” (hooks, 1994, p. xvi)

Higher education purports to hold equality and equity of access at the core of its mission and access courses are one operational element of equity of access strategy within both HEIs in this study. My findings suggest however that, from my participants’ perspectives, there is limited broader awareness of MSAC courses amongst staff within these HEIs. This limited awareness is indicated by most of my participants’ own lack of knowledge of the courses up to the point at which they started their MSAC teaching, and also more generally by how they perceive the levels of awareness or recognition of these courses across the wider institution. For most of my participants the findings theme of ‘teaching below the radar’ meant that they experienced their MSAC teaching work as largely unseen, and also for some the feeling that this work was not valued by academic or other colleagues, or by the “entity” that is the institution. I will explore the relevance of these findings throughout this section, particularly with respect to what they mean for the status of access teaching, drawing largely on the concept of ‘recognition’ to do so.

8.4.1 Programme status and subordination of ‘pure’ teaching

hooks (2003, p. 83) describes good teaching as being a “commitment to service” and offers the view that “teachers who do the best work are always willing to serve the needs of their students”. She suggests that a dominator culture, such as that often seen in higher education, “degrades service as a way of maintaining subordination” and thus teaching, as service, is “devalued”. She goes on to state that:

“teachers who care, who serve their students, are usually at odds with the environments wherein we teach ... Service as a form of political resistance is vital because it is a practice of giving that eschews the notion of reward. The satisfaction is in the act of giving itself, of creating the context where students can learn freely. When as teachers we commit ourselves to service, we are able to resist participation in forms of

domination that reinforce autocratic rule. The teacher who serves continually affirms by his or her practice that educating students is really the primary agenda, not self-aggrandizement or assertion of personal power.” (ibid., p. 91)

Relational pedagogy centres this ethics of care (Riddle and Hickey, 2022) and this commitment to service comes across strongly in the accounts and experiences of my participants. Rowan describes being in regular touch with his students to support them after they move on to undergraduate studies, considering this to be part of his own personal ethos as a teacher. Leslie is regularly approached by former MSAC students to supervise their research in their final year of undergraduate studies albeit she is a ‘casual hours’ teacher. Sam puts the difference between MSAC and undergraduate teaching approaches very bluntly when he tells his students that they ‘won’t have a teacher anymore’ when they progress to undergraduate studies. Thus, his own experience of undergraduate education as a student, combined with his experience teaching on an MSAC, enables him to observe the more relational and caring approach that is possible to embrace in this teaching context.

My participants’ comments are indicative of their perceptions or experiences of the value in which ‘pure teaching’ is held in higher education compared to the status of ‘academic work’ which typically requires engaging in research, often driven by the dominant policy narrative around knowledge-based economic development. This hierarchy between research and teaching, and thus between ‘traditional academic work’ and teaching has been identified in the literature (e.g. Brosnan, 2013; Kinchin and Gravett, 2022). Blackmore and Kandiko (2011, p. 408, cited in Kenny, 2017, p. 900) argued that “academics work in a ‘prestige economy’, where kudos arises through acknowledgement of their peers and recognition flows from research”. Likewise, teaching-only positions in higher education may be seen and experienced as an “academic *cul-de-sac*” (Ivancheva et al., 2019, p. 451). Thus, traditional academic work within higher education is suggested to be more valuable in career and prestige terms and for attracting greater rewards and personal recognition (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011b; Brosnan, 2013; Kinchin and Gravett, 2022). This takes us back to hooks’ view that:

“excellent teaching is often seen as the mere icing on the cake of institutional maintenance. Scholarly writing and administrative tasks are deemed the substantive acts. Teaching, and whether or not one does it well, is merely subject to individual choice or whim” (hooks, 2003, p. 84).

How this view of ‘pure teaching’ can relate to my participants’ experiences is with respect to the level of the programme on which they teach and the student profile on those programmes. These students need teachers who care and whose relational engagement will support their higher education journey. However, the dominant discourses around knowledge and teaching in higher education are suggested to impact work with non-traditional students in that work with such students is often associated with a deficit model of education (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011b; Kearns, 2017). Loxley et al. (2017c, p. 250) posit that academic institutional culture influences teachers whereby disciplinary interests take priority over relational aspects of pedagogy and that “this can be very corrosive when it is combined with a deficit model of non-traditional students”. Therefore, the perception that more ‘care’ and ‘teaching as service’ (hooks, 2003) is required to work with non-traditional students may lend itself to the perceived status of this work within the academy. My participants themselves admit that this work is challenging and in fact is more difficult, and takes more effort, than teaching undergraduate students. Again, this is down to the relational nature of this work as well as the complexity of their students’ lives which are part and parcel of that relational engagement. Therefore, this kind of teaching could be considered to be akin to ‘care work’ which is typically associated with lower pay, lower status and more precarious working conditions, in comparison to “knowledge work, especially in higher education (which) is highly paid, rewarded and respected” (Grummell, 2017, p. 3143). This work could also be described similarly to adult education as being like a “career with a social mission” (Bowl, 2017, p. 85) and it could also be suggested that this is a manifestation within education of the ‘affective inequality’ and lack of recognition of love, care and solidarity work described by Lynch et al. (2007). On the other hand, the lack of performativity pressures associated with this work was discussed in Section 8.3.3. In fact, some participants (e.g. Sydney) considered that their MSAC work offered a ‘respite’ from other teaching. Therefore, perhaps it is not performativity ‘within’, but performativity ‘without’ (as in performativity measures, such as research output, within

the academic arena) that also contributes to the perceived status subordination (Fraser, 2000) of these courses in higher education.

Grummell (2017, p. 3147) suggests that:

“emotional and relational knowledge and learning processes remains invisible and difficult to quantify in these measurable outputs. There is little recognition of the personal emotions and care aspects of educators or learners as they engage in education (in terms of work-life balance, professional values or the status of ‘heart and head’ work in education).”

Due to the absence of national policy as discussed in Section 2.4.1, the legacy of these courses being developed in the Access Services in these HEIs means that they continue to operate separately from academic departments’ teaching responsibilities. Chris pointed out the separation of this work very clearly stating that the MSAC “is one of our biggest efforts towards equality. And yet it is treated in a completely different way.” This approach could be suggested to result in access courses being viewed as operating within a deficit model of education (Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015; Loxley et al., 2017c). Rowan expressed the view that the MSAC is not ‘top of the list’ of things that academic staff are concerned about and that they simply don’t “have time for something like this”. Academic staff and academic departments experience heavy workloads and pressure with respect to generating research and influencing institutional performance rankings (Giroux, 2014), along with ever-growing and -competing priorities such the obligation to evidence equality in the workplace in a way that is publicly recognised (e.g. Athena Swan – see Section 2.4). Perhaps it is little wonder that they may be perceived to not have time for paying attention to or engaging in access teaching particularly when it is not core or prestige work within their departments. It may also be related to the level of these courses i.e. that they are pre-entry courses and thus are not considered by academic staff to be fully or naturally within the remit or responsibility of higher education. However, as I did not seek academic or departmental staff views for this research, I can only surmise in relation to this point.

The experience or position of marginality can be defined as being in relation to a particular system of reference or to a centre (Bradatan and Craiutu, 2012). In the case

of MSACs this is the 'academic centre' within these HEIs and thus marginality with respect to the programmes themselves could be said to be experienced objectively (i.e. structurally). The marginal positioning of these courses could be suggested to contribute directly to the lack of visibility which was related by my participants and to the sense of 'othering' (Baker et al., 2009) of the programmes by academic staff. Similar issues with access work were also found by Brosnan (2013) who posited that the separation of access courses from mainstream academic departments contributed to their status on the periphery of higher education as well as to the status of access work more generally:

"It is noteworthy that ... these preparatory courses are co-ordinated by access (professional services) staff, rather than by academics. These programmes are the only third-level courses in Ireland which are not overseen by academic staff ... This raises an issue about the status of access work and links with previous points on access being located on the fringes of institutions." (Brosnan, 2013, p. 206)

This status issue, and the sense of access work being seen as an 'add-on' to core business, identified in Brosnan's research was felt particularly by part-time teachers in her research. In my own research carried out almost 10 years later, Alex perceives that access feels like an "adjunct" in his HEI and, particularly with respect to teaching, feels that "if it's not in an academic school, it's not part of the institution". However, as I have previously discussed in Section 8.3.2, the complexity of the spaces and environmental influences within which MSACs operate is illustrated by their simultaneous occupation of both caring and relational 'bubble' and marginal 'adjunct' statuses. Although other participants did not voice this perception of marginalisation of access work as strongly, Alex's comments to some extent reflect my own experience, and that of many professional Access staff in Irish HEIs with whom I have interacted over the years, in feeling that Access work is not as interconnected with academic departments as is needed for a 'whole of institution' responsibility to be taken for supporting equity of participation for non-traditional students. Teaching in the adult and community education sectors have had a long legacy of being considered to operate outside of 'mainstream' education (O'Neill, 2015; Moreland and Cownie, 2019) and, as I have already discussed elsewhere, while MSACs strictly speaking are not adult education courses it is nonetheless interesting that adult educators are said to be "familiar with marginal spaces: our practice, our knowledge, our learners and learning spaces often

exist in spaces far from the centre of cultural, societal and institutional authority and validation” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 38). MSAC courses, and thus ‘access teaching’, experience a similar marginal positioning vis-à-vis ‘mainstream’ academic programmes, thus impacting also on how those who take on this critical educational work perceive their own status and marginalisation in the academy, as I discuss in the next section.

It is somewhat ironic in the case of MSAC courses that they are physically and structurally located in HEIs, forming a key element of access strategy, and thus one would not expect that they would exist in a space which is “far from the centre”. It is this duality of being positioned at the heart of strategy but at the margin of practice that hooks’ sentiment evokes in the opening words to this section. Access students, including mature students are part of the student body in higher education – part of the whole – but yet frequently report feeling ‘outside’ the main body (Risquez et al., 2007; Merrill and Fejes, 2018). However, Charlie’s observation that up until a few years ago the MSAC students in his HEI did not even have student ID numbers, and therefore were not considered as “full students”, would lend some credibility to this supposition. Similar could be said of the experience of MSAC teachers with respect to how these programmes are perceived within mainstream teaching functions as the MSACs have operated on the margins of these institutions for many years. Although Fraser’s (2000) concept of recognition as being a question of social status is primarily articulated with respect to individuals or groups, the concept could nonetheless be applied to the perceived status of these programmes in higher education i.e. that they are subordinated to mainstream academic programmes. However, MSACs contribute in an important way to the achievement of higher education equity of access objectives and thus are part of the eco-system which works to support access and inclusion of non-traditional students. It is difficult to separate the programmes, as entities, from the individuals who organise, teach on and participate on these programmes and, in reflecting on my participants’ experiences in light also of my own as a professional in the area of equity of access, it is difficult to shake the feeling that teaching for the purposes of supporting a core mission of higher education is simply not valued within dominant institutional cultures and practices. The subordination of this work could therefore effectively be described as a ‘double marginalisation’ i.e. of both teachers and students.

8.4.2 *Teacher status and belonging*

“And if tutors are doing, as so many are,
really good work,
it can
largely be invisible outside the classroom –
there is very little opportunity for
validation.” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 184)

Social marginality results when individuals can’t participate in a positive reference group “because of hierarchically arranged occupational roles” (Varghese and Kumar, 2022, p. 35) while teacher marginality specifically has been suggested to result from casualisation and precarious contracts (Brown et al., 2010; Varghese and Kumar, 2022). The findings from my study show that it is not just that participants felt the MSAC courses to be separate from academic departments, but my participants themselves, particularly those who were casual or part-time staff members, reported feeling removed as teaching professionals from the wider academic community within their HEIs. For example, Rowan expressed feeling quite disconnected from “the academic world” in his HEI and felt that higher education work can be very ‘silo’ed’, while participants such as Bailey and Chris experienced what they perceived as dismissive comments from academic colleagues about the fact that they were doing ‘access teaching’. While the experiences of my participants who were PhD students were somewhat different, these teachers also shared experiences which illustrated that their MSAC teaching work was considered by their supervisors or academic departments to be separate from their research and/or other teaching obligations and thus this aspect of their work was not of major concern or significance within their departments. Although not directly analogous in terms of positioning within HEIs, tutors on AHE courses in the UK similarly experienced feeling personally marginalised within their institutions “through the geographies of exclusion that were constructed by senior staff” which impacted on their identity and in turn “left them feeling separate” (Busher et al., 2015a, p. 135). While I do not claim that my findings are generalisable, there is merit in pausing to reflect on the fact that many of my participants had been mature students themselves. They had already faced issues of marginalisation as students and are facing similar challenges again as teachers in the very institutions in which they studied, having

been drawn to work with students who are also marginalised. Although my participants did not articulate this as such, this is another aspect of the 'double marginalisation' which I referenced in the previous section.

Misrecognition as status subordination (Fraser, 2000) therefore can be suggested to apply to MSAC teachers' experiences in the context of status recognition from peers. Fraser claims that "institutionalised patterns of cultural value may impact in such a way as to misrecognise and subordinate some social actors" (ibid., p. 113) i.e. the social actors are treated as deficient or inferior. This is reminiscent of both Bailey's and Chris' experiences as the dismissive comments expressed by colleagues appear to exclude the teachers from the professional core of higher education teaching and imply that they are not considered as equals in the academic arena. In this case the institutionalised patterns of cultural value likely relate to the dominant status of subject discipline, production of 'powerful' knowledge and research output. Or, as Alex experiences it, his MSAC work simply doesn't exist within those dominant cultures: "if it's not in the departments, it's not in [name of HEI]". There is a sense of access teaching having an unequal status within the institution expressed here and although I don't claim that this was a ubiquitous experience amongst participants in this study, it does suggest that access teaching, and thus also access teachers, are perceived to occupy a subordinated status within the academic teaching hierarchy. In addition, my participants' experiences imply that the lack of connection with academic departments is seen as a failure on the part of the individual teacher to progress in their career, rather than as a failure on the part of a department to recognise the value of these courses and the contribution of these teachers by embedding access teaching within the mainstream teaching functions of the institution.

Even though the purpose of MSACs aligns with a national policy imperative around social transformation and inclusion, the programmes and educators themselves are marginalised and the experiences of MSAC teachers resonate strongly with the reported experiences of adult and community educators more generally (e.g. O'Neill, 2015; Kenny et al., 2022). Bowl (2017, p. 3) asks "why do so many qualified, skilled and experienced adult educators find themselves in an educational landscape which does not recognise

or value their contribution?”. There is an irony in a situation in which staff participants experienced a sense of being outside or on the periphery of the academic community, while teaching on programmes that are built on the foundation stones of social justice and inclusion. This is similar to Baker et al.’s (2009, p. 154) findings with respect to “inequalities of respect and recognition ... (being) expressed in the educational system in degrees of inclusion and exclusion” and whereby the “culturally marginal are identified as ‘other’”. This could also be suggested to apply to MSAC teachers’ experiences in the context of teaching students who generally feel themselves to be on the margins of higher education. These educators are effectively paying the price of insecurity and uncertainty for “working ‘on the margins’ of education” (Bowl, 2017, p. 95) and there is a resulting sense of ‘social belonging uncertainty’ (Brown, 2021) experienced by my participants, particularly with respect to (lack of) peer connection. However, as Strauss and Hunter (2018, p. 888) note it is the “social and political structures of the teaching environment (that) contribute to a ‘sense of belonging and purpose’” and “unfortunately this marginalisation often becomes accepted practice”. While marginalisation is suggested to hinder the development of personal capabilities and thus of growth (Von Braun and Gatzweiler, 2014), I contend that this is not entirely the experience of MSAC teachers. MSACs are an educational space in which personal growth does occur for teachers through relational engagement with their students as I have discussed in Section 8.3.1. It is possibly another irony that this growth is facilitated precisely *because* these programmes are marginal within the academy. In other words, it is their very marginality that protects these courses from the dominant managerialist practices and the discipline- and research-dominant culture that pervades most of higher education today. Likewise, it is the relational engagement with their learners that creates a sense of belonging and mattering (Rosenburgh and McCullough, 1981; Schwartz, 2019) for my participants, within the classroom and as teachers, rather than any engagement with their academic peers or departments within the institution.

8.4.3 A ‘futureless’ occupation

“Few of those who work in the field of adult education can regard it as a ‘career’; it has a long tradition of voluntary, casualised, temporary and hourly paid employment” (Bowl, 2017, p. 6).

Although MSAC teachers are not adult educators, it is striking how the above statement could nonetheless be applied to some of my participants' experiences. Casualisation of teaching has been a pervasive practice in higher education for some time (O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019). Therefore, the experience and related impact of precarious work cannot be considered exclusive to MSAC teachers within higher education, although has been found elsewhere to impact in the access teaching space (Fleming, 2010; Brosnan, 2013; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2017). While the impact of casualisation is felt more keenly by participants who are part-time teachers, than by those who are PhD students, it is valuable to consider how this practice may contribute to the status and recognition of access teaching and thus of access educators within these HEIs.

It was evident that some of the part-time and casual teachers in this study had been teaching access for quite a number of years and thus there doesn't appear to be a high turnover of staff from these courses. Therefore, any element of 'fear' (Giroux, 2014) expressed by participants that they would *lose* this work due to employment casualisation practices, I would suggest, was limited. Speaking from my own position as an Access practitioner, being able to employ and retain committed teachers with the necessary attributes and/or life experiences to teach on an MSAC, is invaluable. The impact of casualisation as a practice is as much that there is always a risk to Access Services of losing good teachers because this work – other than for a minority – is not financially viable for teachers to merit staying with it for a long time. In some respects, MSAC teaching posts are considered to be 'transient' positions, with some of my participants articulating expectations within the academy that these roles pass to new PhD students. For example, Bailey expressed the view that she was perceived by departmental staff as "hanging on" to this work rather than passing the teaching opportunity on to another PhD student or graduate - or that they should have "moved on in the academic world" (Chris) after a period of time rather than staying with access teaching.

However, my participants' concern around the expected transient and casual nature of these positions could be said to differ according to the point at which they were at in

their careers or in their personal financial security. As previously mentioned, there is no sense from my findings that any of my participants proactively chose this 'career' path and yet it is one that a number expressed that they would stay quite comfortably with if they felt that it offered financial viability for them to do so. However, the insecurity articulated related less to the stress of uncertainty about retaining their position as MSAC teachers and related more to the lack of financial viability, and the insecurity of this teaching as a career option, which meant that, for some, it was not work that they felt they could continue with for the long-term. Those who were older, and also who had been to third-level as mature students themselves, tended to favour staying with this work. Where participants could be suggested to have less reliance on MSAC teaching for basic financial survival or to be more independently financially secure, such as Bailey, Leslie and Alex, they chose to make their own 'career' out of this work, even though they may have welcomed more teaching hours than they had. However, others needed to work on a more full-time basis and therefore could not afford to solely engage in or rely on MSAC teaching for their income. This caused an internal struggle for Sam for example as, due to the broader precarity of his employment situation in his HEI, he questioned whether he should leave to go and teach elsewhere, even though he worried that his job satisfaction may decrease if he did so. This lack of agency with respect to having the choice of continuing to teach access was also expressed as frustration quite strongly by Chris who admitted that she could see the writing on the wall once she finished her PhD as it would not be financially viable for her to continue, despite her strong values-based commitment to this work.

Palmer (2003, p. 376) speaks of the importance of "teaching in ways 'that enhance the human condition and advance social justice'". He suggests that:

"a spiritual crisis arises when we find ourselves in the grip of something larger than society's expectation or the ego's needs ... The challenge of such a crisis is always clear, though finding a way through never is: Do we follow the soul's calling, or do we bend to the forces of deformation around us and within us?" (ibid., p. 377)

My participants expressed a strong sense of intrinsic importance with respect to this teaching with those such as Sam and Chris explicitly making the connection between their MSAC teaching work and their own contribution to equity of access and equality

objectives and thus to the sense that this work has a value for teachers in and of itself outside of its performative or relational elements. This was illustrated to some extent by the fact that Sydney remained teaching with the course even after she completed her PhD, not only because she enjoyed the teaching but also because the purpose of the course resonated with her personal and professional values. However, the “dissonance” that Chris articulated is something akin to what Palmer describes above and from an even more practical and visceral level – the need to choose between the ‘soul’s yearning’ to stay with access teaching and the need quite simply to put food on the table. Similar themes surfaced in Brosnan’s (2013) research on adult access to higher education policy and practice over 10 years ago suggesting that policy and practice has evolved very little in this space in the intervening period.

My participants’ experiences resonate strongly with the precarity and lack of financial security that is experienced in adult and community education work more generally (Fitzsimons, 2017; O’Neill and Cullinane, 2017), while Bowl (2017, p. 88) offers the view that those who choose to work in adult education often see fulfilling the public service purpose of their work as being more important than financial reward, thus making their “exploitation as workers relatively easy”. The impact of precarity as resulting in the lack of career path for adult and community educators is simply and succinctly expressed by O’Neill (2015, p. 204):

“For tutors
there is nothing
to go towards
there is nowhere to go.”

This is the “sense of a futureless occupation” (O’Neill and Cullinane, 2017, p. 126) that is typically experienced by educators in these sectors. Again, the resonance of my participants’ experiences with those of adult educators is distinctly notable. It is relevant to conjecture however that opportunities to teach ‘access education’ (Forster et al., 2022) on a more full-time basis or to teach these kinds of classes with adult learners in higher education will always be limited as access courses are not ‘core’ higher education teaching business as has been discussed throughout this thesis, and particularly as long as responsibility for delivery remains positioned outside of academic departments. Thus,

as long as these programmes, teaching opportunities and more mainstream development of access teaching remain on the periphery of higher education, opportunities with respect to creating a 'career' which involves this teaching are likely to also remain limited, if not impossible, other than for those few who are not economically reliant on this work. Therefore, any possibility to teach under the same terms and conditions as academic staff while remaining exclusively with this work is negligible.

8.4.4 Section summary

Noonan (2020, p. 18) uses the term 'radar' when she considers her reason for studying the experiences of teaching postgraduate students in the Institute of Technology sector: "these students hadn't been on my radar until that point, I began to wonder on whose radar they were, if anyone's...". Noonan describes these students as having "been on stage, but not centre stage ... they have supported from the wings" (p. v), a sentiment which resonates with my participants' experiences. However, while Noonan's research spotlighted the occupational positioning and identity of teaching postgraduate students, my research considers what MSAC teachers' experiences tell us about the institutional positioning of 'access teaching' and thus of their perceived status as access teachers in a HEI.

The findings in this section highlight the marginality and misrecognition, in the form of status subordination, not just of MSAC teachers, but of MSAC programmes themselves within organisational structures and a hegemonic academic culture. There is also a lack of recognition for the complexity of this work with respect to the need to balance relational approaches to teaching with academic 'knowledge transfer'. Teachers experienced social and professional marginalisation (von Braun and Gatzweiler, 2014), experienced as status subordination (Fraser, 2000), although it was not a ubiquitous experience of marginality as it appeared to be more prevalent for those who are part-time, casual teachers, rather than PhD students. For the PhD students the experience was more of a feeling of disregard from academic colleagues or, at best, disinterest in their MSAC work, rather than feeling disregarded on a personal level. The

marginalisation was also very much associated with the programme itself in higher education potentially demonstrating an association of ‘access education’ (Forster et al., 2022) with a deficit model of education as has been found previously with respect to prevailing attitudes to the provision of tailored supports for non-traditional students (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011b; Kearns, 2017; Loxley et al., 2017c).

There are a number of factors which can be suggested to impact on how experiences of marginality and misrecognition result including higher education culture, hierarchy, programme status and level, and precarity of employment. There is no indication that these teachers are seeking ‘remedy’ for struggles as a group as can happen in matters of recognition (Fraser, 1997) as a sense of struggle, particularly financially, seems to be more relevant for some individuals than others. MSAC courses and their associated teaching roles could also be suggested to occupy a “vacuum-like position” (Grummell and Murray, 2015, p. 433) within higher education as there is a distinct ‘looseness’ associated with this teaching, thus contributing to a lack of formal recognition of these roles and of their value in higher education. Despite equity of access being a core element of national higher education policy, the absence of clear processes or requirements for becoming an MSAC teacher and the marginality of their positioning within the institution is a symptom of the absence of national policy on access courses more generally.

8.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed my research findings drawing on relational pedagogy and recognition, and related concepts, to interpret my participants’ experiences of teaching on mature student access courses in two Irish HEIs and the impact of these experiences at micro, meso and macro levels of engagement. Relational pedagogy is a space in which teaching and learning become less of separate entities and more of a “relational dynamic” (Murphy and Brown, 2012). It is also considered to be a space “where people—individual, singular beings—can reveal who they are, can come into presence” (Biesta, 2004, p. 21). Relationships considered are those between MSAC teachers and students, between teachers and higher education colleagues and, to some extent, the

findings also tell us something about teachers' relationship with themselves, experienced as self-esteem (Honneth, 1995). These are spaces of learning and growth for both students and teachers alike. My participants' experiences suggest that the nature of 'becoming' an MSAC teacher is a positive and dynamic experience and is highly influenced by a growing knowledge of and interaction with their learners. The findings from this research are revealing, not so much about what makes a good educator, as much as they are revealing about what makes a good teaching experience, particularly with respect to its relational aspects. Participants' growing awareness of social justice issues and of the importance of recognising their learners as individuals is also something which is indicated as being gained from these teaching experiences. However, this is a transitional teaching space (Noonan, 2020) for some of the participants, although not for all. I suggest that the absence of policy with respect to these courses, and thus these teaching roles, means that there is no overall final 'destination' for participants as MSAC educators. These experiences are part of their individual personal journeys as teachers and the MSAC is a teaching space which facilitates the participants to grow as teachers, in relation with their students at the 'micro' personal level.

Teacher-learner relationships are "embedded within the contexts, cultures and times in which they develop" (O'Toole, 2020, p. 1). For MSACs this context includes a range of influences such as equity of access, 'powerful' disciplinary knowledge, adult education values and principles, and neoliberal values experienced within higher education as performativity and precarity of employment. The significance of considering teachers' motivations and pathways to MSAC teaching is that they tell us something important from the outset about the positioning of these courses within higher education, and about the lack of visibility for MSAC teaching as a field of practice within higher education. These teaching opportunities exist, and align with educators' values, but are not well known nor are they particularly visible. Participants' accounts of their experiences as MSAC teachers reveal that different aspects of their own personal lives and experiences feed into them becoming educators and in navigating this distinct teaching space. I have used adult education literature throughout this section to support my contention that MSACs have distinctive qualities and characteristics as programmes

and as teaching experiences which align with adult education's strong pedagogical and philosophical values of learner-centredness and relationality. While my participants' teaching practices signal a strong alignment with an adult education ethos, they also suggest an understanding of the need to balance these approaches with a commitment to sharing the 'powerful' knowledge (Young and Muller, 2013) of the academy and to upholding academic standards. The ability to draw on both experiential and disciplinary knowledge, and to navigate the required balance between these, contributes to the distinctiveness of these roles and this teaching space within higher education. My findings therefore indicate that these teaching roles straddle an interesting interface between adult and higher education cultures and pedagogies.

Regardless of their own prior experience or background, the values demonstrated by my participants and their commitment to nurturing their learners' confidence and to supporting their learners' educational experiences, expressed a commitment to a relational teaching approach. They also indicated a concern for equality of opportunity as a core purpose of higher education. This suggests that MSAC teachers' work aligns with the social purpose of adult education more generally (Freire, 1970; Slowey, 2016; Bowl, 2017) and the values and teaching strategies they adopt enable them to support the core purpose of these programmes. However, my findings also highlight the lack of recognition of the role of the MSAC teacher, and thus of these programmes, within these HEIs at the macro level, as experienced by my participants. Honneth (1995) suggests that people can attain a sense of identity through intersubjective recognition of their abilities. However, there is a disconnect in the way in which my participants approach their teaching, encouraging the development of learning communities and peer support amongst their students, and the ways in which they themselves experience a sense of disconnection within the institution. This brings out a conflict in some of my participants between two different sets of values – equality of opportunity for learners and my participants' own equality of opportunity with respect to their right to earn a sustainable living doing something they enjoy. Recognition in this case, I suggest, is therefore mediated by culture and hierarchy within the institution and is experienced both as misrecognition and as an absence of relationality at institutional level.

The concept of marginality (Schlossberg, 1981; von Braun and Gatzweiler, 2014) runs through all aspects of these findings. The programmes are delivered on the margins of the institutions; the teachers (especially those who are part-time or hourly-paid) are on the margins of the institutions; mature students often experience marginality within the academy (Risquez et al., 2007; TAP, 2007; Merrill and Fejes, 2018), and in some cases also in society, resulting in a ‘multiple marginalisation’ within this work. Marginality can result in disconnection and Jordan (2018, cited in Brown, 2021, p. 171) suggests that “when disconnection is not addressed, as frequently occurs in unequal power structures, chronic disconnection and disempowerment arise, and the person often loses touch with [their] own feelings and inner experience”. However, I offer the view that, with respect to my participants’ experiences, the relational connection in the classroom is more powerful than the relational disconnection from the institution. Arising from this work is a clear connection and strong relationship between participants and students and there is no sense of marginality *within* the programmes themselves. There is also a strong sense that this work is a valuable and valid “joint endeavour” (to quote Sydney) between teacher and learner. Therefore, the pedagogy of relation that is engaged in by these MSAC teachers could also be suggested to be a pedagogy of recognition in these teaching contexts. My participants’ experiences illustrate that internal relationships are strong within MSAC work, but that this work feels marginal when it is considered spatially or structurally in terms of its position in the organisation and more widely across the higher education sector. Therefore, the sense of marginality really only manifests at the macro level when considering the participants’ relationships to systems, processes, individuals and groups within the institution, that are outside of these courses and Access Services. For the majority of my participants, I suggest that their work is rooted in a desire for meaningful and relational connection, rather than in a desire for social recognition. Persistence in this work is the result of a complex interplay between the desire for meaningful work and the self-recognition of one’s own growth, experienced as self-esteem (Honneth, 1995), and is indicative of the meaning and impact of this work at the meso level of engagement in the classroom. This may also be seen as a ‘push back’ or a resistance against equating teacher recognition with performative values and traditional academic recognition.

Drawing on my participants' experiences therefore I posit that the degree of marginality and recognition experienced by MSAC teachers could be suggested to be a function of relationality. Intersubjective recognition, through relationship, is central in my participants' accounts of their motivations for MSAC work and for their persistence in teaching. The different lenses of recognition cast light on what seems to be an internal struggle for some of my participants with respect to their sense of self when it comes to their relationship with the wider institution or with peers in the 'mainstream' academic departments. There seems to be a deep connection experienced by them in the classroom which supports their sense of belonging (Thomas, 2015; Schwartz, 2019) but a lack of wider institutional connection which exacerbates their sense of marginality and belonging uncertainty outside the classroom. It is this complex space which MSAC teachers occupy and navigate while engaging in this strategically and socially important work and by embracing a relational pedagogy, teachers thus make their teaching space more 'habitable'. This research has cast a light on how MSAC teachers identify and practice as educators, as much as on the distinctive qualities of this teaching space in higher education, viewed through the qualities and values of adult education, as well as those of higher education. My research reveals the extent to which experiences of relational connection and mattering can be impacted by culture, but that culture can be experienced differently at micro, meso and macro levels of engagement by individuals. Ultimately, the ability to engage in a relational pedagogy is critical to teachers' positive experiences of their work and, I suggest, is all the more important given the marginality of these teaching roles and courses in higher education.

My final chapter will summarise the main conclusions that can be drawn from my research. I will also offer some recommendations on policy and practice and suggest future areas for possible research.

Chapter Nine: Conclusions and recommendations

"We are reminded that our institutions are alive – they produce energy, and their parts work together and interact with one another at all times. What happens in one part influences all others ... What becomes clear is that it all matters: how we interact, with whom we interact, and our intentions in our interactions with one another" (Felten and Lambert, 2020, p. x).

9.1 Introduction

This research is grounded in what had been my core professional practice for many years. I began this research journey as a Mature Student Officer with responsibility for supporting mature students' access to, participation and success in higher education. In this role I got to personally know many mature students – their life stories, their challenges, their motivations and ambitions – which brought learning, meaning and value to my work. Amongst the services under my remit was a pre-entry mature student access course (MSAC) for which I had responsibility for recruiting teachers to teach the different subjects offered. Although my own experiences of working with MSAC students from a pastoral care perspective were positive and fulfilling, until I undertook this research, I had not truly reflected on how my teaching colleagues experienced their work and their interactions with these students.

For over 20 years equity of access has formed part of national and institutional higher education policy in Ireland. Access courses, including those designed specifically to support mature students (MSACs), have been a key operational initiative underpinning the access strategy of many higher education institutions (HEIs). Research has frequently highlighted students' perspectives on the effectiveness of these courses in preparing them for undergraduate studies, including the importance of experiencing supportive relationships with their course teachers (Brosnan, 2013; Busher et al., 2015b; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2015; Keane, 2015). An exploration of teachers' perspectives on these courses is one which has been long overlooked however, particularly in Ireland, and this is a perspective that my research has now illuminated. The primary aim of my research was to document an account of MSAC teachers' experiences of teaching on these courses, and to understand what their experiences tell us about the meaning, value and

challenges of engaging in this work. An overview of my findings is offered below and the implications of my research findings for this field of practice are discussed in Section 9.2. I acknowledge that this is a small scale study and therefore the scope for wider application of my findings and recommendations is limited. Nonetheless, some recommendations have merit for consideration by higher education institutions more broadly, and I signify where this may be the case in this chapter, as well as offering some more general reflections on the applicability of my learning from this research..

9.1.1 Overview of findings

Ultimately, this is a story about connection - to values, principles, ethos, to self and to others – and how these connections are developed through pedagogies of relation and recognition. My research complements existing studies on students’ experiences of access courses by foregrounding teachers’ perspectives on working in these spaces, and by taking relational pedagogy (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004; Murphy and Brown, 2012; Gravett, 2023) and recognition (Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2000) as overlapping concepts to guide my analysis. My findings are revealing about the importance of the teacher-student relationship in these teaching contexts and about the importance of the affective and relational dimensions of teaching for educators. My findings indicate that MSACs offer a distinctive teaching experience within higher education, demonstrating how MSAC teachers navigate a teaching space that resides at the intersection of two strong, but distinct, educational traditions - adult and higher education pedagogies and practices. My findings also suggest how, for many participants, their own life and learning biographies inform their approaches to teaching their MSAC students. My participants’ experiences illuminate that MSACs can be highly relational spaces that impact positively on teachers’ feelings about their work, supporting their learning and growth as well as how they come to recognise themselves as teachers, thus identifying an important symbiosis in the teacher-learner relationship in these contexts.

The relational pedagogy which is engaged in by my participants, and their responsiveness to their learners’ needs, combined with a commitment to discipline-based knowledge, illustrates that MSACs are distinctive teaching and learning spaces,

and thus could be considered to be a specific field of practice within higher education. However, this is a field of practice that has limited prominence within the wider equity of access arena or within 'mainstream' higher education teaching and learning discourses and structures, and therefore is a field of practice that is largely unrecognised at institutional, or indeed at national, level. The broader institutional misrecognition (Fraser, 2000) of these courses and of these teachers, that is suggested by my research findings, impacts on the professional self-esteem of some of my participants and on their sense of belonging more widely within their HEI. In this respect MSACs can be said to offer teachers a teaching experience which is highly relational, and which supports personal (micro-level) and professional (meso-level) development, while at the institutional (macro) level there is an absence of relational connection resulting in a lack of institutional recognition for this work and these teachers. There is a sense of disconnection (Brown, 2021) and marginalisation (von Braun and Gatzweiler, 2014) at the wider field level that is indicated by my participants' experiences. Therefore, these courses not only sit at a complex intersection of pedagogies and practices, but the course teachers can be suggested to simultaneously experience inclusion in the form of 'belonging' (which is related to issues of relationality), and exclusion in the form of marginalisation (which is related to issues of recognition) at different levels of engagement within the institution, thus also highlighting the systemic complexity within which these teaching experiences and my research is located.

9.1.2 Filling the research gap

I stated in my introduction to this thesis that I aimed to undertake an "empirically-grounded reflection" (Ivancheva et al., 2019) on the connection between relational pedagogy and recognition as it pertains to my participants' experiences, as well as to understand a teaching space which resides in the 'border country' (Hunt and West, 2006) of higher education and adult education, sectors that espouse different educational philosophies and practices. Throughout this thesis I have drawn on my participants' generously shared words and feelings to understand how their experiences are influenced by educational cultures and values in this specific educational context by drawing on these interconnecting concepts. I have also drawn on my own positioning as

a professional who has worked in the area of access to higher education for many years to develop this understanding, having already been attuned to the policy and practice conflicts and challenges which arise in this space.

I took a qualitative approach to this research so that I could listen carefully to my participants' lived experiences (Krauss 2005; Higgs et al., 2009), in order to understand, explore and reflect on the meaning of these experiences through the interconnecting lenses of relational pedagogy (Bingham and Sidorkin, 2004; Gravett, 2023) and recognition (Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2000). In taking this approach, I also acknowledged the impact of my dual role as a practitioner-researcher, in bringing my own interpretations to bear on my analysis within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). This approach to some extent also mirrors my participants' own influences on their teaching, particularly for those who had been mature students themselves, as their emotional and experiential knowledges (Heron, 1996; Fenwick, 2008) as well as their disciplinary knowledge underpinned their teaching within this 'border country' (Hunt and West, 2006). So too my own unique combination of experience, practice, emotions and knowledge underpinned my engagement in a piece of research which straddles educational borders and cultures.

Practitioners have been described as both 'knowledge consumers' and 'knowledge producers' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993) and engagement in this research has been critical for my professional development both as a practitioner and as a researcher. It has enabled me to develop an 'empirically grounded' evidence base for what, up to now, had been merely my own observations on my work context. This evidence base was developed by engaging in conversations with MSAC teachers, and by reflecting on and critically engaging with educational and research literature. Having this dual identity of practitioner-researcher has enabled me to apply theories and frameworks to a specialised teaching context, to advance understanding of this field of practice and ultimately to also influence my own professional practice and thinking. My positioning also highlights the value of practice-based research in contributing to an understanding of experiences which reside within complex institutions and at the border of different

cultures and pedagogies, and I offer some parting reflections on my personal learning journey in the final section of this chapter.

9.2 Implications and recommendations from my research findings

In the following sections I discuss the two main areas of implication of my research, along with relevant recommendations, which have significance for these teaching contexts as well as, to some extent, for higher education more broadly:

- recognising higher education access courses and teachers; and
- fostering relational competencies and cultures.

In highlighting these particular areas of implication, I aim to explicitly recognise what my research signifies is misrecognised or subordinated within the wider academy, and that is the value and place of relation-centred teaching spaces, practices and teachers. My recommendations draw on my learning from this research, and are presented under subheadings based on key themes from the research, including those such as institutional responsibility; teacher development and inclusion; and educators as relational beings. I also offer some reflections on how relational pedagogy can support social inclusion as a higher education objective. In proposing these recommendations and reflections, I acknowledge again that this study is limited in scale and is specific to the MSAC teaching context. In this respect, the ‘marginal’ nature of this work, as I have previously posited, may well lend itself to the positive aspects of relational engagement and my learning therefrom. In drawing on that learning to consider its applicability to higher education more generally, and bearing in mind these limitations, I consider it important nonetheless to reflect on what might be possible in an ‘ideal world’. I also acknowledge the challenges that may be faced in implementing some of these recommendations in the shifting sands and continually evolving landscape of higher education in Ireland today and the ever-competing strategic and operational priorities therein.

9.2.1 Recognising higher education access courses and teachers

9.2.1.1 Institutional responsibility for equity of access

Despite the prominence of equity of access as a system objective in national higher education policy, my research participants' experiences signify that broader institutional responsibility for this work within these HEIs is absent. Their experiences also illustrate the perennial tensions that have been expressed as existing between neoliberal practices and the social inclusion objectives of higher education (e.g. Reay, 2012; Brosnan, 2013; Kearns, 2017). Although policy advocates for a whole-of-institution approach to equity of access work, from a metrics reporting perspective this work is still considered to primarily come under the responsibility of Access Services, as higher education professional services staff leading the work in this space. MSACs are one operational element of equity of access strategy within both HEIs in this study; however, my findings suggest that, from my participants' perspectives, there is limited broader awareness within their institutions of these courses and thus highlight the marginal positioning and resulting misrecognition, experienced by teachers in the form of status subordination (Fraser, 2000) of these courses and of their own access teaching roles. This begs the question as to why both teaching and equity of access are articulated as being central to the performance of the higher education system (HEA, 2023b), yet 'access teaching' is not.

As I have discussed in Chapter Two, access courses are not accorded a defined status on the National Framework of Qualifications⁴⁹ (NFQ) for either systemic positioning or quality assurance purposes and institutional responsibility for the provision of access courses continues to lie within the remit and indeed, within the operational agency, of Access Services. With respect to higher education's core missions, these courses are deemed to be 'access work' but not 'teaching work' and therefore are seen as an 'adjunct' to the core teaching and research functions of higher education. An absence of policy means that these courses remain in a 'grey', indeterminate space within the broader system of higher education programme provision, resulting in both systemic marginality for the programmes and social marginality (Varghese and Kumar, 2022) for

⁴⁹ <https://www.gqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications>

the teachers. This has implications for teacher inclusion and belonging discussed in Section 9.2.1.4, and for the sustainability of these courses as discussed later in this section. The impact of a lack of policy also means that these courses, and the relevance of this work, remain subordinated to the more dominant discipline-led teaching and research missions of higher education. This effectively manifests as a ‘double marginalisation’ of both MSAC teachers and MSAC students within the academic hierarchy, despite the prominence of equity of access in narratives around higher education policy and strategy. To paraphrase one of my participants, and to demonstrate the power of a dominant culture and mindset, if teaching is not located in an academic department, it is simply not considered core work in the institution.

The contradiction of access courses playing a prominent role in access strategy but operating at the margin of mainstream practice is also exacerbated by neoliberal practices within higher education such as casualisation of labour, practices that are still highly pervasive in Irish HEIs today (IFUT, 2023; Courtois and O’Keefe, 2024). The fact that many of the MSAC teachers in this study are contracted in as part-time or ‘casual hours’ staff lends itself to this vicious circle with respect to the visibility and status of this work. Access courses could therefore be suggested to be a distinct manifestation of the ‘contradiction in terms’ of, and the inherent tensions within, a “neoliberal, socially just educational system” (Reay, 2012, p. 588). Such practices undermine the potential for developing a broader institutional recognition of the value of these courses and thus maintains their position within a deficit model, rather than within an inclusive model of education (Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2015; Kearns, 2017). This point is addressed further in Section 9.2.2.3.

My professional experience is that Access Services in Irish HEIs are under significant resource pressure, coping with ever-increasing and competing demands, priorities and complexities within their work. This pressure has increased particularly over the past six years or so as Access Services have taken on management of additional funding streams and related activities, including under the Programme for Access to Higher Education

(PATH)⁵⁰. There is a risk that the inherent value of access courses to the higher education ‘access agenda’ may become subsumed by such competing pressures internally and particularly where participation numbers on access courses are falling. There is also a risk that in the drive to develop greater sectoral and tertiary cohesion through the creation of tertiary degree programmes and other alternative pathways to higher education, that courses which sit outside the NFQ will continue to be ‘passed over’ for formal recognition, and thus for ongoing support and resourcing. While developments with regard to tertiary programmes are both welcome and commendable in terms of offering greater choice and flexibility to students to access and participate in higher education, my research offers the perspective that access courses offer a unique learning experience to *both* students and teachers. Their positioning within HEIs, rather than within the further education sector, is fundamental to their successful outcomes and to this learning and therefore these programmes hold value internally as well as externally, as the tertiary education system in Ireland continues to evolve.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that the lack of policy in this area be addressed. While the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the National Access Office are not prescriptive with regard to how equity of access support is operationalised by individual institutions, it is recommended that they work with higher education Access Services and academic departments to understand the unique contribution of MSACs and to integrate this learning in policy, as well as to determine how these courses can complement and/or ultimately inform the features and qualities of a unified tertiary education sector. The relation-centred ethos, knowledge and experience involved in bringing two educational traditions together, that are central to these courses, has much to offer with respect to developing, supporting and maintaining a learner-centred cohesion in the sector.
- It is recommended that access courses, including MSACs, should continue to be an integral component of higher education’s programme offerings. In HEIs where

⁵⁰ <https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/>

access courses are currently managed solely or primarily by an Access Service, in order to address the issue of double marginalisation – of students and staff - that pertains to these courses, formal partnerships should be proactively developed between Access Services and academic departments to support visibility of purpose, outcome and impact, and thus to support broader recognition of the value of these courses to students, to teachers and to institutions. Adopting a partnership approach to programme delivery would ensure that professional staff can bring specialised knowledge and experience to the table, particularly with respect to national and institutional access policy, and with respect to the unique needs of these students. Access Services also have an important role to play in providing practical, socio-emotional and pastoral support to students as well as ensuring that the relational ethos that is at the heart of these courses does not get subsumed by performative priorities. A partnership approach would also create opportunities for awareness-raising of the work of MSAC educators within academic departments. Academic departments should commit to supporting the quality assurance and development of these courses by assigning experienced teaching staff as ‘internal examiners’ to relevant subjects to ensure a connection and relevance between MSAC course content and that of undergraduate courses. It is also recommended that academic departments share responsibility for identifying and assigning teaching staff – PhD students or lecturers – to teach on these courses thus strengthening institutional commitment to provision of these courses within their HEIs.

9.2.1.2 Recognition of access course teacher role

Institutional marginalisation appears to be deeply ingrained in the cultures and structures that shape how we work in higher education. Even though the purpose of MSACs aligns with a national policy imperative around social inclusion and equity of access, my findings suggest that the courses and educators themselves experience misrecognition in the form of status subordination (Fraser, 2000) and social marginality (Varghese and Kumar, 2022) in the context of recognition from peers with respect to their work. My participants felt not only that the MSAC courses were separate from academic departments, but that they themselves, particularly those who were casual or

part-time staff members, felt removed as teaching professionals from the wider academic community within their HEIs. This sense of marginalisation was due partly to the organisational positioning of these courses and partly to the impact of precarious employment practices, both of which were discussed in the previous section, but also due to the absence within the formal teaching hierarchy of the role of access course teacher. In Honneth's (1995) solidarity sphere of recognition, recognition is experienced by individuals through their participation in a wider community and thus by developing a sense of wellbeing and identity that results from a recognition of their contribution to collectively achieving common goals. However, the reality is that teachers who are 'casually' employed and who are contracted to teach by a professional service, rather than by an academic department, naturally have fewer opportunities to forge meaningful connections with academic colleagues unless they teach on other courses, or unless they are PhD students. They thus have fewer opportunities to engage in the interactions or to develop the relationships that are necessary for peer recognition (Hickey and Riddle, 2021) on either a professional or a personal basis. Exacerbating the sense of marginalisation felt by my participants was the fact that the lack of connection with academic departments was seen as a career progression failure on the teacher's part, rather than as an academic department's failure to share or take responsibility for one of higher education's core missions.

Institutional practices such as precarious employment is a widespread problem in higher education that has a specific impact on MSACs. Ultimately its impact is on students, as Access Services risk losing teachers who are committed to social justice and inclusion because access teaching – other than for a minority who may have greater personal financial security - is not financially viable for teachers to make a long-term commitment to this work. The resulting impact is a lack of agency for teachers to make a career choice to stay with access teaching, despite the desire to teach in alignment with their personal and professional values. The result is that access course teaching posts, for many, become 'transient' positions to more highly regarded (by others) teaching and research work, demonstrating again the power and dominance of academic cultures and hierarchies within higher education. This lack of recognition therefore also arises from the "institutionalised patterns of cultural value" (Fraser, 2000, p. 113) which privilege

‘powerful knowledge’ (Young and Muller, 2013), research output, and academic status within higher education norms and cultures. The tension that is therefore experienced in this space is at the wider field level – at institutional, systemic and academic structure levels, thus upholding the view that “twenty-first-century academia still remains an exclusionary space for many colleagues” (Kinchin and Gravett, 2022, p. 25). This has implications for higher education – or indeed any teaching context – in understanding the connection between relationality and recognition and thus the importance of individuals’ contributions being actively recognised by others through intersubjective relations and for creating opportunities for these working relationships to develop.

In not recognising these teachers, or the contribution they make to supporting a core mission of higher education, the system is effectively not recognising the relationships that are at the heart of access and inclusion and thus does a disservice not just to students, but also to teachers who wish to forge a career in access teaching. In addition, as some of my participants pointed out, this work is experienced as being more difficult in some respects than undergraduate teaching. As long as these programmes remain on the periphery of higher education, opportunities with respect to creating a ‘career’ which involves this teaching are likely to also remain limited, if not impossible, other than for those few who are not economically reliant on this work. This research indicates that the local, contextual and relational nature of this teaching in higher education holds both professional and personal value for educators and thus potentially reopens a broader debate on the value of spaces for “brass tacks teaching” (as described by Sam) in an academic domain. As bell hooks stated 30 years ago:

“teaching is seen as a duller, less valuable aspect of the academic profession. This perspective on teaching is a common one. Yet it must be challenged if we are to meet the needs of our students, if we are to restore to education and the classroom excitement about ideas and the will to learn” (hooks, 1994, p. 12).

Some of my participants offered the view that there should be more ‘pure teaching’ roles in higher education and while there has been some movement in this direction by HEIs with the introduction of roles such as those of ‘college teacher’ or ‘university teacher’, my participants’ experiences suggest that a level of recognition is still absent within higher education for teaching that does not have visible academic and/or

research dimensions. Lack of opportunities for social integration with teaching peers combined with a hierarchical positioning of teaching roles and the lack of formal alignment of access teacher roles to existing teaching grades in HEIs means that these roles remain outside the formal teaching functions of higher education and in the ‘grey’ area I referenced previously and ultimately results in social marginality for teachers (Varghese and Kumar, 2022). It is worth pointing out that MSAC teachers’ experiences resonate strongly with the reported experiences of teachers in other marginalised teaching sectors, such as in adult and community education (O’Neill, 2015; Bowl, 2017; Kenny et al., 2022), sectors which prioritise education for the purposes of social inclusion as opposed to for the purposes of qualification attainment. However, the risk is that educators who work at these margins will remain subordinated and continue to pay the price of financial insecurity and social belonging uncertainty (Brown, 2021) for living and working by their “deepest convictions and callings” (Palmer, 2007, p. 30). The ‘perfect storm’ of a lack of national and institutional policy, marginal positioning, ‘powerful’ academic cultures, and neoliberal practices therefore can be suggested to profoundly impact these educators in higher education. Considered together, the confluence of these impacting factors thus renders these experiences, these teaching posts, and even these courses, largely invisible.

Recommendation

- It is recommended that Access Services, in collaboration with higher education Human Resources (HR) and academic departments, formally review the roles and responsibilities of access course teachers to ensure that their contribution to knowledge, course development and higher education mission is appropriately remunerated and recognised, and potentially formally aligned with lecturer roles or college / university teacher roles. It is also recommended that equitable access is provided to formal professional development opportunities for access course teachers. While it is beyond my scope as researcher to recommend exactly how this should be done on a practical level, given the complexity of public sector and institutional HR policies, and employment constraints due to the employment control framework (see Section 2.3.2), it is my conviction that formal recognition of and professional

development for MSAC teachers needs to be addressed within our HEIs and across the sector.

9.2.1.3 Teacher learning and development

There is a large body of research available, presented in Chapter Two, which affirms the value of access courses in supporting non-traditional students to successfully and confidently transition to third-level studies. However, my research illustrates the broader value of these courses to teachers also by offering important financial and professional development opportunities for ‘beginning’ teachers (McIntyre and Hobson, 2016) as well as for experienced teachers who are taking on teaching roles for the first time in higher education. These courses support teachers to gain valuable teaching experience which offers a significant degree of autonomy and responsibility in their work, as well as some latitude for creativity. As articulated by some of my participants, for those who wish to progress in the ‘academic world’ MSAC teaching offers a solid foundation for the teaching aspects of an academic career.

The value of these courses also arises from the opportunity they present to teachers to experientially develop their awareness and knowledge of the social justice and inclusion missions of higher education by working directly with non-traditional students on courses that are specifically designed to support these purposes. My findings indicate that MSACs, and potentially extrapolating to access courses more generally, can enhance teachers’ awareness and understanding of the unique needs of learners who participate on these courses and thus of the kinds of pedagogies and teaching approaches that are critical for supporting learners’ successful transition to, and engagement in, a knowledge-centric higher education system. Therefore, access teaching, under a relational pedagogical approach, can strengthen teachers’ understanding of, and commitment to, inclusion and social justice in a higher education context, and can be experienced as an opportunity to engage in meaningful and ‘life-changing’ work. This in turn broadens teachers’ perspectives on the purpose and value of teaching in higher education beyond what it means for transmission of the ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young and Muller, 2013) that is traditionally at the heart of the academy

and focusing more on its purpose and capacity to directly support embracing relational and socially-conscious approaches to teaching.

Given the unique context, positioning and student profile of MSAC courses in higher education, using relational pedagogy as a lens through which to interpret teachers' experiences also highlights the social interdependence (Pijanowski, 2004) and symbiotic nature of learning and meaning making in the teaching and learning relationship, thus counteracting assumptions of unilateral growth (Jordan and Schwartz, 2018) within higher education teaching. We are reminded that teaching involves relationship and that there is a 'growth-in-relation' (Schwartz and Holloway 2012) and an expansion of learning (Schwartz, 2019) about the processes of teaching evident in my participants' experiences as their relational engagement with their students offered opportunities for co-creating knowledge about these processes. I suggest that learning about teaching *in relation with* students is important when working with an ever-diversifying student population. Learners thus become teachers about the processes of learning, and teachers need to become learners about the processes of teaching (Freire, 1970) through a relational engagement in the modern higher education institution. The strength of MSACs is in facilitating these opportunities for shared learning and for mutual growth. This has implications for broadening thinking about how higher education teachers can learn about pedagogy, which I address further in Section 9.2.2.1.

Recommendation

- It is recommended that Access Services work with Teaching and Learning Centres, and with Training and Development Units in their institutions to explore and articulate the learning and development aspects of these teaching experiences, and work with academic departments to proactively create and facilitate opportunities for academic staff to teach on access courses.

9.2.1.4 Teacher inclusion and belonging

Many of my participants experienced a sense of being outside or on the periphery of the academic community while teaching on programmes that are built on the foundation

stones of social justice and inclusion. Therefore, my research juxtaposes the concept of equity of access to and participation in higher education for non-traditional students and equity of access to and participation in higher education for marginalised educators. In Section 2.4 I highlighted that Skilbeck's (2000) report on *Access and Equity in Higher Education* pertained to both students and staff in higher education, but that a focus on equality, and thus on inclusion and belonging, for staff only really began to gain visible traction with the development of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) functions in HEIs in more recent years. Precarious employment impacts on staff inclusion and belonging and my research shows that MSACs are teaching spaces within these particular HEIs – and possibly more widely across the sector – that are impacted by these practices. Inclusion and belonging are both relational and EDI issues of concern and the experiences of my participants have important implications from EDI and human resources perspectives in higher education. My participants have described experiencing a disconnect from the academic functions of their institutions, although they feel a strong connection with their identity as teachers arising from their positive teacher-learner relationships. These relationships can positively shape teachers' lives and experiences and their learning and growth, and thus relation-centred teaching becomes a space in which teachers can develop "a stronger sense of who they are and want to be" (Hunt and West, 2006, p. 174). My participants' sense of identity and belonging as teachers developed from their feelings of 'mattering' (Schwartz, 2019) to their students by having a place in their lives, and as a result of their positive feelings and emotions arising from the relational connection with their students. Thus, a sense of belonging and purpose in my study was *both* present and absent for participants – present through interaction and relationship with their students, and absent as a result of marginalisation both from and by academic teaching peers (for casual staff more so than for PhD students).

Marginalisation can prevent individuals' access to resources and opportunities and can hinder personal growth (Von Braun and Gatzweiler, 2014), and thus can be suggested to be a social justice and equality issue. Irish higher education has undertaken very

visible EDI work to address areas such as gender inequality under the Athena Swan⁵¹ programme (O’Keefe and Courtois, 2019) but has not visibly addressed the issue of employment precarity and how this impacts on teacher inclusion and belonging. My participants’ experiences illustrate the importance of supporting marginally positioned teachers to feel like they belong, and to feel like their work ‘matters’ more widely outside of the classroom. Likewise, from an EDI perspective, job satisfaction is important, and although my participants articulate high levels of job satisfaction arising from their interactions with their students, this job satisfaction diminishes significantly (for some) when employment precarity and experiences of marginalisation are considered. This situation merits reflection given how my research illustrates that access courses are ‘habitable’ spaces (see Section 8.3.2) in which teaching can be a positive and developmental experience and these spaces can be suggested to support teacher development and wellbeing. Of note, the HEA not only advocates for a whole-of-institution approach to equity of access; it also advocates for a whole-of-institution approach to student and staff health and wellbeing⁵² and acknowledges that these are linked to the broader objectives of higher education. If one of those objectives is to ensure that our HEIs are more equal and inclusive workplaces, and not just equal and inclusive teaching and learning spaces, then the practices which result in long-term employment precarity for MSAC teachers should be addressed.

Recommendation

- It is recommended that relevant professional functions in higher education, such as Access Services, EDI, HR and trade unions, work together to proactively address issues of equity and inclusion for access teachers who are impacted by casualisation practices. This could be done through policy development, ensuring equitable, fair and secure employment contracts for teachers in non-standard or precarious work arrangements, as well as through awareness-raising measures about the impact of such practices on teachers’ wellbeing. This would potentially have positive knock-on awareness-raising benefits for other teaching and professional staff who are also impacted by such practices.

⁵¹ <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/international-charters/athena-swan-ireland>

⁵² <https://hea.ie/2024/06/05/a-whole-of-institution-approach-to-health-and-wellbeing/>

9.2.2 Importance of fostering relational competencies and cultures

9.2.2.1 Educators as relational and political beings

The research findings reveal that my participants espoused a range of attitudinal dispositions and values which pointed to a level of relational competence in their teaching. These included intentionality in teaching as a commitment to a way of being with their learners; care as in ‘caring about’ or adopting a ‘caring stance’ (Daloz, 1986) with respect to their students’ experiences and success; empathy as in being open to and intentional about emotional connection with others around their experiences (Brown, 2021); and respect for the contexts of their learners’ lives – amongst others. Together, these attitudes, values and dispositions support relational engagement and thus support creation of an undefinable, yet powerful, energetic learning space (Schwartz, 2019; Sidorkin, 2023). My research suggests that it is this energy, emotions and relational engagement that are at the heart of teaching and learning in these spaces much more so than subject content. Thus, access teaching at its core could be said to be a relational endeavour and my research prompts a consideration of what truly makes MSAC teaching meaningful in the modern academy.

My participants’ work with non-traditional students demanded a level of relational competence and the importance of this in working specifically with non-traditional students is addressed in Section 9.2.2.2. These competencies have relevance across teaching in higher education more widely, given the diversity of today’s student population, albeit discussions around the importance of relational competence are largely absent from current narratives on higher education policy. However, factors which mitigate against demonstrating relational competencies in higher education include large class sizes, pressure to engage in research, and a culture of individualism (Lynch et al., 2007, 2009), discussed in Section 3.3.3. There is also the sense more generally in higher education that ‘caring’ is often viewed as ‘welfare’ work and therefore is separate from the primary task of knowledge transfer (Duffy, 2019). Managerialism, as a technology of power (Foucault 1977), has also had a profound impact on educators’ practices, as performativity condemns educators to “live an

existence of calculation” (Ball, 2003, p. 215), focusing on metrics instead of on ‘mattering’ (Schwartz, 2019; Gravett, 2023), and on learning outcomes instead of on relationship development. Therefore, although teaching is one of higher education’s core missions, relational teaching is invariably “at odds with the environments wherein we teach” (hooks, 2003, p. 91).

Gravett (2023, p. 11) challenges us with the observation that “the literature on this topic is clearly vast; so why have relational pedagogies not been already adopted into mainstream higher education?”. My findings illustrate that relational pedagogies exist in marginal spaces from the way in which my participants contrasted their MSAC teaching experiences with their undergraduate teaching experiences. While acknowledging that an absence of policy and the resulting marginalisation can impact negatively on how MSAC courses and teachers are perceived within these institutions, and also borrowing from Giroux (2015, p. 92) about not wanting to “romanticise positions of marginality” in higher education, I suggest that the marginal spaces occupied by access courses in terms of size, student cohort and programme focus, lend themselves to relational engagement and competence and thus to being ‘habitable’ teaching spaces in which MSAC teachers can create a vision of change for their students and for themselves. Therefore, the positioning of these courses within their HEIs, while on the one hand results in both objective and subjective marginality (Bradatan and Craiutu, 2012) due to their position in sites of power (Foucault, 1977) (i.e. outside of academic departments), it ironically facilitates my participants’ agency to teach in an authentic and relational way. In other words, it is precisely *because* these courses sit outside the sites of power within the academy that MSAC teachers can teach in a way that allows them to “follow the soul’s calling” (Palmer, 2003, p. 377). Thus, relational engagement in these teaching contexts could be suggested to become a form of ‘political resistance’ (hooks, 2003) as MSAC teachers exercise agency in their teaching by adopting strategies and practices that are to some extent “at odds” with teaching approaches that are more commonly found in higher education and particularly in large undergraduate classes. In turn, this helps teachers to feel like they matter, and that they belong within a community of learners (Schwartz, 2019; Brown, 2021), as discussed in Section 9.2.1.4.

It is also interesting to note that in contrast to other studies on access courses (e.g. Busher et al., 2015a; Strauss and Hunter, 2018), or experiences related by those working in adult and community education (e.g. O'Neill, 2015), my participants do not appear to struggle with the demands of performativity and managerial practices, as discussed in Section 8.3.2. Under managerial cultures the traditional 'service norms' by which the practice of teaching is conducted – responsiveness, citizenship, justice and impartiality – are replaced by 'business norms' such as efficiency and productivity, thus transforming the ethical relationship between teacher and student (Schwandt, 2005). However, the absence of pressure of such 'business norms' on MSAC courses may be suggested to support relational engagement and the 'mattering' that is experienced by teachers through interacting with their students in turn supports a mutual 'growth-in-relation' with their learners (Schwartz and Holloway 2012). This highlights the complexity and paradox of how marginal teaching spaces can exist and be experienced within dominant cultures.

My research therefore invites consideration of the potential that relational engagement and thus recognition, have for influencing culture. In a highly digitalised educational environment, as well as in the "prevailing forces and influences" (Hatt and Davidson, 2022, p. 1) of a dominant performative culture and an individualist understanding of learning and education that pervades much of higher education today (Lynch et al., 2012; Giroux, 2015) a narrative of relationality is often absent. My research highlights the diversity of teaching experiences and circumstances within what are complex institutions and systems and suggests that there is a value in recognising these experiences through inclusive practices and policies, for teachers as well as for students.

An implication from my participants' experiences is that mainstream higher education structures, practices, policy narratives and cultural norms can mitigate against educators having the choice to fully embrace relational pedagogies and practices and that therefore perhaps these can only truly exist in marginal spaces. Enacting a relational pedagogy is situational and contextual (Gravett, 2023), and I do not or cannot claim that it would 'look' or 'feel' the same in every higher education space. Nonetheless, at the

very least by acknowledging the value and importance of relational pedagogy in particular teaching spaces “space opens up for something different to happen” (Riddle and Hickey, 2022, p. 4) such as fostering relational competence as a fundamental proficiency for teaching. However, the broader challenge presented to higher education is to find ways to promote this kind of relational teaching “without the catch 22 of marginalised folks ending up doing that work disproportionately”⁵³, thus resulting in ‘affective inequality’ (Lynch et al., 2007; Grummell, 2017) being experienced by those who dedicate themselves to this work. The dominance of the powerful knowledge and individualistic cultures of higher education, as well as the risk of course redundancy arising from declining student participation rates on MSACs, thus risk squeezing out the spaces and opportunities that currently exist for prioritising care and relationality within education.

With regard to what is within our control, the question is, how can we, as access professionals and educators, be supported to make relational choices within our everyday practices? In a post-Covid era of increasing student diversity, deteriorating student mental health, and challenges with student retention⁵⁴, prioritising a relation-centred education is more critical than ever, particularly for learners who are the most marginalised. Felten et al. (2016, p. 28) suggest that “institutions must move the most effective learning practices from the margins to the center of the student experience” and it is incumbent upon all of us who work to support higher education equity of access objectives to ensure that space is protected for relational teaching and engagement with non-traditional students. On a much broader level higher education ideally would take a more systemic approach to promoting and recognising educational spaces that involve both cognitive and relational dimensions by creating “intentional policies and practices that allow the relational side of education to flourish” (Sidorkin 2023, p. 3). The time and effort required to do this can be seen through my participants’ practices of making time to learn about their students’ lives, engaging in conversation within and outside of class, alleviating their anxiety by adopting relational teaching methods, and prioritising live

⁵³ Comment in online chat at Relational Pedagogy and Relation Centered Education Network webinar, 25 October 2023, Maynooth University

⁵⁴ <https://hea.ie/2024/02/29/exploring-student-progression-in-higher-education/>

interactive classes during the emergency remote teaching period. Therefore, while not an easy task to instil a relation-centred culture more systemically – and perhaps not a necessary one for all teaching contexts - HEIs can nonetheless learn from these experiences to highlight the value of relational pedagogy in relevant teaching and learning spaces.

Recommendation

- Promoting a relation-centred culture can have implications for how higher education teachers are prepared and supported to teach. Most HEIs nowadays espouse a range of graduate attributes i.e. the skills, abilities and knowledges that extend beyond disciplinary knowledge that graduates are expected to develop through their engagement in higher education and to be able to apply in a range of life contexts. It is recommended that teacher (and professional staff) attributes are articulated within teacher and other professional development qualifications, in higher education, and that support is offered for MSAC teachers to engage in these courses. My participants demonstrated such attributes as empathy, kindness, respect, care, authenticity and trust, all of which are core to a relational engagement. While these are not values or attributes which can, nor should, be objectively measured, nor indeed mandated, making time for conversations around these within professional development and teaching qualifications could make a valuable contribution to opening conversations about relation-centred approaches in teaching and service engagement with students, and particularly from the perspective of supporting non-traditional student engagement and belonging. Inclusive education and universal design⁵⁵ are currently receiving significant attention within the design of higher education curricula, as well as more broadly across service provision in higher education, and I suggest that it is not too much of an extension of these important conversations to highlight the connection between a relational pedagogy and inclusive practices in education.

⁵⁵ <https://www.ahead.ie/udl>

9.2.2.2 A reflection on higher education from the border country

Teaching is a fundamental function of higher education and I have argued throughout this thesis that MSACs occupy a 'border country' (Hunt and West, 2006) of different knowledges and pedagogies, while operating within a powerful educational domain which privileges disciplinary knowledge above other forms. There is benefit in reflecting on the learning that teaching within such 'border countries' can bring to the development and practice of teaching in higher education more generally. This examination of MSAC teaching experiences invites a consideration of the extent to which other pedagogical philosophies and traditions, such as those from adult education, can or should contribute to pedagogic practices in higher education (Hunt, 2007) particularly with respect to supporting the inclusion and belonging of non-traditional students as addressed in Section 9.2.2.3. The pivotal role of the teacher in supporting an adult learner to build their confidence with respect to their engagement in education has frequently been highlighted in adult education literature and the kind of teacher-learner relationship which unfolds in the classroom has been identified as critical to achievement of this broader personal development objective (Brookfield, 2015; Knowles et al., 2015; Bowl, 2017).

The participants in my study demonstrate an understanding of the need to navigate the dual purposes of MSACs by upholding academic and disciplinary standards and by simultaneously creating supportive learning environments for their students by making their subjects engaging and accessible. Therefore, they could be said to demonstrate a commitment to teaching which is beyond "the practice and perfection only of methods and techniques" (Fitzmaurice, 2008, p. 350). Supporting learners on an emotional level, by helping them to manage their anxiety and build their confidence, ultimately facilitates the learning process (Knowles et al., 2015) and has broader applicability for all students, but particularly for non-traditional students, beyond these specific teaching contexts. Acknowledging the importance of removing such emotional blocks to learning by instilling self-confidence and helping students to grow personally is a critical aspect of teaching, I suggest, and merits greater prominence in higher education teaching spaces more generally, as well as from an access and inclusion perspective.

However, ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young and Muller, 2013) is the mainstay of higher education teaching. These dominant discourses around knowledge and teaching in higher education, combined with the cultural norms that uphold the “self-evident value of a discipline” (Loxley et al., 2017c, p. 250) over a relational pedagogy, can impact work with non-traditional students in that the relational and ‘caring’ elements of work with these students are often associated with a deficit model of education (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011b; Kearns, 2017). The experiences of my participants illustrate however that it is critical for teachers to know or learn how these purposes co-exist together in these educational contexts and where the balance lies at different times between prioritising a learner-centred, relational approach with their students, and prioritising the ‘powerful knowledge’ of the academy i.e. in balancing the ‘*what*’ and the ‘*how*’ in their teaching, while continually keeping the ‘*why*’ – including the underlying purposes of these programmes, and of education in general - in mind.

The importance of being self-aware and of reflecting on one’s own personal experiences in order to more effectively recognise and support one’s learners has long been identified in educational literature (e.g. Dewey, 1916; Brookfield, 1995; Palmer, 1998; Boud et al., 2000). My research suggests that experiential knowledge of being a mature student is as valuable to MSAC teachers as disciplinary and curricular knowledge. My participants demonstrated a capacity to draw on their own experiential, emotional and embodied knowledges (Heron, 1996; Fenwick, 2008) of what it was like to *be* a mature student or of having experienced challenges in accessing and engaging in higher education, as well as drawing on their knowledge of the higher education system in informing their teaching approaches and in their engagement with their students. As Palmer (1998, p. 2) states: “knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge”. These are distinct forms of knowledge, beyond that of subject knowledge, and connecting with these knowledges also facilitates a deeper connection to their roles as teachers. Thus, my research suggests that enactment of a relational pedagogy is supported by the teacher’s own recognition of the value of different knowledges, of their own cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and their ability to draw on these in teaching these students. This in turn supports engaging in a relational pedagogy

through empathy, care and the teacher's capacity to be authentic (Holloway and Alexandre 2012) as they relate to their students in a very human and relational way.

My research offers the perspective that creating space for both the 'hearts and minds' (Nussbaum, 1995; hooks, 2010; Noddings, 2012) dimensions of teaching, where both cognitive and emotional knowledges are embraced and thus expand, enables teaching to be a "site of human flourishing" (Schwandt, 2005, p. 329) through interaction. This 'engaged pedagogy' (hooks, 1994), which acknowledges the emotional nature of teaching, is facilitated through the relational interaction between teacher and student. As discussed in Section 3.2.4, a recognition of the emotional dimension of teaching occupies an 'uneasy' place in higher education. However, by acknowledging the place of embodied and emotional knowledges, a deeper connection to one's role as teacher can result. Although the necessity for such teaching approaches is often associated with the needs of non-traditional students, literature highlights its value for all students (Pearce and Down, 2011; Bell, 2022; Gravett and Winstone, 2022). Thus, the ability to recognise the value of different forms of knowledge, and to draw on those, thus underpinning a relational connection in teaching for a diverse student body, has implications for a higher education teaching system with deep-rooted cultures of individualism and powerful knowledge. Although recognising the value of different pedagogies and knowledges in a dominant academic culture can be challenging, it can be valuable for higher education to recognise the powerful impact that relational pedagogy can have upon educational outcomes (Duffy, 2019). By addressing issues associated with the subordination of teaching as 'service' (hooks, 2003), and by proactively naming and valuing a relation-centred culture, the possibility of creating a 'third space' for educational experiences that are "informed by compassion and a respect for the other" (Giroux, 2015, p. 92) opens up. While HEIs cannot force individuals to practice a relational pedagogy or espouse its ethos, they can try to persuade those who are willing to be persuaded and create the conditions whereby teachers, and indeed all staff in higher education, can engage relationally with students in appropriate spaces.

My research implies how, from the perspective of the teacher, relational practices and pedagogies can support teacher learning, identity development, and job satisfaction,

while other research has highlighted its value to students (Pearce and Down, 2011; Bell, 2022; Gravett and Winstone, 2022). Therefore, how does higher education move from margins and metrics to mainstream and mattering, and thus ensure that we conceive of education as relational as a system? From a social justice and inclusion perspective, my research and my methodology highlight the importance of making time and space to invite conversations with people – students, teachers and professional staff - about their education encounters so that as institutions we can learn about what matters to people within communities of learning, how they experience recognition, and therefore about how important concepts such as relationality, mattering and recognition can be included in educational theory and thinking. The time is ripe to encourage conversations around “what makes teaching meaningful for academics and what underpins the will to teach” (McCune, 2021, p. 23). This starting point in turn can guide and influence policy and practice in this space. However, I acknowledge that while it is easy to recommend relational pedagogy and relational approaches as core higher education values and practices, it is much more complex a task to instil these within strong institutional cultures and systems. It requires strategic change and commitment, as well as significant shifts in institutional priorities and cultures, things which are difficult to achieve in large, complex organisations. The HEA’s current focus on the importance of strong leadership, and on prioritising people and culture within Irish higher education institutions, may potentially go some way to encouraging a stronger focus on these objectives.

9.2.2.3 Relational pedagogy’s importance to social inclusion and lifelong learning in higher education

Relational pedagogy “represents a commitment to inclusion, pluralism and diversity” (Hickey and Riddle, 2023b, p. 2) and therefore is fundamental to supporting and including non-traditional students in higher education. While students’ views were not sought for this research, the literature is strong on the importance of relational connection for non-traditional students, an ethos that has long been recognised and practiced by Access Services in higher education and has also been demonstrated by my participants. My research therefore highlights the important contribution that relation-

centred teachers make to the equity of access agenda by adopting relational teaching approaches which support the inclusion of non-traditional students in higher education.

Learner relationships with higher education begin from the moment they first make contact with the institution thus the quality and intentionality of relationships developed from early on is critical to supporting learners' inclusion and sense of belonging. This is particularly important when supporting non-traditional learners to overcome existing feelings of marginalisation and exclusion and who typically experience greater challenges engaging in education (e.g. Staunton 2008; Fleming and Finnegan, 2011a; Kearns 2017; Loxley et al., 2017c). Therefore, HEIs need teachers and professional staff who will anchor these students in higher education, who will help them to feel like they belong, and to develop the skills and confidence to progress and succeed. My research demonstrates that some HEIs entrust the 'teaching for transition' of some of its most under-represented students to the care and professionalism of teachers who want to create a sense of belonging for their students in university classrooms. These are students who, in some cases, are perched precariously on the threshold of higher education and who may, or may not, subsequently progress into undergraduate studies. That these teachers do this while – for some – not experiencing that same sense of belonging within the institution for themselves is noteworthy. My research showcases a group of teachers who do this through building rapport with their students "as a first principle for the project of educating" (Murphy et al., 2020, p. 599), who demonstrate a passion and a broader moral purpose within their work, and who "speak powerfully to a practice that is responsible and caring" (Fitzmaurice, 2008, p. 350). Offering a safe and relation-centred space for non-traditional students to engage with education and to transition with confidence into further studies is one of the most valuable things that higher education – or education at any level or in any sector - can do. The relation-centred ethos of MSAC teachers therefore has a critical and central role to play within institutional-level equity of access work and practice in Irish higher education. These teachers are "part of the whole" (hooks, 1994) and my participants' growing commitment to and understanding of the role which MSACs play in supporting adult learner access to higher education as experts in this teaching space, makes them

important advocates for equity of access work and for informing both equity of access and EDI-related objectives with respect to student inclusion and belonging.

Centring a pedagogy of relation requires a rebalancing between the '*what*' and the '*how*' of education. Advocating for and embedding relational pedagogical approaches is a way of supporting HEIs to become inclusive spaces which meet the needs of all learners, including non-traditional students. This has implications for understanding the value of relational pedagogy within a broader lifelong learning context as it applies also to higher education. In Section 2.4.3.2 I highlighted that one of the current priorities in making higher education more accessible under a lifelong learning remit is the 'microcreds' project. This is an approach to educational provision which offers learning in 'bite-sized chunks' and which can be 'stacked' by the learner to build towards a formal qualification. The main target audience for this form of education is adult learners. However, with their primary focus on upskilling and reskilling to meet the needs of industry, micro-creds have been critiqued as being driven by human capital rather than by social justice priorities (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2021). My research has shown that relational pedagogy can be a natural 'fit' for teaching and learning in the adult learner space due to its inclusive and participatory nature. The image evoked by stackable learning credits may lead one to wonder where the space is for relational engagement in education which is designed to be delivered in short bursts, with no promise or commitment to an ongoing relationship – either between teacher and learner, or between the learner and the institution. However, there is much to be learned from my participants' experiences who could also be described to some extent as engaging in 'bite-sized' teaching on MSACs. The MSAC employment conditions for most of these teachers effectively precluded extensive engagement with their students other than within the classroom, yet the connection they developed with their students was evident. My participants' understanding of the importance of the '*how*' of their teaching, regardless of its longevity or sustainability, suggests that it is possible to engage relationally for the purposes of effective teaching even within temporary or short-term teaching and learning relationships. In the prevailing culture of individualism in higher education, or within any education which is offered under free market principles, forging meaningful connections between learners and teachers by prioritising a relational pedagogy in

educational ‘offerings’ that are designed to broaden participation has potential to support higher education institutions’ goals, not just of inclusion and belonging, but also of connection with their communities and thus to develop ‘customer loyalty’. Promoting and prioritising a relational ethos therefore has potential to build foundations for longer-term relationships between learners and institutions. The point I am making here is not about creating ‘brand loyalty’ but rather about creating a lasting connection to learning and education in a way that centres the importance of relationships for all parties.

In an era of increasing ‘disengagement’ by undergraduate students, who are predominantly of traditional age group, and in an era of increased digitalisation, there is therefore an argument to be made that centring a relational approach to education can support all learners regardless of age and, under an inclusive practice ethos and approach (Plows and Whitburn, 2017), may help to decrease differences in the way in which younger students and adult learners are taught. To that end it is recommended that an understanding of relational pedagogy is included in discussions on embedding inclusive practices in teaching and learning and in service delivery in higher education, under a universal design approach. This would place relational pedagogy at the centre of a strong and vocal movement within higher education today, one which has inclusivity for all learners at its core.

9.3 Contribution of this research study

This study is unique in both an Irish and an international context in its application of the dual lenses of relational pedagogy and recognition to a specific teaching context in Irish higher education. It thus contributes to both scholarship and knowledge with respect to access teaching and broader equity of access work in higher education. Research undertaken to date on equity of access in policy terms in Ireland has maintained a strong quantitative focus with respect to student participation, success and outcomes, while qualitative research in this space has primarily focused on the student experience, as discussed in Chapter Two. I commenced my research in the knowledge that the role of access (MSAC) educators, their contributions to the equity of access agenda, and their experiences of working with non-traditional students in higher education were not

directly visible in Irish educational research literature. Thus, my research not only reilluminates what Kinchin and Gravett (2022, p. 64, citing Biesta, 2013) describe as the “increasing invisibility of the role of the teacher” in education’s predominant focus on students’ needs and experiences; it also illuminates questions around how peripherally located teaching contributes to the equality and equity missions of higher education, uniquely from the perspective of those who teach on programmes that are designed for that purpose.

I do not claim that my research is statistically representative, nor is it intended to be widely generalisable albeit, given the value of relational pedagogy that is illustrated by my research, some of my recommendations do have broader applicability across higher education. Nonetheless, the findings from this research support and extend research findings from other educational jurisdictions with respect to access course teacher experience (e.g. Jones, 2006; Busher et al., 2015a) and add a context-specific dimension in its focus on teaching mature students. This perspective is valuable to share given that these educators teach some of our most under-represented students in higher education, mature students being a significant minority of the undergraduate student population in statistical terms. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in its application of relational pedagogy and recognition as intersecting analytical lenses which provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the experiences of MSAC teachers within higher education. My thesis also contributes to the recently growing range of literature and studies on relational pedagogy in higher education by extending its application into the MSAC context and recognises the distinct qualities of ‘access teaching’ in higher education as a relational pedagogical space.

There is potential for further research to be carried out in applying these theoretical lenses to the experiences of other precariously employed academic and other staff in higher education, as well as the potential to be applied to research in other educational sectors in which employment precarity continues to be experienced (e.g. further education, adult and community education) and which are equally recognised as relational, and in some cases also marginal, teaching spaces. There is also potential to apply these lenses to research on other teaching contexts in higher education,

particularly those involving adult learners in the postgraduate, continuous professional development and microcreds spaces. There may also be value in extending this research to explore the experiences of other non-permanent staff working in Access Services, particularly given current uncertainties in the sector around the sustainability and long-term nature of funding streams to support access work.

9.4 Limitations of this research

I acknowledge that there are a number of limitations to my research study:

- While my research was undertaken in the form of an exploratory case study, it was limited to just two HEIs. The choice of two HEIs was made so that I might gain a broader perspective on potential phenomena or issues which might emerge, given that both institutions were similar to each other with respect to how their MSACs were organisationally positioned. Although it was not my objective in this research, it is important to reiterate that it is not possible to suggest that any findings from the study are generalisable to teaching staff on access courses in other HEIs or other educational sectors. I also acknowledge that different or more nuanced findings may have been gleaned had more HEIs been included.
- Research was conducted with current MSAC teachers who had already been teaching on the relevant programme for at least one year and the rationale for this decision is offered in Section 4.4.2. Although I wanted to capture that ‘in the moment’ experience of this work rather than focusing, in retrospect or hindsight on what the work meant to participants, I acknowledge that a broader range of experiences, opinions and insights may have been gleaned had I also invited former MSAC teachers to participate in this research.
- My fieldwork was scheduled to be carried out during the first half of the 2020/21 academic year therefore Covid-19 inevitably had an impact. This was a time during which, from both personal experience and from talking to participants, I was strongly aware of the additional demands being put on higher education teaching and professional staff to deliver teaching and services remotely. This

resulted in some challenges for me in gaining access to participants as well as limitations in my own capacity to carry out fieldwork. To that end, the number of participants in the research is limited to nine however participation and input from both HEIs is relatively evenly spread.

- Although not the purpose of this study, my research did not include a multi-stakeholder perspective in that it did not explore access practitioners' or senior managers' views within the participating institutions, nor those of students. A recommendation for others who wish to extend or deepen this research using the lenses of relational pedagogy and recognition, would be to include students', academic staff, professional staff and/or managers' voices to add both rich and alternative perspectives in exploring the value of access courses and the value that access teachers bring to this work.
- My research did not seek to assess or evaluate the efficacy of institutional or national policy which informs the delivery of MSACs, nor did it seek to assess the quality or performance impact of these programmes. However, in drawing on policy to provide contextual information as background and in my discussion, I have made some recommendations in this space in Section 9.2.1.1.

9.5 Parting thoughts

To revisit what I set out in my introduction to this thesis, my research examines a highly contextualised teaching and learning space in higher education, turns its gaze to the educators who work with marginalised students and asks, as Gravett (2023, p. 5) does:

“how do we connect to others, and what is the impact of connections in higher education ... What does it feel like to feel that we matter? ... What do connections and mattering look like in the digital university, and how might higher education move from metrics to mattering? There are no easy answers to these questions. But the questions themselves are important. Examining these questions offers cracks, interstices, writings in the margins of the dominant discourses of higher education” (*my italics*).

While I did not set out to interview only precariously employed teachers or PhD students for this research, it is these teachers who chose to meet with me to recount their experiences, perhaps understandably as they made up the majority of MSAC teachers

in the two HEIs. These are teachers who experience professional marginalisation within their institutions, although not within their access teaching and what was evident to me from our conversations was just how much this work meant to them on an emotional level. There was little sense from any of my participants that they viewed MSAC teaching as solely 'transient' roles and I was pleasantly surprised by how positive my participants felt about their work, even those who were relatively new to MSAC teaching. These are teachers working, to use Gravett's words above, "in the margins of the dominant discourses of higher education" yet their teaching approaches and values are far from marginal within the classroom. There is a very clear and strong relational ethos within these courses, and which goes to the heart of who my participants are as teachers and of the students with whom they work.

However, I myself am on the periphery of this research, from the perspective that I am neither inside nor outside the participant group, especially within my own HEI. My interest in this research topic originally stemmed from my positioning as an Access professional who worked for many years with mature students, and by centring the concept of relationality within my research, I am also foregrounding one of my own values as a practitioner. By reflecting on the experiences of MSAC teachers through the lens of relational pedagogy I have gained a deeper insight into its importance to teachers in terms of having a positive and affirming teaching experience. The value of these relational experiences is heightened even further when the precarious or casual nature of some participants' employment situations is considered. What I find interesting however is that teaching on the margins of higher education offers both relational connection (with students) and relational disconnection (from the institution) simultaneously. This is the complexity of working in, researching and understanding this space which I have grappled with articulating throughout this thesis.

It has been a privilege for me to make time to explore what this work means to teaching colleagues, to understand at a deeper level how MSAC teachers' own experiences inform their work, and to be witness to such dominant feelings of positivity with respect to their teaching. As O'Neill (2015, p. 504) reflected also on his conversations with fellow adult educators:

“one of the striking things that I’ve learned from all this – I probably knew it anyway, but it has become more visible to me as I’ve walked – is the depth and richness of experience of tutors coming into adult education.”

This research has also challenged me to remain mindful in my current leadership position of the lived experiences of those trusted with educating some of our most under-represented students in higher education. I have learned that it is very challenging to respond to the performative and reporting demands of a “greedy institution” (Lynch et al., 2020) whilst balancing the individual and relational needs of both students and staff. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon those of us who are leaders, managers and policy makers in education to acknowledge and recognise the contribution made by those who work at a deeply relational level with all of our students, particularly with those who are under-represented, and to recognise the importance of centring a relational pedagogy and engagement within such higher education teaching spaces. Doing this takes time and resources, deep conversations and sharing of knowledge, and it is my role as leader to advocate for this kind of approach. Within this large and complex educational ecosystem, my position, supported by my research, has given me a wider and more visible forum for ensuring that relationships are kept at the heart of all Access work, as well as more widely in student support services and in teaching.

This is my rational reflection on and response to my research findings and to my own professional development as practitioner-researcher. However, as I have acknowledged and witnessed throughout this thesis, emotions and feelings occupy a valid space in higher education, and the time I have spent researching this topic has been profoundly emotional, for both personal and professional reasons. I have experienced all the normal emotions and thoughts of any ‘beginning’ researcher: excitement, fear, frustration, joy, trepidation, pride, exhaustion, ‘aha’ moments, imposter-syndrome ... and I could go on. Those emotions have kept me connected to my research, even during the times I wanted to give up, and have profoundly shaped my learning, having been recognised, acknowledged and accepted by my teachers as a normal part of this educational journey. On the whole, however, the words below from renowned Irish poet, Seamus Heaney (2014) can best describe what the past six years have felt like. They encapsulate

for me my feelings about my own research journey, as well as what it feels like to work with students with heart-felt life stories (MSAC students and my DHAE peers), with passionate, respectful and relational teachers (MSAC teachers and our DHAE teachers) and to describe what working with mature and MSAC students feels like:

*"You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and below it open."*

So, at the end of this part of my journey can I truly say that these stories are important to share, that MSACs have something distinct to offer as teaching experiences in higher education, and that relational engagement – with students and with each other - should be central to how we work in higher education today? From my own personal experiences of this work, as well as from my learning from my participants' experiences, I would argue very strongly that all of the above is true. However, I will leave the parting words of wisdom and insight to Jody, one of my participants:

"You know, overall, if I have to say, am I happy with the choice and will I do it again? Yes, a million percent, yes. It's just so, it's something so rewarding about teaching mature students. Yeah. There really is."

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Appendix A: Research participant interview guide

“Exploring higher education teacher experiences of mature student access courses”

1. Introductory questions / participant profile:
 - a. What subject(s) do you teach on the access course?
 - b. How long have you been teaching on the access course?
2. How did you get involved in teaching on this course initially? What was your interest in working on this particular course?
3. Can you describe your initial teaching experiences on this course?
(Prompts if needed: What was the first semester like? Did this experience differ from teaching on other programmes / with other student groups? How?)
4. Describe your day-to-day work for the access course.
(Prompts if needed: Teaching, personal support / advisor, administration, communication, assessment, curriculum development)
5. How would you describe the learners you work with on the access course?
6. What do you enjoy most about your work on the access course & why?
7. What aspects of this work do you find challenging & why?
8. In what ways does your work on the access course differ from other teaching work (if any) you undertake?
9. What does this work mean to you on a personal level? On a professional level?
10. How do you perceive your own contribution to supporting mature student participation in higher education through your work on the access course?
11. How do you believe your institution perceives your work / contribution?
(Prompts if needed: Teaching, pay and conditions, involvement in teacher/staff community, professional development, career progression)
12. Is there anything else that we haven't covered, which you think is important to mention about your teaching work on the access course?

Appendix B: Invitation to participate in research

Invitation to participate in the research (to be disseminated by email by gatekeepers)

Subject: *Invitation to participate in research on higher education teacher experiences of mature student access courses*

[Attachments: *Information Sheet; Consent Form; Ethical Approval***]**

This invitation is being sent on behalf of Rhona McCormack, Mature Student Officer, University of Limerick

Dear X

I am Rhona McCormack, a doctoral student in the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University (MU). I am also Mature Student Officer at the University of Limerick (UL), and Course Director of the Mature Student Access Certificate in UL. As part of the requirements for the Doctorate in Higher and Adult Education, I am undertaking a research study in which I am seeking to explore teacher experiences of mature student access courses delivered in higher education settings. This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee.

You are receiving this invitation to participate in this study as you are currently teaching on a mature student access course in your institution and you have also taught on that course for at least the past year. Please be assured that you are under no obligation whatsoever either to respond to this invitation or to take part in this research.

However, if you think you might be interested, I have attached an Information Sheet, Consent Form and copy of the Ethical Approval, to give you more details about this study before you make any decision about responding to this email. Please take some time to read through this information before getting in touch with me.

Should you decide to take part in this study, your participation will involve an individual interview with me in a location and at a time of your own choosing. The interview will be conversational in nature, exploring your experiences of teaching on a mature student access course, and will take between 45 minutes to one hour. If you do decide to take part, you can still withdraw from the research at any time, without repercussions and without giving a reason, up to the point of thesis submission (anticipated to be September 2022).

If you think that you would like to participate in this study or if you would like to discuss any details of this study with me before deciding to take part, you can contact me directly at:

Rhona McCormack

Rhona.mccormack.2019@mumail.ie

06X-XXXX81 (work)

08X-XXXX44 (mobile)

My sincere thanks to you for taking the time to read this email

Appendix C: Information sheet for research participants



Exploring higher education teacher experiences of mature student access courses

Information sheet for research participants

Purpose of the Study. I am Rhona McCormack, a doctoral student in the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University (MU). I am also Mature Student Officer at the University of Limerick (UL), and Course Director of the Mature Student Access Certificate in UL.

As part of the requirements for the Doctorate in Higher and Adult Education in Maynooth University, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr Bernie Grummell. My study is concerned with exploring teacher experiences of mature student access courses delivered in higher education settings. The research is being carried out at two different higher education institutions in Ireland.

The research aims to explore *“How do higher education teachers describe their experiences of their work on a mature student access course?”* and therefore I am interested in hearing about your personal experiences and perspectives of working on a mature student access course at your institution.

I hope that this research will result in greater understanding and visibility, within the higher education sector, for the work which you, as access course teachers, undertake in the context of contributing to the support of mature student participation in higher education. I envisage also that this research will make a contribution to the knowledge base on access programmes within the higher education sector, and that it will be of interest to both internal and external colleagues working in the area of access, as well as to policy-makers.

What will the study involve? The study will involve participating in an individual interview with myself in a location and at a time of your choosing. The interview is conversational in nature, exploring your experiences, and will take between 45 minutes to one hour. You will be offered a full copy of the interview transcript for review within 3-4 weeks after the interview, should you wish to receive this, and you will have an opportunity to amend, add to or withdraw any statement from the interview at that stage. At a later stage in the research, you will also be offered an opportunity to read a draft of the initial research findings and to further contribute, add to or amend anything at that point, should you wish to do so.

Who has approved this study? This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it. This approval has also been notified to, and accepted by, the relevant Ethics Committee in your own institution.

Why have you been asked to take part? You are being invited to take part because you currently teach on an access or foundation course for mature students in a higher education institution in Ireland.

Do you have to take part?

You are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. It is entirely up to you to decide if you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and will be given a copy of the signed form and this information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw from the research at any time, without repercussions and without giving a reason, up to the point of thesis submission (anticipated to be September 2022).

What information will be collected? Information collected will be your personal descriptions of your own experiences of teaching on a mature student access course, via an individual interview. The interview will be recorded in audio format, with your permission, and thereafter will be transcribed into text format. Some of the areas which will be explored in the interview will include your day-to-day work on the course, aspects of your work that you find interesting and/or challenging, your experiences of working with mature students as learners, what your work means to you both personally and professionally, and how you perceive your work contributes to supporting mature student participation in higher education.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. Your personal details will be anonymised and pseudonyms will be used throughout the research. The pseudonym key will be held separately to the original data. Participating institutions will also be assigned a code name. Identifying features of institutions, courses and individuals will be anonymised, synthesised and summarised as general findings.

All hard copy personal information, including signed consent forms, will be scanned or photographed and stored on the Maynooth University secure server. All hard copy material will then be securely and confidentially disposed of. All electronic / soft-copy information will securely held on Maynooth University servers and will be accessed only by me.

Please be aware however that there are certain limits with respect to both confidentiality and anonymity:

Confidentiality: It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances Maynooth

University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

Anonymity: Due to the qualitative nature of the research and the fact that it is being conducted within a relatively small higher education sector in Ireland, complete and absolute anonymity may not be possible to guarantee. However, no findings will be attributed to individuals, and all interviews will be conducted on a one-to-one basis. Any quotations or other references to individual participants will only be made using a pseudonym and any identifying information will be anonymised or removed from the interview transcripts.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party.

What will happen to the information which you give: All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, soft-copy data will be retained on the Maynooth University server and hard-copy data will be scanned or photographed and stored on the Maynooth University secure server. All hard copy material will then be securely and confidentially disposed of. After ten years, all electronically-held data will be destroyed by myself, as Principal Investigator, by reformatting or overwriting the data.

What will happen to the results? The research will be written up and presented to Maynooth University as a doctoral thesis. Findings from the research may also be presented at national and international conferences and may be published in academic journals. Anonymized extracts from your interview will be used in such presentations/publications only if you explicitly give permission for this purpose on the consent form. A copy of the final research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part in this research and I will be guided by you with regard to the experiences you would like to talk about. However, if talking about any of your experiences causes you emotional distress please see below.

What if there is a problem? At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling. If you experience any distress following the interview you may contact me directly, or my supervisor, to discuss any concerns you have. If you feel that you require professional support for any reason, you can contact support services such as the confidential Employee Support Service, Unite Trade Union, or the Human Resources Department (for staff member participants) or the Postgraduate Students' Union, your own academic supervisor or the Human Resources Department (for PhD student participants). Please remember also that:

- You may withdraw from this research at any time, without repercussions and without giving a reason, up to the point of thesis submission (anticipated to be September 2022).
- You can subsequently withdraw or amend any statements you make in the interview

- Procedures have been put in place to protect your confidentiality, anonymity and personal data

You may contact my supervisor, Dr Bernie Grummell (bernie.grummell@mu.ie or 01-XXXX61) if you have any concerns about this research.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me at:

Rhona McCormack
Rhona.mccormack.2019@mumail.ie

06X-XXXX81 (work)

08X-XXXXXX44 (mobile)

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet

Appendix D: Participant consent form



Exploring higher education teacher experiences of mature student access courses

Participant Consent Form

I.....agree to participate in Rhona McCormack's research study titled 'Exploring higher education teachers' experiences of mature student access courses'.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally & in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐

I am participating voluntarily. ☐

I give permission for my interview with Rhona McCormack to be audio-recorded. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating. ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use my data, without repercussions and without giving a reason, up to the point of thesis submission (anticipated to be September 2022). ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request. ☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet. ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in any subsequent publications (e.g. conference presentations/papers or academic journal papers) only if I give permission below ☐

[Please Select as appropriate]

I agree to quotation/publication of anonymized extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of anonymized extracts from my interview ☐

Signed.....

Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitals

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, 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>.

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for Principal Investigator

Appendix E: Ethics approval

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY,

MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND



Dr Carol Barrett

Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

08 May 2020

Rhona Patricia McCormack
Department of Adult and Community Education
Maynooth University

Dear Rhona,

The Social Research Ethics Sub-committee has reviewed the ethical protocol for your project: "Exploring higher education teacher experiences of mature student access courses" and we would like to inform you that ethical approval has been granted.

Any deviations from the project details submitted to the ethics committee will require further evaluation. This ethical approval will expire on 31/10/2024.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carol Barrett".

Dr Carol Barrett

Secretary,

Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

C.c. Dr Bernie Grummell, Department of Adult and Community Education

Reference Number SRESC-2020-2402923
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Appendix F: Review of Irish Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Literature

Loxley et al. (2017c) identified a limited number of empirical research studies in an Irish context which focused on educators' pedagogical practice in working with non-traditional students or on students' own experiences. These studies largely focused on pedagogic practice working with mature students on undergraduate programmes (Berry, 2011; Jennings, 2005) or on working with students with disability (e.g. Donnolly, 2007; Hanafin et al., 2007; Kubiak, 2015). The authors claimed that "more generally, the research work that has been done on T&L in Irish HE has largely treated students in a fairly undifferentiated manner as far as the equity groups are concerned" (Loxley et al., 2017c, p. 239). In a similar vein with respect to equity of access more generally, Loxley et al. (2017a, p. 88) suggest that "there is, and this reflects the politics of academic research, only a handful of studies which take access offices and practitioners as the primary focus".

Although accepting Loxley et al.'s claims as to the paucity of existing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research in the equity of access field, I nonetheless undertook a targeted review of existing Irish SoTL literature, through two of the main forums for SoTL in Ireland; the AISHE-J⁵⁶ journal and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (National Forum, 2015)⁵⁷, to ascertain the extent to which the voices of MSAC teaches were included in this corpus. My review of this literature (see further below for my approach) revealed that while there was some literature which addressed general issues related to non-traditional student participation in higher education, some of which is included in this thesis, there was no literature that I could identify which explicitly foregrounded MSAC or access course teachers' experiences of working with non-traditional students in higher education. The importance of considering my own research within this larger body shows the value of highlighting the diverse contexts within which teaching and learning takes place in higher education. This gap demonstrates the relevance of my research within an Irish SoTL context and particularly with regard to teaching and learning as it relates to access programmes.

Review of AISHE-J articles

The All-Ireland Society for Higher Education (AISHE)⁵⁸ seeks to advance the professional recognition and enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education. AISHE provides a platform for the higher education community in Ireland to engage in critical

⁵⁶ <https://www.aishe.org/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.aishe.org/>

dialogue on good practice in teaching and learning. *AISHE-J* is the Society's open access, peer-reviewed journal of scholarly research on a wide variety of topics related to teaching, learning and assessment in higher education.

A total of 220 articles have been published between 2009 and 2022, in between one and three journal publications annually. The articles address a wide range of different aspects of teaching, learning and assessment, some taking a specific subject disciplinary focus, while others present on themes such as student engagement, skills development, student learning supports (e.g. mathematics or academic writing) or the use of specific teaching tools or techniques in classes (videos, e-learning etc), many of these related to digital or technological tools. Specificities where they arise in articles tend to focus on courses or disciplines (e.g. Nursing, Science), on aspects of pedagogy (e.g. problem-based learning, peer assessment etc), and occasionally a particular volume focuses on a specific 'theme' e.g. writing centres (2013), civic engagement (2014), leadership (2015), entrepreneurship education (2016), or experiences of teaching and learning during Covid-19 (2021). A handful of articles reference adult learners or other under-represented student groups in either higher or further education (e.g. Dunnes, 2019; Kelly, 2013; Howard, 2013; O'Shea, 2016) and for the most part, these articles focused on the value that engaging in a further education or higher education course had for the learners themselves, albeit not all in an Irish context (e.g. Dwyer, 2015).

Review of National Forum articles

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum)⁵⁹ is a forum which leads, advises and supports the professional development of staff in the Irish higher education sector with respect to an evidence-based enhancement and development of future-orientated aspects of teaching, learning and assessment across disciplines. A *National Forum Focused Research Report* published in 2015 (National Forum, 2015) mapped research which had been carried out in Ireland between 1990 and 2015 that was focused on higher education teaching and learning scholarship, in order to develop a baseline picture of the types of publications, key areas of enquiry, contributing disciplines and HEIs on Irish research carried out in this area. For the purposes of my own study, this publication proved helpful in identifying the extent (or otherwise) of research carried out on non-traditional learners, access courses and/or specifically with access course teachers within an Irish SoTL context. The National Forum itself suggested that the publication had potential to "identify areas of teaching and learning which may be under-researched in an Irish context" (ibid., p. 3) and thus "provide direction towards those areas of research which could offer rich insights on matters of learning impact and the potential to inform practice" (ibid.). The report advised that further work would be undertaken to develop a searchable online resource

⁵⁹ <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/>

of Irish teaching and learning scholarship which was subsequently produced⁶⁰ and which additionally includes publications after 2015 and up to the present day.

The mapping for the National Forum research report undertook a comprehensive and systematic survey of teaching and learning research in higher education in Ireland over a 25-year period to 2015. The key criterion used by the research team to identify publications was research focused on teaching and learning in Irish higher education, using defined key words/search terms such as 'teaching', 'learning', 'curriculum', and/or 'student' and 'higher or tertiary education', and involved both structured online and targeted searches of 19 identified databases (e.g. Web of Science, AISHE-J, ProQuest, Google Scholar, JStor, Springer amongst others). Databases searched were broad ranging (i.e. not all solely focused on teaching and learning), as were the search terms, and thus from the perspective of my research, could potentially have identified relevant SoTL research which addressed aspects of equity of access within Irish HE teaching and learning. A review was carried out by the research team of published research specifically conducted by researchers based in Irish HEIs, in peer-reviewed and other journals, of national and international conference papers and presentations during a one-year period (September 2013-September 2014), working papers, reports, theses, and research by identified experts in teaching and learning. Abstracts were reviewed for key themes identified within the four categories of teaching and learning, course design, student experiences and quality, following Tight's (2012) framework.

The publication, together with the online searchable database, were useful tools in ascertaining a summary, yet comprehensive, overview of teaching and learning research in Irish higher education. Although the report only covers research up to 2015 it offered a window onto the breadth of teaching and learning research undertaken in Irish higher education over a substantial period of time and, together with the online database, allowed me to ascertain the extent to which the voices or experiences of educators, and indeed of students, on higher education access or foundation courses are reflected in research themes.

The research report itself produced a comprehensive (static) bibliography of Irish teaching and learning research publications (2,275 entries). A thematic analysis of abstracts of the published research carried out by the project team found that the majority of the research had a disciplinary focus, with STEM subjects dominating overall. The mapping exercise undertaken by the researchers using Tight's categorical framework above, found that research on course design was the largest category, followed by teaching and learning, then quality, while student experience represented the smallest category (356 publications). The largest sub-theme within the Student

⁶⁰ <https://eprints.teachingandlearning.ie/>

Experience theme however was diversity, reflecting the emergence of equality legislation and policies over the time period, with 130 publications identified which sought “to capture the experiences of and challenges faced by non-traditional learners” (ibid., p. 37) within this corpus. However, the researchers admitted that coding based on abstracts alone may have been a factor in identifying lower numbers of publications within this category as they did not include terms related to student wellbeing, health or retention/adjustment to higher education that might typically belong under this theme. Adults and mature learners were identified by the National Forum researchers as being a particular focus within this sub-theme, with some work also identified which specifically addressed working with students with disabilities, with the provision of supports for non-traditional learners driving much of the research in this area. Although representing just under 6% of the body of work being analysed, I determined that reviewing the bibliography, along with cross-checking the online database and searching for relevant research published after 2015, would inform me on the extent of Irish research which foregrounded the voices and experiences of teachers and/or students on mature student access courses specifically within teaching and learning scholarship literature.

The report produced a bibliography of all titles reviewed and analysed by the researchers; however, this bibliography was not categorised by theme or sub-theme which meant that the 130 publications categorised within the sub-theme of diversity were not evident within the bibliography. I therefore undertook a high-level scan of all 2,275 publication titles within the bibliography to identify any research which might contribute to informing or interpreting my own research and/or which fit into the sub-theme of diversity within this corpus. While 130 publications were deemed to come within the sub-theme of diversity, based on title, I identified just 36% (47) of these from the report’s bibliography that could potentially relate to some aspect of the non-traditional and/or mature learner experience in higher education or to issues or experiences related to teaching non-traditional learners in higher education. I also consulted titles within the online database using key search terms that were more directly related to my own research such as ‘mature student’, ‘adult learner’, ‘non-traditional learner’, ‘access course/programme’, ‘teacher experience’, ‘widening participation’ and ‘equity of access’ to complement my review of the static bibliography. Between both sources, I identified 72 publications between 1990 and 2021, which addressed some aspect of the adult learner or mature student learning experience in higher education, or which addressed teaching experiences or strategies in working with mature learners in higher education.

I reviewed abstracts of all 72 publications on the online database and determined that the vast majority of these focused on the non-traditional (adult) learners' experiences of higher education (e.g. Fleming and Murphy, 1997; Inglis and Murphy, 1999; Fleming

and Murphy, 2000; O'Brien et al., 2009; Kenney et al., 2010; Gill, 2018; Thompson, 2021; Sheridan, 2021; Brunton and Buckley, 2021), transitions (Fleming and McKee, 2005; Risquez et al., 2007; Howley et al., 2014), policy or theoretical aspects of widening participation (Lanigan, 2005; Fleming, 2016), learning styles (e.g. O'Faithaigh, 2000; Barry and Egan, 2018), teaching methodologies, curriculum or subject relevant supports (e.g. Gill and O'Donoghue, 2008; Berry, 2011; Buckley et al., 2011; Fitzmaurice et al., 2015; Loxley et al., 2017c), technology-enhanced learning tools or delivery (e.g. Jennings, 2005; Dearnley et al., 2006; Toolan and O'Keefe, 2020) - to support non-traditional learner and/or mature student participation and graduate outcomes (e.g. Finnegan et al., 2019).

Just one publication in the database focused on students' experiences of access courses (Wilson, 2016). No publications that I could identify focused on teachers' experiences of teaching on mature student access courses, while there were only three publications, that I could identify, which either foregrounded teachers' experiences or perceptions of working with non-traditional learners (Kelly, 2004, 2005) or offered a consideration of pedagogical practices with respect to teaching non-traditional students in higher education (Loxley et al., 2017c).

In summary, a review of the Irish SoTL literature reveals an absence of research on educators' experiences of teaching on access or foundation courses and limited research on the educators' personal experiences of working with under-represented students in higher education, other than considerations of teaching strategies, tools and learners' supports. The importance of considering my own research within this larger body shows the value of highlighting the diverse contexts within which teaching and learning takes place in higher education. There is potential for an exploration of these circumstances to enhance the body of knowledge on SoTL in Ireland and to re-emphasise the importance of the educator-learner relationship within higher education teaching and learning. This gap demonstrates the relevance of my research within an Irish SoTL context and particularly with regard to teaching and learning as it relates to access programmes.

Appendix G: Initial non-categorised open code list

1. Time teaching on MSAC
2. Teacher recruitment to course
3. Teacher subject
4. Teaching hours or contract type
5. Enthusiasm to teach on MSAC
6. MSAC delivery format
7. How subject fits in with MSAC
8. Other MSAC subjects
9. Expected learning outcome for students
10. Teacher awareness of student' learning needs for HE
11. Academic technology tools
12. HE resource savvy
13. Curriculum development
14. Awareness of course before started teaching on it
15. Teacher as mature student
16. Teacher qualifications
17. Growing awareness of MS supports
18. HEI staff connections
19. Prior experience teaching or helping students with subject
20. Positive student feedback of teaching
21. Non-HE teaching experience
22. School teaching stressful
23. Unsure what to teach at beginning
24. Identifying MSAC student learning needs
25. Bringing in own knowledge and experience
26. Expanding learning opportunities for students
27. Developing colleague's skills
28. Encouraging teacher collaboration
29. Belief in teamworking and collaboration
30. Non-teaching work
31. Communicating and collaborating online
32. Interested in technology for communicating
33. Figuring out best way to teach students / tailoring delivery
34. Awareness of students' circumstances and abilities
35. Teacher-student connection after course
36. MSAC students better prepared than other students
37. Feeling good on receiving positive feedback
38. Teacher's own belief in value of MSAC
39. Observes positive impact of MSAC on student confidence
40. Teacher's philosophy around helping students after course
41. Teacher role model

42. Managing students' expectations
43. Working of working in HE should replicate industry
44. Other academic duties
45. Preparing classes and assignments
46. Class activity
47. Example of assessment
48. Opinion on suitability of technology
49. Encouraging regular team or class communication
50. Encouraging student skill development
51. Size of classes
52. Drop out from MSAC
53. Personally trying to encourage and support students
54. Student profile
55. Teaching to level the playing field
56. Encouraging peer support & collaboration
57. Challenges with group working
58. Impact of Covid on course delivery
59. Positive impact of Covid on student participation
60. Negative impact of Covid on student participation
61. Teacher's own personal development
62. Other HE teaching work
63. "Less hand holding" adult learners on professional course
64. Higher quality assurance on professional course
65. Easier to pass access course – different level
66. Advantages to high level teaching
67. No preference for level of teaching
68. Enjoy interaction with MSAC students
69. Classes are fun
70. Greater flexibility in delivering MSAC
71. Teacher's feelings re negative feedback
72. Using feedback to improve delivery
73. Challenges with MSAC
74. Higher student expectations on professional course
75. Uncertainty re meeting student expectations or needs
76. Consulting with students re learning needs
77. Customer satisfaction rates
78. Lack of student progression feedback
79. Goal in teaching MSAC
80. Would like more follow up with students
81. Access course valuable for all
82. Teacher feedback to Access Office
83. MSAC teacher experience valuable to all students
84. Impact of not being HE resource savvy
85. MSAC as a "bubble" – separate from academic structures

86. Different mindset in academic teaching / departments
87. MSAC teachers enjoy helping students
88. MSAC teacher belief in students' abilities
89. Would welcome feedback and input from faculty
90. Desire to prepare students in the best way
91. Authority to connect with faculty lies with Access Office
92. How MSAC student progresses
93. Belief in own value as a teacher
94. Silos in HE
95. HE academic structures impact on building connection
96. Belief that collaboration improves the 'product'
97. Would like MSAC work to be 'proper' job
98. MSAC work is a 'side' job
99. Love teaching on MSAC
100. Desire to support diverse learners
101. Teacher feels appreciated by Access Office
102. Importance of trust in teaching relationships
103. Importance of trust in working relationships
104. "Trust battery" needs to be charged
105. Belief that MSAC is a "high trust endeavour"
106. Impact of lack of appreciation and communication on trust battery
107. Trust equation
108. MSAC values
109. Link with academic departments/HEI before MSAC
110. Prior HE teaching experience
111. "Portfolio" teaching
112. Ambition / desire to teach
113. Support from academic department (or peers?)
114. Changing HE organisational structures
115. Good teaching opportunities
116. Lack of teaching opportunities
117. Teacher not part of academic department
118. Second-level teacher training
119. Prior experience teaching adult learners
120. Diversity of teaching experience interesting
121. Preference for teaching adults
122. Adult learner commitment / motivation
123. Remembering good experiences on MSAC
124. Becoming familiar with purpose of MSAC
125. Faculty not aware of MSAC
126. Move into MSAC teaching was positive
127. Lack of connection with other MSAC teachers
128. Different management approach to MSAC – positive
129. Not interested in competitive academic environment

- 130. Nothing to prove being part of MSAC
- 131. MSAC teacher different to lecturer
- 132. Other MSACs use PhD students to teach
- 133. MSAC as “home” department
- 134. Department congeniality
- 135. Happy in work
- 136. Importance of line management support
- 137. Dealing with challenging students
- 138. Difficult teaching experiences
- 139. Importance of peer support (teacher or student?)
- 140. Negative impact on teaching and feelings
- 141. No context for individuals’ circumstances in undergraduate
- 142. MSAC students gelling together
- 143. More interaction with adult learners
- 144. Capacity to get to know students on MSAC – size of classes
- 145. Satisfaction at seeing students improve
- 146. Positive peer feedback on teaching
- 147. Validation of work
- 148. Teaching philosophy
- 149. Teacher’s own school experience
- 150. Purpose of MSC
- 151. Different to teaching second level
- 152. Enjoys seeing students progress
- 153. Positive feelings towards own work
- 154. Good support from HEI for online teaching
- 155. Positive experience of online teaching
- 156. Anger at HEI – questioning hourly teachers’ work
- 157. Initial online teaching experience not so good
- 158. Challenges with online teaching – less interaction
- 159. Praise for MSAC students in online environment
- 160. Emulating F2F classes in online environment
- 161. Size of MSAC classes – easier to teach online
- 162. Feeling at ease if technology doesn’t work
- 163. Student diversity having positive impact on teacher
- 164. Beginning teacher feeling nervous
- 165. Knowing MSAC students & feeling observed
- 166. Teaching as dialogue – working with adults
- 167. Teacher’s love of subject
- 168. Ability to engage students with subject
- 169. Personal relationship with MSAC students
- 170. Different to teaching FT undergrad course
- 171. “Seat of the pants” teaching
- 172. Teaching strategies with adults
- 173. Non-native English speakers

- 174. MSAC as peer support
- 175. MSAC students being competitive
- 176. Students' motivation to do MSAC
- 177. MSAC teacher as "first advisor"
- 178. MSAC role in supporting MS participation
- 179. Lack of recognition by HEI
- 180. Insufficient hours to make a living
- 181. HEIs using PhDs for teaching
- 182. Impact of Covid on teaching opportunities
- 183. Belief in right to job security

Appendix H: Interim expanded and categorised code list

Codes	Categories
1. Time teaching on MSAC 2. Teacher recruitment to course - recommendation 3. Prior awareness of MSAC 4. Familiarising self with course 5. Starting out on course 6. Not aware of course as student 7. Qualifications 8. Qualifications as achievements 9. Availability of teaching opportunities	Becoming involved with MSAC
10. MSAC subject(s) 11. Course structure 12. Easier to pass MSAC – different level	Description of MSAC
13. Other academic duties 14. Preparing classes and assignments 15. Class activity 16. Assessing students 17. Contact hours for students 18. Developing curriculum 19. Academic technology tools	Description of MSAC work
20. Teaching to “level the playing field” 21. HE “resource savvy” 22. Goal in teaching MSAC (???) 23. Expected learning outcome for students 24. Impact on students of not being HE resource savvy 25. MSAC role in supporting MS participation 26. Students’ motivation – missed out when younger 27. Students’ motivation – want to keep dole 28. Developing peer support network 29. MSAC students gelling together 30. Access course valuable for all students 31. MSAC values (??) 32. MSAC students better prepared than other students 33. Drop out from MSAC 34. Course informs students’ decisions 35. Teacher’s own belief in value of MSAC	MSAC course objective / value of MSAC

36. Students need MSAC to be able for degree course	
37. Non-native English speakers	
38. MSAC students are competitive	
39. Adult learners have high expectations	MSAC student profile
40. UoS students	
41. Older learners in class	
42. Student profile hasn't changed	
43. Contract type	
44. Insufficient hours to make a living	
45. Belief in right to job security	Contractual position
46. Would like MSAC work to be 'proper' job	
47. MSAC work is a 'side' job	
48. Adjunct work suits teacher	
49. Unfair treatment of adjunct teachers	
50. Make more on dole	
51. Too old to get a contract	
52. Insecurity and vulnerability	
53. Experience teaching before MSAC	
54. Undergraduate teaching	
55. Postgraduate teaching	Other teaching experience
56. Second-level teaching	
57. Prior experience teaching adult learners	
58. First teaching experience	
59. Impact on students' confidence - positive	
60. Impact on students' skills - positive	
61. Positive feedback is affirming for teacher	Student feedback on MSAC / teaching
62. Teacher's feelings re negative feedback	
63. Using student feedback to improve delivery	
64. Feeling nervous starting out	
65. Overcoming nerves	
66. Second-level teaching can be stressful	Teacher's feelings about teaching
67. Loves teaching	
68. Would work for nothing	

<p>69. Sharing passion for subject</p> <p>70. Enjoys teaching all levels</p> <p>71. Enjoys / loves MSAC work</p> <p>72. Ambition / desire to teach</p> <p>73. Teacher's role model(s)</p> <p>74. Negative impact on teaching and feelings</p> <p>75. Enjoys diversity of teaching experience</p> <p>76. "Portfolio" teaching (??)</p> <p>77. Knowing students - feeling observed</p> <p>78. Growing confidence in ability to teach</p> <p>79. School teaching too structured</p>	
<p>80. Allow for more interaction - MSAC</p> <p>81. Allow for more interaction - Masters</p> <p>82. Allow for more interaction – Evening BA</p> <p>83. Opportunity to get to know students – MSAC</p> <p>84. Prohibits awareness of individuals' circumstances – undergrad</p> <p>85. Easy to teach online – MSAC</p>	Size of classes
<p>86. Course delivery – move to online teaching</p> <p>87. On teacher's enjoyment of teaching course – negative – less interaction</p> <p>88. Initial experience of online teaching – negative</p> <p>89. Experience of online teaching - positive</p> <p>90. On student participation - positive</p> <p>91. On student participation – negative</p> <p>92. Good support from HEI for upskilling in online teaching</p> <p>93. On availability of teaching opportunities</p> <p>94. Angry - HEI questioning hourly teachers' work</p> <p>95. Lack of interaction online is disconcerting</p> <p>96. Teacher opposed to online delivery</p>	Covid
<p>97. "Less hand holding" on HE professional courses</p> <p>98. Students need more hand-holding – lack of confidence</p> <p>99. Flexibility in delivering MSAC</p> <p>100. MSAC teacher is different to lecturer</p> <p>101. Different mindset in academic teaching / departments</p>	MSAC teaching different to other teaching

102. Different to teaching FT undergrad course
103. Second level more structured / pre-defined
104. "Seat of the pants" teaching
105. No interest in competitive academic environment
106. Teaching as dialogue – working with adults
107. Prefers teaching adult learners
108. Advantages to high level teaching
109. Interaction important in teaching adults
110. MSAC teaching similar to Masters
111. More casual approach to classes
112. MSAC students not afraid to ask questions
113. Interaction is challenging for teacher
114. Providing individual support and encouragement

115. MSAC as a "bubble" in organisation – no connection with faculties
116. HE academic structures prohibit building connection
117. No direct line to faculty from MSAC
118. "Silos" in HE
119. Changing HE organisational structures
120. Faculty not aware of MSAC
121. MSAC teacher not part of academic dept
122. Doesn't feel part of academic dept
123. Would welcome feedback and input from faculty
124. Support from academic department (or peers?)
125. Prior connection with academic dept/HEI
126. Support from teaching peers

127. Enjoys interaction with students in classes
128. MSAC classes are fun
129. Enjoying helping students
130. Belief in students' abilities
131. Wants to do best by students

HE organisational structures

132.	Desire to support diverse learners	Teachers' feelings about working with MSAC students
133.	Satisfaction at seeing students improve / progress	
134.	Student diversity has positive impact on teacher	
135.	Pride in own work	
136.	Wants students to improve / succeed	
137.	Move into MSAC teaching was positive	
138.	Uncertain that meeting student expectations or needs	
139.	Adult learner commitment / motivation	
140.	Desire to engage all students with subject	
141.	Being honest with students	
142.	Pride in MS achievements	
143.	Supporting students' skill development is challenging	
144.	Enjoys hearing from students afterwards	
145.	MSAC is favourite programme	
146.	Trust in teaching relationships	Trust
147.	Trust in working relationships	
148.	"Trust battery"	
149.	MSAC is a "high trust endeavour"	
150.	Impact of lack of appreciation and communication on trust battery	
151.	Trust equation	
152.	Feels appreciated by Access Office/MSO	
153.	Work not recognised by HEI	
154.	"Nothing to prove" being part of MSAC	
155.	CSATs create pressure	
156.	MSAC as "home" department	Recognition of teaching work in HEI
157.	Department congeniality	
158.	Importance of having line management support	
159.	Different management approach to MSAC – positive	
160.	Lack of connection with other MSAC teachers	
161.	Teacher feedback to Access Office	

	Connection with Access Office / MSO
162. Teacher-student connection after course	
163. MSAC teacher as students' "first advisor" in HE	
164. Personal relationship with MSAC students	
165. No formal feedback on student progression	
166. Praise for MSAC students in online environment	
167. Engaging students with subject	Relationship in MSAC teaching
168. Emulating F2F classes online	
169. Student share personal information	
170. Students asking for advice	
171. Teacher open to listening & advising/referring	
172. No relationship with undergraduate students	
173. Encouraging teacher collaboration	
174. Belief in teamworking and collaboration	
175. Communicating and collaborating online	
176. Encouraging teacher communication	
177. Supporting colleagues' development	
178. Belief in collaboration to improve the 'product'	
179. Way of working in HE should replicate industry	
180. Awareness of students' learning needs for HE	Teamworking & collaboration
181. Identifying students' learning needs	
182. Tailoring delivery for students	
183. Awareness of students' circumstances and abilities	
184. Managing students' expectations	
185. Encouraging class communication	
186. Encouraging student skill development	
187. Encouraging peer support & collaboration	
188. Expanding students' learning opportunities	

189.	Teacher's experience as mature student	Seeing students as individuals
190.	Consulting with students on learning needs	
191.	Making teaching meaningful	
192.	Belief in own value as a teacher	
193.	MSAC teachers have valuable experience to support all students	
194.	Belief in value of MSAC	
195.	"Always learning"	
196.	Teacher's work philosophy / supporting students	
197.	Bringing in own knowledge and experience	
198.	Positive peer feedback on teaching is affirming	
199.	Teaching philosophy	Teacher Identity
200.	Belief in value of personal interaction	
201.	Wants students to enjoy classes	
202.	Dealing with challenging students	
203.	Challenging students can be intimidating	
204.	Difficult teaching experiences	
205.	Group working is challenging	
206.	Challenges with MSAC	
207.	Non-teaching work	Challenging teaching experiences
208.	Quality assurance of programmes	
209.	Student expectations	
210.	PhD students teaching on MSACs	
211.	Importance of peer support (teacher or student?)	
212.	Teacher's own school experience	
213.	Reasons for becoming a MS	
214.	Developing interest in teaching	
215.	Positive feedback on delivery	
216.	Encouragement to give talks	
217.	Confidence to initiate discussion	Other
218.	Developing initial connection with students	
219.	Stand out memory	

220.	Connecting with students through passion for subject
221.	Ability to engage students with subject
222.	Understands students' resistance to subject
223.	Sharing teaching resources
224.	Learning to teach through observation / imitation
225.	Belief in students' right to challenge teachers
226.	Encouraging students' contributions in class
227.	Confidence in suitability of course content
228.	Students resistant to academic writing
229.	Adult learners are competitive
230.	Students grateful for opportunity
231.	UoS students very motivated
232.	Students' lack of facilities/resources
233.	Feeling bad that cannot reward effort
234.	Need to keep standards
235.	Seeking out students at graduation
236.	Enjoys students personal achievements
237.	Easy relationship/rapport with students
238.	Students seeking advice after MSAC
239.	Some students don't acknowledge access route
240.	Relating subject to student experiences
241.	Student anxiety manifesting
242.	Wants students to enjoy classes

Appendix I: Final code system in MAXQDA

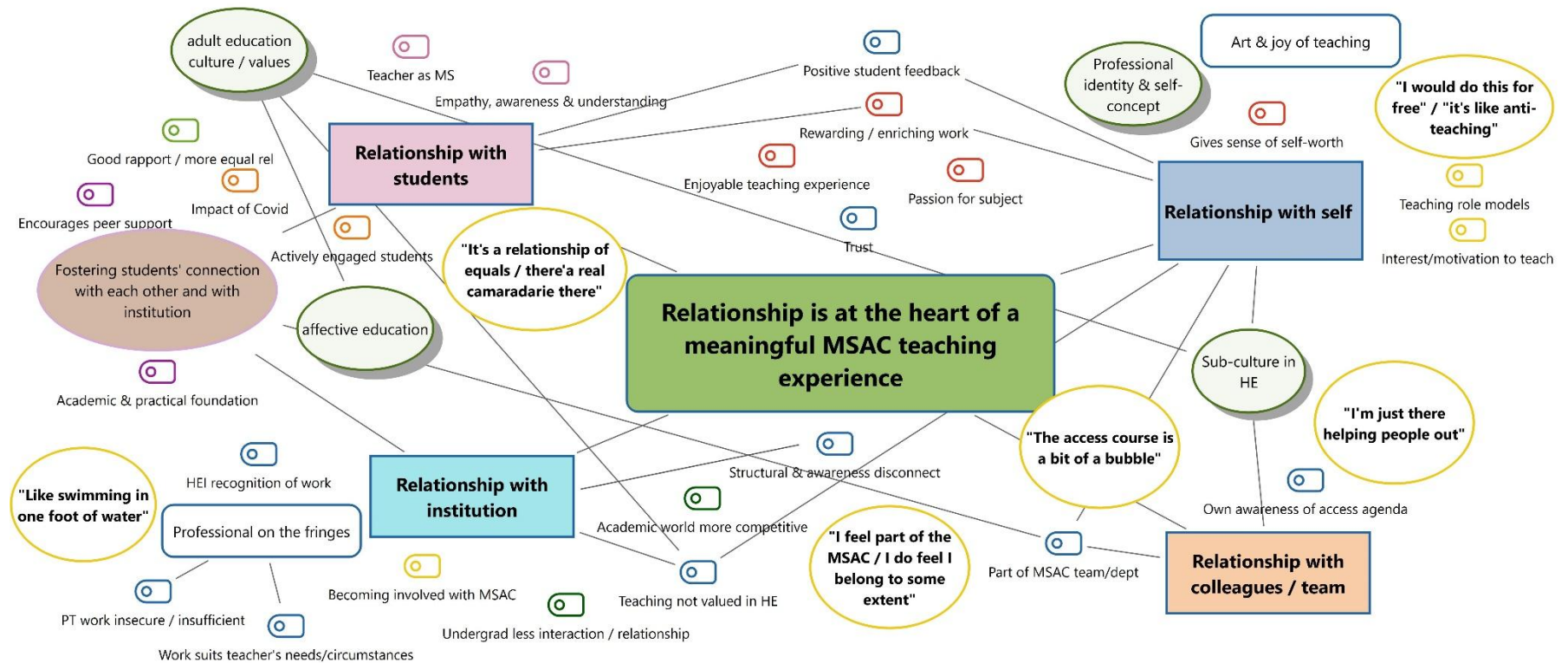
Code System	Frequency
Code System	1078
Empathy, awareness & understanding	24
Teacher as MS	21
Managing student anxiety / resistance	22
MS circumstances/experiences	34
Relationship / connection with students	0
Good rapport / more equal rel	28
Continues after MSAC	22
personal rel / sees students as individuals	18
Context - description	0
Prog features/decrip	21
Student profile	35
Diversity of abilities	6
Teacher subject / content	23
Work activities/resp	19
Other teaching experience	38
Teacher qualifications	21
Interest/motivation to teach	26
Teaching role models	9
Becoming involved with MSAC	18
Prior awareness of MSAC	17
Contractual position	11
Familiarising with module/prog	9
Initial experiences/feelings	13
Time teaching on MSAC	16
Recognition of MSAC teachers' work	0
Trust	4
HEI recognition of work	10
Teaching not valued in HE	18
Academic peers recog	8
Own awareness of access agenda	13
Positive student feedback	20

Structural & awareness disconnect	24
Would like more collab with academic depts	9
PT work insecure / insufficient	19
Different status/pay to academics	6
PhD students used to teach	6
Work suits teacher's needs/circumstances	11
Availability of teaching opps	4
From AO/MSO	5
Part of MSAC team/dept	23
Lack of connection to team	6
Meaning / value of MSAC work to teachers	0
Gives sense of self-worth	13
Passion for subject	16
Develops teaching skills	12
Seeing students progress & succeed	25
Rewarding / enriching work	17
Takes care / pride in doing a good job	13
Enjoyable teaching experience	44
Prefers teaching adults	7
Observed purpose/value of MSAC	0
Informs decision re progression	8
Well prepared for third-level compared to other students	10
Develops confidence / enjoyment of learning	17
Academic & practical foundation	31
Supports MS participation, retention & achievement	12
Encourages peer support	12
Teaching adult learners	0
Tailoring to needs, abilities & interests	29
Impact of Covid	28
Emulating F2F classes online	8
Online teaching is positive experience	7
Impact on students	9
Upskilling in technology / extra work	9
Actively engaged students	33
Dealing with challenging students	10

Teaching adults is a good experience	4
Managing student expectations	9
Individual support	5
Different to other teaching	0
More challenging teaching	3
Prof course more formal	4
Academic world more competitive	7
Encouraging peer learning	5
Undergrad less interaction / relationship	16
Different style/focus of teaching	7
2nd level less enjoyable / more formal	7
Similarities in teaching under-rep students	1
Miscellaneous / n/a	3

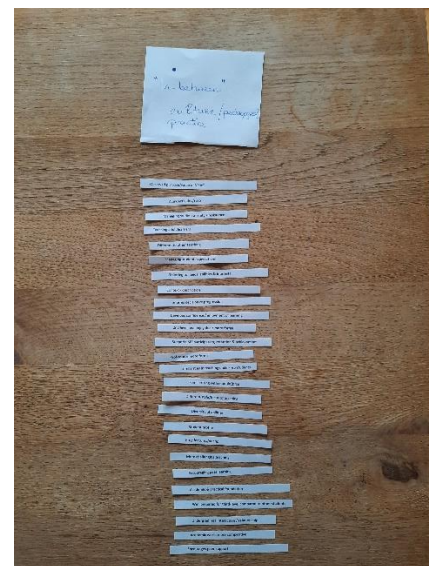
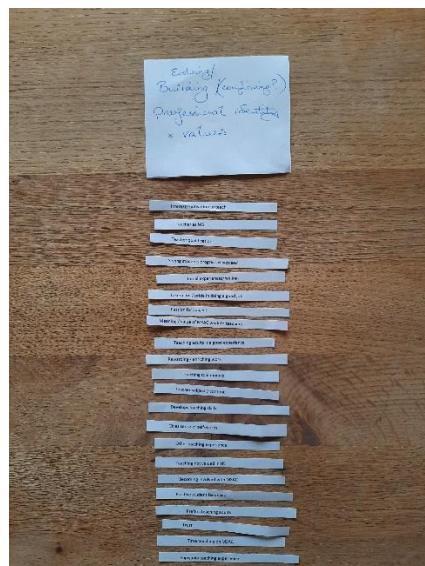
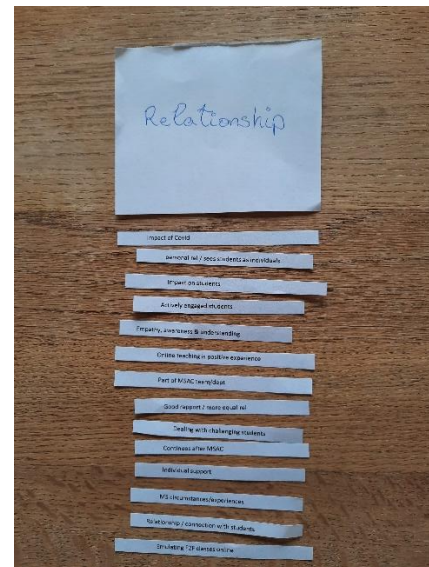
Appendix J: Example of code map in MAXQDA

How do MSAC teachers experience their work?



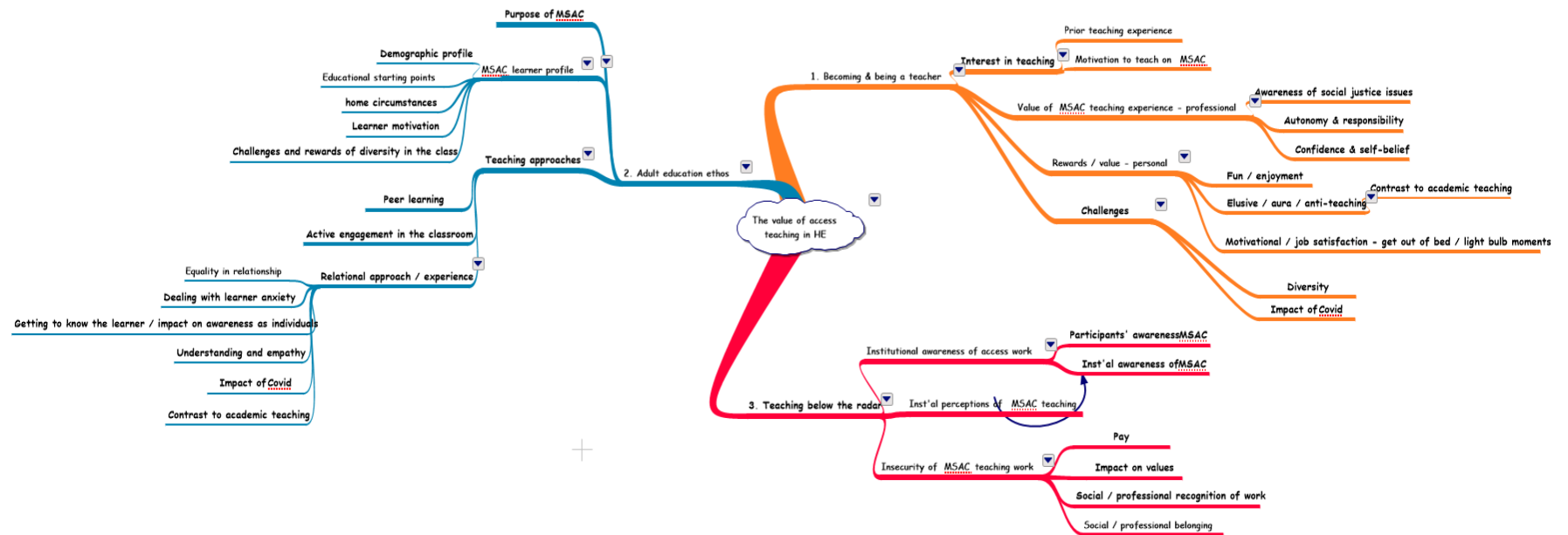
January 2021

Appendix K: Early “hands-on” approach to thematic mapping



February 2021

Appendix L: Later thematic map



October 2022

Appendix M: Extract from fieldwork reflective journal

Did I learn what I expected to learn? Much of it, yes. The relationship piece came across very strongly and requires a lot more reflection. Also the learning to be a good teacher through observing others. And the passion for teaching and for the subject was important for me to hear also.

Change? Re-think question at the end about feeling part of an academic community. “We use the word ‘academia’ or ‘academics’ to describe those who teach in higher education. Would you use that word to describe yourself? And do you feel part of that community?”

Maybe more questions about feelings and identity? Can I be more explicit here?

Thoughts on interview – 31.10.2020 (listening while transcribing)

- Managing adult learner expectations of themselves – early support, reassurance and intervention is required
- Learning to teach from good role models
- Element of competition amongst adult learners
- Recognition of students as individuals and cognisant of personal challenges face by individual learners according to their own circumstances
- Students returning to tell teachers that their learning makes sense in Year 1
- Students seeking out tutors in later years to supervise FYPs
- Seek out the students at graduation to congratulate them
- Students still looking for advice – because you were their “first advisor” (importance of relationship here – not keeping access separate from academic structures)
- Love of subject
- Challenging students
- Covid took away personal connection (e.g. posting lectures with audio – not satisfactory) – enjoys live connection (beauty of small classes?) – wants student experience to be as enjoyable as possible – FUN (necessary for both teacher and student?)
- Pride in work – but also related to pride of students themselves and particularly having been a MS themselves
- Insecurity – contracts – not relevant to self – don’t feel appreciated by institution but do by own departments
- Passion for teaching – and especially the relationship element – the interaction and connection with students

Thoughts

The value of a continuing informal relationship between students and tutors – only possible where a tutor is ‘visible’ on campus, returns to teach year on year and is open to receiving that communication from students. So, it’s not just the work that they do on the access course which is invisible (or is it? How do I know?) but also the continuing, informal unpaid work (??) which is possibly even more invisible because there is no formal thread holding that together

Thoughts/questions ahead of (participant's initial) interview

I have heard Brené Brown say recently that “fitting in” and “belonging” are two different things. “Belonging” means that you retain your sense of self, your identity, while in the situation / organisation

Professional (teacher) identity – how is this formed? Learning the skills of your trade

Blumer – people negotiate the meanings of their social world through interacting with others

(Participant's initial), 06.11.2020

After a rocky technological start we got going. Participant was very easy to converse with – very open, very chatty – strong and honest opinions were offered. The fact that the separation of Access and Depts came up so early, and that it was spoken about at relative length, took me somewhat by surprise. I'm glad I went with it though – although perhaps I should have gotten more into the detail as the connection froze right before we had fully finished.

My own feelings during the interview surprised me. when Participant was talking about the disconnect (my words) between (an) area and Depts – and this was more around a ‘belonging’ feeling I think (I need to listen back again) than an academic feeling. My disquiet is around my own assumptions and acceptance of the ‘way things are’ for hourly-paid staff. My assumption that this is the way it is, and will be. the culture and processes of the university were that way for a long time and only now seem to be changing. My disquiet is that I didn't think to ask more questions, to challenge systems and assumptions.

What is interesting is that ever since I started thinking about this topic, I find myself really challenging my own – and my dept's – assumptions and practices. What have I done and what have we done to make staff feel removed/disconnected? Yet, of the (number of) interviews I have done so far, there is equally a warm and strong connection with the Dept, the work and the students. So it's not all bad. But, my role as CD and as MSO should be – surely – to ensure that the work my colleagues do is recognised, at the very least within my dept.

So, where is this leading my thinking in terms of my next set of interviews? I actually think that it would be very interesting to see how views differ between FT staff who have taught on the course, PT/hourly who have left, PT eve course (slightly different structure?) and a course that is more integrated into faculty structures. There should be some similar views, but some different, contrasting ones also. I will see how I feel after my (number) interview but it could be that speaking to FT staff (former PhD s) might bring a very different, but interesting aspect to the research. It may no longer be ‘case study’ research? Does that matter?

Interviewee thoughts – overall, their work is a nice experience. That's why they do it. Most proud of their own [undergraduate qualification] (as opposed to Masters or PhD).

No-one has ever asked them these questions before – there's my gap!