

**Beyond Social Reproduction:
A Longitudinal Phenomenological Analysis of the Impact
of Further Education on Students within an Irish Context**

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May 2026

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION

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Acknowledgements

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the participants who are central to this research. This research would not have been possible without the generosity, openness and honesty of the participants who willingly gave of their time to share and discuss their invaluable experiences. Their voices are the foundation of this research and they played a vital role in ensuring that the perspectives of FET students are heard, represented and acknowledged.

I am deeply indebted to my supervisors, Dr Delma Byrne and Prof Katriona O'Sullivan whose wisdom, guidance and ongoing encouragement have motivated me throughout this process and helped me to uncover the true insights of this research.

I am deeply fortunate to have the best colleagues and friends imaginable who work passionately and tirelessly in the interests of students. You have given me immense support throughout my teaching career and especially throughout this journey. I am extremely lucky to work with you every day. My sincere thanks also to the colleges and Principals who facilitated and welcomed this research and who willingly gave of their time and insight.

To my amazing Mam and sister, Freda and Geraldine who have continuously encouraged me and kept me going, especially during tougher times. Words cannot convey how grateful I am. To my beautiful children, Kirsten, Amelia and Daniel for your constant support and never complaining that "Mam is always at the computer". You are my greatest source of happiness, joy and motivation. To my partner Pádraig, who inspired me to begin and continue this journey. You kept me on track and helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel. You are my rock and I am forever grateful for your enduring love and support.

I am grateful to the John and Pat Hume Doctoral Scholarship which contributed significantly to my continuation and completion of this research. I am also grateful to the support of the CROÍ (Collaboration and Research for Ongoing Innovation) Féilte Bursary Scheme and for their support and commitment to expanding research and knowledge in the field of education.

Abbreviations

ALL	Adult Literacy for Life
AONTAS	Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Trí Aontú Saorálach (Irish National Adult Learning Organisation)
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
BTEA	Back to Education Allowance
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CAO	Central Applications Office
CDETB	City of Dublin Education and Training Board
CEDEFOP	Centre Européen pour le Développement de la Formation Professionnelle (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training)
CotF	College of the Future
CRT	Culturally Responsive Teaching
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	The Disability Access Route to Education
DCU	Dublin City University
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
ELD	Educational Longitudinal Database
EQF	European Qualifications Framework

ETB	Education and Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
EU	European Union
FARR	Funding Allocations Requests and Reporting
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair (National Training and Employment Authority)
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
FETCH	Further Education and Training Course Hub
FFI	Free Fees Initiative
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HELS	The Higher Education Links Scheme
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
HP	Haase and Pratschke (developers of the Pobal deprivation index)
HPAT	Health Professions Admission Test
INDECON	Independent Economic Consultants
INTO	The Irish National Teachers' Organisation
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Approach
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ISSU	Irish Second-Level Students' Union

ITEC	International Therapy Examination Council
IUQB	Irish Universities Quality Board
IV1	Interview 1 (2020)
IV2	Interview 2 (2021)
IV3	Interview 3 (2022)
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established
LIPA	Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Approach
LQI	Longitudinal Qualitative Interview
LQR	Longitudinal Qualitative Research
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NAPD	National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals
NAVC	National Association of VTOS Co-ordinators
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCVA	National Council for Vocational Awards
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PLC	Post-Leaving Certificate
PLSS	Programme Learner Support System
Pobal	Irish Government-supported organisation responsible for social inclusion programmes and socio-economic data
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RSCI	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland

SEC	State Examinations Commission
SETU	South East Technological University
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (Further Education and Skills Service)
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
TU Dublin	Technological University Dublin
TUD	Technological University Dublin
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
UCD	University College Dublin
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VEC	Vocational Educational Committee
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
VPT	Vocational Preparation and Training
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

Abstract

The Irish Further Education and Training (FET) sector has a long history, spanning almost one hundred years, serving the diverse educational and training needs of school leavers and adults in Ireland. However, this sector is often overlooked in mainstream discourse by policy makers, professionals and the general public. While there is a growing body of literature relating to the Irish FET sector, comparatively less emphasis has been placed on longitudinal learner-centred qualitative research which explores the lived experiences of FET students over time. This thesis builds on existing research by exploring the reasons students enrol in FET and the influence that FET has on their lives both during and after their FET participation. To obtain this insight, the research employs a longitudinal interpretative phenomenological approach (LIPA) which explores the lived experience of participants over three temporal points, from FET entry to one year post completion of FET. This approach allows the identification of ways in which FET shapes student perspectives, attitudes and outcomes over these key points in time.

The findings reveal that structural constraints, as highlighted by Bourdieu's social reproduction theory, negatively impact the ability of individuals to achieve their educational and career aspirations. These constraints strongly influence decision-making to enrol in FET. This research also suggests that FET participation empowers individuals to overcome these constraints. The results highlight that transformative and emancipatory pedagogies, advocated by Freire and Mezirow, are widely practiced in the FET environment and that they promote a transformation of learner identities, characterised by increased self-efficacy and academic confidence. Additionally, these pedagogies facilitate a heightened awareness of societal barriers among students, prompting democratic engagement to overcome and dismantle these restrictions for themselves and for others. This study contributes to theoretical and empirical knowledge of Ireland's FET sector by illustrating the capacity of FET participation to disrupt the persistent cycle of societal reproduction while also providing insight for policy and practice.

Chapter 1. Introduction to the Research

1.1 Introduction to the Study

Frequently referred to as the ‘Cinderella’ of the education system (Baker, 1989; Jackson et al., 2010; McGuinness et al., 2014; McGuire, 2019; McAuliffe, 2020; Petrie, 2021), FET is often viewed as the under-funded and inferior counterpart to higher education, a sector typically associated with more prominence and prestige. While second and third level education is widely recognised and acknowledged, FET is neither second nor third level and is therefore seen as lacking the importance to have its own place in the education system. This leads to the association of perceived inadequacy exemplified by disparaging terms such as the “poor relation” of HE (O’Leary and Rami, 2017, p.76) or “middle sibling” between secondary and third level education (Thompson and Hopkins, 2019, p.6).

Despite its long and varied history in Ireland, the FET sector has received comparatively less research attention than other education sectors (McGuinness et al., 2018). While existing research has discussed aspects of progression experiences, transition and learner outcomes of FET students (McGuinness et al, 2014; The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2016; Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017; SOLAS, 2020f; Sartori and Bloom, 2023), there remains a limited body of learner-centred qualitative research which explores how students make sense of their experiences in FET over time.

Ambiguity exists among the general public, academic institutions and educational professionals regarding the purpose of FET, the people it serves and its objectives, an ambiguity acknowledged since 2014 by SOLAS, the agency responsible for FET in Ireland, which states there is a “lack of clarity on what comprises FET in Ireland. Consequently, defining FET remains elusive” (SOLAS, 2014a, p.50). SOLAS (2018) acknowledges the continuation of this issue stating that: “FET – what it is and who it

caters for - continues to be ambiguous resulting in mis-matched provision across the sector” (p.63) and that this issue “undermines the credibility of FET” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.52). As a result of this ambiguity, FET lacks an identity of its own and is generally viewed as an alternative or interim pathway rather than recognised as a sector in its own right (O’Donnell, 2006; Duggan and Byrne, 2013; Department of Social Protection, 2021).

The substantial changes in the structure of the FET sector contributed to the continued and persistent lack of clarity on FET (McGuinness et al., 2014; Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017; Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2023a). Initially consisting of 65 technical schools, subsequently changing to becoming Vocational Education Committees (VECs), then to Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and more recently to Further Education and Training (FET), the FET sector now comprises 500+ education centres, 137 PLC Colleges, 94 Youthreach Centres, 27 Training Centres and 34 Community Training Centres (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2021, p.4). The expansion of the sector’s provision to incorporate the training element of Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS)¹, as a result of its financial mismanagement and breakdown of internal financial controls, has only added to confusion and ambiguity surrounding the sector. In addition to the original aim of the FET sector to provide secondary, further and adult education, as a result of this expansion, the sector now also provides apprenticeships, traineeships, skills to advance for those already in employment and skills to compete, for those wishing to return to the workforce. These changes within the sector and the expanded provisions result in a profound lack of awareness of FET which in turn, negatively impacts individuals who enrol in FET. SOLAS acknowledge these challenges, stating that the number of “FET programmes is incredibly complex and confusing for the potential learner and undermines the credibility of FET as an option” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.52).

¹ FÁS was the National Training and Employment Authority in Ireland, operating between 1988 and 2013

FET participation is frequently framed as evidence of student failure due to an inability to secure a place in the more esteemed third level educational institutions or to gain successful employment (Sartori and Bloom, 2023). However, there is little research exploring if this viewpoint is justified or if it is unfounded. While a limited number of studies have highlighted the presence of negative stigma surrounding FET and its learners (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017; Sartori and Bloom, 2023), there is a lack of detailed research regarding how FET students feel about this stigma and the impact it has on them. This paucity of research also extends to experiences within the FET environment which are frequently depicted as low status and inferior, with perceptions that its teaching standards and qualifications are less rigorous or prestigious than those associated with higher education (McGuinness et al., 2014; O'Sullivan and Rami, 2022; Sartori and Bloom, 2023; Mellon and Archer, 2024). Through exploring the participant experience during their time in FET, this research provides an insight into the practices and environment of an FET college and the resulting impact on participants.

Opposing views have been expressed regarding the impact of education in the context of societal limitations and constraints. On one hand, education is viewed as a way to provide agency and freedom for individuals, becoming "the practice of freedom" (Freire, 2005, p.34) which enables individuals to "deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire, 2005, p.34). However, on the other hand, education has been viewed as the means to reproduce inequalities in society:

The educational system reproduces all the more perfectly the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes (and sections of a class) in that the culture which it transmits is closer to the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1973, p.80).

This thesis explores the lived experiences of learners within the Irish FET sector over time, examining how participants make sense of their educational journeys, the structural constraints shaping their experiences and their engagement in FET. It also considers the participants' experiences one year after completing FET, exploring how

they interpret the influence of their FET engagement in relation to their subsequent lives and pathways.

1.2 Research Rationale and Research Problem

This research was prompted by several driving factors. Firstly, while important research has examined policy, progression pathways and structural dimensions of FET in Ireland (McGuinness et al, 2014; Grummell and Murray, 2015; Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017; McGuinness et al, 2018; SOLAS, 2018; Rami and O'Kelly, 2021), relatively less attention has been given to learner-centred qualitative studies in FET, especially in relation to the lived experiences of FET learners. This gap in the literature is reflected in the ambiguity among the general public as to the nature, purpose and objectives of FET. Secondly, as a newly qualified teacher, I observed that various shifts occurred for students throughout their FET journey. However, there was insufficient research providing insight into these shifts and their underlying causes. Finally, while some studies have been conducted into the transition of FET students into higher education (Denny, 2015; Department of Education and Skills, 2020; Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2023b), there is little consideration given to the outcomes for *all* FET students, those who subsequently attend higher education, but also those who pursue other interests or objectives thereafter.

In addition, there exists a research gap at a theoretical level. While Bourdieu's social reproduction theory provides an understanding of some of the motivations for FET enrolment, it does not explain how FET can shape the experiences of students during and after their FET engagement. Similarly, there is little research into the outcomes of Freire's critical pedagogy and Mezirow's transformative learning theories, and how these theories impact FET students. Moreover, there have been no studies on the longitudinal influence of these pedagogies on students to examine their impacts beyond their participation in FET.

The research problem of this thesis therefore concerns the limited empirical and theoretical understanding of the lived experience of students in an Irish FET context.

As a result of this knowledge gap, there is little known about how students' prior academic and life experiences influence their pathway to FET, how they experience teaching and learning within an FET environment as they move through FET, and if engagement in FET can lead to outcomes which may ultimately help to break the cycle of societal reproduction. Furthermore, existing research and educational policies tend to emphasise progression to HE and employability outcomes while this research also seeks to capture outcomes which may fall outside of quantifiable metrics but are equally, if not more meaningful for FET students and their communities.

1.3 Research Questions

Illeris (2018) calls for further research into education and the role of educators, urging us to “understand the restless, creative processes of development itself, in which all our students partake before, during, and after their participation in our classrooms” (p.45). The thesis embraces this challenge and through the research questions outlined below, investigates the reasons why participants enrolled in FET, how participants make meaning of their time in FET and how they interpret the influence of these experiences on their lives, both during their year in FET and in the year thereafter. These questions also help to highlight the role of FET in either reproducing or resisting social inequalities. In this way, the questions draw attention to how educational structures can contribute to maintaining social hierarchies and reproduction or if it can create opportunities for agency and empowerment.

This thesis seeks to address the research problem through the following research questions:

RQ1. *Why do students enrol in a college of FET and to what extent do prior academic and life experiences shape their educational decisions?* There are different motivations which influence an individual's decision to enrol in FET. These motivations play an important role in determining the journeys of individuals prior to enrolment and also highlight the perceptions of those around them regarding the FET sector and their educational decisions.

RQ2. *What are the lived experiences of participants with regard to the learning environment and pedagogical practices within an FET college?* Having determined the reasons for enrolment, this research question aims to uncover the lived experiences of participants throughout their one-year course in FET. It also seeks to explore the pedagogies² used within an FET setting and how these are experienced by participants.

RQ3. *To what extent does participation in Further Education and Training transform the experiences and lives of FET students?* This research question explores whether participants' engagement in FET leads to transformative effects as well as the underlying reasons and nature of such transformations.

RQ4. *To what extent does participation in Further Education and Training lead to emancipation in the experiences and lives of FET students?* This research question explores whether participants' engagement in FET has had any discernible emancipatory impacts on participants and seeks to understand the reasons and form of such impacts.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

As a teacher in the FET sector, my introductory classes of the academic year involve asking students to articulate their goals and to share their aims and expectations for the year in FET. Student responses vary, with some students reporting no set objectives or long-term plan in mind, while others view FET as an interim step on their educational journey or as a means to gain employment. As other educational and training routes exist which could satisfy these objectives, I was curious as to why students chose FET specifically over these other routes and if their decision was constrained by factors which limited their choices and ability to choose.

In considering the student population in FET, I was aware that there seemed to be a higher percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to higher education. Research confirms that the percentage of disadvantaged students enrolled

² Although the participants and FET students discussed are adults, I retain the term *pedagogy* for conceptual relevance with Freire's body of work, much of which is framed through the use of the term pedagogy

in FET is more than double the percentage of disadvantaged students in HE, with disadvantaged students comprising 23.4% of the student population in FET compared to 10% of the student population in HE (SOLAS, 2019, p.2; Higher Education Authority, 2022a). Similarly, there is a greater percentage of affluent students in HE compared to FET. According to the Higher Education Authority (2022a), 20% of students enrolled in HE are domiciled in areas classified as affluent³ (Higher Education Authority, 2022a) compared to 8.9% of students enrolled in FET (SOLAS, 2019, p.2). These disparities prompted a contemplation of the possible role that social inequalities play in the decisions of students to enrol in FET. This premise appeared to concur with Bourdieu's assertion that habitus, the internalised dispositions shaped by the experiences and cultural environment of individuals, in addition to their access to capitals such as economic, cultural and social resources, shape their lives and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1990a). Bourdieu's work thus provided a lens for this research to understand the factors guiding student enrolment in FET and to ascertain if FET influences a student's habitus and capital in ways that could alter the trajectory of their lives during their FET experience and beyond.

However, the work of Bourdieu alone was insufficient to capture the complexities I encountered in FET. It has been argued that Bourdieu's work is deterministic where agency is heavily bounded and limited by the constraints of habitus, especially for those marginalised or from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Jenkins, 1982; Giroux, 1983; Bohman, 1999; Bouveresse, 1999; King, 2000; The Friday Morning Group⁴, 2000; Giroux, 2020). Robbins (1991) states that "There is in Bourdieu's position, undoubtedly, an element of fatalism" (p.175) where social reproduction is seen to be inevitable, resulting in the generational perpetuation of inequalities, as reflected in the title of the book "Learning to Labour: How Working-Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs" (Willis, 1977). Yet, as a teacher in FET, I did not witness this sense of inevitability or

³ Based on the Pobal Deprivation Index, students from areas with scores above +10 are classified by the HEA as affluent (Higher Education Authority, 2022a)

⁴ "The Friday Morning Group" refers to an informal interdisciplinary collective of sociologists, anthropologists and educationalists established in 1982 who met regularly to discuss emerging ideas in sociological theory and practice (Harker et al, 1990, p.ix)

fatalistic mindset amongst students but instead observed positive transformations occurring for students throughout their FET studies. While the scarcity of research in the FET sector leads to a lack of understanding of the nature and drivers of such changes and transformations, theories provided by Mezirow (1978) and Freire (2005) were helpful in providing an insight into the reasons for these changes as well as a perspective on their outcomes. Rather than condemning individuals to a pre-determined outcome as Bourdieu might suggest, Mezirow and Freire both advocate that transformative and emancipatory pedagogies fostering support, dialogue and reflexivity can in fact enable students to transcend societal barriers and inequalities.

As a result of transformative and emancipatory pedagogies, Mezirow and Freire contend that students are positioned to become critically aware and reflexive of social inequalities and power relationships that shape their experiences and opportunities. This awareness and reflexivity can subsequently empower students to overcome barriers and improve outcomes not only for themselves but to also positively impact others in their community and society as a whole. This research therefore adopts a framework of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction to understand participant motivations for FET enrolment and to explore their outcomes with regard to social reproduction. Additionally, this research also adopts Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Freire's critical pedagogy as a way to understand the transformations that occur for FET students and the underlying factors contributing to these changes.

1.5 Methodology Overview

The setting for this research is Riverview College⁵, one of the largest FET colleges in Ireland which provides a range of QQI⁶ courses at levels 4-6, BTEC⁷ Higher National

⁵ Riverview College is a pseudonym to protect institutional anonymity

⁶ QQI: Quality and Qualifications Ireland – the state agency with responsibility for ensuring the quality and integrity of FET and HE qualifications in Ireland (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2025)

⁷ BTEC: Business and Technology Education Council – UK based vocational and educational awards (Pearson, 2025)

Diploma courses and ITEC⁸ qualifications. This research adopts a longitudinal qualitative methodological approach which facilitates the observation of change in the participants' experiences and outcomes over time. Interviews were conducted with participants at three separate time points: the first interview took place in the first term of their course in FET in 2020, the second interview took place at the end of this course in 2021, with the third and final interview taking place one year later in 2022. In addition to the longitudinal qualitative methodology, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) is also applied to allow for an enriched understanding of the participants' experiences, capturing the depth and complexity of their perspectives. IPA is a relatively recent methodological approach, developed in the mid-1990s by Jonathan Smith and is "committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith et al., 2022, p.1).

This research centres around nine participants who began a one-year course in Riverview College in 2020 in the subject areas of social sciences, arts, health and welfare. The ages of participants range from 19–67 years, with two-thirds female and one-third male. The timing of this research coincided with the COVID-19 global pandemic which necessitated the participant interviews being held online in accordance with ethical guidelines set out by the Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee. Therefore, in addition to capturing the experiences of participants in an FET setting, this research also provides an insight into the student experience through the lens of a remote learning environment during a pandemic.

As a teacher in the FET sector, I am considered to be an insider researcher. Moreover, I also have experience of being a student in a college of FET which I attended directly after secondary school. This background has allowed me to obtain a deeper understanding of the experiences of participants due to a shared and contextualised understanding from being both a student and a teacher in the sector. Rigorous ethical considerations and protocols were followed throughout this research, including the

⁸ ITEC: International Therapy Examination Council – international body providing qualifications in the areas of sport, beauty and hairdressing (International Therapy Examination Council, 2025)

recruitment of participants⁹ and the provision of full disclosure to all participants in relation to my teaching position in the sector.

1.6 Thesis Structure

Following on from this chapter which introduces the research, **Chapter 2** will begin by defining the FET sector in Ireland in terms of its current provisions and its context within the Irish education system. The origins of today's FET sector dates back almost a century when it was established under the Vocational Education Act in 1930 (Irish Statute Book, 1930). This Act led to the creation of 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) whose primary objective was to prepare young people for employment. Since 1930, many changes and developments have taken place within the sector, the most notable of which was the establishment of SOLAS under the Further and Training Boards Act, 2013 (Irish Statute Book, 2013a). This Act granted SOLAS the overall responsibility for all stated funded Further Education and Training in Ireland, resulting in the replacement of all VECs by 16 education and training boards (ETBs) and the assimilation of functions related to assisting the unemployed gain employment, tasks previously carried out by the now dissolved Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS). As Chapter 2 will outline, continuous changes carried out in the sector have led to confusion, a lack of clarity and a dilution of identity and coherence within the FET sector which act as a barrier to understanding FET (Dowdall, 2017). This in turn leads to "negative socio-cultural attitudes towards FET" (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017, p.56) which contribute to stigma experienced by FET students (Sartori and Bloom, 2023). In addition, the growing emphasis on neoliberal policies in recent years has led to increased pressure on teachers and a change in focus towards metrics and quantifiable targets, all of which risk the prioritisation of economic objectives over the needs of individual learners.

⁹ only participants with whom the researcher had no direct pedagogical or assessment involvement were included in this study

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the theoretical literature which informs this research and begins with an overview of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, explaining how social conditions can shape individual opportunities and decisions. This theory is helpful in understanding the motivations which influence student enrolment in FET. However, as highlighted in Section 1.4, Bourdieu's work alone does not fully capture the complexity of the student experience in FET. In this regard, Freire's critical pedagogy and Mezirow's transformative learning theory provide a more comprehensive insight into the student experience and the role of emancipatory and transformative teaching pedagogies. In addition to discussing the work of Bourdieu, Freire and Mezirow, this chapter also discusses the limitations and relevance of these theories in relation to this research.

Chapter 4 introduces the research philosophy within which this thesis is located and the methodological approaches adopted for this research. This research is positioned within an interpretivist paradigm with the aim of obtaining a deep and rich understanding of the participant experiences in an FET setting as well as their outcomes thereafter. This aim is facilitated through the longitudinal interpretative phenomenological approach (LIPA) which forms the basis for the semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with participants at three temporal time points: upon commencement of their studies in FET, at the end of their FET course and one year later. Ethical considerations are discussed in addition to the limitations of this study. This chapter also introduces the nine research participants who are integral to this research. These participants constitute a diverse cohort in terms of age, gender, socio-economic background and nationality and demonstrate characteristics shared by many FET learners, as outlined in Appendix 1.

Chapter 5 presents the first of four findings chapters based on the analyses of the data. This chapter highlights the factors influencing the participant decision to study in FET and also explores the challenges faced by participants along the way. Chapter 5 aims

to address the first research question: *Why do students enrol in a college of FET and to what extent do prior academic and life experiences shape their educational decisions?*

Chapter 6 explores the experiences of participants within the FET environment. It will delve into the teaching practices described by participants and will frame these experiences within the context of Freire and Mezirow's transformatory and emancipatory pedagogies. This chapter will also provide an insight into the experiences of participants in FET during a time of the COVID-19 pandemic and will therefore establish participant perspectives on remote learning environments during this time (a chronology of the college closures, reopenings, and hybrid learning undertaken by Riverview as a result of COVID-19 is provided in Appendix 17). Chapter 6 aims to address the second research question: *What are the lived experiences of participants with regard to the learning environment and pedagogical practices within an FET college?*

Chapters 7 and 8 will explore the participant outcomes as a result of their experience in FET. These chapters will determine if transformation and emancipation outcomes occur for participants and the nature of these outcomes, both during their time in FET as well as in the longer term. Chapter 7 aims to answer the third research question: *To what extent does participation in Further Education transform the experiences and lives of FET students?* Chapter 8 addresses the fourth and final research question of this study: *To what extent does participation in further education lead to emancipation in the experiences and lives of FET students?* Chapter 8 will also provide an insight into the participant journeys following their one-year course in FET, highlighting changes that have occurred for participants since FET enrolment.

This research concludes in **Chapter 9** which draws together the empirical findings of this study and consolidates key themes with those identified in the literature. Chapter 9 will also discuss the contribution of this research to literature, policy and practice in addition to providing recommendations for further areas of research.

Chapter 2. Historical Context of FET in Ireland and Policy Developments

2.1 Introduction

FET has a long and varied history in Ireland spanning a century of considerable developments and change. Emanating from the Irish Free State in 1922 and rooted in the Vocational Education Act of 1930, the FET sector has evolved from technical schools providing pre-employment skills to a network of colleges and training centres providing over 34 different programmes to almost 426,000 individuals (SOLAS, 2024a, p.14). Characterised by its accessibility to learners across diverse backgrounds and various life stages, FET programmes were developed to meet the needs of school leavers, unemployed adults seeking to re-enter the workforce or gain qualifications, individuals seeking upskilling and reskilling opportunities, those aiming to access higher education pathways, learners with additional education needs or disabilities, adults with low literacy or numeracy skills and members of migrant and refugee communities. However, there is a general lack of understanding surrounding FET as “It is a sector of education which has consistently evaded definition (except possibly in the negative)” (Grummell and Murray, 2015, p.443). This lack of clarity about FET leads to the treatment of the sector as a lower status education, thereby attributing negative perceptions and stigma to FET institutions and those who choose to study there.

This chapter comprises three sections, commencing with an overview of FET from a historical context, charting the changes that have taken place in the sector since its inception. This will be followed by a discussion of existing research on the sector which highlights the inherent complexities involved in defining the sector. Such complexities include inconsistent terminology, the vast range of programmes, different levels of education provided, teaching professions within FET and public perception of the

sector. Finally, recent key policy shifts will be discussed which are relevant to FET learners and which have been initiated since the establishment of SOLAS.

2.2 The Evolution of FET in Ireland

“The further education and training sector developed in a fragmented historical context in the Republic of Ireland, emerging from the training needs of different economic sectors and state departments, often in isolation from the rest of the education system” (Grummell and Murray, 2015, p.434). The substantial changes that have occurred to the sector contribute to the identity, or lack of identity, of the FET sector (Rami and O’Kelly, 2021). This section will provide an overview of these changes and developments since the inception of the sector in Ireland.

FET developed as a response to the educational and economic needs of local communities in Ireland. It began solely as the provision of technical education but over time evolved and expanded to become the diverse sector that it is today, offering many different services and education and training provisions to many different groups within the locality (Geaney, 1998). Following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, the Department of Education assumed the responsibility for both educational training and technical training (Murtagh, 2014). In 1924, 65 technical schools existed in Ireland which focussed on the provision of pre-employment skills, generally consisting of agricultural, trade skills and domestic skills, while also providing evening courses in trade instruction (McGuinness et al., 2014). In 1930, the Vocational Education Act established 38 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) under the Irish Vocational Educational Authority, whose aim was to prepare young people for employment and improve the skills of those in employment. The technical schools became known as vocational schools and their role was to provide continued education which prepared those aged 14-16 years for employment and technical education in trades for those aged 16-18 years of age.

The VECs became a major provider of vocational education in Ireland (Grummell and Murray, 2015), however they did not offer academic qualifications such as the

Intermediate Certificate¹⁰ and Leaving Certificate that were provided in other secondary schools in Ireland. Vocational schools were attended mainly by students from lower income groups and due to the absence of an academic focus of the vocational schools, they were deemed to be inferior educational institutions. Because of this, vocational schools faced a large amount of criticism in the 1950s and 1960s and were viewed as schools which catered for students with low academic abilities and which employed less qualified staff than other schools (McGuinness et al., 2014). By the 1970s, attempts to rectify these concerns were made through the adoption of a community college model. This model promoted the role of the VECs through the provision of adult and further education as well as traditional second level education, thereby significantly expanding the role and functions of VECs (McGuinness et al., 2014).

Following Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community in 1973, funding for pre-employment courses in vocational schools was allocated to over 120 schools by the European Social Fund in 1977. These pre-employment courses were initially termed Vocational Preparation and Training courses (VPT) and subsequently became known as Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses in 1985. Thereafter, in the late 1980s, the range of services provided in the vocational schools broadened significantly to target marginalised learners with the introduction of Youthreach, a programme aimed at early school leavers aged 15–20 years and the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) which was aimed at long term unemployed individuals aged 21 years or older. In the early 2000s, additional programmes including the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) and Adult Literacy Programmes, providing part-time education for those on low income who have low literacy levels and/or have no formal qualifications, were later added to the courses offered by the VECs (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007).

¹⁰ The Intermediate Certificate programme was replaced by the Junior Certificate in 1992 (Dáil Éireann, 1989)

While the VECs were the main providers of state funded adult education and training, the 1995 White Paper on Education (Department of Education and Science, 1995) stressed the importance of The Department of Enterprise and Employment and Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS)¹¹ in the provision of adult education and vocational training. This 1995 White Paper called for a more consolidated and integrated approach to all vocational training and education and called for increased liaison between the various agencies and departments involved, including the Department of Education, the VECs, the Department of Enterprise and Employment and FÁS. Despite this call for integration, the two sectors remained largely separate with FÁS focusing on employment training and the VECs managing vocational education.

In 1991, the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established which introduced a national framework of qualifications in the vocational sector (O’Sullivan and Rami, 2022). However, there was a lack of centralisation and many courses within this sector were not included within the NCVA awards system¹² (Granville, 2003). This led to a lack of standardisation and a disjointed system of qualifications. Eight years later, the Qualifications Act of 1999 (Irish Statute Book, 1999) was passed which gave rise to the concept of a national qualification framework. Within this framework was the creation of a national coordinating body, National Qualifications of Ireland (NQAI) and two bodies with responsibility for course certification; the Higher Education and Training Awards (HETAC), to oversee awards for university level courses and the Further Education and Training Awards (FETAC), to manage the certification of courses in the vocational education sector.

In 2003, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was founded which enabled a convergence and consolidation of the various different awards into one system. The NFQ developed a framework of ten levels of education (NFQ Levels 1-10), with NFQ

¹¹ Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) was the state agency with responsibility for assisting employment seekers

¹² Community-based programmes and many adult and literacy courses commonly used internal or local certification outside of the NCVA awards system (McGuinness et al, 2014)

Level 1 representing courses in the area of basic literacy and numeracy with NFQ Level 10 representing the highest level of academic achievement corresponding to doctoral degrees. The importance of the NFQ cannot be underestimated. For the first time in the history of Irish education, there was now a national accreditation which allowed for recognition of awards across all institutions of education in Ireland (Granville, 2003). Subsequently, the NFQ aligned with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) facilitating the mobility and progression of students, not only among various Irish educational institutions but also within Europe (National Quality Authority of Ireland, 2009). In 2012, The Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established, amalgamating NQAI, HETAC and FETAC. This amalgamation further facilitated the centralisation of certification in Ireland as QQI became the sole national body for quality assurance and qualifications. The vast majority of educational courses delivered in ETBs are accredited by QQI on the NFQ Levels 1-6, with PLC courses placed at Levels 5 and 6.

Prior to 2013, Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) was the state organisation charged with assisting unemployed individuals obtain employment, while the Vocational and Educational Committees (VECs) were responsible for preparing young people for employment and enhancing the skills of those already employed. In 2011, an investigation was conducted into the payment of controversial expenses and financial mismanagement in FÁS, deemed in the media as a 'scandal' and a "shameless waste of taxpayers' money" (Quinlan, 2009). The Comptroller and Auditor General published a report citing a fundamental breakdown of internal financial controls in FÁS. Legislation was subsequently passed to dissolve FÁS and under the Further Education and Training Act 2013 (Irish Statute Book, 2013a), a new state agency named SOLAS was established with responsibility for all state funded Further Education and Training, including all the training functions previously carried out by FÁS.

SOLAS was established employing former FÁS staff whose objectives were to promote skills and training for employment and developing the economy rather than from an

educative perspective (Glanton, 2023). The agency was granted overall responsibility for all ETBs in Ireland with the mandate to promote, support, facilitate and fund FET:

SOLAS will be tasked with ensuring the provision of 21st century high quality FET and training programmes which are responsive to the needs of learners and the requirements of a changed and changing economy (SOLAS, 2014b, p.11).

To facilitate this restructuring, the Irish Vocational Educational Authority changed its name to Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and all of the 33 VECs were dissolved and replaced by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Prior to the dissolution of FÁS, the ETBs were responsible for providing adult and further education as well as traditional secondary education. However, following the dissolution of FÁS, the remit of the ETBs vastly expanded to also include responsibility for employment training, upskilling and apprenticeships. In addition to the substantial amount of diverse programmes now provided (Table 2.1) and the resultingly broad spectrum of FET students, the FET sector is influenced by a considerable amount of stakeholders from international, European, national, regional and local levels, all of which play a part in shaping its direction and outcomes (Hearne et al., 2022; SOLAS, 2024a). This can lead to tensions with regard to the purpose and identity of the sector as it attempts to satisfy the needs and various interests of so many different stakeholders (Grummell and Murray, 2015).

2.3 Existing research on the FET sector in Ireland

Existing research has focussed on policy, structures, progression and outcomes of Irish FET (McGuinness et al., 2014; Grummell and Murray, 2015; O’Leary and Rami, 2017; O’Sullivan, 2018; SOLAS, 2020f; Hearne et al., 2022) while learner-centred qualitative enquiry exploring learners’ lived experience over time has received comparatively less attention. Research suggests that FET is frequently experienced as an alternative or second-chance educational pathway which is often associated with lower status and negative public perceptions (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017; O’Leary and Rami, 2017; Sartori and Bloom, 2023). The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (2016) found that students progressing from FET to higher education often

reported feeling academically prepared, resilient and capable in university settings. Sartori and Bloom (2023) highlight how students transitioning from FET to higher education described an awareness of stigma surrounding FET participation in addition to positive experiences of support, academic readiness and confidence building during their FET studies. O'Donnell et al. (2018) and Murphy et al. (2023) also identify the importance of peer relationships, collaborative learning and supportive learning environments in the FET setting. Duckworth and Smith (2018a, 2018b) contend that further education can enhance confidence and agency among learners while Smith and Duckworth (2022) argue that further education can act as a transformative space which also plays "an important role in bringing about social justice" (p.8). This thesis seeks to build on the existing body of work to deepen and extend understanding of the student experience in FET, exploring how students make sense of these experiences throughout their participation in FET and beyond.

Defining the FET sector in Ireland is problematic due to a variety of factors including the historical evolution of FET, the diverse and vast array of services, the number and range of influencing stakeholders and the substantial amount of overlapping terminology associated with FET. McGuinness et al. (2014) refer to a "lack of appropriate data or a developed academic literature on Irish FET" (p.6) and states that "current data collection within the Irish FET system is wholly inadequate" (p.2). Grummell and Murray (2015) suggest that FET is defined by what it is not, rather than what it actually is. This is reflected in statutory and policy definitions that position FET as "education and training other than post-primary education or higher education and training" (Irish Statute Book, 1999, p.9), reinforcing its ambiguous status within the wider education system. SOLAS has repeatedly acknowledged this definitional ambiguity, stating that there is a "lack of clarity on what comprises FET in Ireland. Consequently, defining FET remains elusive" (SOLAS, 2014, p.50).

Despite the implementation of several successive strategies intended to establish the identity of FET, a clear FET identity continues to be elusive. In 2020, SOLAS state that

“there has been a reluctance to try to define FET as a single cohesive concept...There was a general commentary over the lifetime of the previous strategy that FET was defined by what it was not” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.36). The vast range of services provided by FET further complicates the establishment of a coherent sector identity. SOLAS (2024b) states that “FET is for everyone” and that it “delivers a broad range of learning opportunities from bite-sized to full-time courses across upskilling and reskilling, apprenticeships, adult literacy, Post Leaving Certificate options, community education and everything in between”. Positioning the sector as all things to all people can result in a dilution of the identity of FET, resulting in confusion amongst prospective students, educators, industry and the general public who may struggle to understand the purpose and role of FET.

This ambiguity can contribute to FET being perceived as an inferior institution leading to stigma and marginalisation of students attending FET, as highlighted by participants in recent research by Sartori and Bloom (2023): “I wasn’t really informed about PLCs (Post-Leaving Certificate Courses)...I probably would have seen PLCs as bad. There’d be such a negative stigma around it” (p.18). Sartori and Bloom (2023) call for further work to be done in order to ensure that the role and profile of the FET sector is clearly understood by potential students, communities and government officials.

2.3.1 Terminology

The extensive proliferation of different terms associated with FET further deepens the uncertainty and ambiguity in relation to the sector. It has been argued that inconsistent terminology leads to a fragmented awareness of FET and diminishes the ability of FET to encapsulate a unified system that clearly defines its role within the broader education system (Grummell and Murray, 2015). The term “further education” was first used in the 1995 White Paper on Education (Department of Education and Science 1995, p.ii; Rami and O’Kelly, 2021) and became widely used in the late 1990s to describe post-secondary education that was not part of tertiary education. However, this has changed more recently to the term ‘FET’ following the enactment of the 2013

Further Education and Training Act (Irish Statute Book, 2013a). This Act gave rise to the amalgamation of previously separate sectors of education and training into a single system, integrating the dissolved functions of FÁS and the establishment of SOLAS, the newly established agency for Further Education and Training. The acronym VET (Vocational Education and Training) is also used, albeit in more international contexts when referring to educational systems focussed on the development of vocational skills. More recently, the acronym FETCI or “FET Colleges of Ireland” has been introduced which is a representative committee of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals to engage in policy development and leadership for the FET in Ireland (Rami and O’Kelly, 2021, p.279; National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, 2024).

As highlighted by SOLAS, there is some resistance to using the term FET which acknowledges the assimilation of the training elements from FÁS into the FET environment as this inclusion of “T” or “training” can be seen to dilute the academic significance of academic achievements within the sector:

it is evident that considerable efforts are required to fully advance this agenda to integrate FET and training, ‘FE’ and ‘T’. It is acknowledged by SOLAS that barriers do exist particularly within staffing and funding frameworks (SOLAS, 2022b, p.16).

Terminology evolution and modification is a strong theme within the FET setting. In addition to various terms to describe the sector, there are also different terms associated with the institutions within the sector. Prior to the Vocational Educational Act of 1930 (Irish Statute Book 1930), training was delivered in technical colleges which were under the remit of the Technical Instruction Committees. These colleges later became known as vocational colleges under the guidance of the Vocation Educational Committee (VECs). In 2013, the colleges became known Further Education or ETB colleges, while the Vocational Educational Committees became Education and Training Boards (ETBs) under the auspices of the ETBI (Education and Training Boards Ireland) and SOLAS.

Further changes to terminology have occurred in the area of quality and accreditations in the FET sector. In 1991, the main accreditation body was known as National Council of Vocational Awards (NCVA). This evolved to FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council), established in 2001 to oversee the development, validation and awarding of qualifications. In 2012, FETAC was dissolved and QQI (Qualifications and Quality Assurance) absorbed the functions of FETAC in addition to other qualification bodies in Ireland including Higher Educational and Training Awards (HETAC), National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2012). Despite the transition of VECs to ETBs over a decade ago, many people still use the term VEC and despite the change of FETAC to QQI, many continue to use the term FETAC when discussing qualifications within the FET setting.

A lack of clarity also arises around the lack of a clear teacher identity within FET and teachers find it challenging to articulate their role and their profession (Rami and O’Kelly, 2021). Educators within the FET sector are referred to simultaneously as learning practitioners, FET practitioners, facilitators, instructors, tutors, adult educators, trainers or teachers (Department of Education and Skills, 2017; SOLAS, 2017; AONTAS, 2018; SOLAS, 2020b). Rami and O’Kelly (2021) outline that it is: “difficult to agree on the terminology of what constitutes an educator, a trainer, an instructor, a resource teacher” (p.279). The diverse terms relating to FET educators, further reinforces the sector’s ambiguous identity.

2.3.2 Range of Programmes

While the functions of primary, secondary and higher education are widely established and acknowledged, the functions and purpose of FET are generally less well known and there is a lack of clarity surrounding the purpose of FET (Rami and O’Kelly, 2021). FET facilities incorporate 500+ education centres, 137 PLC Colleges, 94 Youthreach Centres, 27 Training Centres and 34 Community Training Centres (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2021, p.4). There is a wide variety of programmes offered in FET as outlined

in Table 2.1. Programmes refer to validated structured pathways designed to equip learners with specific knowledge, skill and competencies (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2017) and are composed of multiple learning components including courses, apprenticeships and traineeships. The range of courses offered by FET is extensive with over 30,300 courses (Department of Education and Skills, 2020, p.1) providing qualifications in the areas of business and law, health and welfare, adult and community education, computing, agriculture, tourism and hospitality, journalism, arts and creative media, engineering and manufacturing (City of Dublin Education and Training Board, 2025a). This immense variety of offerings within the one body creates confusion as to the purpose and function of the FET sector (Rami and O’Kelly, 2021), an issue acknowledged by SOLAS who state that the large number of different “FET programmes is incredibly complex and confusing for the potential learner and undermines the credibility of FET as an option” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.52). Even within FET colleges, teachers are unsure of their role in their profession (Rami and O’Kelly, 2021) and uncertain of the different offerings available within their own college and other FET colleges in their region.

Table 2.1 FET Programmes

• Primary and Secondary Education: 30+ Community National Schools and 250+ Post-Primary Schools (more than one third of all post-primary schools in Ireland). • Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses: Providing almost 2,000 different courses of one-two years’ duration at Levels 5-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. • Back to Education Initiative (BTEI): Part-time courses for young adults who have not completed a leaving certificate or equivalent qualification. These courses are aimed at Levels 3-4 on the NFQ. • Adult Literacy for Life (ALL): Courses delivered on a one-to-one basis, designed to support adults who require support in the area of reading, writing and maths. These courses are aimed at Levels 1-3 on the NFQ. • Community Education: Adult education aimed at supporting local communities and generally in the form of part-time or evening courses. • Youthreach: education and training programmes for early school leavers between the ages of 15-20 years of age.

- **Youth Clubs and Services:** 1,600 youth clubs delivering 237 targeted youth services.
- **Traineeships:** 77+ traineeships of 6-20 months' duration. These are structured training programmes combining learning in an educational and work environment and which are organised in partnership with employers.
- **Apprenticeships:** 60+ Apprenticeships which provide on the job training and in an educational setting, allowing the apprentice the ability to earn a salary as an employee while working towards successful completion of the apprenticeships.
- **Skills to Advance:** Providing upskills for employees already in employment.
- **Skills to Compete:** An initiative aimed at supporting those whose employment was negatively affected by COVID-19 with a view to gain sufficient skills to re-enter the workforce.

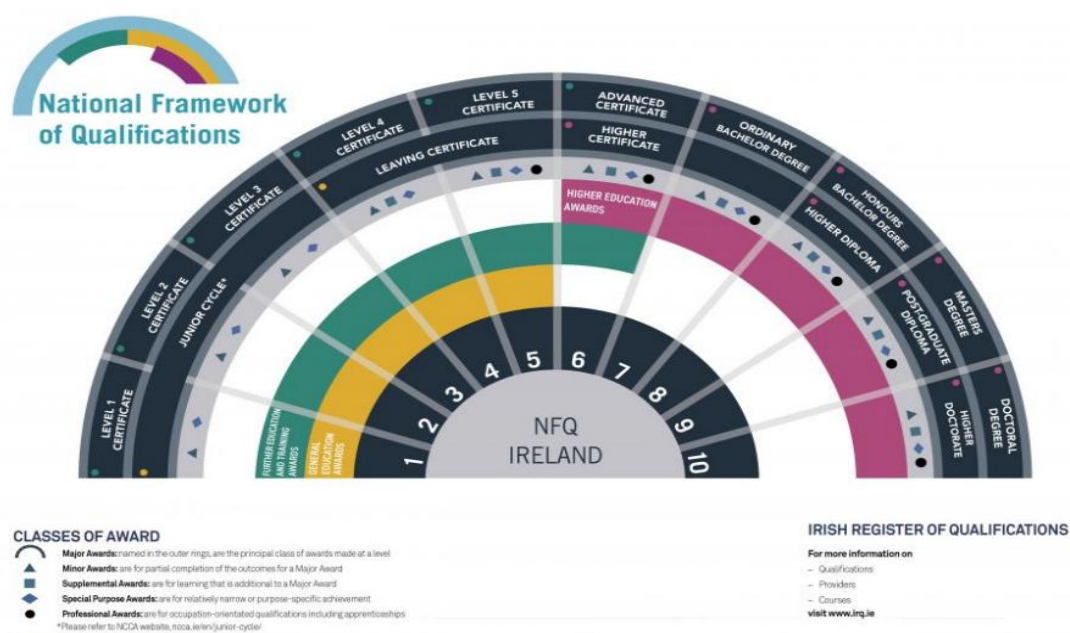
(Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2021, 2024)

Generally education in Ireland is viewed in a clear, linear pathway: pre-school, primary education, post-primary and tertiary education. While post-primary education is deemed as second level and tertiary education is deemed as third level, this prompts the question of the place and position of FET within the education sector. FET post-leaving certificate (PLC) courses are generally aimed at those who have completed secondary level education or equivalent. In a linear fashion, this would imply that FET is third level. However, university is considered as third level and FET is viewed as “education and training which usually occurs outside of post-primary schooling but which is not part of the third-level system” (The Teaching Council 2011, p.2). This results in FET being viewed as a half level between secondary school and university or as “the middle sibling” between compulsory education and third level (Thompson and Hopkins, 2019, p.6), downplaying the status of FET compared to other educational sectors (Grummell and Murray, 2015).

Additional challenges arise regarding the qualification levels on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). Students completing the higher-level Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) are deemed to have completed a course at NFQ Level 5. However, the vast majority of FET PLC courses are also at NFQ Level 5, as demonstrated in Figure 2.1. Arising from this situation, where PLC courses are classified as the same

qualification level as the terminal examinations of the senior cycle, it is likely to add to stigma and negative connotations of FET sector where students may perceive themselves as *repeating* a Level 5 qualification rather than progressing to a higher level on the NFQ.

Figure 2.1 National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)



Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2021)

2.3.3 Participants in FET

FET in Ireland is an extremely complex and fragmented sector which seeks to provide a vast array of services to a large and diverse student population (McGuinness et al., 2014). The FET student population encompasses those who have diverse educational qualifications (primary and post-primary school leavers, FET graduates, third level graduates) as well as a diversity of students in terms of age (teenagers and young adults, as well as mature learners), genders, a diversity of racial, ethnic and migration statuses, as well as diverse socio-economic statuses (SOLAS, 2023a). Student enrolment in FET is driven by a variety of factors: to facilitate access to third level, obtain employment, retrain or upskill for existing or new careers, to learn a new skill, expand knowledge or for the social perspective of meeting other people (Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2024). FET students are typically categorised as marginalised and less advantaged individuals seeking alternative pathways to education (Grummell and

Murray, 2015). Many students in FET have encountered negative previous educational experiences and feel they have been overlooked, “written off” and ignored by the system (Sartori and Bloom, 2023, p.46). FET has a significant role to play in supporting these students and providing opportunities for those who face challenges or barriers when attempting to access education and employment (Smith and Duckworth, 2022; Sartori and Bloom, 2023).

A dominant theme in the literature is that FET provides a non-traditional and alternative pathway for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds with lower academic attainment (Grummell and Murray, 2015; Dunne, 2019; Rami and O’Kelly, 2021). Prior to enrolment in FET, many students face significant economic, institutional, informational and cultural barriers when trying to access education. Economic barriers faced by FET students involve the financial costs of attending education, such as college fees and associated costs, childcare costs, transport costs (Wilson et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2023) and fear of losing social welfare payments or allowances (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017). Institutional barriers encountered include access routes, entry requirements, application bureaucracy, English language proficiency and the digital literacy skills required for online applications and assignment preparation. Informational barriers are comprised of a lack of guidance, access to course information and funding criteria (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017) while cultural barriers include lack of confidence, age, family background, fear of failure as well as the negative perception of FET which results in students experiencing symbolic violence through feeling stigmatised for completing an FET course (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017).

The number of new enrolments per year in FET colleges is greater than that of higher education (Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2024) and the total number of students is comparable between FET and HE. While new entrant enrolments in HE for the academic year 2022/2023 was 46,020, with a total student body of 256,785 (Higher Education Authority, 2023a), new entrant enrolments in FET amounted to 186,740 for

the same period, increasing to a total student body of 218,775 in 2023 (SOLAS, 2024a). SOLAS plans to increase this enrolment figure to 250,000 for the year 2026 (SOLAS, 2024a).

Table 2.2 Annual Unique FET Learner Enrolments (2019-2026)

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2026
Unique FET Learners	179,058	151,630	144,160	186,740	218,775 ¹³	229,000 ¹⁴	250,000 ¹⁵

(Based on SOLAS, 2024a and SOLAS, 2025c)

2.3.4 Public Perception of FET

Often described as the Cinderella of education in both Ireland the UK (Baker, 1989; Jackson et al., 2010; McGuinness et al., 2018; McGuire, 2019; Petrie, 2021), the FET sector is commonly surrounded in discourse of stigma and negativity. Across the literature, FET is commonly framed as an alternative, second chance option aimed at students who did not succeed in school and were unable to achieve the points necessary to access a prestigious university education (Ade-Ojo and Duckworth, 2019; Sartori and Bloom, 2023; Ní Chorcra et al., 2025). There is an underlying assumption that students only enrol in FET as a last resort because their preferred route has been blocked. FET is viewed merely as a “a fall-back option” (CEDEFOP, 2014, p.68) or a route for those who “can’t get anything else” (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017, p.41). Mooney and O’Rourke (2017) found that:

Stakeholders [¹⁶] felt that FET is portrayed and perceived as an inferior second choice by the public for those who do not meet HE eligibility requirements. This diminishes the relative value of FET as a choice for potential learners (p.41).

¹³ SOLAS, 2024a (p.14)

¹⁴ SOLAS, 2025c

¹⁵ SOLAS, 2024a (p.6) Planned figures for 2026 (figures for 2025 not yet published)

¹⁶ The stakeholders for the study by Mooney and O’Rourke (2017) comprised representatives from employer and business groups, educational institutions, civil society and non-governmental organisations as well as state agencies and government departments as well as educators, potential learners and current FET learners

These negative perceptions implicitly position FET, its learners and teachers as inferior to third level institutions (O’Leary and Rami, 2017) and associate FET with academic failure rather than opportunity (Sartori and Bloom, 2023). Despite acknowledgement in the literature of the lower perceived status of FET, there is a lack of insight into how this stigma is experienced and perceived by FET students. This study intends to address this gap and explore the experiences of students regarding the stigma surrounding FET and to determine if FET is always viewed as a necessary divergence or if it can reflect a planned and intentional choice. Through the longitudinal nature of this research, this study also aims to explore how experiences related to the public perception evolve throughout the student’s journey in FET and beyond, highlighting if students believe that these negative associations are justified or undeserved.

2.3.5 The Value of FET

Duckworth and Smith (2018a) emphasise that further education plays a vital role in helping individuals regain hope and a sense of control over their lives. Duckworth and Smith (2018b) contend that further education can develop student confidence and provide students with a sense of acceptance, encouragement and belonging. For students who wish to continue to higher education after FET, studies show that these students are more adaptable, responsible and independent than students who have come to university directly from secondary school and that this is a result of teaching practices and relationships adopted by teachers in FET (Sartori and Bloom, 2023). Research also shows that many FET students feel prepared for the academic rigour of university and experience a smooth transition to university due to increased confidence, self-belief and academic ability as a result of their FET experience (The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2016).

The Department of Education and Skills (2020) found positive retention rates of FET graduates in university, which is further highlighted by the SOLAS report on FET learner outcomes stating that the FET “cohort had a retention rate of 89% in their higher education course at NFQ level 8” (SOLAS, 2022c, p.3). This figure is comparable to the

overall retention/progression rate of 89% determined by the Higher Education Authority (2025). FET was also found to help students develop their academic skills through varied assessments in addition to building peer relationships through collaborative tasks and group projects (Sartori and Bloom, 2023). The methods of assessment in FET receive positive recognition from external stakeholders (McGuinness et al., 2018) while groupwork and peer support was deemed to be a positive factor for FET students who felt that it increased their enjoyment of their course and gave them encouragement to continue and succeed (O'Donnell et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2023; Sartori and Bloom, 2023).

FET also assists individuals who are “jobseekers, school leavers, labour market returners, employees, those interested in new career direction” (Hughes, 2021, p.11) and therefore provides employment skills to individuals who are new to employment, returning to employment or seeking to pursue an alternative career direction. Duckworth and Smith (2018b) highlight that further education helps people to “thrive” (p.165) and provides career opportunities to move away from “dead-end jobs” (p.164). FET provides improved opportunities in the workforce, higher earning potential and increased job satisfaction (Bowes et al., 2015). Research shows that FET graduates have substantial employment outcomes as a result of their FET qualification (Dunlop, 2020) and that there is an increasing demand for employees with FET qualifications (European Commission, 2025). Because of the many benefits associated with further education and the pivotal role it plays for individuals, employers, communities and society, Anderton (2023) proposes that the term “Fairy Godmother” would be a more appropriate and fitting term to describe further education instead of the disparaging “Cinderella label” that has been attached to the FET sector.

FET not only positively impacts the learner but also creates a ripple effect which expands to their friends, family and communities (Smith and Duckworth, 2022) and is deemed to be effective in developing social and cultural networks whilst simultaneously encouraging acceptance, tolerance and active civic participation (Preston and Hammond, 2002; Bowes et al., 2015; Smith and Duckworth, 2022).

Furthermore, studies highlight the positive correlation between further education and improved health, well-being and happiness (Bowes et al., 2015; Lisauskaite et al., 2021). While the benefits and value of FET are noted in existing studies, such studies present a one-dimensional aspect of time and do not explore the changes that occur over time. In response, this research seeks to demonstrate the evolution that occurs to students not only throughout the duration of their FET experience but to also uncover the impacts that endure in the year after they graduate from FET.

This section has highlighted the complexities involved in defining and positioning the FET sector in Ireland, including issues relating to terminology, programme diversity, learner profile, public perception and the value attributed to FET. The following section now turns to recent policy developments relevant to FET learners.

2.4 Recent policy shifts and developments relevant to FET learners

Research on the Irish FET sector recognises a distinct structural and policy phase beginning with the establishment of SOLAS in 2013, marking this period as a new developmental stage in the history of Irish FET (Bates Evoy, 2025). This period demonstrates a new phase of systematic planning and strategic direction following the enactment of the Further Education and Training Act, 2013. Since this time, several national strategic policies related to FET have been implemented including:

- Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019
- Programme for Government: Our Shared Future (2020)
- Future FET: Transforming Learning, the National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024
- Powering Lifelong Learning and Workforce Transformation: SOLAS Corporate Plan (2024–2026)

The following sections will discuss the key issues of these policies relevant to those who study in a college of FET. These issues are consistent with the focus of this research which centres on the learner experience, the progression opportunities and the responsiveness of the sector to meet the needs of the learners through the implementation of these strategic issues. Many students enrol in FET as a means to

gain access to HE, therefore, the first issue to be explored relates to policy directions in relation to increasing pathways for FET students, including the creation of tertiary degrees to facilitate a seamless transition to HE. The second issue to be discussed will outline the lack of awareness of FET and associated negative perceptions which impact FET learners and SOLAS' plans to address these areas. The third issue to be reviewed will discuss the policy direction of FET, how this impacts the learners and the ability of teachers to respond to the needs of learners.

2.4.1 Increase Pathways to HE for FET Graduates

Ryan (2018) states that "The opportunity to use FET to access HE is very important for students" (p.277). Research shows that many individuals choose to study in FET as an alternative pathway to access university having previously experienced obstacles to progression to HE (McGuinness et al., 2014; O'Sullivan, 2021; Sartori and Bloom, 2023). Successive SOLAS strategies have prioritised strengthening progression routes and clearer transition mechanisms between FET and higher education¹⁷. However, despite this continued strategic objective of increasing and facilitating pathways to HE over the past decade, the composition of university entrants from FET remains low, as evidenced in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3 Percentage of New Entrants to HE with an FET Award¹⁸

2017/2018*	2018/2019**	2019/2020**	2020/2021**
10.9	5.5	5.9	6.1

**SOLAS (2020g, p.17)*

***The National Access Plan 2022-2028 (Higher Education Authority, 2022b, p.69)*

The figures post-2018 are significantly lower than the target of 10% set by the National Plan for Equity of Access in Higher Education 2015-2019 (Higher Education Authority,

¹⁷ The objective of increasing and facilitating pathways to university is noted in the strategies: Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019; Future FET: Transforming Learning (SOLAS, 2014a) and the National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024 (SOLAS, 2020a)

¹⁸ Figures from 2018 onwards report the percentages of "new entrants who entered higher education based on a further education award" (Higher Education Authority, 2022b, p.69)

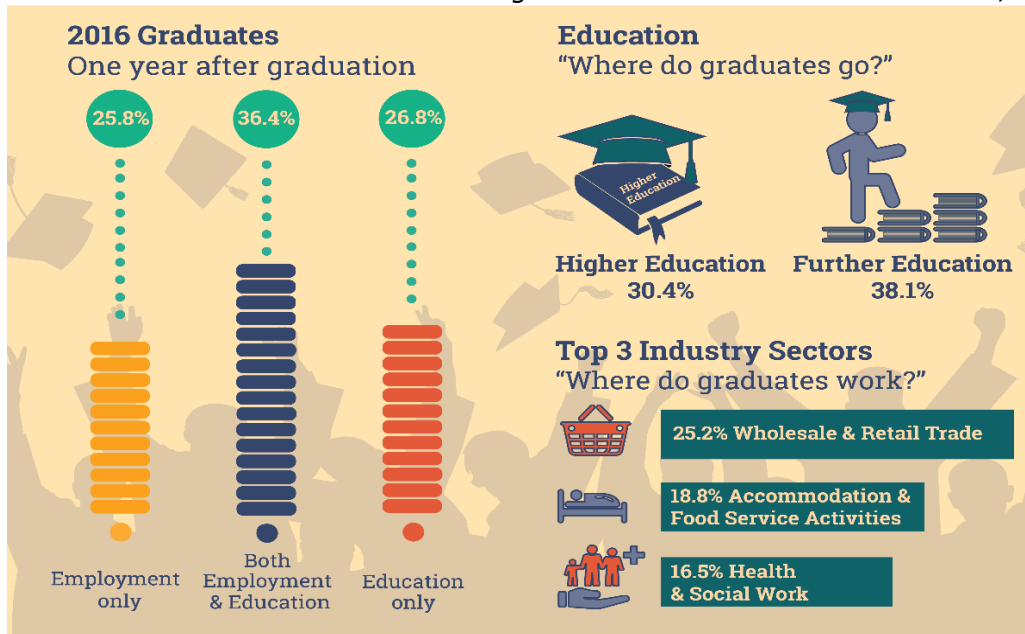
2015) which would appear to demonstrate a substantial decline in progression rates between 2017/18–2018/19. However, this decline must be interpreted with caution and may be the result of changes in data measurement and reporting criteria rather than an actual reduction in learner progression to HE¹⁹. This change in measurement and criteria also highlights the issues and challenges of comparing and analysing FET data collected in the period prior to 2018.

In 2016, there were 32,920 FET graduates (Central Statistics Office, 2019a) while in 2021, this number reduced to 25,515 FET graduates (Central Statistics Office, 2024a), showing a decrease of almost 7,500 graduates which is attributed to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (SOLAS, 2020c; 2021b). According to the CSO, the percentage of students who attended third level after FET engagement increased from 30.4% in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, 2019a) to 34% in 2021 (Central Statistics Office, 2024b) as outlined in Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3. In 2021, almost one third of FET graduates tracked by the CSO²⁰ returned to study at FET post-graduation (Figure 2.3), although this 2021 figure decreased by 7.1% compared to 2016 (Figure 2.2), correlating somewhat with the increase in HE progression. Participation of FET graduates in education and employment is high following their course in FET with 89% of FET graduates actively involved in employment and/or education in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, 2019b), rising to 92% in 2021 (Central Statistics Office, 2024b). These statistics show that FET increases opportunities for educational and economic participation.

¹⁹ Figures post-2018 are derived from verified enrolment in HE identified through SOLAS-HEA linkage system via the Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) and the CSO Educational Longitudinal Database (ELD)

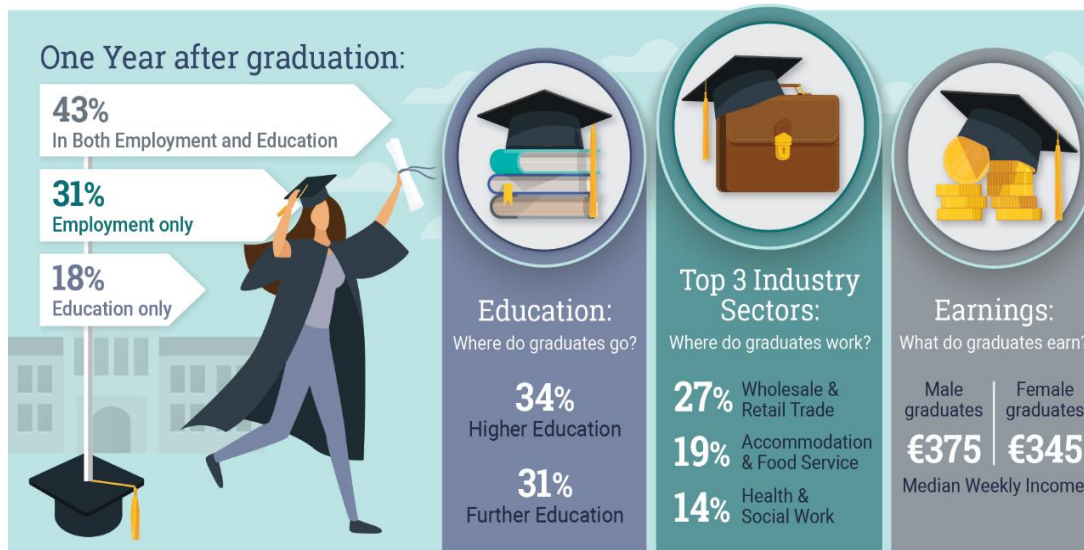
²⁰ The CSO developed a statistical framework known as the Educational Longitudinal Database (ELD) providing statistics on outcomes for FET graduates (Central Statistics Office, 2019c). The ELD framework accounts for a restricted cohort of graduates. The following categories of students are excluded from the ELD framework: graduates of minor, special purpose or supplemental awards as well as those with a missing or invalid Irish Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) and mature graduates: “Mature graduates are excluded from this study as their outcomes may be strongly influenced by their working experience prior to enrolling in a further education course...graduates over the age of 25 at the time of graduation are classified as ‘Mature’ “. (Central Statistics Office, 2019c)

Figure 2.2 Further Education Outcomes, 2016



(Central Statistics Office, 2019a)

Figure 2.3 Further Education Outcomes, 2021



(Central Statistics Office, 2024b)

The second SOLAS strategy titled "Future FET: Transforming Learning, the National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024" sought to facilitate seamless movement "between FET and HE with clear transition criteria" (SOLAS, 2020a, p.63).

However, the process of applying to HE is complex and application criteria is confusing for FET students and remains a challenge in 2025, five years after the implementation of this strategy. O’Sullivan (2021) writes that “For applicants from the QQI pathway, the administrative phase is far less straightforward [than for those from Leaving Certificate pathway]” (p.204).

Not all HE courses have a QQI pathway (O’Sullivan, 2021) and where a pathway exists, FET graduates must apply to HE through the CAO application system, a system which can act as a barrier for FET applicants. Applications through the CAO require non-refundable application fees and strict application closing dates (Central Applications Office, 2026). High levels of literacy and digital literacy skills are also required for using the CAO application system which can pose challenges for some applicants, especially those with low literacy skills or limited financial means (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2024) .

The FET to HE application system is further complicated by the fact that different universities and courses have different QQI entry requirements in terms of academic and subject requirements (O’Sullivan, 2021). Each university sets its own QQI-FET entry requirements for each course which includes specific modules (Central Applications Office, 2025a) and specific grades in those modules, notwithstanding the fact that these entry requirements can change from year to year without prior notice to the students or FET colleges. The CAO advises that applicants need to contact the universities directly to receive updated information which places additional workload and pressure on students from FET: “For any further information on how these awards are assessed you should contact the Admissions Offices of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that you have applied to” (Central Applications Office, 2025a). In addition to module requirements, some universities also have grade requirements in specific modules: “These usually take the form of distinctions (80% or greater) in specific modules which prospective students are required to hold to be eligible to apply” (University of Galway, 2024, p.7). As evidenced from the Table 2.4 below, even

having accomplished all of the requirements, there may only be *one* place set aside for QQI applicants on a course:

Table 2.4 Application Criteria for FET graduates to HE (Bachelor of Midwifery Sciences)

GY517 Bachelor of Midwifery Science	Places: 1
Holders of QQI (FETAC or NCVA) Level 5 qualifications in any of the following awards: 5M4349/DCHSN, 5M4468/DCHSX, 5M4339/ DHSXX	
*Additional Conditions: Distinctions must be achieved in all of the following: 5N0749/D20001 Anatomy and Physiology 5N4325/D20012 Nursing Theory and Practice and either 5N1279/D20032 Human Growth and Development or 5N2746/C20006 Biology.	

(University of Galway, 2024, p.30)

Furthermore, many universities accepting FET graduates apply a quota system, whereby only a small percentage of places are reserved for QQI students (Central Applications Office, 2025b) who are then placed into a lottery system of random allocation (Central Applications Office, 2025c): “Where more than one student has the same score, students will be ranked by the CAO on a random basis” (University College Dublin, 2025). In addition to navigating the CAO application system and seeking to meet the eligibility criteria, FET graduates are subject to a fixed quota resulting in a competition for places whereby despite fulfilling all of the set criteria, a university place may still not be offered to the FET graduate:

Applicants that meet the above entry requirements may compete for a place based on their QQI points score. Application is competitive and places are awarded on merit basis. We would encourage you to aim for all distinctions in your QQI FET award as this gives you the best chance of competing for a place (but does not guarantee you a place) (Dublin City University, 2025).

Overall, the CAO application system lacks standardisation and is confusing, difficult to understand and requires a substantial amount of additional work and pressure for FET applicants. As highlighted by O’Sullivan (2021): “The current system is complex and lacking in transparency. FET professionals find it difficult to navigate. What must it be like for students?” (p.206). Rather than offering a seamless transition from FET to HE consisting of “clear transition criteria” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.63), university admission policies currently function as a complicated and discriminatory mechanism, excluding many FET graduates from the HE admission process. These issues persist as Sartori

and Bloom (2023) state: “there are differences between the Leaving Certificate pathway and the QQI pathway (undertaken by students in FET), that are inconsistent with equity of access” (p.8) and that FET students continue to encounter significant obstacles to accessing HE (Sartori, 2024).

The National Tertiary Office (NTO) was established in 2022 to enhance collaboration and pathways between FET and higher education institutions. This initiative is jointly managed by SOLAS and the HEA, establishing degree programmes where the student commences the first and/or the second year of the degree programme in the FET setting, after which they transition to the university environment to complete their degree which is accredited by the higher education institution (Sartori, 2024; National Tertiary Office, 2025a). In 2023, the NTO announced the launch of programmes in eleven locations across various course areas including Business, ICT, Arts, Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction and Health and Welfare (Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board, 2025) and there are now almost forty examples of such arrangements which are located in every province in Ireland (National Tertiary Office, 2025a; SOLAS, 2025a). However, despite 2025 being the third year of the tertiary degrees, the uptake of students is low with only 224 students commencing these courses in 2024 (O’Brien, 2025). O’Brien (2025) reports that there may be little buy-in from third level institutions and that the degrees assigned to the tertiary degree programme “tend not to be the ones in high demand through the CAO... In many cases, they are courses the colleges are struggling to fill anyway”. Other reasons include the lack of public awareness in addition to “a lingering stigma that further education is second best” (O’Brien, 2025). Moreover, these initiatives are agreed on an individual FET college-university basis and are not available in all FET colleges. Application to these programmes are via the National Tertiary Office (NTO) rather than through the CAO or FET college, thus further complicating the application process for FET graduates.

2.4.2 Raise the Profile and Identity of FET

As discussed, FET lacks a clear identity and is perceived as an inferior form of education. This manifests for FET students as “feelings of anxiety, low self-esteem or

embarrassment for having ‘ended up’ attending an FET college as opposed to a university” (Sartori and Bloom, 2023, p.9). The first SOLAS FET strategy²¹ acknowledged the issue of FET identity and the perception of FET as a low standing education as an “unresolved problem” (SOLAS, 2014a, p.22) and aimed to “Promote and provide high quality FET” (SOLAS, 2014a, p.122). This challenge is further highlighted in the 2020-2024 FET strategy which states that the FET sector must “build a more powerful identity within communities and potential learners. It must become louder and prouder” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.8). However, the low standing remains a challenge for the FET sector and FET is still viewed by stakeholders as an inferior education in the Irish educational landscape (Sartori and Bloom, 2023; Ní Chorcóra et al., 2025).

(i) The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science The Programme for Government (2020) aimed to increase awareness of FET through the unification of the tertiary sector (Government of Ireland, 2020). To achieve these goals, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) was established. In announcing its creation, the Minister of the Department, Simon Harris emphasised that “We must remove the barriers in accessing further and higher education, and recognise fully the importance of the role of further and community education” (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2020).

DFHERIS was established to bring about a more cohesive approach to policy development and implementation and aims to unify tertiary education policy and raise the profile of the FET sector. The inclusion of further education in the Department title and its objective to raise the profile of FET is evident in its vision of: “a well-functioning, unified tertiary system for knowledge and skills, composed of complementary FET and training, higher education and research and innovation sectors” (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022, p.6). In November 2021, the Minister for DFHERIS also announced the inclusion of more than

²¹ Further Education and Training Strategy 2014–2019 (SOLAS, 2014a)

650 PLC courses on the CAO website (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2021). This initiative demonstrates a commitment to the integration of the FET and HE sectors and increases awareness and visibility of the FET sector. Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS at the time stated that: “This is a significant milestone for FET and Training and Apprenticeships given the focal point the CAO holds in the mind of the school leaver, as well as parents, teachers and guidance counsellors” (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2021).

(ii) FET Teaching Qualifications

A further initiative to increase the standing of FET was the introduction of qualification and accreditation requirements for teachers within the FET sector. Prior to 2013, any individual deemed sufficiently qualified by the college Principal was able to teach in a college of FET, without the requirement to hold third level academic qualifications or registration with the Teaching Council. In order to ensure consistent standards of teacher qualifications with the FET sector, the 2014-2019 FET strategy prioritised “standards for staff qualifications in the FET sector” as a key objective (SOLAS, 2014a p.122). These requirements included successful completion of an accredited degree and annual registration with the Teaching Council (The Teaching Council, 2025). As a further step to increase the qualification of the teaching staff within the FET setting, Route 3 of the Teaching Council came into effect in 2019 which provided that teachers entering the teaching profession in FET from January 2019 must also have successfully completed a Teaching Council accredited teaching qualification²² (The Teaching Council, 2024). This teaching qualification criteria requires a degree or post-graduate qualification specifically focussed on teacher education at NFQ Level 8 or NFQ Level 9. Rami and O’Kelly (2021) state that the development of postgraduate qualifications for teacher education led to a national HEI forum “who are committed to developing and recognising FET in its own right” (p.279).

²² or complete the teacher qualification within three years of commencing their teaching post

A continued focus on raising the professionalism and qualifications of teachers remains a theme in the 2020-2024 FET strategy and is also evident in the creation of a dedicated FET Professional Development Strategy 2020-2024 which dedicates its mission: “To create a culture of excellence in professional development to ensure that FET Practitioners are equipped to deliver a world class FET service” (SOLAS, 2020b, p.11). The expansion of postgraduate teacher training programmes and research-based FET related master and doctorate degrees has also contributed to a further increase in recent research and literature regarding the FET sector.

(iii) FET College of the Future

The FET 2020-2024 strategy contains the vision for a “FET College of the Future” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.38) which allows for the consolidation of FET provision within a single college structure, resulting in collaboration between FET and HE for co-delivered programmes²³. As evidenced in section 2.2 of this chapter, the variety in terminology used to describe the FET sector can lead to ambiguity and a lack of identity for FET. “FET College of the Future” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.1) constitutes another addition to the expanding vocabulary associated with the FET sector. Moreover, an additional acronym for this concept “CotF” is now included in official publications (CEDEFOP, 2023; CEDEFOP, 2024, p.7; SOLAS, 2024c, p.17).

As part of a recent rebranding initiative under the FET College of the Future strategy, some colleges have been renamed as City of Dublin FET Colleges (for example, Crumlin College of Further Education has been rebranded to become City of Dublin FET College, Crumlin). However, inconsistency in terminology and brand identity is apparent as some colleges in the FET sector use the term *College of Further Education*²⁴ while others use terms such as *Institute*²⁵, *Centre*²⁶ or *FET College*²⁷. Gormley (2025) believes

²³ 1+2 and 2+2 models whereby the first and/or second year of a degree is delivered in an FET setting and the remainder of the degree is delivered in the relevant university (SOLAS, 2020a, p.38)

²⁴ Dunboyne College of Further Education (2026), Mayo College of Further Education and Training (2026)

²⁵ Drogheda Institute of Further Education (2025), Dún Laoghaire Further Education Institute (2026)

²⁶ Celbridge Further Education and Training Centre (2025), Maynooth Further Education and Training Centre (2025)

²⁷ City of Dublin FET College, Central Campus, Ballsbridge (2025), City of Dublin FET College, Crumlin, Southwest Campus (2025)

that the new branding of CDETB FET colleges is “far too unwieldy to gain popular recognition and smothers the identity of the colleges involved”. Additional inconsistency exists in relation to the visual logos of FET colleges (as outlined in Figure 2.4), which can lead to further confusion and ambiguity around the core identity of FET.

Figure 2.4 Inconsistencies in Names and Logos of FET Colleges

 <i>(City of Dublin FET College, Central Campus, Ballsbridge, 2025)</i>	 <i>City of Dublin FET College, Crumlin, Southwest Campus (2025)</i>
 <i>(Drogheda Institute of Further Education, 2025)</i>	 <i>(Dublin College Blackrock 2026)</i>
 <i>(Dún Laoghaire Further Education Institute, 2026)</i>	 <i>(Maynooth Further Education and Training Centre, 2025)</i>

2.4.3 Policies Driving Commodification of the FET Sector

Research shows that rising administrative demands on teachers reduce their capacity for learner support and undermines the quality of teaching, learning and assessment (Jerrim and Sims, 2021; Madigan and Kim, 2021; Li and Tsang, 2023). Saeki et al. (2015) found that “accountability practices have unintended, negative effects on teacher well-being, instructional practices, and student learning” (p.95) leading to reduced performance and lower levels of engagement with students (Betoret 2009). In the past decade, fundamental reforms have reshaped Ireland’s FET landscape. According to Brennan and O’Grady (2023), FET practitioners are concerned about these reforms as they fear “that in leading sectoral change, ETB management is signalling approaches that threaten to sacrifice adult-only educational environments, programmes, adult educational philosophies, and ethos” (p.109).

The inception of SOLAS in 2013 brought about a wave of successive and significant policy reforms to the FET sector with increasing pressure to support economic objectives over social inclusion (O’Leary and Rami, 2017; Elftorp et al., 2018). There is a sense through the SOLAS documentation and within ETBs that there has been a powershift over the past ten years as the role and influence of local ETB colleges on strategy development and direction are progressively being diminished with greater control shifting more centrally to SOLAS. A study by O’Brien (2018) reports strong and negative statements from ETB employees regarding this power shift: “The ETBs are following along like lambs, there is no body challenging it because SOLAS have been given a huge amount of power (ALO4)...SOLAS have become all powerful and all-consuming (ALO8)” (O’Brien, 2018, p.561).

SOLAS was initially charged with the role of promoting, supporting, facilitating and funding FET under the Education and Training Boards Act of 2013. However, in its Corporate Plan (2024-2026), SOLAS states that its role is to: “Assess whether or not ETBs and other funded bodies engaged in the provision of FET perform their functions in an economic, efficient and effective manner” (SOLAS, 2024a, p.20). This reflects a considerable shift in the role of SOLAS from one intended to focus on support and facilitation to one that is centred on assessment and evaluation. This shift is further evident in the policy changes that have occurred in the FET sector since the inception of SOLAS in 2013, demonstrating a growing dominance of neoliberal ideology where education is commodified, thus treating education as a marketable consumer product, and where punitive funding tied to performance metrics and interventionist policies pervade (Grummell and Murray, 2015; Glanton, 2023). Brennan and O’Grady (2023) contextualise these changes “as neoliberal in nature, if not a manifestation of new managerialism” and that these developments are viewed “as a means to control the sector rather than simply funding it” (p.110).

The Strategic Performance Agreements and Outcomes Based Funding measurements introduced by SOLAS in 2018 provide strong examples of punitive and interventionist

policies (Brennan and O’Grady, 2023). SOLAS initiated Strategic Performance Agreements in 2018 prescribing targets and objectives for each ETB which are strongly linked to funding allocations. SOLAS views these agreements as a critical means to increase public accountability (SOLAS, 2018) and state that these agreements enable the sector to develop “multi-annual sector targets” and “multi-annual commitments” (SOLAS, 2018, p.57). SOLAS states that the agreements and the outcomes-based funding model “will allow outcomes to be recognised and good performance to be rewarded” (SOLAS, 2022b, p.33).

A shift towards neoliberalist policies is also occurring to the further education sectors in the UK (O’Leary and Rami, 2017) and internationally where there is progressive emphasis on performance-based metrics and outcome driven strategies (Glanton, 2023). In the Australian context, it has been argued that the imposition of reductive and quantifiable metrics ignores the vital elements of teaching and learning which greatly impact FET learners but which is often unmeasurable (Duckworth and Smith, 2018b; Smith and Duckworth, 2022). Sweeney (2013) reported that “non-accredited learning can be important for particularly disadvantaged groups” and that it is important to focus on the benefits of measurements of skills such as social skills and confidence (Sweeney, 2013, p.80). AONTAS (2019) highlights the importance of a supportive learner-centred approach to education especially for disadvantaged and marginalised groups stating that “funding opportunities for community education providers cannot simply be measured according to the basic metrics of accreditation and employment” (p.7). Brennan and O’Grady (2023) fear that: “With funding tied to outcomes, there is a risk of a myopic focus on outcomes at the local level” (p.109).

In addition to metrics and performance-based funding, SOLAS strongly focusses on the bureaucratic issuing of reports and strategies. In addition to the “multi-annual sector targets” and “multi-annual commitments” (SOLAS, 2018, p.57), there is an overwhelming volume of plans and strategies issued by SOLAS. According to the SOLAS Library website (SOLAS, 2026), since 2020 there have been twenty-three FET

strategy and planning documents, sixteen Strategic Performance Agreements, sixty Labour Market Research reports, seven SOLAS Annual Reports and Corporate Plans and three Evaluation Reports (Appendix 16).

Ball (2016) states that the educational sector has experienced a “steady overall increase in visibility, measurement and standardization, and they represent a change in the relations of power between teachers and the state” (p.1052). There are approximately 32,000 people employed in the FET sector (ETBI, 2024, p.2), 72% of whom are deemed as “learning practitioners”, 14% are engaged as managers while 13% of staff carry out support and administrative work (Rami and O’Kelly, 2021, p.278; SOLAS, 2017, p.16). In a survey by Teachers’ Union of Ireland (2023), 92% of respondents believe that duties outside of their core teaching role have increased since they began working in the profession, adding that bureaucracy and administrative duties deflect from their key role as a teacher (p.16). The Teachers’ Union of Ireland (2024) found that the “sharp increase in workload caused by bureaucratic and administrative demands is eroding personal time and resulting in needless meetings and a box-ticking culture. All of this is sapping morale and deflecting from the core duties of teaching” (p.4). Ball (2016) echoes this sentiment stating that: “within the rigours and disciplines of performativity we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time in making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do, rather than doing it” (p.1053).

O’Brien (2018) notes that the increased workload leaves staff feeling disoriented and shocked, making it easier for SOLAS and ETB management to force through changes without resistance (p.562). These issues demonstrate a neoliberal approach to education where “Results are prioritised over processes, numbers over experiences, procedures over ideas, productivity over creativity” (Ball and Olmedo 2013, p.91). Empirical research by O’Brien (2018) further highlights this issue as adult literacy organisers report: “There is an awful lot of box ticking going on...rather than us meeting the individual’s needs now the individuals needs have to tick our box, on [FARR]” (O’Brien, 2018, p.561).

There is also a growing focus by SOLAS on the quantifiable hard targets of moving learners into jobs and higher education, without recognising the vast benefits that learners receive while actually in FET colleges, benefits supported by the fact that almost one third of FET graduates return to study in FET (Central Statistics Office, 2024b). In FET, much of the impactful work is supporting individuals to become more confident and contented individuals rather than through the achievement of quantifiable metrics and targets such as numbers of student enrolment and completion. However, such work is not included among SOLAS targets. There is evidence that teachers are resisting this pressure through their teaching practices where they promote care, quality and the importance of the learner in education (Hodkinson et al., 2007; O’Grady, 2018). However, commodification of the sector and reduction of the teaching and learning experience to metrics can result in reproducing inequality and increasing educational injustice (Ade-Ojo and Duckworth, 2017). O’Brien (2018) reported feedback from an employees in the FET sector who stated: “I don’t think SOLAS want to hear about soft skills and people being able to support their families and not being on medication, helping to raise their children and helping them with their homework” (p.561). Yet, this work is the cornerstone upon which FET is built, namely: “excellence in education, training, and support...underpinned by the core values of care, respect, community, and equality” (ETBI, 2025).

A final example in this section of the negative impact of the neoliberal influence on the FET sector is evident through the phasing out of the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). This scheme has been in operation since 1989 and is vital for many FET students who are vulnerable members of society, including the unemployed and the socially disadvantaged (AONTAS, 2019; National Association of VTOS Co-ordinators, 2021). VTOS prepares individuals for employment or education through enrolment on full-time FET courses, most of which are at Level 5 and Level 6. In 2020, SOLAS commissioned an economist consultancy company, Indecon, to write a review on VTOS. This report on VTOS was published without any opportunity of response by the National Association of VTOS Co-ordinators (NAVC), an opportunity which was afforded

to similar evaluation reports commissioned by SOLAS in the areas of Apprenticeships and Youthreach, leading the NAVC to state that “the failure to allow the NAVC sight and response opportunity prior to dissemination is questionable” (National Association of VTOS Co-ordinators, 2021, p.3).

The Indecon Report (2020) confirms that there are many benefits of VTOS: "learners gain a range of benefits from undertaking education through VTOS, with stakeholders indicating satisfaction with how learning was delivered" (Indecon, 2020, pp. xv, 74, 77). However, Indecon prioritised the quantifiable metrics of VTOS without considering the holistic impact of the scheme in terms of the effect on the learner and society stating: "The benefits of social inclusion and education offered by VTOS participation are not measured in this empirical modelling" (Indecon, 2020, p.69). Radin (2006) writes that targets, measurements and evaluations are often used as mechanism of control, to control individuals and activities but also as a way to eliminate activities. AONTAS (2019) emphasised the importance of funding to individuals in accessing FET and critiqued SOLAS' funding strategy stating that: “none of the features of this core area identified [by SOLAS] respond to the first step into a learner’s FET journey which is access into FET. Learners require funding to cover basic needs so that they can access FET” (p.12). Despite the clear benefits of VTOS and Indecon’s admission that they conducted a very narrow evaluation of the scheme, their conclusion and primary recommendation was to discontinue VTOS stating that the “VTOS programme should be phased out” (Indecon, 2020, p.78). The NAVC’s description of the Indecon review as a “fait accompli” (National Association of VTOS Co-ordinators, 2021, p.6) implies that the decision to phase out VTOS had been decided prior to the completion and dissemination of the report to relevant stakeholders.

2.5 Conclusion

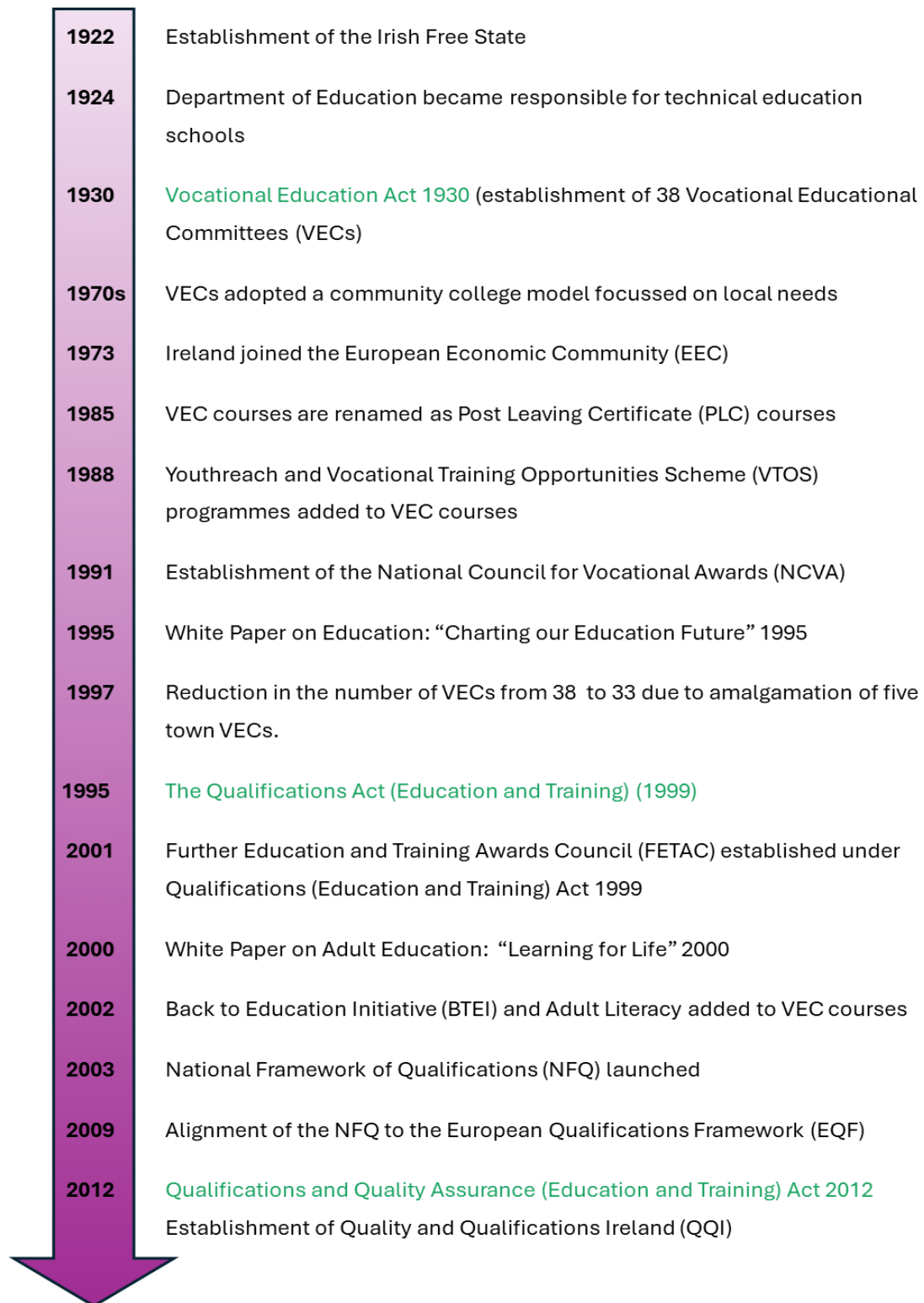
This chapter has demonstrated that the FET sector has undergone significant structural, institutional and policy changes since its inception under the Vocational Education Act of 1930, a summary of which is illustrated in Figure 2.5 and Figure 2.6. The literature

highlights a sector characterised by complexity, shaped by historical restructuring, broad programme provision, diverse learner populations and evolving policy priorities. These factors help explain the continuing ambiguity surrounding the identity, purpose and positioning of FET within the wider Irish education system as well as the stigma that can attach to participation in the sector (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017; Sartori and Bloom, 2023).

This chapter has also shown that, while policy initiatives have sought to raise the profile of FET and strengthen pathways to higher education, significant challenges remain for learners navigating progression routes, particularly in relation to consistency, transparency and access. While tertiary degree initiatives may offer opportunities for some learners, uptake remains low (O'Brien, 2025) and structural barriers persist.

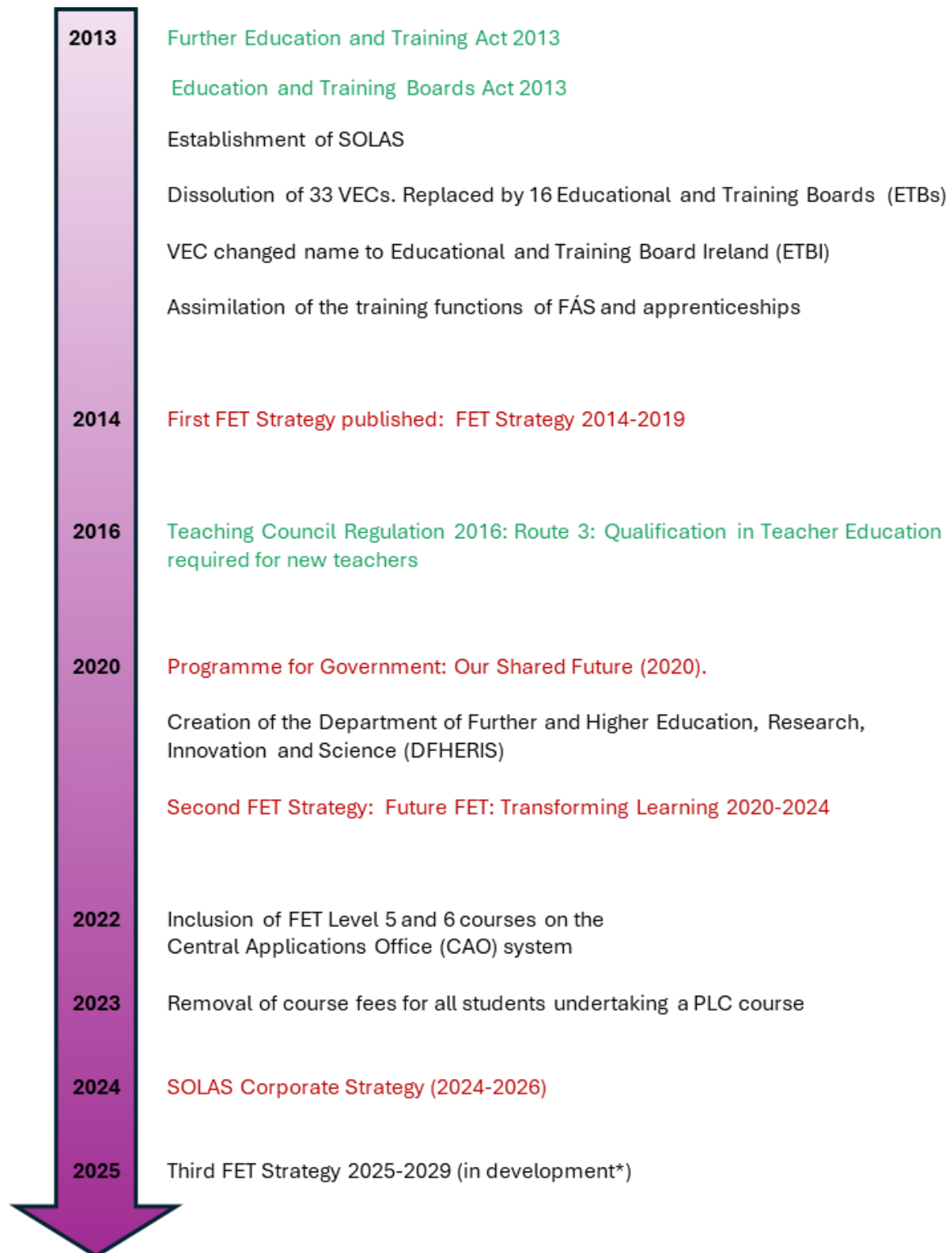
Since the inception of SOLAS, there has been an increase in the influence of neoliberalism and commodification within the FET sector (O'Brien, 2018). Neoliberalism ideologies of increased measurement, performativity and association of education with economic value have a negative impact on the learner who is often forgotten in the race to meet targets. The Teachers' Union of Ireland (2024) state that: "the sharp increase in workload caused by bureaucratic and administrative demands is...sapping morale and deflecting from the core duties of teaching" (p.4). The policy of outcomes-based funding places additional pressure on colleges, directing their focus to metrics and targets, at the risk of overlooking the individualised needs of learners. Brennan and O'Grady (2023) fear that "There are signs that positive elements of these policies will be lost in translation, as ETBs work under the new funding model" (p.115). While these developments may strengthen strategic oversight, concerns remain that an excessive focus on metrics and targets may marginalise the relational and learner-centred dimensions of FET that are central to many learners' experiences (Brennan and O'Grady, 2023; Glanton, 2023; Teachers' Union of Ireland, 2024).

Figure 2.5 A Summary of Vocational Education in Ireland: 1922–2012²⁸



²⁸ Legislative Acts are highlighted in green

Figure 2.6 A Summary of Vocational Education in Ireland: 2013–2025²⁹



* Not yet published as of 14 January 2026 (SOLAS, 2026)

²⁹ Legislative Acts are highlighted in green / Strategies related to FET (post-2013) are highlighted in red

Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Introduction

Enrolment patterns in FET traditionally reflect a concentration of students from marginalised groups and lower-socio economic backgrounds (SOLAS, 2017; SOLAS, 2019; O'Mahony et al., 2022). For many of these students, FET represents "an alternative pathway to the worlds of work and higher education" (SOLAS, 2014a, p.22) as their original plans and pathways were constrained. To understand the reasons for these constraints and the factors which shape students' opportunities and decisions leading them to enrol in FET, this chapter opens with a review of Bourdieu's work in the area of social reproduction. Bourdieu (1977; 1990a) contributes to our understanding of the perpetuation of social inequalities and societal reproduction, highlighting inequalities and barriers faced by individuals which inhibit their opportunities to progress to improved personal and economic positions.

FET is promoted as a driver of equality, social inclusion and personal transformation as a means to overcome societal constraints, marginalisation and exclusion (SOLAS, 2025c). While Bourdieu's work offers insight into the reasons why students enrol in FET, it is limited in aiding our understanding on how equality, social inclusion and transformation can be accomplished. In order to explore this area further, Freire's critical pedagogy will be discussed which proposes that collaborative teaching, critical dialogue and the praxis of reflection and action can result in emancipation and empowerment for students. Building on Freire's critical pedagogy, this chapter will then explore Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory which provides an insight into the transformative potential of the teaching and learning practices as a mechanism to level the playing field for students from all backgrounds, affording them opportunities for personal and life transformations. This chapter thus provides an interdisciplinary theoretical framework which combines theories from sociology and adult education as

a means to understand the mechanisms that influence FET enrolment and how lives can be shaped by education.

As will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, the inductive nature of this study rejects the use of “pre-existing theoretical preconceptions” (Smith and Osborn, 2015, p.41). However, some theoretical concepts are helpful in unravelling and contextualising the findings. These theories and concepts are outlined in the following sections and the role of theory in the research process will be expanded upon in Chapter 4.

3.2 Social Reproduction (Bourdieu)

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction is frequently used to explain how social class shapes the decisions, educational and career aspirations and trajectories of individuals. In this study, the work of Bourdieu provides a theoretical framework to understand how social inequalities are perpetuated and reproduced within society both on an intra- and inter- generational basis. The following sections will discuss key concepts of Bourdieu’s framework involving habitus, capital and field which according to Bourdieu, collectively contribute to social reproduction. Tensions within Bourdieu’s work in the area of agency and transformative possibilities will also be discussed, followed by an overview on the relevance of Bourdieu’s work to this thesis.

3.2.1 *Habitus*

Bourdieu states that our behaviour, decisions and opportunities are shaped by our experiences and our environment, which he refers to as habitus (Bourdieu 1990a). Habitus refers to:

systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular"...objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.53).

Habitus constitutes the social and cultural background within which we have grown up and live and how this affects our perceptions and decisions. It is the subconscious influence which determines our actions, behaviour and participation in society and is “embodied history, internalized as a second nature...the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.56). It also creates sets of perceptions about the world and can construct barriers and constraints around what the individual believes they can achieve or attempt to achieve throughout their life (Bourdieu, 1999).

Bourdieu (1977; 1999) contends that the individual and their actions cannot be viewed separately or in isolation from the individual’s formative context or from the influence of surrounding members of their society. Family life, childhood experiences and schooling serve as distinctive influences on habitus and greatly affect the individual’s decisions and perceptions throughout their life (Bourdieu, 1977). According to Bourdieu, habitus shapes individual behaviour and becomes embodied within the individual, guiding and driving their responses and actions at a subconscious level. As such, each person is the product of “an entire collective history” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.91) which affects how they think, feel, act and behave (Bourdieu, 1984). This product of collective history is not static and as the environment around the individual changes, so too does the habitus of the individual (Di Maggio, 1979).

Habitus generates patterns of behaviour that are aligned to an individual’s social conditioning, compelling the individual to reproduce the social conditions of the past:

Even if dispositions may waste away or weaken through lack of use (linked, in particular, to a change social position or condition), or as a result of heightened consciousness associated with an effort of transformation (such as the correction of accents, manners, etc.), there is an inertia (or *hysteresis*) of habitus which have a spontaneous tendency (based in biology) to perpetuate structures corresponding to their conditions of production (Bourdieu, 2000, p.160).

Reproduction and reinforcement of class differences are examples of the manifestations of habitus (McClelland, 1990) and can contribute to our understanding

of why individuals remain within their social, economic or cultural field rather than attempting to become a member of a different grouping within society. For example, a lack of exposure to friends or family with university experience can discourage individuals from considering university as a viable option (Granfield, 1991; Archer et al., 2007; Raey et al., 2009). Others may lack self-confidence or self-esteem fuelled by a sense of failure as a result of interactions with family or teachers which prevents them from seeking or availing of opportunities (Reay and Wiliam, 1999; Archer et al., 2007; Owens and Lynch, 2012; Smith and Banks, 2012).

Although Bourdieu speaks of habitus as encompassing sustained patterns of behaviour and enduring tendencies developed over time, he also emphasises that habitus is capable of change. Bourdieu (1990a) describes habitus as “durable”, “regulated and regular” (p.53) but he also states that “Habitus change constantly in response to new experiences” (Bourdieu, 2000, p.161). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) state that:

Habitus is not the fate some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an *open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal! (p.133).

Bourdieu (1990a) explains this apparent contradiction, clarifying that habitus is neither fixed nor static but allows for “revisions and transformations” to remain current and relevant:

the habitus, which is constituted in the course of an individual history...is what makes it possible to inhabit institutions, to appropriate them practically, and so to keep them in activity, continuously pulling them from the state of dead letters, reviving the sense deposited in them, but at the same time imposing the revisions and transformations that reactivation entails (p.57).

Bourdieu (1977) believes that a change in habitus is also possible as a result of reflexivity involving conscious self-awareness through reflection and subsequent action:

The slow evolution...from analogy as a practical scheme of ritual action to analogy as an object of reflection and a rational method of thought, is correlative with a transformation of the function which the groups concerned confer on myth and rite in their practice (p.156).

Reflexivity involves the recognition of how our own habitus shapes the way we see, know and understand the world which creates space for agency and the potential of change, as the habitus shapes experiences which in turn, alters the habitus:

an undertaking of reflexivity aimed at objectivating the transcendental unconscious that the knowing subject unknowingly invests in acts of knowledge or, to put it another way, his habitus as a historical transcendental – which can be said to be a priori inasmuch as it is a structured structure produced by a whole series of common or individual learning processes (Bourdieu, 2004, p.78).

Wacquant (1992) writes that “If there is a single feature that makes Bourdieu stand out in the landscape of contemporary social theory, it is his signature obsession with reflexivity” (p.36). The importance placed on reflexivity by Bourdieu is echoed by other theorists including Freire and Mezirow as will be discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Every experience and interaction contributes to shape and modify the habitus which in turn alters ideas, beliefs and actions. However, while adjustments are generally slow and incremental as it “ensures the active presence of past experiences, which...tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ or practices and their constancy over time” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.54), radical adjustments may also be triggered as a result of the dynamic interplay between the habitus and the field. This concept will be discussed further in Section 3.2.3.

3.2.2 *Capitals*

Bourdieu defines capital as resources built up over time in both material assets and embodied form through personal capacities which can be mobilised to secure advantages and opportunities. Capital refers to distinctive types of expertise, abilities

and knowledge that individuals acquire from their environment and Bourdieu identifies four main types of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Economic capital relates to monetary assets which can give the individual financial power and authority. Cultural capital takes various forms; embodied, objective and institutionalised. Embodied capital refers to durable dispositions and competencies that include ingrained habits, skills and ways of thinking; objective capital is tangible and expressed through material goods and cultural artefacts; and institutional capital is secured through formal and recognised titles and qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital refers to the friendships and relationships that the individual develops which can expand their exposure to different groups, thus increasing the opportunity for social mobility. Symbolic capital is defined as the legitimised and recognised form of capital, manifesting as socially acknowledged authority, superiority or prestige (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013).

Bourdieu (1986) maintains that different types of capital can be converted into other forms of capital; “the different types of capital (or power, which amounts to the same thing) change into one another...Depending on the field in which it functions” (p.16). For example economic capital, such as monetary resources, can be mobilised to secure admission to elite schools and prestigious qualifications, both of which constitute valuable forms of cultural capital. Within elite schools, relationships can be cultivated with students and staff, developing influential networks thus generating social capital. These accumulated forms of capital can subsequently provide privileged access to lucrative career opportunities, thereby re-converting these forms of capital back to economic capital and advantage.

Possessing sufficient and relevant capital equips individuals with power and leverage which enhances their position and potential for success in the field. Bourdieu associates the field with a game of cards governed by rules and competitions and where individuals can strengthen their positions depending on the value of capital in that field:

We also have *trump cards* that is, master cards whose force varies depending on the game; just as the relative value of the cards changes with each game, the hierarchy of the different species of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) varies across the various fields...their relative value as trump cards is determined by each field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.98).

Bourdieu (1986) asserts that individuals from higher socio-economic groups have access to increased capital which is passed on from one generation to the next, thus ensuring the continuation and reproduction of advantage and privilege. Bourdieu (1986) also points out that capital can lead to inequality: "It is what makes the games of society—not least, the economic game—something other than simple games of chance...a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible" (p.241).

3.2.3 *Field*

Individuals do not exist or act within a vacuum (Bourdieu, 1993), but instead, they interact in an environmental or situational context which imposes boundaries and rules (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu refers to this place of interaction as the *field*. The field represents the space where the "game" is played, such as educational institutions, school, university or places of employment: "In a game, the field (the pitch or board on which it is played, the rules, the outcome at stake)" contains "rules and exercises expressly taught by institutions expressly designed for that purpose" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.67). It is through this meaningful practice of gaining mastery and becoming skilled in the field that adjustments can be effected on an individual's habitus and on their capital. Bourdieu refers to this purposeful activity and interaction as "practice" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.22)³⁰.

Similarity between an individual's habitus and the field can result in harmony and ease of integration (Bourdieu, 1990a). However, if substantial variances present between

³⁰ Bourdieu avoids the term "praxis" which is sometimes used by other writers in relation to the actions of individuals in the field : "I really must point out that I have never used the concept of praxis which, at least in French, tends to create the impression of something pompously theoretical – which is pretty paradoxical...I've always talked, quite simply, of practice" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.22)

the habitus and the field of engagement, dissonance, conflict and resistance may be experienced as individuals struggle to come to terms with these variances (Reay et al., 2005; Smyth and Banks, 2012). If variances between the habitus and field are excessive, the individual can feel like a “fish-out-of-water” (Reay et al., 2009, p.1106), resulting in withdrawal or disengagement with the field. Increased disparities and gaps in global wealth and social inequalities can lead to increased variances which hinder mobility between fields (Adams, 2006) and may partially account for the differing rates of progression to university between students from higher socio-economic backgrounds and those from lower socio-economic classes (Flannery and Donoghue, 2009; Mooney et al, 2010; Byrne and McCoy, 2017).

While Bourdieu tends to view habitus as durable and constant, he also provides that the field can act as “a *space of possibles*” (Bourdieu, 1993, p.64). Such *possibles* can be seen through the potential of capital transformation from one form into another: “The transformation of any given kind of capital into symbolic capital, a legitimate possession grounded in the nature of its possessor, is the fundamental operation of social alchemy” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.129). Bourdieu contends that transformation is possible in the field where individuals acquire “le sens pratique” (Bourdieu, 1976, p.43) as they learn and understand the rules and the practices of the field to such an extent that they become equipped to “master” these rules, resulting in successfully navigating these rules to their advantage:

transformation is inscribed in the fact that agents can adequately master the *modus operandi* that enables them to generate correctly formed ritual practices, only by making it work practically, in a real situation, in relation to practical functions. An agent who possesses a practical mastery, an art, whatever it may be, is capable of applying in his action the disposition which appears to him (Bourdieu, 1990a, pp.90-91).

Habitus ‘revisions’ generally take time and involve modifications over generations or during the lifetime of an individual. However, it is also possible to incur dramatic shifts

in habitus due to crises in the field. Crises which challenge ingrained doxa³¹, can lead to a rupture in “the immediate fit between the subjective structures and the objective structures” (Bourdieu, 1977, pp.168–169). Such crises can involve economic upheaval, personal displacement or as witnessed in recent times, global pandemics, all of which can bring us to question and re-evaluate our assumptions, our *raison d'être*, life objectives and priorities. These moments can lead to a mismatch between the individual's habitus and their field, particularly when the rules or conditions change more rapidly than anticipated and the individual must radically adapt in order to adapt. Bourdieu (1977) refers to this situation as the “hysteresis effect” (p.78) which can lead to uncertainty, alienation, disorientation or ultimately transformation. In this way, this concept bears similarity to Mezirow's disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991; 2000) where dramatic or epochal learning ensues (as later discussed in Section 3.4.3).

According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), the field can also be a space of “conflict and competition” (p.17) whereby the participants battle it out to survive and succeed.

The field of symbolic production is a microcosm of the symbolic struggle between classes; it is by serving their own interests in the struggle within the field of production (and only to this extent) that producers serve the interests of groups outside the field of production (Bourdieu, 1991, p.168).

Conflict within the field can manifest as symbolic violence which attempts to restrict an individual's potential to succeed in the field. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as “violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, mis-recognition), recognition, or even feeling” (Bourdieu, 2001, pp.1-2). Symbolic violence can function to confine individuals to their social class by discouraging ideas or attempts to escape social limitations and can be exerted through creating a sense that something is inferior and lacks value (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Such violence can manifest in educational institutions which impose regulations and policies

³¹ “Doxa is the relationship of the immediate adherence that is established in practice between a *habitus* and the field to which it is attuned the pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world that flows from practical sense” (Bourdieu, 1990a; p.68)

perpetuating social reproduction: “insofar as it is an arbitrary power to impose which, by the mere fact of being misrecognised as a legitimate authority [pedagogic authority], a power to exert symbolic violence” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p.13). Bourdieu believes that the field of education is a system of institutions and processes which are responsible for the reproduction of power relations in society but also where symbolic violence acts a mechanism of control and domination to ensure this reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu (1991) states that:

'symbolic systems' fulfil their political function, as instruments which help to ensure that one class dominates another (symbolic violence) by bringing their own distinctive power to bear on the relations of power which underlie them and thus by contributing, in Weber's terms, to the 'domestication of the dominated (p.167).

This violence can extend outwards from the institution to the general public who in turn adopt the stance that certain institutions are inferior. Participants in those institutions may become victims of stigma and negative comments as Bourdieu (1991) states that symbolic violence also has “a capacity for the physical violence to which it alludes, especially in insults” (p.87). Bourdieu maintains that symbolic violence is suffered mainly by those in lower classes who are “predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it” (Bourdieu, 1991, p.51) and where repeated experiences of marginalisation create an expectation and acceptance of such treatment. In contrast, those in wealthier social classes will reject such violence as an alien concept and dismiss its validity, thereby remaining immune to its effects.

The distinctiveness of symbolic domination lies precisely in the fact that it assumes, of those who submit to it, an attitude which challenges the usual dichotomy of freedom and constraint...a symbolic violence which is not aware of what it is (to the extent that it implies no *act of intimidation*) can only be exerted on a person predisposed (in his habitus) to feel it, whereas others will ignore it (Bourdieu, 1991, p.51).

3.2.4 Critiques of the work of Bourdieu

Although Bourdieu (1990b), appears to affirm agency stating that “Social agents, in archaic societies as well as in ours, are not automata regulated like clocks, in accordance with laws which they do not understand” (p.9), his deterministic views on social reproduction reveals an underlying contradiction:

The relation which the subjects have to their class condition and to the social determinisms which define it is part of the complete definition of their condition and the conditionings which it imposes. These determinisms do not need to be consciously perceived in order to force subjects to take their decisions in terms of them, in other words, in terms of the *objective future* of their social category. It may even be, in a more general way, that the determinisms are that much more rigorous in their influence when the extent of their influence is less clearly recognized (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, p.27).

There is a further contradiction through Bourdieu’s acknowledgement on one hand that individuals may act autonomously, while on the other hand, he asserts that this act of autonomy is in fact, a form of submission to the rules and constraints that control the working class: “there is no denying that there exist dispositions to resist...[yet] the dominated seldom escape the antinomy of domination” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 81-82). This sense of determinism is further evident as he states that “The virtue of freedom does not come without the social conditions of freedom” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.183). According to Bourdieu, even in the rare occurrences where agency may be evident, the outcomes of agency for the working class have little consequence:

I have repeatedly denounced both this pessimistic functionalism and the dehistoricizing that follows from a strictly structuralist standpoint...Similarly I do not see how relations of domination, whether material or symbolic, could possibly operate without implying, activating resistance. *The dominated, in any social universe, can always exert a certain force*, in as much as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it (if only to elicit reactions of exclusion on the part of those who occupy its dominant positions) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 80).

Similarly, while Bourdieu (1990a) outlines that “the *habitus* makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions and actions” (p.55), he still insists on the application of limitations through the “constraints and limits initially set on its inventions” (p.55). Bourdieu (1990a) further appears to introduce a paradox when discussing free will as he states that the *habitus* has “infinite yet strictly limited generative capacity” and “determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and unconscious” (p.55). Furthermore, he places any confusion in attempting to interpret this paradox at the fault of the reader who he feels may be incapable of understanding the complexities of *habitus* because it “is difficult to understand only so long as one remains locked in the usual antinomies” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.55).

King (2000) highlights that not only does Bourdieu believe that individual’s lack agency, but he also believes that the working class are ignorant of their actions as highlighted by Bourdieu’s (1977) statement: “It is because subjects, strictly speaking, do not know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know” (p.79). While Reay (2022) supports Bourdieu’s assertion that working class people find themselves in situations as a result of their decisions, she highlights that they experience “limited opportunities and education cruelties” (p.4) and while this may be the result of their decisions, their “choices are rarely of their own making. Rather, they are being made primarily by others with much greater and economic and political power” (Reay, 2022, pp.4-5). Although Bourdieu does not specifically attribute individual responsibility for reproduction, he emphasises that the dispositions of working class individuals contribute towards reproduction (Bourdieu, 1991) and in particular their lack of reflexive abilities allows them to be dominated stating that only those “who are in a position to be rational” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.131) and only “the most socially privileged” are capable of reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.119).

Giroux (1983) articulates that “Bourdieu's work is not without some serious theoretical flaws. The most glaring flaws concern the mechanistic notions of power and

domination and the overly determined view of human agency that characterizes much of this work” (p. 271). Giroux (1983) believes that Bourdieu holds “little faith in subordinate classes and groups and little hope in their ability or willingness to reconstruct the conditions under which they live, work, and learn” (p.274). Bourdieu attributes these limitations to the habitus of the lower classes and infers lower intellectual capabilities in lower-class individuals as they feel “incapable of understanding” or “incapable of distinguishing”:

If formal explorations, in avant-garde theatre or non-figurative painting, or simply classical music, are disconcerting to working-class people, this is partly because they feel incapable of understanding what these things must signify, insofar as they are signs. Hence the uninitiated may experience as inadequate and unworthy a satisfaction that cannot be grounded in a meaning transcendent to the object. Not knowing what the 'intention' is, they feel incapable of distinguishing a tour de force from clumsiness, telling a 'sincere' formal device from cynical imposture” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.43).

Bourdieu continually compares working class individuals to those in more elite and privileged backgrounds, highlighting the inadequacies and deficiencies of working-class individuals rather than viewing this group of individuals as differently endowed and equipped to adapt to their life situations. There is little evidence of Bourdieu comparing the inverse to identify areas where the privileged classes demonstrate inadequacies to those in working classes. Resultingly “he tends to hone in not on the productive practices of the ‘working class’ but on the productive practices of the ‘upper class’ ” (Seim and McCarthy, 2023, p.8). For example, qualities often associated with the working class which are not acknowledged by Bourdieu include resistant and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005). These forms of capital relate to “students’ ability to recognize and challenge injustice (resistant) and navigate institutions that perpetuate inequality (navigational)” (Bañuelos, 2021, p.10) and are important assets, particularly in marginalised or disadvantaged groups (O’Shea, 2015). Instead, Bourdieu constantly uses the privileged classes as the standard and metric against which to be measured and fails to view other capitals, assets or qualities of the working class.

Jenkins (1982) critiques Bourdieu's work due to his "deterministic model of social reality and the practice of social agents" (p.278) where "conformity to the dictates and probabilities of that reality is the only possible outcome" (p.278). Bohman (1999) states that Bourdieu's theory "provides no basis for practical agency" (p.145) and that it "makes the cultural reproduction of domination inevitable" (p.141) removing any possibility of innovation or transformation. Agency is limited by the implication that individuals are constrained by their habitus and field as "agency is still a bounded process, compromised and attenuated, via habitus, by social structure and unconsciousness" (Adams, 2006, p.515). The Friday Morning Group³² (1990) argues that Bourdieu's notion of agency is non-existent due to the structural constraints imposed by the field while Bouveresse (1999) believes that the concept of habitus imposes a restriction on agency and free will whilst also denying the possibility for spontaneity.

Bourdieu fundamentally uses class as the defining restrictions but he fails to discuss the impact of intersectionality including ethnicity, gender and learning abilities when identifying factors involved in societal reproduction (Webb et al., 2017). Giroux (1983) highlights that Bourdieu "provides no theoretical opportunity to unravel how cultural domination and resistance are mediated through the complex interface of race, gender, and class" (p.272). Therefore Bourdieu's one-dimensional application of class to social reproduction lacks the complexities and nuances to fully comprehend the practical application of reproduction to modern society.

Bourdieu (1990b) states that individuals may work towards transforming the structures which are maintained by social reproduction: "victims of elimination (or at least the most socially privileged of them) aim at transforming the structures which the mechanisms of elimination, and thereby of reproduction of structures, tend to preserve" (p.119). However, there is little evidence of Bourdieu's considerations to

³² "The Friday Morning Group" refers to an informal interdisciplinary collective of sociologists, anthropologists and educationalists established in 1982 who met regularly to discuss emerging ideas in sociological theory and practice (Harker et al, 1990, p.ix)

how an individual's agency may bring about these changes (King, 2000). In fact, he contends that efforts to resist reproduction will contribute to the very inequality it opposes: "active resistance by students can, and often does, objectively collude with the reproduction of class and gender hierarchies" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.80). Several studies have shown evidence where working class students have surpassed and exceeded the accomplishments of students from more privileged social groups (Lehmann 2009a; Reay et al., 2009; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Lehmann, 2014; Warin, 2015). However, while Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction can help us to understand the limitations and barriers faced by individuals, it does not sufficiently explain how change can be achieved, irrespective of background and social class. Bourdieu acknowledges that the cycle of social reproduction can be broken through a process of change: "To change the world, one has to change the ways of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced" (Bourdieu, 1989, p.23), yet he does not provide any specific guidance or advice on how this change can be achieved.

Riley (1997) states that Bourdieu's "explanations are often tautological or weak" (p.109) and that they lack detail in discussing the processes which can effect change. Croce (2019) contends that Bourdieu remains theoretical rather than identifying ways whereby individuals can actively transform society: "While Bourdieu's conception of the agents' contribution to social change could easily take up these challenges, his understanding of how it concretely takes place is intellectualist" (p.33). This contrasts sharply to Mezirow (1978; 1991) who promotes specific pedagogies to bring about change through transformative learning and to Freire (2005) who calls for active involvement by individuals to overcome societal inequalities: "It is absolutely essential that the oppressed participate in the revolutionary process with an increasingly critical awareness of their role as Subjects of the transformation" (p.127).

3.2.5 Relevance of Bourdieu's work to this research

Bourdieu believes that the educational system strongly contributes to reproduction of the social structure (Bourdieu, 1996) and categorised the educational system as "one

of the fundamental agencies of the maintenance of the social order” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.387). He maintains that particular educational strategies are at play which are geared towards ensuring “socially homogenous academic groups” (Bourdieu, 1996, p.275), outlining that the educational curriculum was biased in favour of middle-class students and therefore reinforced their ability to succeed while making it more difficult for students from other economic groups. Irish primary and secondary schools are seen to be often responsible for ensuring the status quo through the acceptance of students who ‘fit’ within their criteria (Cahill, 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024) and through the elimination of those who do not, either preventing such students’ admission to their schools or rejecting them thereafter through disciplinary or economic means (Murphy et al., 2019; O’Donoghue, 2023; Molloy, 2024). In this way, access to educational opportunities is controlled by the dominant groups in society and for the less dominant groups “access is more of a struggle and less of a ‘right’ than for other students” (Thomas, 2002, pp.424-5).

Many students in Ireland are restricted to attending the schools in their locality, which implies that if a student lives in a disadvantaged area, their school is more likely to be a DEIS³³ school, schools usually located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, which participate in ‘Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS)’, a national programme aimed at reducing educational disadvantage by providing additional resources and supports to these schools (Citizen’s Information, 2025). The expectation of students in DEIS schools to attend university is significantly lower than those who attend non-DEIS schools and there is a much higher probability of DEIS students completing a course in FET or an apprenticeship than their non-DEIS counterparts (Nelis et al., 2021). Several studies demonstrate the low esteem evident in working class students which is fuelled by their sense of failure as a result of interactions with parents and teachers and to entertain the thought of going to college or university was

³³ “The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme aims to reduce educational disadvantage. It is a Department of Education and Youth policy” (Citizens Information, 2025b)

often seen as having notions beyond the norms of their social group (Reay and Wiliam, 1999; Archer et al. 2007).

Compared to their peers from more advantaged backgrounds, students of lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to have reduced levels of economic, cultural and social capital. The majority of Principals in disadvantaged schools report shortages of teaching staff, inadequately qualified teachers and a lack of educational material, including technology, textbooks, science materials, adversely affected their schools and the teaching and learning environment (Nelis et al., 2021). Students attending schools in disadvantaged areas were found to have greater shares of students with special educational needs, lower parental support for learning and much lower access to “home educational resources, cultural possessions and family wealth” (Nelis et al., 2021, p.x). Furthermore, school locations and classification of disadvantaged schools’ status result in lower institutional capital for these students.

Parents of disadvantaged students are found to have lower levels of qualifications than the parents of advantaged students, with the highest academic achievement at Junior or Leaving Certificate level (Nelis et al., 2021). Reay et al. (2009) and Archer et al. (2007) found that students from lower class backgrounds tended to have less knowledge about university and less support from their families and peers to pursue third level opportunities. These students were less likely to know anyone who attended university and obtaining a university degree was never an aspiration or goal amongst their friends and relatives. Going to college was deemed as something for ‘posher’, ‘cleverer’ and ‘richer’ people (Archer et al., 2007, p.231).

McCoy et al. (2014) state that “Research consistently indicates that students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to drop out of upper secondary school than their middle- or upper income counterparts” (p.9). Furthermore, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to progress to third level education than their counterparts in lower socio-economic classes (Hannan et al., 2003; Flannery and

Donoghue, 2009; Mooney et al., 2010; McCoy and Byrne, 2011; Byrne and McCoy, 2017; Loxley et al., 2017). These socio-economic differences have a significant impact on students and on their families, not only in terms of their current lives but also on their medium term and long-term futures (Willis, 1977; Duckworth and Smith, 2018) whilst also creating a ripple effect impacting families, communities and society as a whole (Duckworth and Smith, 2018). Individuals with lower levels of education continue to be more likely to enter the workforce at inferior salary grades than those with third level degrees and their career trajectory generally demonstrates inhibited career progression and a reduction in earning potential (Frawley et al., 2020).

The examples above illustrate how habitus, capitals and field can act as barriers for students, making it difficult to transcend their social circumstances and positions. Additionally, if these students do gain access to university, they are faced with further obstacles in that field that they must manage and address. It requires substantial effort and energy to not only gain access to university but also to succeed in that environment (Harker, 1990). It is also much more difficult for students from lower socio-economic groups to succeed in university due to the lack of familiarity with the language used, surroundings and social interactions. Conversely, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds have been shown to possess an advantage for easing into university as the culture, rules and language spoken in education institutes are similar to that of their home environment (Thomson, 2017). Harker (1990) notes that the academic language used in educational institutions can maintain inequalities as this language is not accessible to those from lower income groups. As a result, university can be seen as an “alien space” (Archer et al., 2007, p.232) for working class students where they experience a lack of belonging and feeling out of place (Reay et al. 2005; Archer et al., 2007). This can lead to a crisis for students moving from the familiar environment and field of secondary school into the new unknown and unfamiliar field of higher education (McNay, 1999; Adams, 2006).

Notwithstanding the relevance of Bourdieu's work to lower socio-economic students, Bourdieu frames social reproduction as a comprehensive process that applies to all socio-economic groups in society (Nash, 1990; Jarness and Strømme, 2022; Gupta, 2023). Individuals can remain trapped in a cycle of social reproduction with little hope and limited possibility to break beyond that which is expected of them, regardless of their status or economic background. In seeking to understand the actions and implications of this diverse student body in FET, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capitals assist in contextualising the effect of culture, family and social class on FET students' experience and progression opportunities. However, positive educational environments can lead to changes within the class cycle, enabling individuals to break free from the constraints imposed by their habitus and lead to ways where they can optimise their ability to survive and compete successfully within the field. Von Rosenberg (2016) writes that education can bring about a transformation in a person's habitus and that it can also be responsible for enhancing and restructuring their cultural capital.

Bourdieu acknowledges an ability of individuals to manipulate the rules and constraints in the field to their benefit, although there would be effort involved in achieving this: "Freedom is not something given; it is something you conquer" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.15). Bourdieu advocates reflexivity and self-awareness as a way to accomplish this, where individuals critically examine their position, usually as a result of a crisis or disruption, prompting them to become more analytical and capable of transformative choices. However, Bourdieu does not believe that meaningful change can be facilitated by the individual alone, but that it requires external support and assistance:

When the newcomers are not disposed to enter the cycle of simple reproduction...but bring with them dispositions and position-takings which clash with the prevailing norms of production and the expectations of the field, they cannot succeed without the help of external changes (Bourdieu, 1993, p.57).

Such external changes may be in the form of political or policy changes which lead to a change of power relations within the field. This underscores the importance of policy interventions in addressing and mitigating social reproduction.

Bourdieu insists that “Habitus is not destiny” (Bourdieu, 2000, p.180) but he states that in order to break the cycle of reproduction, interventions are required in the form of a “transformation of the conditions of the production and transformation of dispositions” (Bourdieu, 2000, p.180). Freire and Mezirow’s transformative and emancipatory theories provide the opportunities for such interventions. The following sections will discuss the work of Freire and Mezirow and explore how educational interventions can enable individuals to transcend societal reproduction, limitations and constraints.

3.3 Critical Pedagogy (Freire)

Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy emerged as a result of his experiences and work with adults who had been excluded from education as a result of poverty and social exclusion. Arising from their lack of literacy skills, they had been denied opportunities to participate in democracy³⁴ and to have influence and to have control over life choices and trajectories (Freire, 2021). For Freire, education is “an ongoing process of empowerment whose objective was the creation of critical agents” (Giroux 2021a, p.4). Freire believed it essential that all individuals gained access to education to overcome these constraints, thus viewing “education as the practice of freedom” (Freire, 2013, p.131).

Freire’s critical pedagogy is an approach to education that aims to equip students with the skills to critically analyse, examine and challenge societal oppression in ways which centre on the liberation of individuals from constraints and inequalities. Freire strongly critiques traditional methods of education which he believes contribute to

³⁴ “The authoritarian discriminations of Brazilian society ultimately proclaim the illiterate incapable of thinking, deciding, or choosing, so that they ought not to be accorded the right to vote.” (Freire, 2021, p.234)

marginalisation and dehumanisation. Instead, he advocates for teaching approaches which bring about empowerment and emancipation. These approaches involve building positive teacher-student relationships which foster open communication and allow students to reflect critically on their lives and engage in purposeful meaningful action. Adult and community-based learning in Ireland and the UK frequently draw on Freire's work to explore how educational pedagogies can support learners in challenging constraints imposed by society and their life histories (Fleming, 2016; McKillican, 2017; White et al, 2018; Smith and Duckworth, 2022; Grummel, 2023; Connolly, 2024; Fitzsimons, 2024).

Freire believes that the oppressed are domesticated and fearful to break free from the control of their oppressor: "They may still be in the position previously termed "adhesion" to the oppressor...the oppressor is "housed" within the people, and their resulting ambiguity makes them fearful of freedom" (Freire, 2005, p.163). In this way, Freire suggests that systems of oppression are not sustained solely through external control but also through internalised forms of domination, such as fear and uncertainty. This aligns with Bourdieu's view that an individual's habitus leads to repeated domination by the dominant, sustaining prevailing perceptions, dispositions and actions in ways that reproduce existing power relations (Bourdieu, 1991). The works of Bourdieu and Freire also concur in their views of the class system and the ability of the "dominant elite" (Freire, 2017, p.146) to have power and control over the "oppressed" (Freire, 2017, p.19) or the "dominated" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.82). This power and control lead to a suppressed habitus of individuals which restricts their opportunities for knowledge acquisition. Both Bourdieu and Freire highlight a lack of knowledge amongst those dominated, which Freire attributes to a lack of experience and in turn, a lack of confidence:

Almost never do they realize that they, too, "know things" they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men. Given the circumstances which have produced their duality, it is only natural that they distrust themselves (Freire, 2005, p.63).

Freire was critical of the rise of neoliberalist policies in education arguing that market-driven agendas risk reducing the purpose of education to economic productivity rather than act as *a practice of freedom*: “The fatalistic philosophy of neoliberal politics of which I have been speaking is a case in point of how human interests are abandoned whenever they threaten the values of the market” (Freire, 1998, p.93). Freire cautions that such agendas are ultimately “worthless” and result in a “loss of liberty” (Freire, 1998, p.117). While acknowledging that difficulties exist in placing the importance of individuals before profit and market interests, Freire advocates that education must remain grounded in ethical and moral responsibility and democratic participation. In this way, he views education as a means to resist and overcome social reproduction, through acting as a site which promotes agency, reflection and social engagement.

The following sections will explore Freire’s pedagogical framework, followed by an insight into the limitations of Freire’s critical pedagogy and the implications of his work for this thesis.

3.3.1 *The Banking Concept of Education*

Freire (2005) criticises teaching practices which involve a lack of engagement and interaction between the teacher and students. He refers to this as “the banking concept of education” (p.72) whereby students are forced to assume a passive role as “receptacles” (p.72) or “listening objects” (p.71) and where students are denied the opportunity to fully understand, engage and interact with information. Freire (2005) outlines that students are exposed to rote learning, where teachers *narrate* content which students must passively learn and memorise with the intention of repeating this information in exams.

Education is suffering from narration sickness...His [the teacher’s] task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance (Freire, 2005, p.71).

This banking concept closely echoes Locke's "white paper" empty vessel or tabula rasa (Locke, 1765) which views learners as blank slates to be filled with knowledge by the educator. Dewey (1916) also strongly critiqued this form of education and instead, proposed experiential learning which encourages active participation by the student in their learning. The lack of engagement evident in the banking concept denies students the right to be involved in their learning and reduces education to an act of domination where the teacher holds complete power over students.

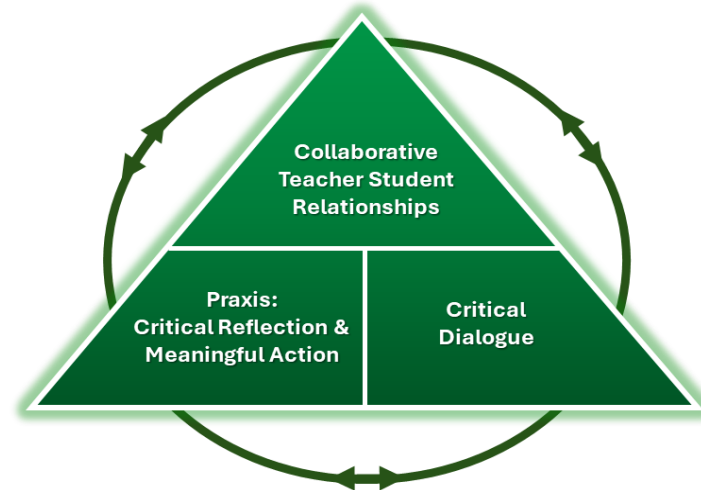
Freire is highly critical of the use of control or power structures in education, arguing that they suppress individuals' right to free expression and restrict independent thought. Freire (2005) further criticises "structures of domination" (p.154) which perpetuate oppression through "Manipulation, sloganizing, "depositing," regimentation, and prescription" (p.126), enabling those in authority to augment their power to dominate and erode the humanisation of individuals resulting in their submission and silence. Denying students the ability to interact and engage, the student lacks praxis, thus reducing their ability to be "truly human" (Freire, 2005, p.72). Such power structures were also critiqued by Dewey who stated that "far too much of the stimulus and control proceeds from the teacher" (Dewey, 2019, p.41) and who advocated for a democratic learning environment where power and control of the teacher are reduced:

The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to this influence (Dewey, 2019, p.41).

Observations by Fitzsimons (2024) note the existence of traditional teaching methods such as the banking or "depository model" (p.18) in adult educational contexts where the student is expected to sit passively while absorbing information that is fed to them by their teacher. Fitzsimons (2024) notes that this educational approach neglects student well-being while also leading to a reinforcement of dominant social, cultural and economic norms. As an alternative to this banking concept of education, Freire

proposes an approach which involves students in their education and where student-teacher collaboration and critical dialogue are encouraged in addition to praxis, the act of continual reflection and action. This approach is illustrated in Figure 3.1 below and is discussed in the following sections.

Figure 3.1 Components of Freire's Critical Pedagogy



3.3.2 Collaborative Teacher-Student Relationships

In order to overcome oppression in the classroom and facilitate emancipatory education, Freire highlights the importance of the role of the teacher-student relationship:

Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students (Freire, 2005, p.72).

In concordance with Habermas (1972), Freire stresses that education should allow for freedom to discuss ideas without coercion. Ginott (1972) also concurs, proposing that the teacher needs to remove fear from the classroom as a way to improve learning:

The major obstacle to learning is fear; fear of failing, fear of criticism, fear of appearing stupid. An effective teacher makes it impossible for each child to err with impunity. To remove fear is to invite attempt. To welcome mistakes is to encourage learning (Ginott, 1972, p.242).

Within the teacher-student relationship, teachers can provide space for agency to develop which can maximise the opportunities for students to overcome societal inequalities (Clegg, 2011). Positive relationships between the teacher and student can greatly impact the learner's outlook, self-esteem, confidence and opportunities within education. Many studies have shown that improving relationships within the schooling system, especially the relationship between the teacher and the student, can lead to better health and can significantly influence the psychological, cognitive and social development of young adults (Kim, 2021). Kim (2021) contends that "when students had positive relationships with teachers, they tended to have better physical and mental health as well as lower levels of substance use" (p.14). Research by Meyler et al. (2024) found that 95% of learners in FET felt respected by their teachers (p.72) and that the majority of learners experienced an increase in their self-confidence and had a more positive outlook on the future after studying in FET.

Duckworth et al. (2021) highlight the importance of positive relationships within the school system in overcoming social, emotional and academic challenges while Sundani and Mamokhere (2021) found that the relationship between the student and the teacher plays a vital role in increasing student motivation, competency and success. Giroux (2020) emphasises the importance of the teacher-student relationship in overcoming modern day and future challenges in our technological, globalised and culturally diverse world which can be achieved through making small and substantial changes such as feedback, student centred learning and collaboration.

Freire strongly argues that a supportive and collaborative education environment must be created which allows students to fully engage and feel a sense of ownership and control over their learning: "If for a person to be in the world of work is to be totally dependent, insecure, and permanently threatened— if their work does not belong to them—the person cannot be fulfilled" (Freire, 2005, p.145). Grummell (2023) emphasises the importance of "relationships of learning" (p.151) where teaching practitioners work with students to promote active collaboration and shared decision-

making in the learning environment. The importance of the teacher-student relationship is further emphasised by Nodding (2013) who contends that the teacher must establish a caring relationship with the student and in doing so must work collaboratively with the student towards the student's goals. Brookfield (2022) believes it is important to build a relationship of trust and familiarity in order to encourage student independence and empowerment while Kegan (1984) proposes humans have a desire to feel included, involved and independent in order to have a healthy sense of agency. Thomas (2002) found that students feel more accepted if teachers know their names, are friendly and treat them as equals. She also found that students who had good and open relationships with their teachers were able to approach them with problems and seek ways to resolve difficulties they may encounter.

3.3.3 Critical Dialogue Teaching Practices

Freire draws attention to the crucial role of dialogue in education and as outlined in Section 3.3.1, he is strongly opposed to a style of education where information is merely deposited in or transferred to students:

Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants (Freire, 2005, pp.88-9).

Freire (2005) also encourages a critical form of dialogue which challenges societal assumptions where "The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (p.81). In this way, the teacher must create an environment which facilitates the exploration of unsubstantiated beliefs or information ("doxa") through rational discussion, questioning and analysis ("logos") (Freire, 2005, p.81). This view is also evidenced in the works of Dewey (1916) who proposes a democratic classroom environment where interactions take place freely between the student and the teacher. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Mezirow (2003) refers to this dialogue as "critical-dialectical discourse" (p.59)

highlighting that dialogue plays a vital role in education and leads to significant and transformative changes.

Empirical research by McKillican (2017) highlights the relational and dialogical nature of education where students are actively involved in their learning and feel supported by their educators. He states that dialogue facilitates a “co-intentionality in the shared learning process” (p.67) where both the teacher and the student work together to understand and interpret experiences. In this way, traditional hierarchies of control and authority are reduced, enabling a more balanced relationship which creates greater space for learner participation and agency through a more equitable process of shared inquiry. Biesta argues that any “education worthy of its name” (Biesta, 2009, p.41) should enable students to become “more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting” (Biesta, 2009, p.41), thereby unlocking education’s emancipatory potential through nurturing independence and agency.

Studies show that educators can positively influence the self-confidence of learners through their interactions and their belief in students’ capabilities and learning potential (Henson, 2001). Research by Ruegg (2018) found that teacher feedback can significantly increase learner confidence. Support, encouragement and avoidance of blame by teachers also enables students to build their skills and take charge of their learning, which in turn correlates with students’ achievements and progression in education (Shaughnessy, 2004; Protheroe, 2008). Conversely, when teachers communicate low expectations to students and provide little support and encouragement, the potential for academic success is greatly diminished (Rosenbaum et al., 1996; Smyth and Banks, 2012).

3.3.4 Praxis: Critical Reflection and Meaningful Action

Freire (2005) emphasises the importance of praxis as a fundamental element of emancipation which fosters a combination of critical reflection and meaningful action, leading to the deep, transformative process of “conscientização” (Freire 2005, p.35). According to Freire (2005), praxis cultivates a “background awareness” (p.83) of the

challenges in a person's life leading to the development and implementation of strategies and plans to overcome these challenges:

Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?...Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it (Freire, 2005, p.45).

Self-reflection and reflexivity allow individuals to continually develop their self-awareness, make sense of their lives and adapt to new situations (Giddens, 1990, 1991). These processes can help individuals decide on their priorities and organise their lives accordingly (Heelas, 1996). Research finds that there is an increasing focus on self-awareness in society which allows individuals to adapt to change by increasing exposure to other cultures and opening minds to the fact that there may be different ways to do things and accomplish various goals (Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Peng, 2024; Zhang et al., 2025). Connolly (2008, 2024) discusses the importance of group learning in adult education whereby the social dimensions of group learning allow individuals to gain an insight into different perspectives held by others, which in turn facilitates the development of critical awareness of their place within wider social structures. Findings from the National Adult Literacy Agency (2018) indicate that engagement in education can enhance learners' participation and active involvement in the community. Tett and Maclachlan (2008) argue that democratic learning through groups fosters agency and empowers learners to challenge power structures through the development of "collective consciousness-raising that can enable people to talk back to the power that has constructed them as wanting" (p.668).

Smith and Duckworth (2022) assert that Freirean pedagogies foster reflexivity and critical thinking, especially for those navigating educational disadvantage. Their research provides empirical evidence where students became increasingly aware of structural inequality in society and the challenges they faced as a result. This awareness or "conscientisation" (Smith and Duckworth, 2022, p.72) equipped students with the ability to challenge their situations and internalised assumptions, recognise

the influence of broader structural influences and exercise greater agency in interpreting and responding to their own personal, educational and social circumstances. This point is also emphasised by White et al. (2018) who highlight the value of Freire's praxis approaches in developing agency and a sense of self among learners, especially those from lower socio-economic or marginalised backgrounds where such opportunities had previously been constrained.

3.3.5 Limitations of Freire's Approach

Despite the repeated attempts at emancipation, it can be challenging to move beyond the vicious circle of oppression and it is clear that education has the ability to both liberate and constrain the student. As highlighted in Chapter 2, there is an increasing level of demands placed on teachers which make it difficult to dedicate the time and attention needed to build relationships with students (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021; Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 2022). Grummell (2023) writes that Freirean pedagogies are "severely curtailed by the growth of performativity and reporting requirements imposed through the annual performance targets in Irish FET" (p.155). Structural barriers such as examination criteria and formats can "limit opportunities for critical dialogue and participatory learning" (Majola et al., 2025, p.27) and teachers may struggle to implement student centred and dialogical practices due to limited autonomy and control over classroom conditions as a result of structural constraints, school expectations and curriculum demands (Calcagni et al., 2023).

Further challenges present where teachers lack the skills and confidence required to adopt the elements of Freire's critical pedagogy and where they resort to traditional teacher led approaches such as the banking concept discouraged by Freire (Fitzsimons, 2024; Majola et al., 2025). Furthermore, Brookfield et al. (2022) outline that even though a teacher may make great attempts to create a democratic learning environment, "some of the learners just experience it as a slightly revamped form of oppression or manipulation or coercion" (p.132) and that regardless of the teaching approaches, students still view the classroom as a "heightened form of surveillance"

(p.132). Compayré (1907) states that “Education would be a tyranny if it did not lead toward freedom” (p.90), indicating that education is powerful and that if it did not actively foster freedom, it risks functioning as a mechanism of domination and control.

Reay et al. (2009) found that many students who succeeded in education had developed high levels of resilience as a result of reflecting on their situation and developing survival strategies to successfully complete their studies. This process of reflection and action helps students to identify areas of self-improvement which in turn enables them to adapt and fit in with their environment (McNay, 1999). However, while this process has proven to be a positive influence on students in general, for others, it can present more problems than solutions. Research reveals that through self-reflection, individuals can develop a deeper awareness of the constraints shaping their lives as well as a recognition of the limited nature of the freedoms and choices available to them (Craib, 1992; Mitchell and Green, 2002; Adams, 2006; Ballard et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is a body of literature that argues that individuals possess reflexive agency and actively engage in “the process of self-formation” (Giroux, 1983, p.292) whereby they develop critical awareness through lived experience independently of educational experience (Marginson, 2023). This is also evidenced in findings by Reay et al. (2009) who found that working class students demonstrated “super-human” resilience through a “process of self-conscious reflexivity” (Reay, 2009, p.1105).

Freire’s critical pedagogy provides an important framework for understanding education as a site of power, dialogue and emancipation. However, critiques of Freire suggest that his framing can at times risk insufficient attention to the differentiated ways in which power is experienced across social identities such as gender, race, disability, migration status and age (Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 1994; Gore and Luke, 2014). Crenshaw (1989) argues that experiences of disadvantage cannot always be adequately understood through singular categories of analysis as individuals may experience multiple structures of inequality. As Fitzsimons (2024) observes “No one form of oppression exists on a single axis. Rather, they are intersectional” (p.22). Building on

Freire's work, hooks offers a more explicitly intersectional understanding of education and power (hooks, 1994, 2000, 2003). While aligned with Freire's critique of the banking model of education and through her emphasis on dialogue, critical consciousness and emancipation, hooks foregrounds the lived realities of individuals whose educational experiences are shaped by multiple forms of marginalisation. Therefore, while Freire's work offers an important framework for understanding oppression and emancipation, these critiques suggest that a more nuanced interpretation is needed to fully account for the complexity and diversity of the lived experience.

3.3.6 Contribution of Freire's Critical Pedagogy to this thesis

Freire's critical pedagogy provides a theoretical and practical framework for understanding how FET can operate as a transformative and emancipatory space for FET students. Freire's work is aimed at helping the oppressed to overcome societal inequalities and oppression and is therefore relevant to the FET student population which is largely made up of disadvantaged or marginalised learners (SOLAS, 2019; Bailey, 2021; O'Mahony et al., 2022). Many of these learners feel they "ended up doing a PLC" by necessity rather than by choice (Ní Chorca et al., 2025, p.13), some felt forced or bullied to enrol in FET in order to retain government social welfare payments, while others felt that they were unable to invoke choice and free-will as a result of institutional barriers (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017).

It is argued that FET has the capacity to deliver an emancipatory experience for students, leading to equity and autonomy, empowering individuals to move beyond hardships and inequalities (Smith and Duckworth, 2022). While Bourdieu argues that the "educational system reproduces all the more perfectly the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes" (Bourdieu, 1973, p.80), Freire on the other hand asserts that education enables individuals to recognise and transcend structural constraints, exercise human agency and position themselves critically in their world:

as men and women we are cultural beings endowed with the option to choose. We are also cultural beings who can make our own decisions and, for this reason, we are cultural beings endowed with the ability to rupture...Then we can conclude that we are innately programmed to choose, to make decisions, and to take positions in the world. We are born programmed to learn. Thus, we are programmed to learn, to teach, and in doing so, our human agency cannot be reduced to any form of determinism (Freire and Macedo, 1995, p.388).

Fleming (2016) believes that Freire's pedagogy "is the most significant theory of adult education" (p.2) suggesting that it positions education as a potential catalyst for change, supporting a shift from social inequality and injustice towards a more inclusive and humane society. Jacobs et al. (2022) propose that students and teachers have the ability to be "changemakers" and that they "play a powerful role in creating a better world" (p.112). Freire's critical pedagogy has the potential to facilitate this capacity for change through the establishment of collaborative teacher-student relationships, critical dialogue and praxis. In this way, FET can act as "the practice of freedom" (Freire, 2013, p.131) which enables individuals to overcome societal barriers and "deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Shaull, 2005, p.34). Therefore Freire's critical pedagogy provides a lens for understanding how educational settings can either disrupt or perpetuate societal reproduction.

Freire's critical pedagogy is further strengthened through the integration of an intersectionality framework providing an interpretative lens to understand the complex and differentiated experiences of participants (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2015). This lens is particularly relevant to this study as student experiences cannot be fully understood through social class or educational disadvantage alone. While socio-economic positioning shapes educational opportunities and constraints (Bourdieu, 1990a), education may also be experienced through the intersecting influences of gender, age, disability, migration history, language, caring responsibilities and prior educational trajectories (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1994; Reay, 2003; Collins, 2015;

Goodley, 2017). An intersectional critical pedagogical lens therefore adds a more nuanced interpretation of student experiences, recognising the different ways these experiences are lived and negotiated. This is particularly important in a longitudinal study as participants entered FET from different starting points and encountered different educational experiences over time. In this way, intersectionality offers a complementary interpretative lens that enhances understanding of the complexities of the participant experience and perspectives as a result of their engagement in FET.

3.4 Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow)

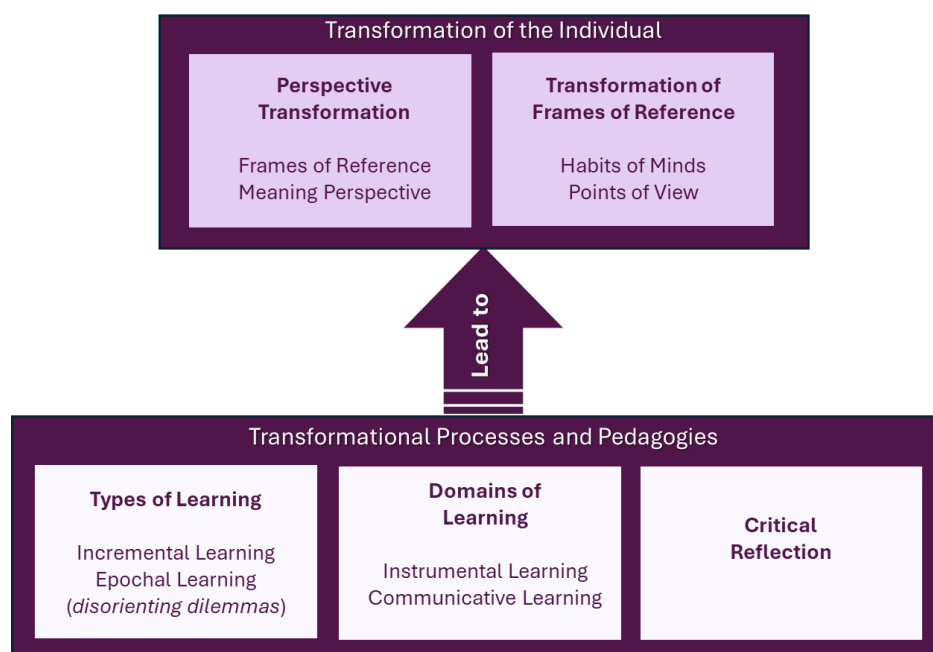
Theories of adult learning can assist our understanding of how “people learn to awaken and then act on their human agency” (Brookfield, 2012, p.135). Mezirow’s transformative learning can therefore help us to understand the potential of education to “awaken” students (Brookfield, 2012, p.135), helping them to harness their agency in order to bring about transformative changes in their lives (Taylor, 2000). Taylor and Cranton (2012) write that “Transformative learning has both individual and social dimensions and implications” (p.77) which is highlighted by Mezirow (1981) when he defines transformative learning as:

the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new under-standings. It is the learning process by which adults come to recognize their culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them and take action to overcome them” (pp.6-7).

As illustrated in Figure 3.2, Mezirow identifies several elements within his theory of transformative learning. He believes that students’ *frames of reference* (the assumptions, beliefs and attitudes that guide their behaviour), and their *perspectives* (how students interpret and understand the world) can be transformed through the implementation of pedagogical practices including the types and domains of learning

and critical reflection. The following sections shall discuss these theoretical concepts further and outline their applicability to this study and the FET sector.

Figure 3.2 Elements of Mezirow's Transformative Learning



3.4.1 Perspective Transformation

Transformative learning, originally referred to as Perspective Transformation (Mezirow 1978) is a concept introduced to the field of adult education whereby learners change their perspectives and attitudes towards their relationships, thus facilitating a change in their behaviour and outcome. This concept emerged as a result of Mezirow's awareness of the lack of relevant and practical theories to assist adult education practitioners, stating that "research has been fragmented" and that "Results have been too particularized or too generalized to provide practical guidance to practitioners" (Mezirow, 1970, p.1).

Mezirow's work was inspired by Freire's concept of conscientization (Freire, 1970) which holds that education enables individuals to become consciously aware of their environment through critical reflection, thus motivating them to take action to rectify or improve their situation. Mezirow believed that certain situations can initiate a change or transformation in the way individuals view themselves, their relationships

and the world around them. He viewed this as a “crucial development task of maturity” (Mezirow, 1978, p.108) and he believed that people had the potential to become critically aware of their perspectives and capable of changing these perspectives. Mezirow highlights the possibility to escape from the chains of social reproduction through advocating that individuals become “critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships” (Mezirow, 1981, p.6). While Mezirow highlights that not all learning is transformative, he believes it may still be important: “We can learn simply by adding knowledge to our meaning schemes or learning new meaning schemes...and it can be a crucially important experience for the learner (Mezirow 1991, p.223).

3.4.2 *Frames of Reference: Habits of Mind and Points of View*

Mezirow continued to develop this perspective transformation theory further, incorporating a more holistic and inclusive approach and referring to this theory as Transformative Learning which he defined as:

This rational process of learning within awareness is a metacognitive application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired *frame of reference*—a mind-set or worldview of orienting assumptions and expectations involving values, beliefs, and concepts—by assessing its epistemic assumptions (Mezirow in Dirkx et al., 2006, p.124).

Mezirow believed that having entered adulthood, people have amalgamated a body of assumptions, values, biases and conditioned responses which define their lifeworld which he characterises as meaning perspectives or *frames of reference*. Frames of reference are an integral part of the adult’s make-up and affect how they perceive, process and respond to new information and experiences (Mezirow, 1997). A vital element to transformative learning is for the learner to become aware of their own frames of reference and be able to challenge or adjust these frames of reference, which in turn may alter their original frame of references to one that is more inclusive, open and integrative of new knowledge and experience (Baumgartner, 2012).

Frames of reference function as a lens through which the individual views the world and they are made up of fixed assumptions, expectations and *habits of mind*, the internal coding of an individual causing them to think or act in a certain way (Mezirow, 1997). Cranton (2010b) believes that transformative learning has the propensity to alter habits of mind and thus enhance the emancipatory outcome for the individual. Habits of mind tend to be deep rooted and fixed, so much so that they are difficult to change, reflecting Bourdieu's theory on habitus mentioned earlier in this chapter. Mezirow (1997) illustrates that "An example of a habit of mind is ethnocentrism, the predisposition to regard others outside one's own group as inferior" (p.6). Habits of mind regularly emanate from the influence of friends, family and peers throughout the individual's formative years and can be the result of socio-cultural assimilation (Mezirow 1997), again echoing Bourdieu's concept of habitus which is a "structuring mechanism that operates from within agents" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.18).

Points of view are a second dimension within a frame of reference. Points of view are more surface level tenets and are the outcome and results of habits of mind. They are situational and can be changed more easily than habits of mind as we are more conscious of them and we tend to receive feedback on our points of view. Mezirow (2000) explains that "A point of view comprises clusters of meaning schemes—sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes and judgments—that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects, and attribute causality" (p.18). Points of view are perspectives that people hold and that can be adopted from other points of view or adapted in order to interpret information or resolve a problem (Wang and Cranton, 2011). An example can be seen through problem solving - if we do not reach the appropriate resolution with our own point of view, we may attempt to use the points of view of others as an alternative method of problem solving. If this works, then an adult may change their point of view to incorporate the point of view that was successful in that instance. Mezirow (1997) views education as an active mechanism through which points of view are examined and altered, stating that through transformative learning "We can become critically

reflective of the assumptions we or others make when we learn to solve problems...We may be critically reflective of assumptions when reading a book, hearing a point of view, engaging in task-oriented problem solving” (p.7).

3.4.3 Transformational Processes and Pedagogies

(i) Incremental and Epochal Learning

Transformative learning may be incremental, taking place gradually and over a period of time, or it may be epochal, where learning takes place suddenly, intensely and quite dramatically (Dirkx et al., 2006). Incremental transformative learning refers to changes that arise as a result of smaller and less impactful experiences which take place in piecemeal fashion, steadily over a period of time. Epochal transformative learning is much more dramatic and immediate, often the result of a personal crises or a pivotal moment which leads to a sudden shift in the individual’s frame of reference. Mezirow (1978) believes that this can be the result of a “disorienting dilemma” (p.103) where something dramatic happens that causes us to reflect on our existing knowledge and seeks us to question and reassess our views and lifeworld. This epochal learning and change in participants’ frames of reference bears similarities to Freire’s belief of “education as the practice of freedom” (Freire, 2013, p.131) and that education has the potential to remove obstacles or “limit situations” thereby initiating the agency and free-will of individuals (Freire, 2021, p.208). The concept of a disorienting dilemma resonates also in Bourdieu’s discussion of the “hysteresis effect” (Bourdieu (1977, p.78) involving times of crises where profound changes or unexpected occurrences can compel the individual to adopt a reflexive approach to identify solutions, potentially leading to an occurrence of transformation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

According to Mezirow disorienting dilemmas are catalysts for bringing about transformative life changes (Mezirow, 1978). Sudden or epochal learning tends to have a profound impact on the individual and can be life altering, resulting in changes in the individual’s beliefs, assumptions and ultimately habits of minds (Kasl and Elias, 2000; Mejiuni, 2012). Mezirow (1978) contends that dilemmas involve both commonplace

challenges as well as significant challenges with more dramatic consequences such as life crises like a sudden loss of a friend, career, betrayal or rejection. Dirkx et al. (2006) outlines that while an individual may be presented with such crises, they may not always accept to engage in a deeper form of learning as a result. Mezirow (1978) outlines that this is dependent on what an individual wants to learn, their readiness to learn and their determination to succeed, highlighting that individuals can either accept the challenge and embrace the change or we can ignore it. In this way, it is clear that transformative learning is not automatic or guaranteed. It is a process that we must consciously choose and accept to engage in. Mezirow therefore views the role of the educator as one which develops the readiness, motivation and conditions needed for transformative learning:

To facilitate transformative learning, educators must help learners become aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions. Learners need practice in recognizing frames of reference and using their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective. Finally, learners need to be assisted to participate effectively in discourse (Mezirow, 1997, p.10).

(ii) Domains of Learning: Instrumental and Communicative Learning

Drawing on Habermas' communicative action (1984), Mezirow believed that domains of learning are a vital aspect of transformative learning and involve both instrumental and communicative learning. Instrumental learning seeks to control the environment or to predict events and take appropriate action in order to ensure an optimum outcome (Cranton and Roy, 2003), an example of which could include gaining knowledge through empirical tests (Mezirow, 1997). Instrumental learning is important, but not as impactful as communicative learning (Cranton, 2010a) which seeks to understand and interpret what others mean when they communicate with you. Communicative learning involves dialogue and discourse which enables individuals to engage in critical thinking through communication.

For communicative learning to occur, it requires at least two people and it "involves understanding purposes, values, beliefs, and feelings" (Mezirow, 1997, p.6). Mezirow (2012) believes that free and full participation in learning is brought about through

discourse which assists the learner in “finding one’s voice” (p.78). Mezirow grounded his concept of discourse in the work of Habermas who conceptualised inquiry as “processes of mutual understanding in interactions mediated in ordinary language” (Habermas, 1972, p.194). Such inquiry involves ongoing feedback and critical reflection, functioning as a “self-regulating, cumulative learning process” (Habermas, 1972, p.95) that contributes to the development of knowledge and a more complete understanding of reality. Mezirow (2003) also points to the importance of critical-dialectical discourse in enabling transformative learning which involves an analytical examination of self-beliefs, true consideration of different viewpoints, engaging in reflective and rational debates and seeking consensus or synthesis of various perspectives.

Mezirow (2003) asserts that the educator can nurture and develop the skills of the learner so that they may fully participate in critical-dialectical discourse. “Transformative learning is not an add-on. It is the essence of adult education” (Mezirow, 1997, p.11). As such, Mezirow believes it is imperative that adult educators actively work towards ensuring inclusivity and equality for learners:

As economic, social, and psychological conditions fostering social justice are essential for inclusion in effective critical-dialectical discourse—the process by which we come to understand our own experience—overcoming the threat of exclusion constitutes a significant epistemological rationale for adult educators to commit themselves to economic, cultural, and social action initiative (Mezirow, 2003, p.60).

Mezirow (1997) holds that the educator plays a significant role in facilitating these conditions in order to fully realise the benefits of transformative learning. He regards the educator as a ‘collaborative learner’ who views the learners as peers in the learning environment as opposed to the subject-object relationship that education has been traditionally based on. As a result, teacher-student relationships and peer relationships play a key role in transformative learning (Cunningham 1998; English and Irving 2012; Fleming 2018). Echoing Freire’s desire for supportive learning environments that are free from coercion (Freire, 2013), Mezirow outlines that ideal

conditions for transformative learning require participants to have access to full information, feel free from unequal power structures and coercion and have equal opportunity to participate in discourse where they can question, challenge, refute and reflect (Mezirow, 1996a).

Gunnlaugson (2005) states that people have a need to feel motivated toward transformation and for this to be achieved, students need to be and feel supported. Mezirow (1997) proposes that the educator acts as “a facilitator and provocateur rather than as an authority” (p.11) in order to encourage full, equal, respectful and collaborative participation. Taylor (2007) indicates that trust, friendship and support are necessary for the occurrence of discourse and that effective discourse can only be achieved “through trustful relationships that allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve mutual and consensual understanding” (Taylor, 2007, p.179).

Mezirow (2000) also discusses the value of autonomous thinking where the learner can develop confidence in new environments, roles and relationships, bringing about a “reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspectives” (p.22). Transformative learning leads to agency through the learner’s increased confidence, awareness and understanding (Curry-Stevens 2007; Taylor and Synder 2012). This allows the learner to become an autonomous thinker whereby they are independent, self-directed, critically reflective and confident learners who are able to set their own goals and make informed judgements and decisions without undue influences or pressure. Mezirow (2000) believes that through encouragement of full and free participation by students, critical-dialectic discourse and reflective action, educators foster a “greater realization of agency for all learners” (p.30).

(iii) Critical Reflection

While Freire wrote of the importance of reflection (Freire, 2017), Mezirow deepens this concept, shifting this reflection towards greater criticality and reflexivity. Mezirow outlines the importance of critical self-reflection whereby individuals reflect in an

analytical manner which challenges their assumptions, beliefs and meaning structures. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built and "are the emancipatory dimensions of adult learning, the function of thought and language that frees the learner from frames of reference, paradigms, or cultural canon...that limit or distort communication and understanding" (Mezirow, 1998, pp.191-192). Critical self-reflection, also referred to as reflexivity (Nairn et al., 2012; Fabbri, 2024), helps individuals decide on their priorities and organise their lives accordingly (Heelas, 1996). Sweetman (2003) found that process of critical self-reflection was a systematic process which allowed students to create opportunities and succeed in higher education, a goal that was once unachievable for them due to societal barriers. Reay et al. (2009) found that disorientating dilemmas prompted students to engage in processes of "self-conscious reflexivity" (p.1105), enabling them to move beyond feelings of alienation in their environment. Mezirow (1997) contends that through designing participatory, learner-centred activities such as group discussion, problem-solving, role-play and reflective exercises, educators can actively cultivate critical self-reflection by creating supportive learning environments that promote autonomous thinking, dialogue and an examination of assumptions.

3.4.4 Tensions within Transformative Teaching and Learning

Divergent opinions on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning have been proposed since its inception and critical perspectives are evident in the literature. Newman (2012) proposes that "transformative learning does not exist" (p.39) and that it is just a good form of learning and teaching. He asserts that the term "good learning" (Newman, 2012, p.36) should actually be used instead of transformative learning, suggesting that learning by definition implies change and as a result some change is always to be expected from a learning process. However, having reviewed several empirical studies using transformative learning theoretical processes, Newman (2012) acknowledges that evidence does exist of a change in attitudes, knowledge and skills, although he believes that this is not unexpected given the effort involved by educators, organisers and the learners, arguing that any steps outlined as part of the

process towards transformative learning, are simply “examples of good educational practice” (Newman, 2012, p.38).

Kegan (2018) views the universality of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory to be problematic as “Transformation begins to refer to any kind of change or process at all” (p.41), while Taylor (2007) questions the tendency to assume that change is the result of transformative learning when in fact it may in fact just be the “product of normal development of the individual and/or socio-cultural change within society” (p.176). Nevertheless, Wang and Cranton (2011) highlight that transformative learning is in fact a powerful tool to help learners develop and grow and “Therefore, the value of such a theory is self-explanatory” (p.64). Jean (2019) argues that ambiguities are inherent in transformative learning as it is unclear of what exactly transforms? This point is also raised by Kegan (2018) who questions “What form transforms?” (p.29). Merriam and Bierema (2014) question the “boundaries of transformation” (p.99), particularly the extent to which transformative learning can facilitate change not only at the individual level but also within groups and wider society. Further tensions arise in attempting to ascertain the stage a learner is at in terms of the transformation process and how to assess transformation in terms of effectiveness and the nature of the evidence required (Merriam and Bierema, 2014). This also raises issues that transformative learning is difficult to assess due to the absence of a tool to measure transformative outcomes (Rojo et al., 2022).

As highlighted in Chapter 2, teachers are increasingly bound by performative accountability policies which pose challenges to designing and implementing transformative learning pedagogies (Pereira and Tay, 2023). Morley (2023) highlights that teachers have reduced time and control over how they manage academic practice due to the rise of neoliberalism in education where “practices are subordinated to managerial imperatives” (p.571). Morley (2023) states that there is increasing pressure on teachers to show quantifiable outputs of their work “while concurrently reducing academic practices to robotic-like, decontextualised techniques” (p.579).

While critical self-reflection has proven to have a positive influence, for some students it can present more problems than solutions. Mitchell and Green (2002) found that the process of reflexivity enabled individuals to consider their situation and to examine the choices and opportunities that could be available. However, because of the lack of support available to these individuals, they became more aware of the constraints upon them and the absence of freedom of choices that were truly open to them. Reflexivity can therefore give rise to the situation of “reflexivity losers” (Adams, 2006, p.519) where people can feel worse after reflecting on their lives and realising the lack of control that they actually have (Adams, 2007). In such cases, reflexivity can have a negative impact on an individual’s self-esteem and future aspirations as they become increasingly aware of their lack of freedom to make choices to change their lives for the better (Adams, 2006; Craib, 1992). Reay et al. (2009) found that reflexive practices “rarely work as an impetus for hope and mobility for the vast majority of the working classes” and that “self-awareness often result in fatalism and statis” (p.1115). Similarly, Adams (2006) concludes that “Reflexivity in this context does not bring choice, just a painful awareness of the lack of it” (p.525).

Questions have been raised about how exactly to apply transformative learning in practice and knowing when a student is ready to engage in transformation (Taylor, 2007). Some critics feel that it lacks theoretical, methodical and conceptual rigour and discipline (Dirkx, 2012; Newman, 2012) or that it should embody a more visual, spiritual and emotional approach (Dirkx, 1997; Dirkx, 2001; Tisdell, 2003). In dialogue with Mezirow and Dirkx (Dirkx et al. 2006), Cranton acknowledges critical considerations of Mezirow’s theory which revolve around it “being too rational and not incorporating more imaginative and affective dimensions” (p.137).

Alhadeff-Jones (2012) warns of seeking a more prescriptive approach as a search for “a totalizing discourse [of transformative learning theory]...tends to reduce the diversity of variables determining real-life experience in order to highlight universal characteristic” (p.181). However, given the vast elements involved in the teaching and learning environment, it is not possible to detail every minutia involved throughout a

learning process and as a result, the educator must assume some responsibility for adapting this theory to their own specific cases. Furthermore, adopting a prescriptive approach to transformative learning would remove responsibility and creativity from the teacher. It would also ignore the unique requirements of situational and learner adaptability, thereby simultaneously eliminating the concept of autonomous thinking, a key tenet of transformative learning.

In response to critics, Mezirow (1996a) considers transformative learning as “an evolving theory of adult learning” (p.162). This is evident in the changes over time from Mezirow’s theory from Perspective Transformation in 1978 and subsequent inclusions of frames of reference, types of learning and domains of learning. In the title and coverpage of his book, Mezirow (2000) acknowledges that transformative learning is a “*a theory in progress*” emphasising that transformative theory is not a perfect unmoveable framework but that it continually adapts to meet the new demands and requirements within education. Mezirow has always welcomed contributions to improve his theory (Mezirow, 1996a; Mezirow, 2000) and in the true spirit of transformative inducing critical-dialectical discourse, Mezirow was open to engaging in critical conversations with other authors about his theory. Mezirow has frequently responded to critical questions (Mezirow, 1989; Mezirow, 1994; Mezirow, 1996b) and in some cases collaborated on articles with critics who posed varying opinions (Mezirow, 2000; Dirkx et al., 2006; Mezirow and Taylor, 2012). In fact, even multi-dialectical critical discourse takes place as Dirkx (2012) responds directly to a sharp review of transformative theory by Newman (2012) advocating that transformative learning “has demonstrated remarkable theoretical consistency” since its inception in 1978 (Dirkx, 2012, p.399). Despite criticisms, there is even some humour and good nature in the process of discourse as Newman (2012, p.36) titles his article as “some mutinous thoughts” while Dirkx (2012, p.399) promptly responds with “An Intellectual Spanking”.

Fleming (2018) writes that “If transformative learning is to remain a living theory it must always remain open to being reconfigured and opportunities for elaboration

continue” (p.10). Recent developments in the field indicate that transformative learning is expanding beyond Mezirow’s predominantly individualistic and cognitive model towards more holistic approaches to education, reflecting emotional, moral, social and political growth. Cappiali (2025) proposes a Transformative-Emancipatory Pedagogy (TEP) which “prioritizes holistic, inclusive, deep, experiential, interconnected, transformative, and emancipatory learning...to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse, interconnected, and polarized world” (Cappiali, 2025, p.xxi). Fleming (2018) suggests that “Transformation is not just of the individual but also of society” (p.10) and that transformative learning addresses “freedom, justice, care and equality in the spheres of family, law and work” (p.10). There is increasing evidence of the intersection of critical pedagogy with transformative learning which places an emphasis on social justice, challenging entrenched power structures and promoting societal change through critical consciousness and critical reflection (Walton, 2015; Fleming, 2018; Bedford, 2022).

3.4.5 Significance of Mezirow’s theory to this study

Significant gaps exist in our understanding of students’ experiences in FET and the influences of teachers and the FET environment on the student. Many students come to FET having faced challenging barriers and personal difficulties which contributed to feelings of shame, low self-esteem and futility, but as a result of studying in further education, these students can feel an increased sense of dignity, confidence and empowerment (Smith and Duckworth, 2022). Mezirow highlights the importance of the teacher in guiding these processes through the provision of safe and supportive learning environments which are free from power structures and coercion.

SOLAS acknowledge the transformative potential of FET in naming their 2020-2024 strategy: “Future FET: Transforming Learning” and states that “FET can have a transformative impact on the lives of our learners” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.6). This thesis seeks to unpack transformative processes and mechanisms that occur in the FET setting and to explore transformative changes that they produce. In this way, Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory offers an extremely pertinent framework

to understand not only the impact of learning on students, but also the educational practices within FET that contribute to their experiences and outcomes.

3.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is central to this thesis as it acts as a guide or “integrating ecosystem” which consolidates all elements of the research in a way that connects context, theory and methodology of the research (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017, p.32). This thesis is underpinned by an integrated conceptual framework that combines the work of Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, Freire’s critical pedagogy and Mezirow’s transformative learning theory in order to explore the experiences of participants before, during and after their studies in an FET college.

Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field and capital provide a theoretical lens to understand how students’ backgrounds shape the reasons and motivations for studying in an FET college. This will also allow contextualisation of the effect of culture, family and social class on students’ educational experience and progression opportunities, all of which can lead to societal reproduction. Freire’s critical pedagogy will determine if students encountered oppressive forces and if so, how these may have impacted their decision to enrol in FET. It will also identify if there are examples of emancipatory learning practices in FET that may enable students to overcome such oppression. Moreover, Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning will be applied to determine if there is evidence of transformative practices in an FET college and the effect of these practices on students. This integrated framework will thus allow the exploration of why students enter a college of FET and also how their experiences in FET influence their personal and professional trajectories over time. Figure 3.3 illustrates the key elements within the conceptual framework used for this research.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the theoretical work of Bourdieu, Freire and Mezirow whilst also discussing the limitations of each theory as well as their relevance to this thesis. In his research with working-class students, Willis (1983, p.110) notes

that “education was not about equality, but inequality”, where educational structures produce a continuous cycle of societal reproduction (Bessett and Gualtieri, 2002; Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004). Bourdieu emphasises that social structures, classifications, stereotypes and culture make it difficult for individuals to break out of lower social classes to access higher salaried and elevated status employment, with the predicted result that “*Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*” (Willis, 1977; Sassatelli et al., 2009). As outlined, many students face significant obstacles trying to access education or enrolment. Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction can help us to understand the factors which contribute to these barriers.

Bourdieu writes of habitus, field and capitals which greatly influences students regarding their educational choices and decisions. Habitus is the subconscious influence which determines how we act, behave and participate in society. The field, on the other hand relates to the environment into which the individual enters, voluntarily or otherwise, such as school, university, employment or moving home. This field environment imposes its own set of rules which may be the same or different to those experienced in the individual’s habitus. If the environments are similar, the individual may transition smoothly into the field, but if the environments are different, the individual may experience crises and find it difficult to remain or succeed within the field. Bourdieu also introduces the notion of capital which relates to assets or advantages that an individual may possess or acquire in order to strengthen their position in the field. The interaction of these concepts gives rise to the choices and decisions ultimately made by individuals (Bourdieu, 1990a; Cohen, 1998; Reay et al., 2009).

Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction can leave us bereft of hope and ambition, the realisation of which could have devastating consequences on individuals who may feel condemned to a life of social repetition and persistent inequalities. Moreover, social reproduction theory on its own does not explain why different outcomes occur for individuals from similar backgrounds and it also fails to explain the potential impact of FET as proposed by Smith and Duckworth (2022): “Further and adult education is a

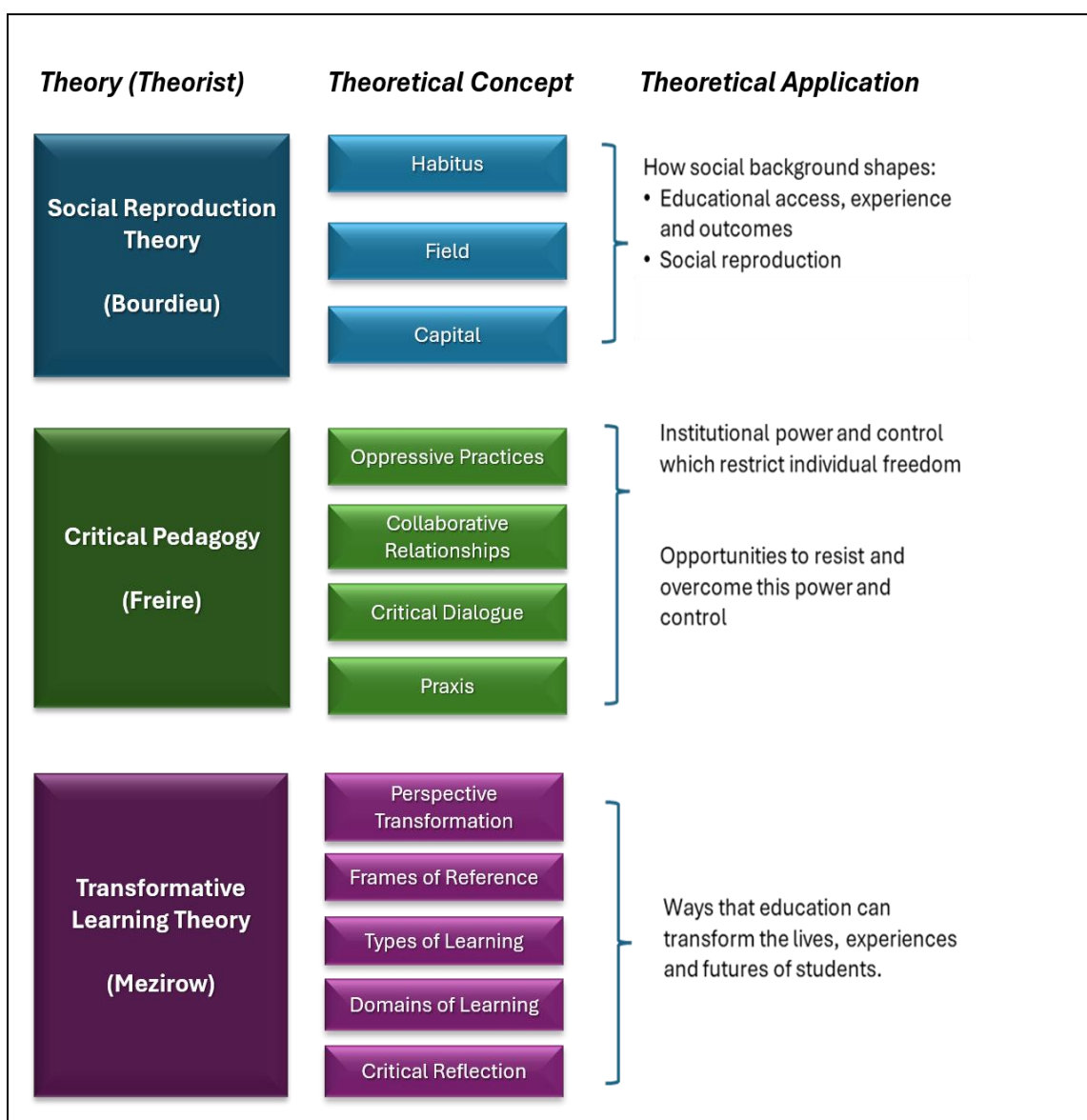
force not just for individual development but for addressing social inequality” (p.6). The work of Freire and Mezirow assists in bridging this gap through understanding how teaching and learning practices can help students to transcend barriers within society and education in addition to overcoming personal difficulties and challenges.

The student body of FET is comprised mainly of marginalised students who enrol in FET due to a lack of options and many have endured difficult life circumstances. For students who experienced a lack of autonomy in their lives, Freire’s critical pedagogy proposes a system of education which allows the student to be fully engaged and interactive in their education, build collaborative relationships with their teacher and to engage in critical dialogue which leads to a self-awareness and cognition of change, including ways to enact this change. Fleming (2022a) writes that “Conscientization according to Freire points to the process of becoming aware of one’s social class and of the roles that class and race (and in his later years gender) play in society” (p.11). This leads to empowerment which enables students to gain control in their lives, control which may never have been accessible to them before.

Supporting Freire’s critical pedagogy, Mezirow’s theory of Transformative Learning is also helpful as it provides guidance on the educational practices that can assist in achieving personal change and transformation. Mezirow confirms that all learning is important, but some types of learning may be more impactful than others. He terms the latter as epochal learning, consisting of disorienting dilemmas which act as powerful catalysts for individuals to critically examine and potentially challenge their deeply held beliefs, values, assumptions and ultimately their worldview. From an individualised or local perspective, disorienting dilemmas faced by students in FET can include prior academic failure, inability to gain access to university, discrimination, navigating identity and rapid technological development. From a global perspective, examples include the COVID-19 pandemic, social movements and protests, political upheavals and unrest. Mezirow explains that such events can instigate change for individuals.

In summary, while Bourdieu and Freire demonstrate a contextual illustration of the stratification and constraints within society, Freire and Mezirow provide guidance on how to move or adapt between different socio-economic environments. Freire and Mezirow collectively highlight education's role in advancing social justice and emphasise the importance of positive teacher-student relationships which are free from coercion, encouraging open and critical dialogue and communication. Freire provides the structural lens to dismantle oppression while Mezirow provides the practical lens to enable student transformation.

Figure 3.3 Conceptual Framework



Chapter 4. Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Research is a purposeful and systematic activity which aims to expand our knowledge and understanding. It “requires the methodology to see the detail that was not observable before” (Kumar, 2017, p.19) and involves a “process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue” (Creswell, 2012, p.3). This chapter will describe the research steps undertaken to provide empirical insight into the experiences of students within an FET context. Research methodology is an essential part of research which reveals the researcher’s motivations for the research and any influences that may affect the researcher, the research process or the outcome. Research methodology acts as a guide allowing the researcher to plan and organise a coherent and structured approach to their research and identify any potential issues or challenges. Most importantly, it provides a foundation for the research findings and strengthens the relevance, accuracy, credibility, validity and trustworthiness of the research outcomes (Adeoye, 2025).

This chapter will begin by outlining the influences on the researcher in terms of my ontological and epistemological perspectives and the significance of these perspectives for the research process. I shall then discuss the qualitative methodological approaches undertaken in order to address the research objectives of this thesis. Information will be presented regarding the processes involved in obtaining, interpreting and analysing the data for this study. The nature of this study and my position as a teacher/researcher lead to various ethical complexities which are considered in detail. The chapter will then conclude with an acknowledgement of the limitations of this research.

4.2 Research Philosophy

4.2.1 Researcher Positionality

Positionality outlines the researcher's worldview and their approach to the research process. It concerns the beliefs and assumptions of the researcher and their influence on the research (Holmes, 2020). The background of the researcher affects the area that the research has chosen to investigate (Malterud, 2001). Therefore, a declaration of positionality is increasingly common in the social sciences as many researchers include an auto-biographical section to outline any factors which may influence the results or findings of the research (Sikes and Potts, 2008).

Simon (2014, p.20) argues that the researcher is not expected to be objective or neutral but to "admit to biases and work with them". In this way, disclosure promotes transparency through the admission of potential biases and the identification of steps to minimise their impact. With regard to my background, I am a former FET student from a lower socio-economic sector who experienced significant barriers to higher education and subsequent career opportunities. I attended a one-year course in a Dublin VEC college immediately after my Leaving Certificate in 1989 and my experience during that year had a positive effect on me not only personally, but also on my educational and professional careers. Having worked in the business sector for several decades, I was continually drawn back to FET and began working full-time as an FET teacher in 2016. I am therefore considered an insider researcher, the implications of which are discussed later in this chapter, under Section 4.8.2.

Though my work in an FET College, I became increasingly interested in the journey of students during and after their time in FET. A significant number of students spoke frequently of their frustration with the education system and reported negative experiences from secondary school and barriers accessing university. These conversations prompted me to research this area further. These students also indicated that the educational system ultimately reduces their life to CAO points and

statistics which dictates their life course (O’Sullivan, 2018; McCoy et al., 2019; Irfan and Doyle, 2023). Therefore, through my research, I feel it is important to give a voice to participants where they are provided the opportunity to express themselves and share their opinions and experiences.

While my personal and professional connection to the FET sector offered valuable contextual understanding and facilitated rapport with participants, it also required critical reflexive attention. My own positive experience of FET, together with my professional commitment to the sector, may predispose me towards sympathetic interpretations of participant narratives while paying less attention to negative or contradictory experiences. Similarly, my familiarity with structural barriers in education may have created assumptions about participant motivations and influences which shaped their decisions to enrol in FET. Rather than claiming complete impartiality, I approached this research from a reflexive perspective, recognising that interpretation is inevitably shaped by personal history, values and professional experience. To strengthen transparency and analytical rigour, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, documenting assumptions, emotional responses, methodological decisions and emerging interpretations. Regular supervisory discussions also provided critical external challenge to my interpretations and helped ensure that analytical claims remained grounded in participant narratives rather than researcher assumptions.

4.2.2 Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives

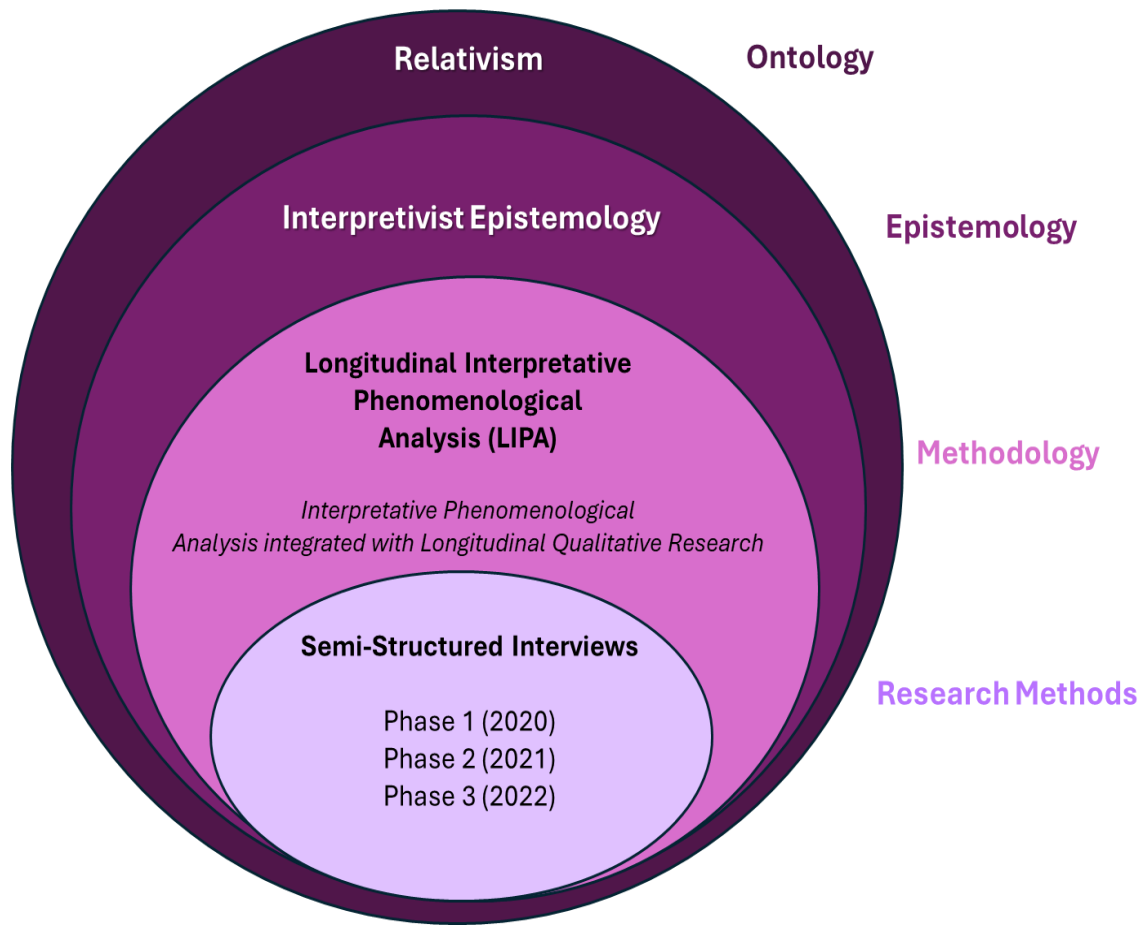
Awareness of the philosophical position of the researcher, including their ontological and epistemological perspectives, is important as a means to understand their approach to knowledge and data interpretation (William, 2024). It provides a critical foundation for methodological choices in research (Greene, 2008; Maxwell, 2011) and provides an insight into the worldview of the researcher (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Given the subjective and personal nature of the student experience in further education, this study adopts a relativist ontological stance acknowledging that reality is neither objective, singular or fixed but instead comprises multiple, co-existing realities that are experienced differently by different individuals or groups (Levers, 2013; Pretorius, 2024). Relativism seeks to understand how people make sense of their environment (Pretorius, 2024) and views reality as subjective in that “reality *is* human experience and human experience *is* reality” (Levers, 2013, p.2).

This ontology is supported by an interpretive epistemology which regards participants as the experts of their experience, providing the researcher with insights into their lives (Gunbayi, 2020). In this way, the researcher assumes the role of an interpreter in seeking to understand the meaning that participants bring to the research through these narratives.

Thus, this research is situated within an interpretivist paradigm which seeks to understand the experiences of students within a further education setting and gain an insight into how students view the effects of further education on their lives. This paradigm emphasises the understanding of subjective meanings, perspectives and experiences of individuals within a social context (Figure 4.1). While many similarities exist between interpretivism and constructivism (William, 2024), a key epistemic difference is evident as “constructivists view the research process as a shared construction of meaning, interpretivists maintain a certain level of separation, seeking to understand and explain participants' realities” (Pretorius, 2024, p.2706). Context is particularly important to this interpretative paradigm in order to understand cultural, historical and social factors that influence individuals and their beliefs (William, 2024; Gamage, 2025). No two students are identical and each student has lived a life prior to enrolling in further education. It is therefore important to consider the histories and backgrounds of individuals as these factors significantly shape their perceptions and experiences in further education.

Figure 4.1 Interpretive Research Paradigm



4.3 Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA)

This research aims to represent the experiences of participants who attended Riverview College of Further Education during the research period and to demonstrate the impact of further education on their lives. To achieve these aims, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is applied to this study. Additionally, this research seeks to understand their lived experiences not only during their time in further education but also in the subsequent year. For this reason, this study also employs a longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) approach. The integration of both IPA and LQR is a new and emerging qualitative research approach that is referred to as Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) (Farr and Nizza, 2019). Despite the

limited number of studies using this methodology, LIPA has been used to explore multiple topics, including health (Wanat et al., 2025), social sciences and education (Lane, 2022; Richards, 2024). Fara and Nizza (2019) indicate that the use of LIPA is expanding as it is “well-positioned to explore a range of temporal experiences, such as life transitions” (p.200). The following section discusses both the IPA and LQR elements of LIPA, their relevance to this research and the challenges involved with this methodology.

4.3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Phenomenology is an epistemological approach that looks at the perspective of those experiencing a phenomenon in order to expose the essence of the phenomenon (Teherani et al., 2015). Phenomenology looks at the lived experience of individuals and the impact of the phenomenon on their lives from their perspective (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 2016). It seeks to understand the experience “both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p.91). Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) was developed in the mid-1990s by Jonathan Smith and is a qualitative research approach (Smith et al., 2022) “concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience” (Smith, 2011, p.9). Qualitative methods allow for deeper understanding and interpretation by the researcher (Holloway and Galvin, 2016) which are not facilitated by quantitative approaches (Kuo and Wallace, 2020). McLeod and Thomson (2009) argue that qualitative research provides a “close-up shot of real lives, with focus on plot, storyline, turning points and defining moments” (p.61). IPA is a means to explore the lived experience of participants but also to examine the convergence and divergence of experiences (Tuffour, 2017; Miller et al., 2018). IPA integrates concepts by key phenomenological theorists including Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer and is “an approach to qualitative, experiential research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography” (Smith et al., 2022, p7).

Phenomenology looks at the lived experience of individuals and the impact of the phenomenon on their lives from their perspective (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 2016). It seeks to understand the experience “both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p.91). “Hermeneutic phenomenology is rooted in interpretation – interpreting experiences and phenomena via the individual’s *lifeworld*” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p.94). In order to go beyond descriptive phenomenology, the researcher must be aware of the background of the participants and the influences on their experiences. A further aspect of IPA is idiography which focusses on detail and provides for an in-depth analysis of the phenomena (Tuffour, 2017). In this way, IPA should use small samples, which allow the analysis and findings to move “from the examination of the single case to more general claims” (Smith et al., 2022, p.24). Smith (2022) contends effective IPA research allows for the exploration of the unique perspectives of each individual in addition to the identification of overarching and common themes in terms of alignment and differentiation (Tuffour, 2017).

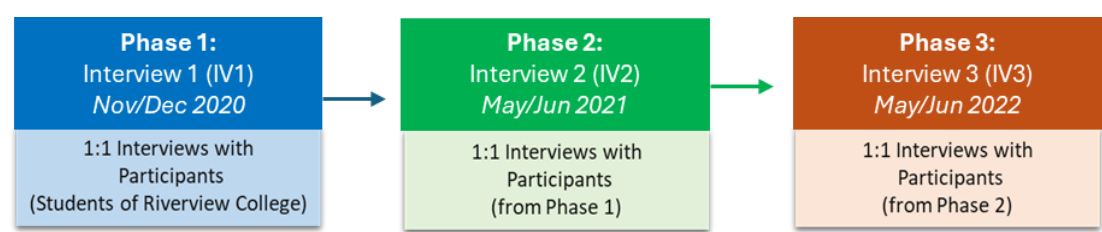
4.3.2 Longitudinal Qualitative Research (LQR)

For this research, while it is important to extrapolate a deep and comprehensive insight into the experiences of participants, it is also important to view the impact of further education on the student experience, not only during their participation in the college, but also after they leave FET. Smith et al. (2022) note that “Temporality and change are important aspects of experience” (p.127). To this end, longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) is an appropriate research methodology as it facilitates the observation of changes in individuals over time (Hermanowicz, 2013; Kneck and Auduly, 2019; Wright and Patrick, 2019). LQR is a form of qualitative research that provides for the collection of information from the same participants during a period that sufficiently allows the researcher to investigate the existence of change in the phenomena under review (Balmer and Richards, 2017).

LQR provides for data to be collected over two or more distinct periods of time, thus allowing phenomena to be observed and compared not only at one specific time point but also through time (Menard, 2002; Hermanowicz, 2013). LQR research makes it possible to view each individual participant’s story and journey, events that occur along the way and the impact of these events on the individual (McLeod and Thomson, 2009). Unlike traditional qualitative research collected at a single point in time, which tends to provide a retrospective and historical collection of data, LQR allows for information to be captured in real time (Saldaña, 2003), enabling us to look to the past, present and the future and to examine if forecasts were realised.

LQR is a relatively new and innovative approach that is gaining popularity, especially in the social sciences, due to the nature and level of information that can be gleaned from this approach (Thomson and McLeod, 2015). It is recommended that while two is the minimum number of phases for a longitudinal research design, three or more phases are ideal (Chan, 1998). Singer and Willett (1996) found that the use of three or more phases in an LQR study increases reliability of the research. The LQR for this study comprised a three-phase study involving participants of FET courses over a period of two years: the first interviews were organised within the first academic term of the course (November/December 2020), the second interviews were organised at the end of that academic year (May/June 2021) and the third interview took place one year later (May/June 2022). In this way, changes can be identified from when participants began their course in FET to when they completed their course and also to examine their life stories in the year after completion of their FET course.

Figure 4.2 LQR Timeframe³⁵



³⁵ The number of interviews undertaken at each stage is discussed under Sample Size (Section 4.4.4)

It is worth clarifying that the terminology surrounding LQR varies with different authors employing different terms to discuss this approach. Some use the term longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) (Thomson and Holland, 2003; Hermanowicz, 2016; McCoy, 2017; Smith et al., 2022; Cooper et al., 2025), some use the term qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) (Corden and Millar, 2007; Morrow and Crivello, 2015; Neale, 2015; Irvine et al., 2025), while others use these terms interchangeably (McLeod and Thomson, 2009; Audulv et al., 2022). This thesis adopts the term longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) to emphasise the significance of time and temporality in the research design.

4.3.3 Challenges of Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA)

Any research of a longitudinal nature can be demanding for both the researcher and the participant. Smith et al. (2022) advise that while longitudinal IPA studies can be “extremely powerful and informative” (p.128), they can also be complex and challenging. The iterative process of analysing qualitative data through various time periods is resource intensive and can require a significant amount of time and commitment from the researcher (Alase, 2017). To alleviate this issue, continuous reflexivity enabled an awareness of researcher well-being and regular communication with supervisors provided guidance and support throughout the research process (Wanat et al., 2021).

Due to the recurring and time-consuming nature of this methodology, participants may suffer from participant fatigue and feel that they are over researched (Clark, 2008). The comparatively prolonged timeframe of LIPA can lead to students drifting away from the study (Clark, 2008) resulting in declining engagement rates (Baxter et al., 2001). Attrition rates can vary substantially with some studies reporting as little as 4.1% while other studies report an attrition rate of up to 85% (Marcellus, 2004; Delfabbro et al., 2017). Participant drop-out can lead to potential attrition bias in the study, posing a threat for the internal and external validity of a study (Jacobsen, 2021; Northcutt Bohmert, 2019). Wanat et al. (2021) note that participants who drop out of the study

can be fundamentally different to those who continue in the LQR. This can bias the results of the study as dedicated participants are more likely to remain throughout the study resulting in more positive responses than may otherwise have been received (Asendorpf, 2014; Winefield et al., 1990).

To reduce the possibility of attrition, I focussed on developing positive relationships with participants and continuing this relationship throughout the duration of the study (Hanna et al., 2014). I remained in contact with participants and sent individualised emails on various occasions including Christmas and end of term. I also met up with some of the participants when we returned to college after COVID-19 and I plan to share my research findings with participants when the thesis is finalised. Further details on participation and attrition rates will be discussed in the data collection section (4.4) of this chapter.

IPA is inherently subjective which means that existing biases and assumptions of the researcher can influence the findings. As a result, “two analysts working with the same data may come up with different interpretations” (Tuffour, 2017, p.5). A participant’s account of a phenomenon may be influenced by a range of situational factors such as their present emotional or physical well-being, current life events, stresses and constraints and their accounts may alter depending on a variance in any of these factors. Such situational factors may similarly affect the researcher. The double hermeneutic process whereby “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith and Osborn, 2015, p.41), introduces the risk and potential for ambiguity or misinterpretation (Tuffour, 2017). It is therefore important to ensure ongoing reflexivity through note taking and critical self-reflection to ensure that I am aware of my own biases and worldview. This reflexivity allowed me to identify, critically examine and minimise the influence of my own assumptions on the interpretative process (Love et al., 2020). I have also provided a declaration of positionality in this chapter as a means to promote

honesty and transparency in this research (Holmes, 2020; Gurr et al., 2024; Ugiagbe et al., 2024).

Participants may find it difficult to express their opinions and to fully articulate their lived experiences. The interviewer therefore needs a high level of skill in the area of interviewing (Hartman and Squires, 2024) and requires “a combination of strong empathic engagement and highly attuned antennae ready to probe further into interesting and important aspects” (Smith and Osborn, 2015, p.42). Prior to my work in the field of FET, I worked in the area of human resources gaining over twenty years’ experience conducting recruitment interviews and holding meetings on topics such as employee relations, well-being and engagement. I also hold two post-graduate qualifications in human resource management. Therefore, as a researcher I believe that I possessed the knowledge and skills required as proposed by Smith and Osborne (2015) in putting participants at ease and conducting participant interviews.

4.4 Data Collection

IPA is inductive by nature and views the participant as the expert of the phenomenon being explored. It allows participants to share their experiences and provides for a deep and profound insight into their perspectives (Smith and Osborn, 2015; Noon, 2018). In order to facilitate this inquiry, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate research instrument.

4.4.1 Research Setting

This research was conducted in Riverview College³⁶, one of the largest ETB colleges in Ireland. It is a well-established provider of further education and has a long-standing reputation for delivering a wide range of courses at Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Levels 5 and 6 as well as Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) Higher National Diplomas and International Therapy Examination Council (ITEC) qualifications. Riverview College offers full-time and part-time educational courses in

³⁶ Riverview College is a pseudonym to protect institutional anonymity

areas such as business and computers, nursing and healthcare, social studies, sports, tourism, arts and childcare. The college also provides community education, back to education initiative (BTEI), skills to advance and adult literacy. The college serves a large student body of more than 600 students, including school leavers, mature learners and adults returning to education. Riverview College was chosen for this study due to its diverse student body and the provision of a wide variety of subject courses. The setting also facilitated the researcher access to the college, including approximately 60 staff members, and the full student population which is essential in terms of longitudinal research designs.

4.4.2 Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews are particularly relevant to this research to allow the investigation of many different experiences in detail and to enable the extrapolation of complex perspectives which may not otherwise be obtained through approaches such as quantitative methods (Walliman, 2011; Clarke and Braun, 2013). Most studies employing interpretative phenomenology analysis have used semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2004; Noon, 2018; Robinson and Williams, 2024). Smith et al. (2009) outline that interviews support IPA as a means to deeply engage, listen and probe in order to learn more about the participant experiences. While some interview questions were framed as a result of the researcher's prior knowledge and familiarity, the semi-structured interviews facilitated inductive openness through the opportunity for participants to introduce new themes or topics to the discussion (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). This semi-structured approach allowed sufficient flexibility to encourage the participant to expand on their answers (Denzin, 1989) while at the same time, ensuring standardisation of the interviews (Barriball and While, 1994). This standardisation reduced the potential for leading questions or directing the conversation in a way that might influence the outcome of the interviews (Mercer, 2007; Walliman, 2011).

The semi-structured interviews were longitudinal in nature and were conducted with the same participants at three time points over a period of two years to allow the identification of changes in attitudes and perspectives during this period (Hermanowicz, 2013). Ruspini (1999) outlines that longitudinal qualitative interviews (LQIs) are a creative and pioneering way to observe change at several levels, be it individual, group of individuals, structural or societal. The interviews allowed for discussion and further exploration of topics and issues raised by participants, in addition to encompassing the effect of temporal dimensions through the ability to follow up on conversations held with participants in previous stages to enquiring if any changes have taken place in the intervening period.

The interview design facilitated an iterative process, allowing questions from previous interviews to be revisited and the exploration of change and development in participants' experiences across multiple timepoints. It was important to provide the opportunity for participants to revisit their thoughts from the previous interviews and to identify any changes that may have occurred in the meantime. For example, if a participant mentioned difficulties encountered with online learning platforms during Interview 1, this topic could be reviewed in subsequent interviews to determine if their experiences changed and to explore their use of technology in new contexts, such as university or work.

Interview guides were designed for all three interviews which aligned to the conceptual framework underpinning this study, namely socio-cultural influences determining FET enrolment, participant experiences and engagement within the FET environment and how their experiences in FET shapes their lives during their course and in the year that follows. These interview guides are available at Appendices 7, 8 and 9. All three interviews followed a consistent approach commencing with an opening section where the researcher introduced herself, explained the nature and purpose of the study, confirmed the participants' comfort in the interview setting and reviewed the consent form with the participant. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from

the study, decline questions and amend or retract their responses. This opening section provided an opportunity to build rapport and ease the participant into the interview setting (Gill et al., 2008) while also ensuring processual consent. The closing section was also standardised with the opportunity for the participant to revisit any questions, review or alter responses. Collaborative reflection was encouraged during the closing section where participants were invited to reflect on the interview, provide feedback and propose any suggestions for improving the process for subsequent interviews (Urry et al., 2024). The subsequent stages and timing of the research process were then discussed with the participant.

The preliminary idea for this thesis resulted from my own experiences of further education and from reading works highlighting links between education and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Reay et al, 2009, 2010; Byrne and McCoy, 2017). Throughout this initial research, specific concepts interested me in relation to further education and I decided to apply these to my own research to determine their influence on students in further education. Accordingly, each interview was structured around section topics and concepts that arose from my a priori knowledge while also allowing new information to emerge (Bernard and Ryan, 2003). All interviews retained core themes but subsequent interviews also introduced follow-up questions and prompts to reflect prior responses and delve further into emerging issues and concepts. Each interview also facilitated the emergence of new information in addition to comparison with experiences over time. The sections of the interviews are outlined as follows:

1. Opening Section
2. Personal Information
3. Socio-economic and cultural background
4. Academic and social involvement in FET
5. Motivation, resilience and achievement
6. Educational Options and Perceptions
7. Changes in attitudes and opinions over time
8. Impact of COVID-19
9. Educational, emotional and technological supports in FET
10. Closing Section

The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed the researcher to adapt questions in response to issues raised by participants and to ask reflective questions regarding developments or changes that may have taken place since the previous interview (Hermanowicz, 2013). Each interview was transcribed (Section 4.6.1) and notes were made by the researcher during and after each interview. Through continuous and careful reading of each interview, specific areas were identified that required further inquiry in subsequent interviews. Participant transcript and interview notes were studied in detail prior to their interview and follow-up questions were devised such as: “The last time we talked/the first time we talked you mentioned that/you were thinking that/you were hoping that....”. In this way, every interview was tailored to each participant, making sure that pertinent details that had been raised in the previous interview/s were not omitted. This also demonstrated to the participant that the researcher was genuinely interested in their lives and experiences and that their contributions were documented and acknowledged.

The interview questions combined a mixture of open questions as well as closed questions. These closed questions would typically render a Yes/No answer which functioned as a way to introduce a topic and ascertain relevance to the participant. Closed questions were followed up with open questions such as “tell me why you think that”, ‘how did that make you feel’ “how did that impact you”, “can you tell me more about that” in order to encourage the participant to elaborate on their responses and provide deeper insights into their experiences.

Hermanowicz (2013) outlines that identical questions can be asked of participants at different time points to facilitate the tracking and analysis of stability or change. Some interview questions were designed to repeat certain questions in each phase so that the researcher could compare responses given at each stage and identify areas of stability or change. For example, in each of the three interviews, participants were asked about their plans for the future. This allowed the researcher to determine if participant plans had changed since they began studying at Riverview and what might

be the cause for this change. During the interviews, the processes of reflexivity and continually verifying interpretations of information provided by participants and inviting participants to seek clarification on questions posed also enhanced the transactional validity of the research (Cho and Trent, 2006).

4.4.3 Participant Recruitment

Recruitment took place during the global pandemic when most classes were conducted online and at a time when students were receiving a substantial amount of emails from teachers, course coordinators, college administration and fellow students. In order to reduce the risk of important messages being lost in these emails, it was agreed with the Principal of Riverview College that I would approach the Course Coordinators of each relevant course directly within the college to inform them of the research, share the recruitment poster (Appendix 6) and request their assistance in participant recruitment. Course Coordinators were extremely supportive and discussed the study with their students, highlighting the significance of the research. In addition, some course coordinators invited me to speak directly with their students during their online classes.

For ethical reasons, recruitment was limited to adults (aged 18 or over) studying in Riverview College and students whom I taught or assessed were not invited to participate in this research. In order to ensure that the cohort was relevant to the study, the following selection criteria was devised in advance of recruitment and included on the recruitment notice (Appendix 6) so that students were aware in advance of eligibility criteria.

- Phase 1: Adults (over the age of 18 years) who are undertaking a full-time or part-time course in Riverview College.
- Phase 2: All participants from Phase 1, including students and individuals who withdrew from their college course prior to Phase 2.
- Phase 3: All participants who participated in Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Throughout all of my communication with participants, I was conscious of being both friendly and professional so that participants sensed that this was an important study but also feel that I was approachable (Hewett, 2017). Students who were interested in the study were asked to email me directly and I then responded promptly with further details about the research including the Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form (Appendix 5) and a choice of dates and times for scheduling the interview. As it is helpful to remind participants about their upcoming interview (Anastasi et al., 2024), one day prior to the interview, I emailed participants with a reminder of the date, time and online meeting link. The day following their interview, I emailed each participant thanking them for their participation in the study. I also emphasised the value of their contribution to the research and mentioned the timeframe of the next interview which I hoped they would participate in.

4.4.4 Sample Size and Attrition

Patton (2002) notes that “The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p.245). Furthermore, the idiographic nature of IPA research suggests that research “utilizes small, purposively selected and carefully situated samples” (Smith et al., 2022, p.24) with many IPA studies using between 5-10 samples (Smith, 2014). Hennink and Kaiser (2022) confirm that qualitative research can be effectively conducted with limited sample sizes and that “studies using empirical data reached saturation within a narrow range of interviews” (p.1), suggesting that between 9-17 interviews are sufficient. In fact, expanding the sample size is not always essential (Bowen, 2008) as data saturation might be reached early on in the study, even if the number of participants is relatively small (Small, 2009; Saunders and Townsend, 2016).

Sixteen students from Riverview participated in the first interview of the research. Ten of these students completed the second interview and nine of these participants completed the third interview. An introduction to each of these nine participants is

provided in Section 4.5 of this chapter. The findings of this study centre around the nine participants who completed all three interviews, resulting in a dataset of 27 interviews for analysis. The rationale for this approach ensured continuity of participant narratives over three phases and identified changes that occurred for these participants during this period. All three phases were important to the study as it was vital to capture and compare participant experiences not only at the beginning of their FET participation but also towards the end of their course and in the year that followed. Given the limited research on the transitions of learners within the FET sector, this design offers a unique contribution as a result of the temporal depth and internal coherence of the participant narratives across three time periods involving their transitions throughout their FET journey and beyond. Moreover, the inclusion of participants who withdrew from the study would render the process of thematic identifications and consistency of comparisons problematic.

However, while there are several strengths associated with this approach, some notable weaknesses are also recognised. Research indicates that participant attrition can be attributed to many factors including disengagement from the environment (Moore-Cherry et al., 2015; Ezarik, 2024), life changes (Malschinger et al., 2023), lower socio-economic status and levels of education, in addition to poor health (Bamer et al., 2020). These factors are particularly relevant to the FET cohort and as such, the potentially rich and valuable data from these participants may be lacking due to participant attrition. The loss of this data may also lead to an imbalance in the research findings which can affect the robustness of the research (Neale, 2019). While steps were taken to minimise participant attrition in this study as outlined in Section 4.4.3, attrition is a limitation of this study and discussed further in Section 4.9 of this chapter. The data from the participants who withdrew prior to the second and third phases has been retained and shall be incorporated into future research publications as appropriate.

Table 4.1 Participant Recruitment and Retention throughout the LQR

	Interview 1 (IV1) (Nov/Dec 2020)	Interview 2 (IV2) (May/Jun 2021)	Interview 3 (IV3) (May/Jun 2022)
Number of Participants	16	10	9

Table 4.2 Participant Attrition within this study

	From Interview 1 (IV1) to Interview 2 (IV2)	From Interview 2 (IV2) to Interview 3 (IV3)	Overall from Interview 1 (IV1) to Interview 3 (IV3)
Attrition Rate			
Participant Numbers	6	1	7
Percentage	37.5	10	43.75

The overall attrition rate between Interview 1 and Interview 2 was 37.5% and the attrition rate between Interview 2 and Interview 3 was 10%. The overall attrition rate of the full LQR study (i.e. between Interview 1 and Interview 3) was 43.75% (See Tables 4.1 and 4.2). For those who did not respond to my email regarding subsequent interviews, I sent a reminder email. However, if further non-response ensued, I did not contact them again as I respected their decision to not respond and I did not want to place pressure on them to continue participation (Teague et al., 2018). Some participants experience research fatigue, especially when they feel that their participation will have no impact (Clark, 2008). In order to reduce this impact, I frequently reminded participants of the value of their contribution and sought to involve them in the interview process through enabling them to select the time and duration of the interviews and also to provide feedback on the interview process (Appendix 13).

It is important to remember that this study took place during the period of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Research shows that the pandemic posed issues for recruitment and retention on research studies due to the lack of personal contact (Jalbert et al.,

2024; Schultz et al., 2024). Combined with participation fatigue, this significantly impacts participation retention (Wanat et al., 2021). It is likely that the unprecedented demands placed on students during COVID-19 impacted the withdrawal of participants from the study, notwithstanding the fact that there was only virtual contact between the participant and researcher during this time. Additionally, at the time of Interview 1 (IV1) (2020) many students were not working due to lockdown, all classes were online and some felt bored by the lack of mental stimulation. Research shows that research participation increased during lockdown (Becker et al., 2022; Malschinger et al., 2023). However, by the time of the second interview (2021), most workplaces had reopened and many students were working and/or physically attending college. At this stage, students generally had less downtime to participate in the study or had other interests to keep them sufficiently occupied (Takács et al., 2023). Furthermore, students who do not complete their course are more likely to disengage with college staff or activities associated with the college environment (Moore-Cherry et al., 2015; Ezarik, 2024). With regard to the participants who withdrew from this study, no further contact was made following their decision to discontinue participation. Therefore, it was not possible to determine their outcomes subsequent to our final interview as from an ethical perspective, continued contact would have been inappropriate. In relation to the nine participants who completed the three interviews required for this study, eight participants successfully completed their FET course and one participant withdrew from his course prior to completion. This participant remained in contact with the college and intended to return to recommence the course in the future.

4.4.5 Interview Timeframe

In the original design of this research, it was planned to conduct the first phase interviews (IV1) at the beginning of the first term (September/October 2020). This assumed that the academic term would commence in early September as was normal practice in the college. However, as a result of the pandemic, many factors gave rise to a later start to the academic year³⁷, including delayed CAO results and college offers

³⁷ The academic year began on 28th September 2020

to students (O’Kelly, 2020). Preparations at Riverview College also delayed the term commencement due to COVID-19 compliance measures and staff training to facilitate online course delivery. As a result, the start of the academic year was busier and more stressful for staff and students. The term was also more unsettled due to frequent changes in class timetables related to the fluctuation of student enrolment figures as a result of CAO delays.

Consequently, the research interviews were scheduled at the later timeframe of November/December 2020. Likewise, the initial plan was to conduct the second interview in March/April 2021. However, given the delayed timeframe of Interview 1 and given that March/April was an extremely pressurised period for students due to end of year assessments, I decided to conduct the second interviews (IV2) at the later time of May/June 2021. At this time, students would have completed their course and have more availability to meet with me for the interview. I conducted the third and final interview (IV3) one year later in May/June 2022. With this in mind, despite these delays, the overall research plan was achieved with first phase interviews taking place within the first academic term, the second phase interviews occurring during the final academic term and the third phase interview being held one year later. An outline of the interview timeframes and objectives of the interviews at each timepoint is outlined in Table 4.3. The online interview approach created more flexibility in interview scheduling as interviews could be conducted outside of standard college or business hours, with most interviews taking place Monday – Friday between 5pm – 9pm.

Table 4.3 Interview Timeframe and Objectives

Interview 1 (IV1): Nov/Dec 2020:	Purpose: to identify reasons why the student opted for a course in FET and to explore their expectations of the course and any plans they may have for the future.
Interview 2 (IV2): May / June 2021	Purpose: to determine how participation on a course in FET has influenced the student and their future plans and choices.
Interview 3 (IV3): May / June 2022	Purpose: to follow the progression of students after their FET course and to discover if or how their experience in FET has impacted their lives and outcomes

4.4.6 Interview Setting and Location

The data collection phase took place when all colleges were closed for access and restrictions of movement were in place (Figure 4.3). As a result, an alternative meeting space had to be decided upon. With approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee, it was agreed that interviews with participants could take place online via MS Teams. All participants were sent an email which contained a MS Teams meeting invitation access link and details on how to download MS Teams to their device. Interviews took place online in the comfort of the participants home environment and in a location away from distractions. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher conducted all interviews in a room where the researcher was the only occupant. It was recommended to participants that they situate themselves in a private room for the interview, where they felt free to talk openly, without distractions and interruptions. For all interviews, both the participant and researcher activated their camera and audio which allowed for rapport to be developed throughout the interview. The average duration of each interview was one hour and with the agreement and consent of participants, each interview was recorded on MS Teams.

Online interviews can be beneficial for research as they can reduce impediments to participation such as time and costs associated with attending interviews and facilitate those with mobility issues, caring responsibilities or work commitments (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2009) emphasise the importance of creating a comfortable environment where the participant is sufficiently relaxed to provide in-depth details on their experiences. Smith et al. (2022) state that “the most important thing at the beginning of the interview is to establish rapport with the participant. They need to be comfortable with you, to know what you want and to trust you” (p.61). In order to settle participants into the interview, I thanked them for engaging in the research and provided information on my background and reason for the study. It was important to me that participants felt comfortable and viewed the interview as a conversation rather than a formal meeting, albeit “a conversation with a purpose” (Smith et al., 2009, p.57). At the end of the interview, I invited the participant to share how they felt about the interview and if there were any changes or improvements they would suggest for the

interview in the subsequent phase. All interviewees responded positively with many stating that they enjoyed the interview and were very interested to hear the findings and results of the research. Some participants also reported that participating in the research contributed to feelings of inclusion and a sense of belonging to something meaningful. Appendix 13 provides feedback from participants in relation to their interview.

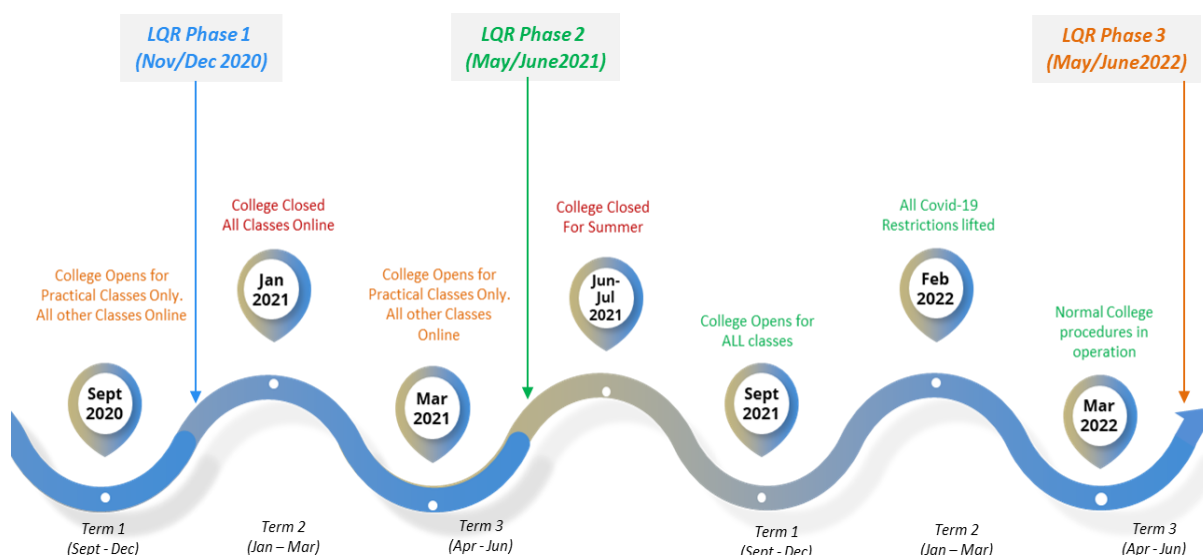
Bearing in mind the advantages for conducting the interviews online, there were also some challenges with this format. While some participants were familiar with MS Teams, particularly those who had come directly from secondary education and had used MS Teams for school during the pandemic, other participants had never used MS Teams before and were unfamiliar with the set-up³⁸. Although information had been provided in advance to participants with instructions for installing MS Teams, the lack of familiarity with the system caused some delays to meeting start times. Internet stability issues also occurred on two occasions where there was insufficient broadband on the participant's side, however this was temporary and quickly resolved. There were of plenty of dog barking situations in the background or stories shared regarding online meeting experiences as typified by the rise in memes during the pandemic (Aslan, 2021; Akram et al., 2021). However, such situations allowed for relationship building as it provided an opportunity to discuss family pets or humorous online situations. If I felt that the participant might need time to step away from the online meeting to deal with a situation, I always offered the participant the opportunity to take a break or to postponement or reschedule the interview. In all cases, the participant quickly resolved the issue and promptly returned to the interview.

Although the final phase of the data collection (Interview 3) took place during a time when colleges had reopened (Figure 4.3), I decided to continue with the interviews in this online manner for a number of reasons. Given the prevalence of COVID-19 infections in the community, the online nature of the interviews supported social

³⁸ in FET, most colleges were using the online video platform Zoom as the virtual learning environment

distancing and it provided flexibility in the event that the researcher or participants needed to self-isolate. Furthermore, I was keen to retain the same setting of the interview both for the comfort of the participant and for the reliability and consistency of the study. As participants were able to meet online from their own environment, I found that students were more relaxed and at ease than they may have been in a more formal in-person interview setting as initially planned. This improved the ecological validity of the research as participants as participants were interviewed in settings familiar to them (Willig, 2004).

Figure 4.3 Timeline of Interviews in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic



4.5 Introduction to the Research Participants

4.5.1 Participant Overview

The participants in this study are comprised of nine students who attended a course in Riverview College in 2020 (Tables 4.4 and 4.5). In this section, I will provide an overview of each of these nine participants, briefly outlining their stories and how they came to study a course in Riverview. As will be discussed further in Section 4.6.7, it was possible to group the participants into two categories based on commonalities apparent among the participants:

1. Secondary school leavers: students who have recently completed their secondary school education (i.e. within two years of attending Riverview College).
2. Lifelong learners³⁹: students who are over the age of 25 years and have returned to education several years after having completed their secondary education in Ireland or outside of Ireland.

Table 4.4 Secondary school leavers

Name	Age	Nationality	Riverview FET Course	Previous Completed Education ⁴⁰
Owen	19	Irish	Social Studies	Leaving Certificate Applied
Naomi	19	Irish	Nursing Studies	Leaving Certificate Established
Kevin	19	Irish	Nursing Studies	QQI Level 5 – Computer Studies Leaving Certificate Established

Table 4.5 Lifelong Learners

Name	Age	Nationality	Riverview FET Course	Previous Completed Education
Ciara	26	Irish	Theatre Studies	QQI Level 5 in Hospitality Diploma in Journalism Leaving Certificate Established
Gemma	26	South American	Psychology	QQI Level 5 in Child Psychology QQI Level 5 in Special Needs' Assistant Degree in Gastronomy Leaving Certificate Equivalent
Brenda	33	European	Childcare	Degree in English Leaving Certificate Equivalent
Nigel	42	Irish	Theatre Studies	Higher Diploma in Arts (Teaching) Bachelor of Arts Leaving Certificate Established
Nora	45	Irish	Health and Therapy	Leaving Certificate Established
Irene	67	Irish	Art	Leaving Certificate Established

³⁹ Lifelong Learners is a term used by SOLAS with regard to students 25-64 years "Lifelong Learning is based on the EU measure of lifelong learning, the number of adults that are 25-64 years of age" (SOLAS, 2020e, p.3)

⁴⁰ In chronological order, starting with the most recently completed course

4.5.2 Secondary school leavers

Owen: Owen is 19 years of age and lives with his brother and his mother. Owen's parents are separated and his father is a tradesperson while his mother is currently studying full-time in order to train and become a teacher. Owen has dyslexia which he refers to regularly throughout our interviews. He has just finished secondary school, having completed the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) in 2020. Owen attended a DEIS school and is acutely aware of his socio-economic status and additional educational needs. He frequently refers to the area he lives as "disadvantaged" and feels that college is a dream but something he'll probably never be able to access. Owen commenced the one-year QQI Level 5 Certificate in Social Studies at Riverview College of Further Education in September 2020. He works as a volunteer in a youth centre and hopes that this course will help him to work in community and social care in the future.

Naomi: Naomi is 19 years old and lives one hour outside of Dublin. Naomi's parents are divorced and she lives with her mother and sister. Naomi has always wanted to be a nurse from a young age, inspired by her mother who works in healthcare and her cousin who is a nurse. Naomi is very conscious of the financial burden that is involved with going to university. Naomi did not enjoy her time in secondary school and was happy and relieved to finish secondary school. However, these emotions soon turned to sadness and disappointment when she received her Leaving Certificate results and was unable to secure a place on her desired course in university. This was difficult for Naomi because she always aspired to become a nurse and felt she had worked hard to achieve this. Naomi was offered a university place on a language degree but her passion has always been nursing, so she declined the university offer on the language degree and instead enrolled in a Nursing Studies QQI Level 5 one-year course in Riverview College of Further Education which she hopes will help her gain access to a nursing degree in university.

Kevin: Kevin is 19 years of age and completed his Leaving Certificate at the age of 17, two years prior to studying at Riverview College. Kevin lives outside of Dublin, approximately two hours away by public transport. His father works in IT and is considered as an expert at the top of his field in Europe while his mother has a master's degree and works in psychology. Kevin has two family members who are nurses and one sister who is training to become a doctor. Kevin believes it was predetermined that he will go to university as all his family went to university. The cost of college was not a factor in any of Kevin's educational decisions. This is Kevin's second time in further education in an attempt to gain access to third level. As he was not offered a place on his desired university course, Kevin attended Woodrock FET college after secondary school in an attempt to gain access to third level. However, following completion of the FET course in Woodrock College, Kevin still was not offered a university place. Kevin regularly refers to the sentiment of shame as he has been unable to gain access to university. This time in Riverview College, Kevin is studying a QQI Level 5 one-year course in nursing studies with the continued aim of gaining access to university.

4.5.3 Lifelong Learners

Ciara: Ciara is 26 years old and lives at home with her parents in Dublin. Ciara's mother is a lecturer in a Dublin university and her father is a therapist in the healthcare sector. Ciara attended a private girls' secondary school in Dublin. Ciara suffered with anxiety in the final years of secondary school and as a result of this, she decided not to apply to university after her Leaving Certificate school, but instead attended Seaview College of Further Education where she completed a Level 5 QQI course in Arts. Since then, Ciara entered the workforce working in various types of temporary jobs which she found unfulfilling. Ciara has contemplated various careers which range from tourism, to law, journalism, arts management and presently theatre production. She also completed a Level 6 course at a private third level college. Ciara's main goal this year is to gain direction and guidance for the future as she is still unsure regarding the direction she would like to take after this year in Riverview.

Gemma: Gemma is 29 years of age, was born and raised in South America. Gemma's mother was a teacher while her father worked in IT. When Gemma was 15 years of age, her parents changed careers and opened a family restaurant where Gemma worked until she was 25. Both parents are now retired and throughout Gemma's childhood and adulthood, they strongly encouraged education. Gemma has a degree in gastronomy which she studied in South America. Gemma has been living in Ireland since 2015 and shares rented accommodation in Dublin's inner city along with her flatmates. She finances her own living expenses and studies, receiving no funding from the government or from her parents. Despite holding a Level 8 degree, Gemma has not applied to university in Ireland. Gemma initially found it difficult to understand the different levels of education in Ireland and the courses required for different career paths. As English is not her first language, Gemma was not confident that she would pass the English Language requirement for university. Since moving to Ireland, Gemma has completed a QQI Level 5 one-year special needs assistant (SNA) course in Redwood College of Further Education. Gemma felt that she had a keen interest in the area of psychology and she wanted to learn about the different practical and applicable aspects of this subject. As a result, she applied for the one-year full time QQI Level 5 Psychology course in Riverview College which she hopes will make her eligible and ready to study at a university in Ireland.

Brenda: Brenda is 33 years of age and comes from Europe where her father is a taxi driver and her mother is a cleaner. Brenda is fluent in four languages and has a degree in English from a European University. It was during this degree that she first came to Ireland to spend one year at Maynooth University as part of the Erasmus programme. Brenda returned home after Erasmus, completed her degree and worked with children for six years, teaching children in an English academy. However, this work came to an end during the summer of 2020 due to work closures as a result of the global pandemic and Brenda decided that it would be a good opportunity to move to a different country to improve her English language skills. Brenda has been unable to secure work since coming to Ireland and this prompted her to undertake a course in

childcare. Brenda is now attending the one-year full-time Level 5 QQI course in Childcare at Riverview College where she hopes to learn more about child development and teaching children with a view to working in this area as a childcare practitioner.

Nigel: Nigel is 42 years of age and was previously a secondary school teacher in the UK. Most of Nigel's family members are qualified healthcare professionals or teachers. He decided in secondary school that he wanted to work in education and applied to Irish and UK universities. As he did not obtain enough CAO points to study arts in Ireland, he accepted an offer to study arts in the UK. At the age of 17 he moved to the UK completely on his own, not having any friends or family in the UK for support. Nigel completed his degree and teaching qualifications and spent almost 20 years working as a teacher in the UK. However, he encountered personal and social challenges which resulted in him leaving his employment and returning to Ireland some years ago. Upon returning to Ireland and continuing to struggle with personal issues, Nigel found himself homeless. Now living in supported accommodation, he is a member of a local community acting group and has completed drama courses and workshops as part of a community employment scheme. It was through the community acting group that Nigel learned about the course at Riverview College. Nigel was delighted to be accepted on the Theatre Studies course in Riverview College, hoping that the course will give him confidence and provide the opportunity to work with a theatre company in Ireland.

Nora: Nora is 45 years of age and lives at home with her parents in Dublin. Nora had been working full-time in the family retail business since she left secondary school. Nora left full-time employment at the beginning of January 2020 as her parents had retired and the lease on the family business was up for renewal. Around the same time, both of Nora's parents had encountered health problems. Nora's mother has restricted mobility and Nora feels she is very dependent on her. This prompted Nora to consider a career change in to the area of healthcare. Since leaving work, Nora

had been receiving job-seeker's allowance from the Department of Social Protection. Nora attended secondary school in Dublin which is currently defined as a DEIS school. She felt she was not a strong student so while she did contemplate applying to university, she did not think her grades would be good enough, so she started working in the family business. As many of Nora's friends went to university after secondary school, she felt left out that she was unable to share in their experience or gain an educational qualification. Nora recently decided to study a course in Health and Therapy at Riverview College as a means to support her mother with her restricted mobility and as a means to explore alternative career directions. This is the first time that Nora has been in full-time education since secondary school.

Irene: Irene is a 67-year-old mother of four and grandmother to several grandchildren. Both Irene and her husband are retired and she lives in a disadvantaged area in Dublin. Irene's mother was a housewife and her father worked in a factory. Irene was the eldest in her family and the only one in the family to complete the Leaving Certificate. She completed the LCE when she was 17 but did not feel she had enough support or structure in her life to do well in the exam. Irene would have liked to go to university after school but did not have the option as her parents deemed it more important for her to earn a wage. Irene was married at the age of 20 and had her first child at 23 years of age. Two of her children attended a college of further education and all four children went to university. Now that she has retired and her children are grown up, Irene feels that she can give her attention to things she always wanted to do. Irene enjoyed art as a hobby when she was young but due to work and family commitments, she was no longer able to pursue this interest. Once retired, Irene became interested again in art. In 2017 she visited an art gallery and spoke with an artist who told Irene that she had completed an art course in a college of further education. The artist recommended Irene consider doing likewise. Irene researched various colleges and courses and in 2020, she enrolled on the one year full-time, QQI Level 5 Art course at Riverview College.

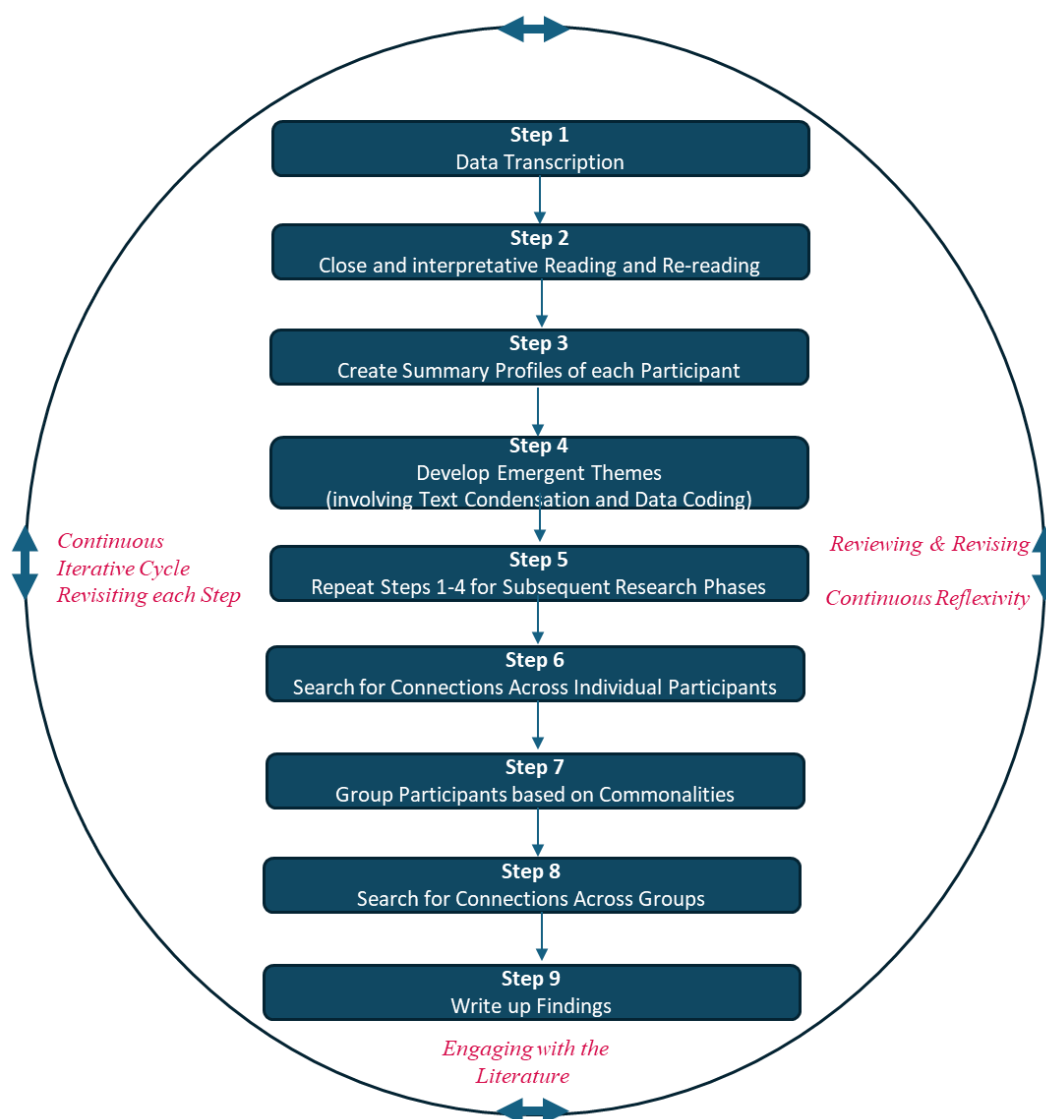
4.6 Data Analysis

IPA is characterised by its inductive orientation to data analysis. Inductive approaches enable the exploration of the participants' multiple and associated realities and allow the identification of common themes and theories to emerge from the data without the imposition of predetermined theories or hypotheses (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Smith et al. (2022) encourages researchers to use innovative approaches to analysis, outlining that there is no one way to conduct IPA data analysis and that it is "personal, intuitive, difficult, creative, intense and conceptually demanding" (p.76). Braun and Clarke (2021) agree that there is no one perfect qualitative analytical approach to research while Ramanadhan et al. (2021) propose that a combination of analytic processes and strategies provide flexibility and balance insider and outsider perspectives.

The process of data analysis for IPA studies can vary, with some studies implementing four stages while others use up to seven distinct stages (Cooper et al., 2015; Larkin and Thompson, 2015; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). The following outlines the data analytical process I undertook for this research which provides for nine stages of data analysis (Figure 4.4). I believed that these nine stages were essential in order to facilitate the longitudinal element of this study but also because I wanted to conduct both individual and cross-group analyses. The process is fundamentally guided by Smith's guide to IPA (Smith et al., 2022) whilst also drawing on the work of Finlay's thematic analysis (Finlay, 2021) and Malterud's systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2012).

Cycles of reading and writing, attending to the whole and parts, allows the researcher to construct an understanding of the lived experience (Neubauer et al. 2019). The analytical process I undertook was iterative at every stage involving the review and refinement of themes, revision of codes and verification of interpretative accuracy. Throughout the data analysis process, I also kept a reflexive journal to enable an exploration of my thoughts and decision-making processes. Reflexive writing including personal journalling and writing up field notes, iterative revisiting of transcripts, documentation of coding decisions and supervisory discussions were used to critically

analyse interpretative decisions and strengthen the credibility and transparency of the analytical process and to ensuring the accuracy and integrity of the coding (Tobin and Begley, 2004). All interview material, transcripts and data coding were shared continually throughout the research with my two supervisors which enhanced the credibility, consistency and trustworthiness of the data analytical process.



All interviews were recorded to the Maynooth University MS Office 365 system which operates under strict security protocols and in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (2018). Transcription of the first and second Interviews were typed by hand. By the third interview in 2022, MS Teams had incorporated a transcription facility

which automatically transcribed each interview. The auto-transcription was thoroughly checked against the recording and amended as required. Overall there was a high level of accuracy in the auto-transcription facility. Key participant identifiers were anonymised and a pseudonym was assigned to each participant so that I could refer to them by name throughout the data analysis and research findings. Assigning pseudonyms rather than numerical labels were intended to humanise the research process especially given that during the interviews, some participants mentioned they felt ignored during earlier educational experiences or reduced to a number as a result of their secondary school results and CAO points.

Transcriptions were initially uploaded to NVivo (Interview 1) but while coding, I found this software to demand high computational capacity, resulting in reduced processing speeds (Mattimoe et al., 2015). Although NVivo is one of the most popular tools used for coding, I found the interface cumbersome and time-consuming. These issues also acted as a barrier resulting in a sense of distance and dislocation from the raw data (Zamawe, 2015; Dollah et al., 2017). Due to these challenges, I was prompted to research other software instruments, resulting in MAXQDA becoming my preferred choice of coding software as it overcame the above issues and was extremely user-friendly and enjoyable to use. All data transcriptions from Interview 1 were imported into MAXQDA and permanently deleted from NVivo. Once anonymised, all subsequent interview transcriptions were uploaded to MAXQDA and all transcriptions were reviewed, coded and analysed within MAXQDA.

4.6.2 Step 2: Close and interpretative Reading and Re-reading

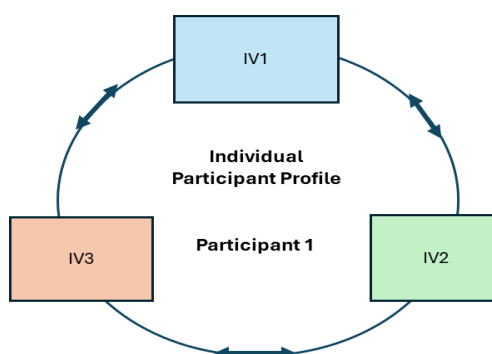
Having uploaded the transcriptions to MAXQDA, I then conducted a close interpretative reading and re-reading of data from each interview in order to absorb data from the interview and gain an overall sense of the data (Finlay, 2011) while making notes on my initial reaction to the text (Smith, 2007). Wertz (2011) advises “slowing down and dwelling in each moment of the experience” (p.132) and encourages an “Empathic immersion in the situations” (p.132) in order to understand the experiences from the

perspectives of participants. It was helpful in this regard to have audiovisual recordings of the interview to review during and after the transcription so that participant hesitations, reactions and emotions could be accurately interpreted. In this stage, I gained an overall impression of each of the participants' perspectives and began to form initial and general ideas for themes.

4.6.3 Step 3: Create Summary Profiles of each Participant

Due to the longitudinal nature of this research and due to the vast amount of data collected for each participant, I found it useful at this point to focus on each participant individually and to immerse myself in their story as it evolved throughout all three interviews. To assist in this process, I wrote a detailed profile of each participant including relevant quotes and extracts, noting the key themes that arose for them and the significant changes that occurred between the interviews (Figure 4.5). At this stage, initial data condensation took place as “a form of analysis that sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that “final” conclusions can be drawn and verified” (Miles et al., 2014, p12).

Figure 4.5 Longitudinal Data Analysis of each Participant



4.6.4 Step 4: Develop Emergent Themes

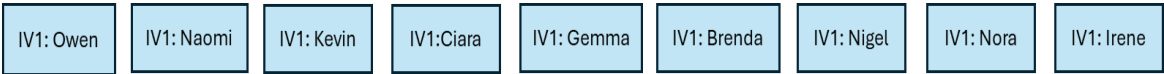
At this stage, I wrote up detailed anonymised summaries of each participant's interview, creating headings of the main themes that emerged in their interview (Figure 4.6). Systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2012) was helpful in providing an intuitive process in terms of view data from 'chaos' to themes (p.796). Systematic Text Condensation involves breaking down textual data into meaningful units, condensing

these units into themes and then synthesising the condensed material into coherent content (Malterud, 2012).

Miles et al. (2014) state that “By condensing, we’re making data stronger” (p.12). This involved reviewing the summary profiles of participants followed by the creation of thematic visual representations with the aid of Lucidspark software which facilitated the visual mapping of the key themes and sub-themes that emerged for each participant (Appendix 11). This aided the concentration and synthesizing of data into manageable and understandable forms of information while also assisting in the familiarisation of each participant’s story and the reestablishment of my connection with the participant from earlier interviews.

I adopted a hybrid coding approach, combining a priori themes (Section 4.4.2) with inductive engagement with the interviews to capture emergent meanings. This abductive process involved iterative movement between a priori knowledge and participant accounts, allowing codes to be refined through constant comparison between theory and participant data. Sensitising concepts provided the basis for initial analytical interpretation (Charmaz, 2006) and acted as a starting point for data analysis and provided a way of understanding the data, thus laying “the foundation for the analysis of research data” (Bowen, 2006, p.3). As patterns and meanings revealed themselves during this step, I then created codes reflecting these themes and allocated to the appropriate data in MAXQDA. The codes applied are included in Appendix 10. This approach aligns with IPA’s idiographic commitment which emphasises detailed analysis at the individual level before moving toward broader patterns (Smith et al., 2009).

Figure 4.6 Individual Participant Themes and Codes: Interview 1 (Winter 2020)



4.6.5 Step 5: Repeat Steps 1-4 for subsequent Research Phases

Due to the longitudinal nature of this research, the above steps were repeated for Interview 2 and again for Interview 3 (Figures 4.7 and 4.8).

Figure 4.7 Individual Participant Themes and Codes: Interview 2 (Summer 2021)

IV2: Owen	IV2: Naomi	IV2: Kevin	IV2: Ciara	IV2: Gemma	IV2: Brenda	IV2: Nigel	IV2: Nora	IV2: Irene

Figure 4.8 Individual Participant Themes and Codes: Interview 3 (Summer 2022)

IV3: Owen	IV3: Naomi	IV3: Kevin	IV3: Ciara	IV3: Gemma	IV3: Brenda	IV3: Nigel	IV3: Nora	IV3: Irene

4.6.6 Step 6: Search for Connections Across Participants

The purpose of this step was to identify patterns of similarity and differences among the participants. The summary profiles created in Step 3 and visual representations created in Step 4 greatly facilitated this process as each profile contained themes which could then be cross-referenced and viewed against the profiles of the other participants.

4.6.7 Step 7: Group Participants based on Commonalities

IPA is also underpinned by the hermeneutic circle which means that “To understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts” (Smith et al., 2022, p.22). In this way, the method of interpretation for IPA research involves an iterative process where data is analysed through thinking about the information in a range of ways rather than in a linear fashion. The ‘part’ in this sense could refer to a single interview, whereas the whole could refer to all of the interviews of that participant or of the whole research project (Smith et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) pose the important question: “Do you wish to focus on the process of individual change for the person or do you want to highlight change for the group?” (p.127). There are nine individual participants considered in this study. Several commonalities exist among these nine individuals that may provide insight into patterns or themes that arise as a result of these shared commonalities (Table 4.6). Therefore, I chose to

focus not only on each participant's unique lived experience, but also on identifying emergent themes arising from shared characteristics.

Participants were thus grouped into two broad categories: secondary school leavers (those who had left secondary school within the previous two years) and lifelong learners (those aged over the age of 25 years at the time of the first interview). This grouping reflects differences in life stages, educational biographies and relationships to learning, all of which can shape how individuals experience and interpret FET. Consistent with the experiential and idiographic focus of IPA, this grouping enabled exploration of both shared and divergent experiences across different participant categories.

Table 4.6 Categories of Participants

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Secondary school leavers: students who have recently completed their secondary school education (i.e. within two years of attending Riverview College of Further Education).2. Lifelong learners: students who are over the age of 25 years and have returned to education several years after having completed their secondary education in Ireland or outside of Ireland |
|--|

4.6.8 Step 8: Search for Connections Across Groups

Once the group categories were established, the next analytical step involved a cross-case analysis of patterns and themes between the groups (Smith and Osborn, 2003). The case studies facilitated the identification of convergence or divergence across groups and mirrors the process undertaken at Step 6, focussing on the interpretation at group level rather than at the individual level.

4.6.9 Step 9: Write up Findings from the Data Analysis

Smith et al. (2022) suggest that “as with every other stage of IPA there is not a single right way to write up an IPA analysis” (p.109). It is imperative that the data analysis was conducted in a rigorous and appropriate manner as it provides the foundation and ingredients for the research findings, which is arguably the pinnacle of the study. The aim of the findings section is to provide a full narrative account which not only explains

but also illustrates the experiences of the participants through the inclusion of relevant quotes and extracts from the interviews, bringing the findings to life. Smith et al. (2022) recommend that the findings sections provide “a close reading of what the participants have said” (p.116) independently of the literature.

In order to provide clarity on the time period associated with each of the participant quotations, temporal dimensions are colour coded as follows:

Interview 1 (IV1) (2020): Participant quotations are coloured in blue

Interview 2 (IV2) (2021): Participant quotations are coloured in green

Interview 3 (IV3) (2022): Participant quotations are coloured in orange

By assigning a colour code to the quotations, the temporal context of each quotation is easily identifiable and allows immediate visual identification of when quotes were captured. This enhances the transparency in the findings and provides a clearer evolution of the participant experiences across different timepoints.

4.7 Engaging with the Literature

Qualitative research is dependent on the participants’ views and perspectives and consequently, the literature review “plays a less substantial role at the beginning of the study” (Creswell, 2012, p.17). This research is guided by IPA which is inductive by nature (Smith et al., 2022). While “IPA does not test hypotheses, and is not usually used to build theory” (Larkin and Thompson, 2011, p.103), the findings of IPA research can be used to engage with existing theory. Smith et al. (2022) advises that IPA researchers are likely to re-engage with the literature after the analysis has been completed. This is exemplified in the research of Robinson and Williams (2024) who write that the discussion section of their IPA research involved “returning to the literature with the insights gained from the analysis of findings” (p.947). Postponing a detailed literature review at the early stages of the research avoids “importing preconceived ideas and imposing them on your work” (Charmaz, 2006, p.165). It also reduces delays in data collection and analysis, eliminates time spent on potentially irrelevant research while promoting the researcher’s openness to new ideas (Glaser and Holton, 2004).

At the commencement of this thesis, I conducted a literature review involving the historical background of FET and Bourdieu's work on social reproduction and a review of the FET sector and related policies. This provided me with an overall understanding of the FET environment and an awareness of the influence of capital in shaping the opportunities and trajectories of individuals. However, it was only upon listening to the experiences of the participants and subsequently analysing the data that other themes emerged and where it became apparent that the work of Freire and Mezirow were also pertinent to this study. According to Smith et al. (2022), while literature is addressed in the literature review chapter, it is also appropriate to present new literature at a later stage in the research process or for the first time in the findings and discussion chapters (Smith et al., 2022). As the data analysis progressed, I engaged in an iterative and abductive movement between data and theory which allowed emergent themes to be grounded in participants' lived experience while also being theorised in relation to extant work (Charmaz, 2006). According to van Hultst and Visser (2025), "Abductive analysis makes theorizing relevant throughout the research process" (p.572). The emergence of key themes from the participant interviews prompted me to conduct a more targeted review of the relevant literature which allowed a theoretical contextualisation of the findings as well as identification of parallels or divergences of these findings within the current body of knowledge. As part of this process, I also found it helpful to visually map and situate the experiences of participants within the conceptual framework of Bourdieu, Freire, Mezirow and FET policies and literature in order to locate the connections between these theories and findings from the participant interviews. This process can be viewed in Appendix 12.

The inductive nature of IPA bears some resemblance to grounded theory in the suspension of extensive literature reviews in the early stages of the research (Charmaz, 2006) and its rejection of "pre-existing theoretical preconceptions" (Smith and Osborn, 2015, p.41). However, unlike grounded theory, theory is not the objective of IPA studies. IPA aims to provides a rich interpretative insight into the lived experiences of

individuals rather than to generate theory from the data. IPA is idiographic in nature, “delineating and attempting to “understand” a single individual (or a small collection of unique individuals)” (Harris, 2003, p.41) whereas grounded theory is nomothetic which aims to build a generalisable theory to explain behaviour amongst a larger population (Dzwigol, 2022).

4.8 Research Ethics

As a research student in Maynooth University, I am guided by the Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy (Maynooth University, 2019), the British Educational Research Association’s Professional Code of Ethics for Educational Research (BERA, 2018) and The Teaching Council’s Code of Conduct regarding student-teacher relationships and comportment (The Teaching Council, 2016). Further ethical considerations for this research are outlined below.

4.8.1 Research Approval and Participant Consent

Prior to commencing the research, it was essential to obtain ethical approval from the Maynooth Research Ethics Committee. This approval was obtained on 18th May 2020 and provided in Appendix 4. As the research involved a college within an Education and Training Board (ETB), I also obtained approval from the relevant College Principal and the Chief Executive of the ETB (Appendix 3). For the purposes of college anonymization, this thesis contains redacted approval documentation while original forms have been shared with the research supervisors.

In order to engage fully, honestly and openly in this process, participants need to feel comfortable and secure that the information discussed shall remain anonymous (Elmes et al., 1995). Participants were fully informed about the research purpose and procedure and their right to withdraw from the study prior to the data anonymisation. In each phase of the study, a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent was emailed to each participant in advance of their interview (Appendix 5). From an LQR perspective, processual consent was obtained from each participant at the

commencement of each of their three interviews (Rosenblatt 1995; Hermanowicz 2013; Farr and Nizza, 2019; Bennett et al., 2020).

It was originally intended that consent would be obtained in writing from participants prior the commencement of each interview in each phase, but due to the pandemic, it was not possible to physically meet the participants and obtain this written consent. To resolve this, I devised a system to obtain online consent via digital signatures using Adobe software. However, many participants encountered difficulties with this technology so upon agreement with my supervisors, verbal consent was obtained online and recorded. This was achieved by reading out each question and statement on the Consent Form and the participant verbally agreeing or disagreeing to each question posed. This consent was audio recorded on MS Teams and stored on the Maynooth University secure server.

4.8.2 Insider Researcher

An insider researcher has a direct association with the research environment (Griffith, 1998). As a teacher within FET, I am categorised as an insider researcher. Griffith (1998) contends that the research produced by an insider produces different results and information than if the researcher was an 'outsider' i.e. a researcher who does not have prior detailed knowledge of the participants or environment. Insider research is becoming more frequent in the field of humanities and social sciences (Taylor, 2011). Mercer (2007) states that there are no prodigious benefits or drawbacks to being an insider or an outsider while Hammersley (1993) outlines that "Each position has advantages and disadvantages, though these will take on slightly different weights depending on the particular circumstances and purposes of the research" (p.433).

Roseneil (1993) highlights the benefits of insider research which include a deeper level of understanding and a knowledge of the language used by participants rendering the researcher "empirically literate" (p.189). Terms or acronyms used by participants that are specifically related to their course or college were more familiar to me than they

would have been to an outsider researcher. This was beneficial as it enabled me to converse more fluidly with the participant. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) indicate that insider status helps to generate a degree of trust and openness among participants that might not occur for external researchers. Other advantages experienced include familiarity with the FET environment, an understanding of terminology and processes used by staff and students and improved access to stakeholders, facilities and information.

My positionality was acknowledged to participants and discussed within this thesis (Section 4.2.1), recognising the relational and contextual factors that could shape the research process. I informed all participants of my professional work within the ETB and that I am a former student of a further education college. This was important to ensure openness and informed consent. In order to mitigate perceived researcher bias and avoid power differentials, only participants with whom the researcher had no direct pedagogical or assessment involvement were included in this study. This risk was further reduced as the college adheres to strict quality control measures by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2013) and Business and Technology Education Council (Business and Technology Education Council, 2024), which ensure transparency and fairness of teaching and assessment.

As an insider-researcher, conscious steps were taken to minimise the influence of prior assumptions and positionality on the generation and interpretation of the data. Consistent with the IPA of this study, efforts were made to approach each account with openness and curiosity, while recognising that complete bracketing is neither fully possible nor conceptually aligned with IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Ongoing critical self-examination was important to minimise the risk of over-identification with participants whereby shared background and FET familiarity could lead to an uncritical acceptance of the participants' experiences (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). On an ongoing basis, I frequently questioned areas which could result in taken-for-granted assumptions and ensured that I grounded interpretations in participants' own words, thus including

verbatim extracts within the findings to demonstrate transparency in the data interpretation and analysis.

Reflexivity was treated as a methodological commitment embedded across all stages of the research process. This practice enabled ongoing examination of how my positionality, progressional background or prior experiences may influence the interpretation of the data. Regular meetings with my two supervisors combined with ongoing supervisory oversight helped to ensure that findings were grounded in participant accounts rather than shaped by prior assumptions or research setting familiarity. These meetings and critical discussions with my supervisors, in addition to continual journalling and reflexivity, helped to minimise any potential biases on my part due to my insider researcher position (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999; Willig, 2004).

Interpretations were systematically and iteratively checked against participant verbatim transcripts to ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than inferred from my own positioning, knowledge or experience within the FET context (Finlay, 2014). During the semi-structured interviews, open and non-leading questions were used in order to allow participants to frame their own experiences without the sense of influence from the researcher. All interview transcripts, coding frameworks, data encoding files and data interpretation processes were shared with my supervisors to ensure transparency and analytical rigour throughout the data analysis process. In writing up the research findings, I provided participant quotations throughout the thesis to provide the opportunity to readers to view the direct connection between the data and the interpretations made, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis. Further information on continuous reflexivity undertaken throughout this study is provided in Section 4.8.6.

Insider research can also present challenges for maintaining anonymity and confidentiality for staff members and the research setting itself, as institutional anonymity can be problematic and difficult to ensure (Costley et al., 2010; Floyd and

Linnet, 2012). Every effort was made to uphold both internal and external confidentiality while providing sufficient context for meaningful analysis (Smyth and Holian 2008; Costley et al, 2010). Participants were asked to refrain from using names of teachers or other FET employees. If staff were referred to by name, these names were anonymised in the transcripts, all personal identifiers were removed and course details were included to reflect the diversity of participants' experiences and to provide necessary and relevant context.

4.8.3 Participant Considerations

Research in education often requires the need to explore issues which can be upsetting for participants (Oliver, 2010). While studies shows that research participation, even on sensitive topics, is generally well accepted and tolerated by participants (Draucker et al., 2009), it is never possible to fully anticipate or predict human behaviour. Sometimes students can feel worse after an interview, especially where they feel they have given too much information or shared too much of themselves (Twigg, 2005; Darra, 2008). To overcome this, I endeavoured to put the participant at ease by introducing myself, outlining my background and by building a good rapport with the participant. I also reassured them that they could withdraw or amend any information they provided in the interview prior to anonymisation of the data.

I acknowledge that a power imbalance may exist stemming from my position as teacher and researcher as well as composing the questions to be asked of the participants (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2005). However, I advised the participant that they were free to decline responding to any questions and that they can amend or retract their statements. I reminded the participant that they could choose to end, pause or postpone the interview at any stage and that if they wish to view any information that I hold on to them, they may request to see this at any time (General Data Protection Regulation, 2018). These factors sought to minimise the power imbalance that can occur in interview situations (Mauthner, 2019).

If the participant displayed any sign of discomfort during the interview, I asked how they were feeling and if they wished to continue the interview, take a break or stop the interview. The semi-structured format of the interview facilitated moving on to a different question if a topic appeared too sensitive for the participant. The Education and Training Board (ETB) with responsibility for Riverview College provides student support in terms of psychological and emotional counselling. If the participant introduced a topic of a sensitive nature or if I felt they were affected in an adverse manner, I reminded the participant of the counselling and support services provided by the college and the ETB. All researchers need to be mindful of the possibility that participants may introduce topics that might require reporting under legislation. At the beginning of the interview, I made participants aware of the limits of confidentiality as outlined in the Participants Information Sheet and the Consent Form.

It is also recognised that there are positive impacts on students when they participate in research. Oliver (2010) notes that interviews can lead to increased self-esteem of participants and it can help provide clarity for them on different topics. Tarpey (2006) notes benefits which include increased confidence, the opportunity to demonstrate that they are “experts of their own experience” (Tarpey 2006, p.13) and a sense of altruism. Students may benefit from being given the opportunity to share their opinions and feeling that they have a ‘voice’ within the system and that their views are valued, as evidenced in Gemma’s statement below:

I'm very happy to be part of this study because I know the value of further education... I think that you know it will have an impact... I feel like 'oh I'm being part of the history story', you know, like, someday (Gemma IV1).

Further participant feedback on the interviews is provided in Appendix 13.

4.8.4 Social Desirability Bias

Crowne and Marlowe (1960) define social desirability as “the need of subjects to respond in culturally sanctioned ways” (p.354). Accordingly, the participant may offer responses that would avoid negative perceptions of them or the fear of being judged

(Oppenheim, 1992). The fact that I am a teacher in an FET college may increase the risk of social desirability bias whereby inaccurate responses are provided by the participant. Participants may also be conscious that the relationship could continue in some form after the research has been completed and may alter their responses to maintain a positive relationship and influence future interactions (Mercer, 2007). In order to reduce this risk, I assured participants that candid and genuine responses were both vital and valued in order to ensure the accuracy and integrity of this study.

4.8.5 Participation Bias

It would be fair to assume that most students who volunteered to take part in this research had an interest in education and were willing to dedicate their own time to participate. Consequently, this research only accounts for their stories and is unable to include stories of students who did not volunteer. Reasons for non-participation could relate to a lack of interest in the study or in education in general, dissatisfaction with the college, reluctance or incapacity to devote time to participation. It could also be due to a lack of confidence, inability to comprehend the research information due to literacy, language or other challenges. As a result, it must be noted that the participants in this study could potentially portray more favourable experiences than might be experienced by non-participants.

4.8.6 Continuous Reflexivity

Reflexivity is “an active, ongoing process that saturates every stage of the research” (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p.274) and provides for an acknowledgement and awareness of the researcher’s potential bias throughout the research process (Willig, 2004). Continuous reflexivity was an essential element of this study as it assisted in the identification of ways where my involvement in further education might have influenced or informed the research (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999; Willig, 2004). As part of my reflexive practice, I wrote field notes after each participant interview to identify any impact I have on the participants (Darra, 2008). This helped to improve my involvement in the research and refine the interview process (Rice and Ezzy, 1999).

Journaling also assisted in processing thoughts and ideas on the interviews and allowed the identification of ways to continually improve the interviews and the overall research process going forward. I also had ongoing communication with my supervisors and consulted with them to ensure transparency, procedural consistency and avoidance of bias or subjectivity. This process of reflexivity improves the validity of the research process as I continually reflected upon and reviewed my role in this research in order to ensure that objectivity and impartiality were maintained (Willig, 2004).

In addition, I found it helpful to devise a research timeline of the work and activities required for this study as a way to provide a holistic visualisation of the stages involved in the research process (Appendix 14). This timeline provided ongoing motivation through the completion of tasks and phases while also facilitating clear guidance on the next steps of the research journey.

4.9 Research limitations

Considering the limitations outlined in the previous section including desirability bias and participation bias, other potential limitations of this study must also be acknowledged. This research adopts an IPA approach which is inherently subjective and relies on the researcher's interpretation of the lived experiences of participants. This is evident through the dual interpretative process or double hermeneutic, whereby both the researcher's and the participants' subjectivities may impact the role of interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). Measures have been taken to minimise these influences through transparency, continuous reflexivity and ethical considerations (as outlined in Section 4.8) to ensure that interpretative decisions are clearly articulated and grounded in the data. Furthermore, as an insider researcher, my positionality within the FET context shaped access, relationships and interpretative engagement with the data. Although this facilitated nuanced understanding and rich data generation, it also introduced the possibility of assumption based interpretation and constrained critical distance. Reflexive monitoring, transparency and ongoing

engagement with my two supervisors were therefore integral throughout this study to ensure critical external perspectives and maintain analytical credibility (Section 4.8).

This research is a single site study, conducted in one FET college in Ireland. There are in excess of 500 Further Education and Training centres in Ireland, all of varying sizes and programme offerings (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2021). Research highlights that variations exist in quality, standards and the delivery of FET across different courses and different FET settings (McGuinness et al., 2014; Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2023d). This study recognises that the institutional context may influence the findings. If Riverview College represents a particularly effective or supportive FET environment, participant accounts may reflect this localised success and therefore should not be assumed to represent the experiences of learners across the broader FET sector, but instead offer insight in one specific context. Moreover, Noon (2018) states that the purpose of “IPA should not be to uncover what occurs in *all* settings, but rather the perceptions and understandings of a particular group within *their* setting” (p.81). Therefore, while this research provides a deep insight into the experiences of the participants in the setting of Riverview College, it does not seek to produce generalisable findings, nor to suggest that these experiences are indicative of learners in other settings.

Riverview College provides programmes including QQI Levels 5 and 6, BTEI, Skills to Advance and BTEC courses, while other colleges also offer programmes such as Traineeships and QQI Levels 1-4 and Youthreach. All participants who volunteered for this study were enrolled on a QQI Level 5 full-time courses in Riverview College. Brocki and Wearden (2006) note that “most papers employing IPA do not aim to achieve a representative sample in terms of either population or probability” (p.95). As an IPA study, the purpose of this research is not representativeness but the development of an in-depth, interpretative understanding of participants’ lived experience. Consequently, this study captures the perspectives of participants within Riverview College but it does not claim to represent the broader FET student population either

within this college or the FET sector as a whole. Instead, the value of the study lies in its idiographic depth rather than any claim to representativeness or generalisability.

Participant attrition may narrow the diversity of perspectives captured within this study. Research shows that withdrawal from research participation is often associated with lower health and demographic backgrounds (Okpara et al., 2023; Young et al., 2006). As a result, the voices of students who discontinued participation may be underrepresented and their experiences may have provided alternative insights into the student experience in FET.

Data collection for this study took place between 2020-2022 when the country was experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. While the participants' accounts reflect their lived experiences of FET during this period, they are shaped by the specific social and educational conditions of that time. Therefore, consistent with the idiographic and interpretative nature of IPA, this study provides a unique insight into the lives and experiences of students in one FET college during an unprecedented period in the history of education.

Chapter 5. Findings (I): Influences on FET Enrolment

5.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to identify the influences and motivating factors which led participants to enrol in FET. The interpretation of the nine participants' decision-making is explored through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and the role of habitus and capitals on participants' goals and aspirations prior to FET enrolment. Habitus is the result of a person's lived histories, social environment and experiences. According to Bourdieu, "The *habitus* - embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.56). Bourdieu contends that habitus shapes the opportunities and aspirations of individuals by reinforcing existing social structures leading to social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1999). Primary habitus is the set of dispositions established through family and friends while secondary habitus involves the dispositions that are developed later in life as individuals encounter new social, educational or professional settings (Wacquant, 2014). This chapter will explore the role of both primary and secondary habitus in relation to the educational choices and opportunities available to participants.

In addition to habitus, Bourdieu also highlights the importance of capitals as a set of resources which can be leveraged to create opportunities and to enhance one's place in the world:

the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241).

This chapter will also seek to examine the influence of capitals on the decision of participants to enrol in FET and the extent to which their access to capital impacted

their opportunities and decisions. Chapter 5 thus aims to address the following research question:

RQ1: Why do students enrol in a college of FET and to what extent do prior academic and life experiences shape their educational decisions?

5.2 Enrolment Motivations among Participant Groups

SOLAS states that FET is for “Young people who completed their Leaving Certificate. Adults returning to education. Unemployed people seeking to gain new skills to transition back into the labour market” (SOLAS, 2020f, p.4). Given the diversity of the FET student body, various factors are involved in the decision-making process of different individuals which lead them to enrol in FET. This section will highlight key factors that emerged from the research, including access to university, access to employment, a pathway to changing careers and personal development. Specific commonalities amongst some participant groupings will also be revealed and as outlined in Section 4.6.9, participant quotations will be colour coded to reflect their temporal context⁴¹.

5.2.1 Secondary school leavers (Owen, Naomi, Kevin)

This group of participants had recently completed the LCE or LCA (within two years prior to enrolling in Riverview College) and were coming to FET in in order to gain entry to university or achieve qualifications for employment. No members of this group displayed positive sentiments about their decision to come to FET. SOLAS aims to promote FET “as a valid and smart potential destination” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.51) so that it is recognised as a purposeful educational option, rather than being perceived as an alternative or backup choice. However, this does not appear to be the case for this group who viewed FET, not as a choice, but as a decision of last resort.

⁴¹ Interview 1 (IV1) (2020): Participant quotations are coloured in blue
Interview 2 (IV2) (2021): Participant quotations are coloured in green
Interview 3 (IV3) (2022): Participant quotations are coloured in orange

Owen did not complete the LCE but instead completed the LCA as a result of his dyslexia. Owen was passionate about pursuing a career in the area of youthwork for which he needed a social studies qualification. However, as an LCA student, Owen's educational choices after secondary school were severely restricted: "because I did LCA, I can't go straight from school to university. I had to do a PLC course" (Owen IV3). From a young age, Naomi wanted to be a nurse which requires a university degree in nursing: "I always wanted to be a nurse...I always kind of had it in my head that I wanted to be a midwife" (Naomi IV1), while Kevin felt that attending university was a preordained path as all his family members were highly educated and were senior professionals with established careers. However, for both Naomi and Kevin, their LCE results did not lead to the CAO points required, leading them to consider FET as the only way to gain access to their desired course in university. Therefore each member of this group felt that their pathways were blocked and that they "ended up" in FET by necessity rather than by choice:

a PLC course was the only thing I could do (Owen IV1).

I just decided that I would try and do like a level 5 PLC course and I ended up in Riverview (Naomi IV1).

I didn't get any of my CAO choices...A lot of people expected me to go to college [university] in the first time around and I didn't (Kevin IV1).

There was a sense of resignation in the way that Naomi and Kevin spoke about their route to university being blocked, a sense that was amplified for Kevin as this was now his third attempt to access university. Having completed his LCE in 2019, he "got a few points too low" (Kevin IV1) for university entry. As a result, he chose to study in Woodrock College of FET in 2019 as a means to apply to university through the QQI-FET entry route. However, for a second time, Kevin's points were too low for his university choices that year. There is a sense of despondency for Kevin as his route to university was blocked again: "so I'm once again in further education until I can get through the CAO and progress...I'm like everyone who didn't get their choice... I felt as though we were ignored. Yeah, but there's nothing I could do about it" (Kevin IV1).

5.2.2 Lifelong learners (Ciara, Gemma, Brenda, Nigel, Nora and Irene)

Lifelong learners are defined as learners aged between 25-64 years (SOLAS, 2020e) and in this research, consist of a diverse group in terms of age, gender, nationality, ethnicity and migrant histories. For this group, a number of years or even decades have passed since completing their second level education. These participants enrolled in further education to facilitate a change in career paths or to explore personal interests. They viewed enrolling in FET as a liberating and exciting experience which expanded their life choices and opportunities. Participants who experienced stressful situations in their professional or personal lives found a sense of relief and happiness coming to FET as it allowed them to escape from adverse situations and plan for a better future:

Words cannot describe my last job and how horrifically awful it was. We were like micromanaged and bullied, overworked and underpaid and stressed every single day. I got gastritis from it I was so stressed, my body went into a total inability to work so I had applied to the course...And my mam encouraged me to go [to FET], she really wanted me to (Ciara IV1).

Nigel echoes these sentiments as he felt relieved and fortunate to have been offered a place at Riverview College given his precarious situation at the time: “Thank God. It was brilliant that [the manager] had said it to me. And then within a week, I auditioned and then I was offered a place. I was lucky...and was delighted” (Nigel IV1).

However, some participants were apprehensive and concerned regarding a potential age disparity among students and a deficiency in their computer literacy skills:

Being for me being an older person in a young person's world. I mean everything in college is really geared for young people...When I went for the interview, I asked [the teacher], “will there be anybody else my age” 'cause that was my big worry (Irene IV1).

The cost of FET was a key factor for most of the participants in this group. Nigel and Nora were receiving government financial supports. The ability to study while

retaining these supports was instrumental in their decision to attend FET: “Its affordability was a huge factor and...to receive VTOS payments which has been approved” (Nigel IV1). Irene was retired and the lower fee of FET compared to university was also important in her decision-making process:

I saw that the overall fee was around €500 I think, so that was OK. That was fine. So I did have a look, yeah? Like if it had been five grand I wouldn't have you know so yeah, it did [influence my decision] (Irene IV1).

Gemma and Brenda had no family support in Ireland and were independently covering all of their living costs including accommodation, education and daily expenses. They also found the low fees of FET courses to be an influence on their decision to enrol: “I thought this course was like the cheapest one” (Brenda IV1).

Although there is a paucity of research regarding the motivations of migrant learners enrolling in FET, this study clearly shows that both Gemma and Brenda came to FET to gain new career skills but also significantly, because they felt that they would not pass the English language requirement for university access. Although both participants possess academic degrees equivalent to Level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications, they both enrolled in FET courses at Level 5. Gemma states that she is: “going to FET to actually then access third level” (Gemma IV1). Both participants state that the rationale for enrolling in FET was they would be required to pass the IELTS⁴² exam for access to university and felt unsure they could pass it given that English is not their first language. Gemma felt that despite her competence in English, the exam is extremely difficult. She therefore decided it would be more worthwhile to deepen her knowledge of psychology rather than invest time and money on IELTS preparation:

I would have to do IELTS and...I would have to spend a lot of time getting a good score...IELTS test is so hard. It's made for you to not get a good score...my decision was I'd rather spend time learning something...rather than spending money on IELTS preparation course (Gemma IV1).

⁴² IELTS: International English Language Testing System

The global COVID-19 pandemic influenced Brenda to move to Ireland in 2020. Brenda had been working in Europe, teaching English to children in a language academy but due to the COVID-19 outbreak, her role in the academy finished in the summer of 2020. Having already spent one year in Ireland several years previously as part of an Erasmus programme, she decided to return to Ireland to improve her level of English and seek employment. Obtaining employment in childcare proved difficult due to nation-wide closures of childcare facilities as a result of the pandemic which prompted her to investigate educational opportunities. Brenda had considered applying for a Master's degree in English but felt that the associated costs were too great. Like Gemma, she too felt that the requirements to pass the IELTS exam and have her qualifications officially translated would be cumbersome and expensive, so she decided to enrol in FET instead:

But [a] Master['s] was like very expensive for me and the most difficult part was...the subjects I've been learning there in [Europe], they kind of have to transfer them...they need to know that I finished degree and I'm allowed to do master...So it's more work, more papers...I think it's a lot (Brenda IV3).

5.3 Influence of Primary Habitus

Bourdieu (1990a) contends that habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions which are the result of the internalised, embodied history of experiences, responsible for the way that individuals act and react. When considering the relevance of habitus as an influence on FET enrolment, it is useful to begin from the perspective of their primary habitus, the set of transposable dispositions instilled through experiences with family, class and early childhood and social experiences. This primary habitus “constitutes our baseline social personality” (Wacquant, 2014, p.7) and it “is the basis for the subsequent formation of any other habitus” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p.45). The following sections will provide a discussion of the participants' primary habitus which include their socio-economic background and family support.

In this study, 71.5% of Irish born participants present evidence of disadvantage (Owen, Naomi, Nigel, Nora and Irene), with 28.5% demonstrating levels of affluency (Kevin and Ciara). All participants who were born and educated abroad (Gemma and Brenda) exhibit markers of affluency (Appendix 1). These findings are consistent with the SOLAS Key Insights Report (SOLAS, 2019) which shows that almost two-thirds of FET students indicate levels of disadvantage and that migrant learners are generally more affluent than their Irish counterparts. According to Bourdieu's social reproduction perspective, students from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to attend university:

the combination of the educational chances of the different classes and the chances of subsequent success attached to the different sections and types of schools constitutes a mechanism of deferred selection which transmutes a social inequality into a specifically educational inequality, i.e. an inequality of 'level' or success, concealing and academically consecrating an inequality of chances of access to the highest levels of education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p.158).

However, the experiences of participants in this study challenge this contention as some participants from affluent backgrounds did not gain access to university. Kaufman (2005) states that "Privilege associated with class does not automatically yield benefits" (p.265). Secondary school leaver Kevin comes from a wealthy and highly educated family and lifelong learner Ciara also comes from an affluent and educated family background. Yet neither gained access to university after secondary school.

I finished my leaving cert and had applied to the CAO and I didn't get any of my CAO choices, so I decided I would reapply through the CAO the following year to get one of my choices. I simply got a few points too low...And I went and did a year of college [FET] for the reapply, then through CAO this year...I had a choice 40 points below what I had and that had exceeded my threshold, so I'm once again in further education until I can get through the CAO and progress (Kevin IV1).

These experiences emphasise that life trajectories are not as deterministic as Bourdieu may claim and that his theory of social reproduction does not sufficiently allow for

individual nuances or variations which can result in a deviation from Bourdieu's expected pattern of reproduction. In this research, these variations include personal challenges in conforming to stressful situations, as in Ciara's experience: "So I was missing a lot of school...I missed the last 6 months of school because of depression and anxiety"(Ciara IV1) or difficulties in adjusting to strict and inflexible educational requirements such as rote learning, as recounted by Kevin:

I'm disfavoured by the system, but I can't, I can't change that...and I pity people who come after me. You know people who just, they're not good at tests and I'm not good at studying. I have difficulty. I have difficulty remembering things that are written down...I just remember photos and I remember every place I've ever been. But if you write down something like piece of paper and tell me to remember it 15 minutes later, I can't remember it (Kevin IV2).

Family support and encouragement played a significant role in helping students decide on their life choices. All of the secondary school leavers, as well as lifelong learners Ciara, Gemma and Brenda, received parental support and guidance in relation to their education:

I think she [Mam] just guided me to more, like she knew that this was what I really wanted...She just tried to guide me. She tried to, you know, almost play devil's advocate sometimes and then encourage me other times just so I really thought about the decisions and that I could actually think about all the options that I had. So I was really actually grateful to have someone there who was, you know, who would just let me make up my own mind, but at the same time make me think about everything (Naomi IV1).

While each of those who transitioned into FET directly from secondary school displayed sentiments of unhappiness in applying to FET, they gained some reassurance from family and friends which partially eased these negative emotions and enabled them to feel slightly more positive about attending FET. Owen's colleague at a voluntary youth centre provided information and reassurance about Riverview College: "I could ask the people who did this type of course...they all said I've heard good things on Riverview. If you get into it you'll be grand" (Owen IV2). Despite

Owen's initial frustration at the limited educational and career choices open to LCA students, he then felt fortunate that there was an option for him to study on a course which would allow him to work in his chosen field of youth work: "I find out that PLC courses are part of the degree [qualification] I have to do [for a career in youthwork]. So for me it was lucky" (Owen IV1). While Naomi still harboured feelings of disappointment, she spoke with people she knew who previously studied at Riverview and who reported good things about the college's reputation which made her more hopeful and optimistic:

I do have a cousin and she's a children's nurse in [Hospital X] and she just said that she knew a few people who went to Riverview and who...progressed on to different courses [in university]. So I just said that I would come here 'cause it had a good reputation (Naomi IV1).

The decision to study in Riverview also provided relief for family members who felt comforted that it offered the potential for positive changes for participants:

I knew Riverview was good because my cousin has been there as well...And my mam encouraged me to go...She knew that I was really worried about going back to another job that I hated and couldn't wait to go back to college. So she was delighted (Ciara IV1).

Gemma and Brenda received substantial encouragement from their family to continue in post compulsory education. More than a decade after leaving secondary education, this encouragement continues to play a significant part in their educational decisions:

they've [my parents] always urged me to study so always, even though when I was in [South America] after I left the secondary school, there was a massive encouragement in furthering my education, going to college and even though nowadays I talk to my mom because right now, I'm experiencing a change in career so I want to pursue psychology, social work...So even that, still my mom says "Listen, you have to, you know, find yourself for college. You know further your education, you know". So there is always an encouragement (Gemma IV1).

Participants whose family were supportive of their educational journey were more inclined to pursue education after second level. In contrast, some lifelong learners were less likely to have continued in education post-secondary school when their families placed a lower value on education and where there were no members in their family who had studied at third level. Irene and Nora who completed secondary school more than twenty-five ago received no support or encouragement to attend university. In fact, post-compulsory education was actively discouraged in favour of obtaining employment:

I didn't know people who were going on, my direct friends didn't and no encouragement it was you better leave school to get a job kind of a situation...They'd [my parents had] no interest...they didn't believe in education...Basically, no support (Irene IV1).

This absence of support or encouragement which prevented Irene contemplating continuing her education is a prominent theme for Irene as she revisits these experiences in her second interview: “life was kind of messy at home when I was doing my leaving cert...no support and no confidence. I was a mess, you know as a teenager. So I basically opted out.” (Irene IV2). The more mature participants who left school several decades ago and did not continue in education post-secondary school, had no family members and knew very few people, if any, who attended university at that time. This sharply contrasts with participants who left school more recently, all of whom know both friends and family who attended university. This highlights that while significant barriers to third level education still exist, there has been an increase and widening of access to university in Ireland over the past number of decades (Maxwell and Dorrity, 2010; Roinn, 2013; McTaggart, 2024; NíChorcra et al., 2025).

5.4 Influence of Secondary Habitus

In addition to the influences of participants’ primary habitus, their secondary habitus is also influential as it involves changes to individual dispositions that occur through later life experiences as a result of interactions with institutions such as school, college or work (Wacquant, 2014). While Bourdieu contends that the socio-economic

backgrounds of individuals can predict their outcomes, he claims that institutional experiences further contribute to these pre-determined outcomes: “the organization and functioning of the school system continuously and through multiple codes retranslate inequalities in social level into inequalities in academic level” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p.158). This section will explore the experiences of participants in relation to their secondary habitus and how these experiences impacted on their life opportunities and their ultimate decision to enrol in FET.

5.4.1 Banking Concept of Education

All of the secondary school leavers voiced concerns regarding the pedagogical methods practiced in secondary school, citing an over-reliance on rote learning and memorisation. Freire (2005) refers to this as the “banking concept” (p.72) whereby education seeks to fill the student with information. Freire claims that “Education is suffering from narration sickness” which objectifies students as mere “listening objects” (Freire, 2005, p.71) and where students are forced to memorise content with neither context nor the ability to engage in critical thinking or discourse. Participants strongly criticised the LCE which they feel prioritises memorisation skills over the development of independent thought: “the leaving cert is...teaching someone to *just regurgitate*” (Kevin IV2). This banking concept is not limited to the Irish LCE as it was also experienced and mentioned by participants who studied overseas: “*I think that schools are just a bunch of facts. You know, you go to school and you come back home with a book which is full of facts rather than your brain being exercised*” (Gemma, IV1). Freire (2005) contends that this practice is inherently dehumanising and seeks to further marginalise students within the education system. This dehumanisation is evident in the format of examinations which fail to respond to and recognise the individuality of students and their different learning needs: “*I'm disfavoured by the system, but I can't, I can't change that...and I pity people who come after me* (Kevin IV2).

5.4.2 Institutional Control

This research finds strong evidence of negative experiences in secondary school as a result of educational institutional control. Institutional controls represent “structures of domination” (Freire, 2005, p.154) which seek to suppress freedom of expression and freedom of choice. Foucault (1995) describes how manifestations of power exert control over students through normalising and legitimising judgement, stating that “we are in the society of the teacher-judge...educator-judge”(p.304).

All participants born and educated in Ireland discussed negative experiences which stemmed from institutional controls such as the secondary school examination system, the CAO and university entry requirements. Owen undertook the LCA programme as a result of his dyslexia. However, as “Students with the LCA cannot gain direct entry through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system to universities or institutes of technology” (Citizens Information, 2025a), it was never possible for Owen to apply to university, thus severely restricting his educational and career opportunities: “For some people it's the only college they can go to simply because of how the education system is set up...it seems like a barrier to people trying get education in and moving on in their career” (Owen IV1). While the LCA has expanded in 2022 to include some LCE subjects, such as Mathematics and modern foreign languages (Department of Education and Youth, 2025), it still remains impossible to directly access university based on the LCA qualification.

Making the transition beyond second level was viewed by the secondary school leaver cohort as an extremely stressful situation which determines your life opportunities, or lack thereof: “it can be a bit of a worry knowing what you want to do, 'cause there can be pressure when you're leaving school that you have to know what you want to do for the rest of your life” (Naomi IV1). It was felt that the LCE and associated CAO points system also failed to recognise the consistent hard work and dedication of participants throughout their second level education. Kevin was a diligent student and class prefect throughout his six years of secondary school. Because of his hard work, his classmates

expected him to be top of his class. However, he feels he ended up with an inferior Leaving Certificate which prevented him from accessing university.

But in retrospect, I was the one who paid attention to school. I would be, people looked at me and they said to me “Kevin, I thought you were the top of the class...I thought you did well”. And then at the end of it, you come out with a with a poor, with a poor, poor leaving cert result and...then I'm in the PLC and...some of the other people who weren't, you know who weren't the top of the class, who weren't, you know, sitting in the front row. Where did they go? They are in college [university] now and the person who was at the top of the class is in the PLC (Kevin IV2).

The LCE is a high-stakes exam which determines the future life and career of students resulting in elevated stress levels (McCoy et al., 2019), placing them “constantly under strain or pressure” and “losing sleep with worry” (Banks and Smyth; 2015, p.2). The Children’s Ombudsman states that the LCE is a traumatic experience for students and that it places a substantial amount of mental stress on students (Ward, 2021). This was the experience of participants who felt “just totally overwhelmed” (Ciara IV1) and found the experience “just so stressful... overwhelmed” (Naomi IV2).

Each of the secondary school leavers experienced institutional control over their ability to progress to university as a result of their senior cycle exam and the CAO, which act as gatekeepers to university access. Kevin strongly disagrees with the way that the points system establishes class divisions:

there's that sort of stigma around the...course point brackets. It's sort of the like class hierarchy...if you get anything less than 300, you go off and be a plumber or an electrician...and then you, like 300 plus, it's like, oh, you're like a middle-class worker, you go off to do business or work or something. And then for 500 plus you go off and do accounting or be a doctor or a lawyer (Kevin IV3).

This control was also experienced by some lifelong learners, particularly those who had a recent migrant history. Nigel was denied a place in third level in Ireland due to insufficient CAO points and had to travel to the UK to study at university, while Gemma

and Brenda describe the university criteria for non-native English speakers as overly stringent, stating that the language assessment is “so hard. It's made for you to not get a good score” (Gemma IV1).

This study finds the CAO to be an example of “structures of domination” (Freire, 2005, p.154) which prevented freedom of choice for participants. Having completed the stressful LCE examination, students faced an anxious waiting time to learn if they gained sufficient CAO points to qualify for university. None of the secondary school leavers who applied to the CAO received their desired university place. Freire (2005) asserts that structures of domination result in a sense of futility among those who feel unable to change the system: “I felt as though we were ignored. Yeah, but there's nothing I could do about it” (Kevin IV1). These sentiments are echoed by Naomi: “the unfairness of it [the CAO] and how it's still going on now...it's just maybe like exhaustion of talking about it and saying how terrible it is and then knowing that it won't change” (Naomi IV2).

Negative experiences in secondary school greatly influenced the educational journey of participants and in some cases prevented them from continuing their education post-secondary school. Irene relays sentiments of intimidation in school which are still vivid over thirty years later: “Gosh, I can't oh...intimidation OK, from way back, from there [school]” (Irene IV1). Nigel associates the word “discipline” (Nigel IV2) with school and “is glad it's finished” (Nigel IV1) while Nora “hated primary school, hated secondary school, didn't, had no interest in going to university or college” (Nora IV3). Ciara also presents strong reactions when she thinks of the control over her learning in secondary school:

Fourth year royally fucked me up, cos they changed the way we learned and they changed the teaching method and then they put me into 5th year and they tried to change it back again. And I remember feeling completely flooded with knowledge, I lost my ability to learn, I lost my ability to remember, I got so laden down with all the work and it was awful (Ciara IV1).

Control over participants was further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic which led to the cancellation of the LCE examinations and the introduction of calculated grades. Participants felt that the system of calculated grades was unfair as it removed their involvement and participation from the most important exam of their school life. Naomi was unhappy because she did not feel that calculated grades were a true reflection on her work throughout secondary school: “if I had sat the Leaving Cert that it would have been a reflection on me and...if you had been disappointed then you only have yourself to blame in a way...it's hard not to blame the system” (Naomi IV1). Studies show that fairer outcomes would have occurred if the student had actually taken the LCE exam as some teachers were not fully objective when determining calculated grades for students (Doyle et al., 2021). Studies highlight the inherent bias that can impact teacher’s grading decisions, especially when it involves students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Neuman, 2022; Richmond and Regan, 2023). Neuman (2022) found that students attending private schools were more likely to receive higher inflated grades, further highlighting the influence of social class and habitus on an individual’s choices and access to third level. Doyle et al. (2021) found that more than half of the teachers surveyed admitted that they found it difficult to arrive at the calculated grades due to inconsistencies in students’ work over periods of time and admitted to bias challenges in their grading approach.

Calculated grades in 2020 also led to higher results being awarded to students than in previous years, with the awarding of H1s being two-three times higher than grades awarded in 2019 (Doyle et al., 2021). Due to the calculated grade system, “students in 2020 received approximately 40 CAO points more than their counterparts from previous years” (Doyle et al., 2021, p.396). This was a predicament that secondary school leaver Kevin faced. Kevin completed his LCE in 2019 but then had to compete again in 2020 for a place in university, this time against students who received calculated grades, which resulted in higher results for 2020 LCE students and higher

CAO point requirements⁴³. As Kevin completed his LCE in 2019, he was now competing with students with these higher points, resulting in him being denied a university place for a second time. Interestingly, the shortfall of points that Kevin needed for a university place was exactly 40 points, the same number referenced above as the increase awarded to studies in the study of Doyle et al. (2021): “My final choice on the CAO, but with a 40 point jump I couldn't do anything” (Kevin IV1).

In addition to educational controls, this research also identified the role of social welfare as an institutional control, dictating if participants could continue to receive government benefits while pursuing education. For Nora, this was a major source of stress as upon FET enrolment she was informed that if she continued in education, her social welfare payments would be terminated: “And when I applied for college, they cut me off my social welfare...But then I couldn't get any social welfare money from anybody” (Nora IV2). Fortunately through the support of FET staff, this was ultimately resolved and her payment continued, but not without a substantial amount of effort from Nora and staff in the college.

5.4.3 Guidance Counselling

Smyth and Banks (2012) found that secondary school students reported “quite negative interactions with their guidance counsellor” (p.273). Each of the secondary school leavers in this study received information from career guidance support in school but reactions towards guidance were generally negative. Owen felt that the guidance counsellor assumed that all LCA students would apply for apprenticeships and therefore did not discuss other choices. Owen reported that it was only after he persisted in asserting his disinterest in apprenticeships that the guidance counsellor provided meaningful information about FET. Naomi also reported that her school guidance counsellors were neither supportive nor informative. When asked if she found guidance counsellors helpful, she replied:

⁴³ In 2020, 79,176 individuals applied to the CAO, representing a 9% increase on the previous year and applications for nursing and midwifery courses increased by 21% (courses which Naomi and Kevin had applied to study) (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, 2021)

Not really to be honest...she didn't really say a whole lot to me and she didn't seem to know a lot about any courses or even I tried to ask her about things like UCAS and things and she just kept saying, "oh, you could go on the website", and I was like, Oh well, I know I could go on the website, but sometimes it's nice to be able to hear it from someone...When my points came in then and I wasn't happy with them...they [guidance counsellors] were saying oh, you can come in and have an appointment with us, but I just thought that it would have been a bit of a waste of my time (Naomi IV1).

While Kevin who came from a more affluent background was unenthusiastic about guidance counselling in his school, he acknowledged their support in identifying suitable career paths and options for students which led Kevin to study computers in Woodrock FET College and subsequently nursing in Riverview:

There was never so much guidance as in 'What would you be good at'? They had us do testing and I did a CAT [cognitive ability test] test years ago and they said I'd be good in healthcare, so that's why it was always an option and they said I was also going to be good in computing and that's what I [did]. (Kevin IV1)

Naomi feels that FET was not spoken of positively in the school or by guidance counsellors and it was generally looked down upon and only spoken of as a back-up option in the event of insufficient CAO points for university: "in my school it was almost seen that PLC's were kind of like where you go if you can't get into a university...It wasn't anything that we were really encouraged to even look into that much" (Naomi IV1). Kevin outlines that university courses were promoted as the optimum choices while other choices such as FET courses and vocational opportunities were treated as less favourable options and considered as options only for those who weren't able to achieve good exam grades. Discussions of further education pathways were "Ignored or moved on, hurried" (Kevin IV1). Ciara who attended a private all girls secondary school found the school guidance counsellor helpful and proactive in discussing options including those outside of the CAO process, but only when it was noticed by the guidance counsellor that Ciara had prolonged absences from school: "So I was missing

a lot of school and the guidance counsellor reached out to me and she reminded me that there were PLCs that I could do and I applied to them” (Ciara IV1).

Career guidance counselling is intended to be the main source of information for students on career and educational options post-secondary school and since 1998, career guidance is a requirement and an entitlement in schools in Ireland. The Education Act of 1998 states the importance to “ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices” (Education Act, 1998, p.13). As career guidance is a relatively and recently institutionalised in secondary education in Ireland, it mainly applies to participants in secondary education after this Act was initiated. Neither Irene nor Nora report any experience with a guidance counsellor in secondary school while Nigel notes there was a guidance counsellor in his secondary school but that “I never remember PLC being mentioned in in school by them [teachers] and the careers guidance counsellor (Nigel IV1).

5.4.4 *Symbolic Violence*

In conjunction with institutional control, a further theme identified throughout this research was that of symbolic violence experienced by participants. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) talk of power in terms of symbolic violence as a power which “manifests itself in the form of a right to impose legitimately, reinforces the arbitrary power which establishes it and which it conceals” (p.13). The type of exam undertaken, the exam results, the CAO and the CAO points inflation linked to COVID-19 all resulted in symbolic violence on the secondary school leavers which left them feeling shame, disappointment and had enduring effects which still impact Kevin, as evidenced in his third interview: “my Leaving Cert was utterly redundant...it was meaningless...that's a shitty Leaving Cert in the current scheme” (Kevin IV3).

The LCA is an alternative certification to the LCE with emphasis on vocational learning. Although the purpose of LCA is to foster inclusion (Curneen, 2024), the LCA is not recognised by the Central Applications Office (CAO) for entry to university courses thus

restricting options for all LCA students on their progression to third level. As stated on university websites: “The Leaving Cert Applied Programme will not meet minimum entry requirements and will not be awarded points” (Technological University Dublin, 2025). Owen felt that the options of LCA students are substantially hampered and he is frustrated that the education system can act “like a barrier to people trying get education” (Owen IV1). Moreover, public perception of the LCA is typically dismissive, assigning little or no value to the LCA (Irish Second-Level Students’ Union, 2023). Owen encountered stigma and lack of respect as a result of being an LCA student: “she [person in conversation] turned around and goes, ‘that’s [LCA] for the dropouts’. Like that was the most rudest thing I’ve ever heard...LCA aren’t classed the same level as the traditional counterparts and that to me seems very strange” (Owen IV1). Owen completed the LCA as he felt it was more suited to his learning needs as a result of his dyslexia. However, Owen’s experience shows how educational disadvantage intersects with additional learning needs, institutional access and social stigma. Although the LCA is designed as an inclusive educational pathway, its restricted progression opportunities can reproduce exclusion and stigma, highlighting how disadvantage operates through overlapping structural and social dynamics.

As indicated in Chapter 2, FET is often perceived as an alternative pathway for students with lower academic attainment (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017) and is long associated as a college for students who are unable to obtain sufficient points for university (Ade-Ojo and Duckworth, 2019; Sartori and Bloom, 2023; Ní Chorcra et al., 2025). Kevin feels that people look down on him as a result of enrolling in FET as he experienced: “a stigma that was like, not the, not the best and brightest of us go to PLC (Kevin IV1).

A substantial amount of negativity towards FET appeared rooted in secondary school as secondary school leavers recalled experiences where there were strong implications that FET was an inferior educational option and that it was only deemed as a back-up option for those whose CAO points would be insufficient to gain access to third level:

it [FET] was kind of pushed on to us in a way that it was almost saying that you go here if you can't get into University (Naomi IV1).

And I think PLCs are kind of seen as like...if you can't go to college, you just do a PLC. Or if you have no like ambition, you do PLC. If you don't care enough to try in a way. And I don't think secondary school helps that at all because they just kind of said 'Oh well, if you can't do this, do PLC, you don't need any points' (Naomi IV2).

Kevin recalls how little attention was given to discussing FET in school and how he feels that stigma attached to FET is cultivated in secondary schools:

It was mentioned but it was, it was mainly ignored for a lot of us...Ignored or moved on, hurried...they knew that not everyone is going to get into college the first time around...and it was always treated as that. (Kevin IV1)

The stigma around them is deeply unfair. Mainly 'cause people don't know and people only, the only thing people know about it is you learn what the PLC is in secondary school (Kevin IV2)

Societal views affected how participants felt about coming to FET, representing yet another setback for those who had already endured the pressures of secondary school, the stress of the LCE, disappointment with their LCE results, being refused a university offer by the CAO and now having to contend with the negative public perceptions of FET. While lifelong Learners were aware of negative attitudes towards FET: “That's [FET] for kids who didn't get into college, isn't it?” (Irene IV1), they did not appear to be personally impacted by these comments or perceptions. This may be due to the time lapse between when they attended secondary school and enrolled in FET, but may also be linked to advanced maturity and accumulated life experience which may render individuals less vulnerable to the judgment of others compared to their younger counterparts (Charles, 2010; Castrellon et al., 2024).

Gemma and Brenda, who were migrants to Ireland, were completely unaware of any negative perceptions towards the FET sector. However, they did experience symbolic violence through the lack of recognition of their English proficiency. Lalor and Rami

(2008) note that educational policies “are underpinned by a particular concept of Irish/national identity” (p.685) which can seek to exclude students from diverse backgrounds. This was the experience of both Gemma and Brenda who experienced a sense of inadequacy regarding their language skills attributed to the English language proficiency tests required for university, despite the fact that both had lived, worked and studied successfully in Ireland, while Brenda also possessed a degree in English and had worked professionally as an ESOL teacher for several years. Admission of non-native speakers of English to third level institutions requires evidence of a recognised English language exam such as IELTS which demands a high pass mark which involves an: “average score of 6.5 over all components and a minimum of 6.0 in each band” (University College Dublin, 2024). Research shows that English language competency requirements can be a significant barrier to education (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017) as it involves substantial effort and investment with regard to translations of existing qualifications and preparation for and completion of accepted English language qualifications: “I would have to do IELTS and which I think I would have to spend a lot of time getting a good score in Ireland because that's what the requirement is” (Gemma IV1).

5.5 Influence of Capitals

Bourdieu believes that individuals from more affluent backgrounds have access to increased levels and forms of capital which “enables them to appropriate social energy” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241). This capital reinforces societal advantages for these individuals while those from less privileged backgrounds have reduced capital resources, thus limiting their opportunities and position in society.

the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241).

According to Bourdieu there are “different types and subtypes of capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241) which take the form of economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. The following section explores the influence of these forms of capital on the participants’ decision to enrol in FET.

5.5.1 *Economic Capital*

Economic or financial capital plays a significant role in providing advantage to individuals and facilitating access to education and educational success (Bourdieu, 1990a). Limited economic capital influenced the decision for many participants to enrol in FET, with all participants, with the exception of Kevin, discussing the financial obstacles faced in accessing education, such as course fees and transport costs. The cost of FET courses is substantially lower than those at universities or private colleges. Participant interviews took place between 2020 and 2022 and during this time FET course fees were approximately €450 per year (Tullamore Further Education and Training Centre, 2020, p.14). FET course fees have subsequently been abolished⁴⁴. This contrasts dramatically with the substantial annual costs involved in attending university in Ireland. It is estimated that the average annual cost of attending higher education is €11,064 per year, or €1,229 per month (Delisle and Hauptman, 2021; Indecon, 2022), with course fees averaging in the region of €3,000 per student per year. Furthermore, the duration of the average post leaving certificate course in FET is eight months, compared to three to four years in university. FET enabled participants to overcome the economic barriers of costs associated with attending university while also achieving a recognised qualification in a reduced amount of time: “the only reason why I chose PLC, cost and like a four-year degree and the four-year degree wasn't worth the qualification for the amount of money I was going to be spending” (Owen IV1).

The cost of courses and general living costs were key considerations for all of the lifelong learner participants. None of the participants in this group had their own

⁴⁴ The removal of course fees for FET courses was announced in 2023 with effect from September 2024 (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023). Registration fees may apply, but in the event of registration fees, medical card holders are exempt from paying these fees

independent earnings or income at the time of this study. Irene was retired and in receipt of a low pension while Nigel and Nora were both in receipt of job-seekers' allowance which was then converted to VTOS upon commencing their course. The VTOS scheme which made it possible for Nora and Nigel to participate in FET however, as discussed in Chapter 2, is being phased out by SOLAS with some FET colleges no longer operating this scheme (National Association of VTOS Co-ordinators, 2021). One participant (Ciara) was neither employed nor receiving any government funding as she was living at home with her parents and deemed to be a dependent. Despite displaying markers of relative affluency, Ciara said she would have found it difficult to pay the annual university fees of around €3,000, which is the reason she chose the Level 5 QQI course at Riverview College:

that was kind of another reason why I was looking at PLCs...It's because I'm a mature student but I also live with my mom. I wouldn't be applicable for SUSI ^[45]. So I would have to pay three grand to do [a year at university] (Ciara IV2).

Lifelong learners, Gemma and Brenda were both employed on a full-time basis prior to living in Ireland but were no longer employed at the time of FET enrolment. Neither were in receipt of government funding, both were living in rented accommodation in areas of Dublin that would not be deemed disadvantaged (Pobal, 2022). Both were financing their educational and living expenses based on savings and money earned from previous employments. Nevertheless, their ability to finance their education, outgoings and day-to-day expenses concerned these participants, especially as they had no family presence in Ireland. When asked what her main goals would be in the short term, Gemma replied:

it will be to fund my survival and be a student. That's I think the main challenge because as a mature student you know it's different. When I went to college for the first time, my parents were funding me, you know, but now I have to. (Gemma IV1)

⁴⁵ Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) is the national authority with responsibility for awarding further and higher education grants (SUSI, 2025). Grants received from this authority are commonly referred to as "SUSI grants"

Brenda also spoke of having to fund herself while doing the course and this greatly impacted her decision to study at Riverview College: “like I don't have my parents here so I kinda need to look [out] for myself economically”. (Brenda IV1).

Transport costs and time involved with travelling to college have also been found to be an impediment to enrolling in education (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017). This study reveals that location was an important consideration for participants when choosing the specific FET college. SOLAS emphasise the importance of providing FET in every locality in Ireland which ensures that FET is locally accessible to all individuals, stating that FET is: “available in every corner of Ireland and it must remain rooted in its communities” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.45). The ease with which participants could access Riverview College was a significant factor for all participants in their decision to enrol in Riverview College, with the majority of participants commuting to Riverview via public transport, bicycle or on foot: “This [the college] is great, it's central...Yeah technically I mean, I could walk there. It's very accessible with the Luas” (Nigel IV2).

Owen states that he specifically chose the college location because:

most of the courses on the [far side of Dublin] are a two-hour drive away and that. I looked up when most classes start and I'd have to get up at like 5[am], the Luas for 5.30/6.00[am], get in there for 8[am] and then find it by 9[am] so it's like it didn't seem worth it to try for there. So I tried on [this side of Dublin] (Owen IV1)

Despite living two hours' away from Riverview College by public transport, Kevin, chose the college due to its accessibility rather than the time or cost taken to get there: “And so, so easy to get to. The train and then luas. (Kevin IV1). Nevertheless, the online nature of the course as a result of COVID-19 restrictions made it easier for students to attend the college by reducing transport time and costs.

it's an hour and a half each way for me so I don't have travel. So that's like three hours saved each day. Like so online actually suits me now. (Nora IV2)

I think, like with transport and everything, I was still saving money (Brenda IV3)

5.5.2 Cultural Capital

Bourdieu posits that individuals who possess strong cultural capital are better positioned to navigate the educational system (Bourdieu, 1990a). Cultural capital refers to knowledge and habits that can provide advantage to individuals in society, for example success in the field of education can be linked to previous educational experience or knowledge. Bourdieu and Passeron (1972) state that “abilities measured by scholastic criteria stem not so much from natural “gifts”...but from the greater or lesser affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it” (p.22). Most participants possessed cultural capital in the form of their current familiarity with educational settings and environments having recently attended secondary school, FET or third level prior to enrolment in Riverview College. None of these participants reported any levels of anxiety, doubt or nervousness in relation to commencing a course in FET. In this way, these participants demonstrate a sense of ease in their new FET environment: “when a habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water’: it does not feel the weight of the water” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.127). Conversely, lifelong learners, Irene and Nora, who had no previous experience of education post-secondary school, displayed sentiments of fear and anxiety regarding commencing their FET studies: “I was so anxious” (Nora IV1). “I was really nervous” (Irene IV3).

Irene and Nora were extremely apprehensive about commencing their course due to their age or lack of digital skills: “I was afraid...I think there should be a lot more support even for the likes of me. I mean, I haven't gone back to education, so you're talking 26 years” (Nora IV1). Digital literacy plays a key role in learning and students who do not have sufficient digital skills or access to adequate technology are at a fundamental disadvantage in the educational environment (Pierce and Cleary, 2024). A lack of self-belief among older students can also act as impediments to educational engagement (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017; AONTAS, 2023). The findings of this research therefore highlight that reduced cultural capital can lead to increased levels of apprehension and unease among individuals, acting as a barrier to pursuing educational options.

5.5.3 *Social Capital*

Social capital refers to the relationships and support through friends, family or membership of groups or networks “which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, pp.248-9). The level of social capital of participants was strong with all secondary school leavers and the younger lifelong learners having access to friends and family who completed or who are completing a third level education. This underscores the changes over time in university participation in Ireland, with all lifelong learner participants who completed their second level education over twenty-five years ago reporting fewer connections to university students at that time.

Irene completed her LCE in the late 1970s when participation in university was less common, especially for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research shows that enrolment in higher education has since doubled (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022) and that nowadays “more than half of Irish workers hold a degree” (Delisle and Hauptman, 2021, p.3). This increased university participation correlates with the introduction of the Free Fees Initiative (FFI) by the Government of Ireland in 1995 which removed the requirement for students to pay tuition fees for public third level institutions (Indecon, 2022). It also corresponds with the introduction and extension of the Higher Education Access route (HEAR) which expands access opportunities for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to attend university (Trinity College Dublin, 2009) and the introduction of the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme, introduced in 2009 with the aim of increasing the number of students with disabilities in university (Wood, 2009). Nevertheless, disparities still remain as those from disadvantaged areas are still less likely to attend university (Higher Education Authority, 2021; Forster et al., 2022; Ní Chorcra et al., 2025). While Kevin highlights that: “all of my friend group is in university currently, save one” (Kevin IV1), Owen who attended a DEIS school reported that most of his friends planned to complete apprenticeships: “in school, most people I knew would go into apprenticeships” (Owen IV1). Archer et al. (2007) and Reay et al.

(2009) found that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds tended to know few people in their peer group or family who had attended university, which in turn, made it difficult for them to aspire to third level. Conversely individuals who know friends or family who attended university are more likely to pursue educational pathways post-compulsory education (Aguirre and Matta, 2021; Alvarado, 2021; Tompsett and Knoester, 2023).

All participants in this study received information or recommendations to attend Riverview from people in their family or social circle. This demonstrates a reliance on “hot knowledge” (Ozga and Jones, 2013, p.204) where information is shared informally within social networks as opposed to information that is derived from official or published sources:

somebody told me about FETCH^[46] courses.ie...I saw this course and I knew I have to do it. I want this course. It's because of my parents' background...I just knew how good it was and I'd love to do it. So that's the reason I got into this course (Nora IVI).

However, heightened access to social capital may not always result in positive outcomes. Lifelong learner, Ciara, and secondary school leaver, Kevin, came from more affluent backgrounds and had increased access to senior professionals, friends and relatives who had completed third level education or worked in senior positions, yet this did not alter their situation in relation to accessing education after secondary school. In fact, it may actually have had the effect of providing too many options, thus creating confusion their education and career directions:

I did a course in [a private college]...in journalism...in the summer I spoke to a man that we know, he's actually now head of [government department]...he had worked in human rights law and so I went to meet with him...I just found that so fascinating...for a while the intention was to go and do a law course...the arts events management came up... so that then led me to the arts administration work (Ciara IV1).

⁴⁶ Further Education and Training Course Hub

The high achievements of Kevin's family and friends placed extra pressure on Kevin to succeed which felt amplified when he did not achieve the expected outcomes: "I'm from a university family. I was going to be you know, I was going to university. There wasn't really a question. Otherwise things wouldn't have worked out very well" (Kevin IV3).

Lifelong learners Gemma and Brenda, who were born and educated outside of Ireland, demonstrated reduced amounts of social capital in their knowledge of the Irish education and qualification system. Gemma found it difficult to understand the levels of education in Ireland and the qualifications required for different careers.

I have to say is that in the beginning I struggled to understand the different levels. What was level 5, what was level 6. You know an understanding? What the jobs are requiring? Let's say what level do I have to do to be able to work as a social worker for example, you know. I had a bit of struggle understanding that (Gemma IV1).

Brenda was completely unaware of the educational options open to her and only decided to enrol in FET because of a recommendation by an acquaintance. While these participants had some awareness of FET, it was not something they considered until it was suggested to them by members of their family or social circle who had previously attended FET: "A friend of a friend told me that she did that. She actually recommended to me. She enjoyed the course. So I decided to do that" (Brenda IV1). Gemma and Brenda's experiences highlight how social capital was not equally available to all participants, as those who were born and educated abroad encountered different forms of informational and institutional disadvantage when navigating FET. Their migrant backgrounds shaped their access to educational guidance, knowledge of the Irish system and familiarity with institutional processes, which in turn influenced their engagement with FET.

5.6 Agency and Resilience of Participants

Bourdieu contends that "The practical world that is constituted in the relationship with the habitus, acting as a system of cognitive and motivating structures, is a world of

already realized ends – procedures to follow, paths to take” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.53). Through this assertion, Bourdieu denies the potential of personal agency and the ability of individuals to take ownership and control of their own lives. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) contend that societal reproduction is inevitable and that social factors including habitus and capital will continue to ensure the preservation of structures and social classes within society. Yet the participant stories from this research challenge this assertion. Despite coming from different backgrounds, many of which were disadvantaged, combined with negative educational experiences and capital shortcomings, all participants displayed remarkable evidence of resilience and determination to improve and advance their situation in life. When their planned pathways were blocked, participants did not merely accept this situation and resign to social constraints. Instead, they made immense efforts to seek alternative options as a means to progress and access opportunities to improve their lives. This points to participants’ engagement in reflexive self-formation (Giroux, 1983; Marginson, 2023) prior to entering FET, which contributed to their conscious decision to enrol in FET.

Owen attended a DEIS school, his father is a tradesperson, his mother works in the home and is also a student, and most of his friends planned on becoming apprentices. It was assumed by his peers and teachers that he would follow in the footsteps of his father and his friends to become an apprentice. Although Owen highlights the deterministic role and influence of his primary habitus on his life opportunities, he also shows his efforts to move beyond these constraints by creating opportunities that would lead him to work in his desired career in social care: “if I didn't go to further ed or like start in volunteering, I would have been an apprentice because I come from a family of tradesmen” (Owen IV3). Through volunteering in a community centre, Owen not only gained experience in this field but also obtained information on qualification routes he could follow, which prompted him to urge his school guidance counsellor for further details. When asked about the obtaining information on the options available to him he responds: “I found it easier because I volunteer in a youth centre. Then I

could ask the people who did this type of course 'Did you go? How did you find it?' " (Owen IV1).

Freire refers to the obstacles faced by students as "limit situations" (Freire, 2005, p.99) whereby individuals become aware of the barriers they face which leads them to "devote themselves to overcoming them" (Araújo Freire⁴⁷, 2021, p.208). The participants in this study acknowledged their situation of being unable to achieve their dream of progressing to university or their chosen career. Yet instead of submitting to a lack of opportunity, they viewed "their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting - and therefore challenging" (Freire, 2005, p.85). Despite the limit situations experienced by Kevin in his second denial of a place in university, he persevered in his attempt to gain access to university through FET, using the time to his advantage: "I can use this year to...equalize with my peers going into college [university] and maybe an advantage 'cause I'll have first aid training. I'll have practical experience and I'll have...a very beginning in nursing" (Kevin IV1). The lived experiences of participants in this research illustrate considerable self-awareness and willingness to challenge the status-quo as they opted to convert the obstacles of university access into the possibility to learn and develop new skills. Ciara refused to settle for an unfulfilling career and instead used FET as "a pathway to see where I wanted to go, see what I wanted to do" (Ciara IV1).

Freire (2005) believes that individuals can overcome societal pressures and constraints through "conscientização" or critical consciousness which he defines as the ability to "perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p.35). Conscientização is a process whereby individuals become creators of their own destiny rather than passive actors trapped by fate. This process of taking action was evident throughout the participants' narratives and is further exemplified in the way that Nora challenges institutional structures. Nora was almost prevented from studying in FET because she had insufficient

⁴⁷ Ana Maria Araújo Freire was a scholar, educator and wife of Paulo Freire

unemployment credits to qualify for educational funding. However, she was determined to oppose what she perceived as an injustice within the system: “I had an argument with social welfare...they said, “we're not going to give you any funding to help you pay back to education funding” because I was three weeks too early. And I fought and fought, fought and fought” (Nora IV3).

A study by Reay et al. (2009) showed that working class students developed “superhuman” levels of determination and resilience (p.1115). Reay et al. (2009) attributed this resilience to students’ ability to reflect on their situation and identify areas of self-improvement through a “process of self-conscious reflexivity” (Reay, 2009, p.1105). Nigel presented with indicators of disadvantage in his life, yet he completed a degree and a secondary school teaching qualification directly after secondary school, despite not obtaining the CAO points needed to attend an Irish university. This was because he conducted research on his own initiative and independently sought out alternative university options as he anticipated difficulties in gaining a university offer in Ireland.

So I did eventually go to university but I think an awful lot of the research you had to do it yourself...I went to [UK university] 'cause I didn't have the points and I knew I wouldn't. I didn't have the points to do an arts degree in Ireland...but I knew I wasn't going to get into the University in Ireland, so I was quite driven and I went through the UCAS [UK university application] system (Nigel IV1).

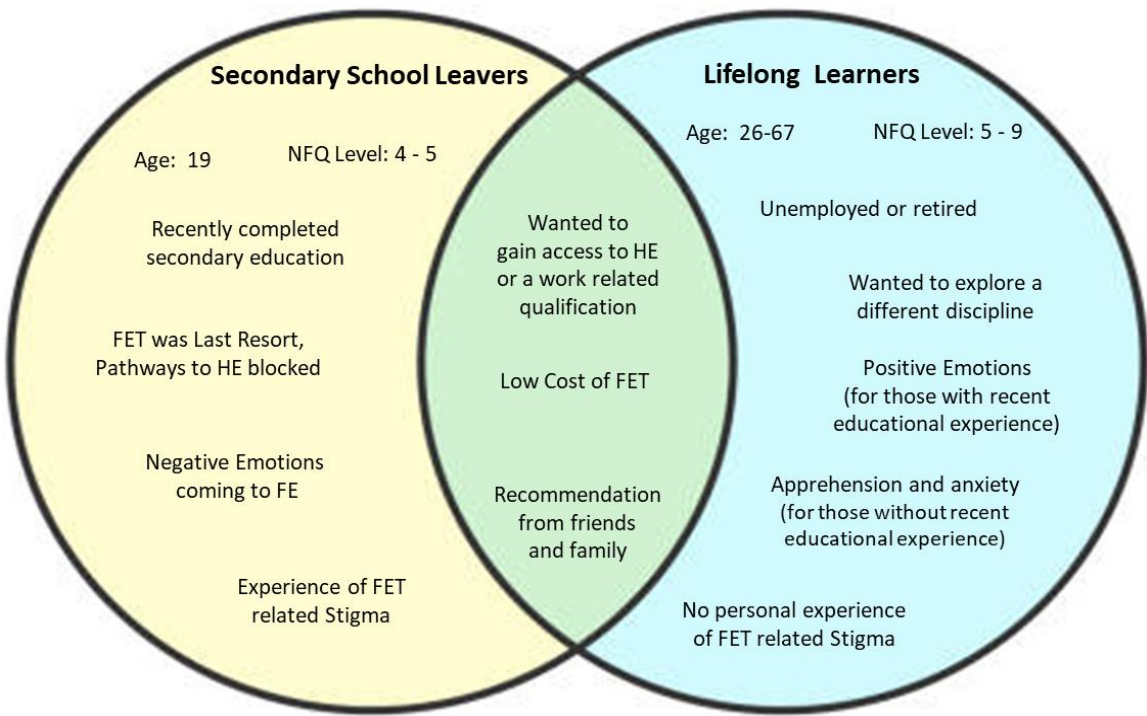
In being denied access to university after secondary school, Nigel took the decision to travel on his own at the age of seventeen years to live and study in the UK. Despite this being a traumatic move for him: “I was later quite heartbroken after being away for six weeks. I, oh my God, I crashed with this emotion after leaving home” (Nigel IV1), he persisted and completed his degree and teaching qualifications. More than two decades later, Nigel still demonstrates this resilience. Despite enduring many personal and social difficulties in recent years, he was resolute in making positive changes and improvements to change his life and future opportunities: “I've lost a lot already...So yeah, so yeah, my obstacles would be personal life issues...You have to be positive” (Nigel IV1). Nigel proactively sought out ways to overcome these issues which involved

seeking support, reaching out for guidance and identifying FET courses that would enable him to work in the future.

5.7 Conclusion

The evidence in this study shows that FET was not a planned route for any of the participants. None of the participants had medium or long-term aspirations to attend a college of FET. All participants made their decision to come to FET immediately prior to enrolment either due to educational barriers or a recent awareness of FET through friends or family. Patterns of commonality were observed between the various participant groups as illustrated in Figure 5.1. For secondary school leavers, FET was not a choice but a decision made from necessity in order to gain entry to university or a career. This group of participants expressed sentiments of disappointment, shame and frustration upon enrolling in FET. For lifelong learners, FET provided an opportunity to explore alternative career opportunities or to focus on personal development and interests, generally resulting in sentiments of relief and happiness. However, for the more mature participants in this group, fears of age disparities and a lack of computer literacy were also expressed.

Figure 5.1 Motivations for Enrolling in FET



Family support played a key role in participants' post-secondary school decisions as participants with low levels of familial encouragement for education were less likely to continue their education after secondary school, thus emphasising the influence of primary habitus on participants' educational decisions. The secondary habitus, shaped by institutional structures, substantially constrained the opportunities afforded to participants. The rote learning pedagogies of secondary school and stress of examinations excluded participants with different learning abilities from success, thereby precluding them from accessing university. Participants found guidance counselling facilities in secondary school to be inadequate and there was a difference observed in the service provided by guidance in private schools versus non-fee-paying schools. The arbitrary CAO points system acted as a gatekeeper preventing participants from attending university while their friends and peers progressed ahead. The conditions of the COVID-19 global pandemic removed control from participants in their LCE and inflicted the process of calculated grades on participants, a process which has been proven to disfavour disadvantaged students (Neuman, 2022). Additional institutional constraints were evident through the application criteria for university which discriminated against participants for whom English is not their first language.

Symbolic violence was inflicted on participants through the negative societal perceptions of the LCA and of FET. LCA was seen as an educational system "for the dropouts" (Owen IV1), while FET was viewed as a place where students go only "if you can't get into University" (Naomi IV1). Stigmatisation of FET appears rooted within secondary school discourse as participants recalled several encounters where FET was looked down upon and deemed as a place for the unsuccessful: "And I don't think secondary school helps that at all because they just kind of said "Oh well, if you can't do this, do PLC, you don't need any points" " (Naomi IV2). These negative perceptions led to diminished confidence and a lack of self-worth: "not the best and brightest of us go to PLC" (Kevin IV1). These experiences of control and symbolic violence exerted

by educational structures in the participants' secondary habitus support Bourdieu's assertion that education serves to reinforce the existing societal structures:

The educational system succeeds so perfectly in fulfilling its ideological function of legitimating the established order only because this masterpiece of social mechanics succeeds in hiding, as if by the interlocking of false-bottomed boxes, the relations which, in a class society, unite the function of inculcation i.e. the work of intellectual and moral integration, with the function of conserving the structure of class relations characteristic of that society (Bourdieu, 1977; pp.199-200).

This chapter also explored the role of capital in the decisions of participants and found that social capital, in the form of support and guidance from family and friends, played a pivotal role in providing participants with valuable information and reassurance regarding courses and options in FET. The majority of participants reported concerns over their limited economic capital and the low cost of FET courses was viewed as a considerable factor in participants' enrolment decisions. This burden is further reduced due to the removal of FET course fees, although some colleges have implemented registration fees of approximately €50-€100 per student and potential additional course related costs (Cork ETB, 2026; Rathmines College, 2025).

Cultural capital in terms of access to information on educational opportunities was increased for participants from more affluent backgrounds compared to participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Recent post-secondary school educational experiences provided participants with more confidence in engaging in new educational experience whereas participants who completed their education at secondary level several decades ago expressed emotions of anxiety and apprehension related to commencing their FET studies. Despite SOLAS' policy to increase inclusion, there was no evidence of promotion of FET evidenced by the fact that all lifelong learners only became aware of FET through family and friends. Nor was there any evidence of strategies or programmes to ease the apprehension felt by lifelong learners in advance of FET commencement. Furthermore, SOLAS (2020) adopts the EU definition of lifelong learners as "adults aged 25-64" (CEDEFOP 2012; Europa,

2025). However, this definition excludes the experiences of more mature learners like Irene, who was 67 years upon commencing her studies in FET.

hooks (1994) argues that education cannot be separated from intersectional social dimensions. While participants shared a common decision to enrol in FET, their motivations were shaped by different life circumstances and experiences prior to FET enrolment. Secondary school leavers faced institutional pressures, stigma and uncertainty regarding progression whereas lifelong learners often balanced educational participation alongside broader family responsibilities, prior employment histories and migration experiences. In this way, participants engagement with FET was shaped by a variety of overlapping factors including age, socio-economic position, educational history, additional learning needs and personal circumstance.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) claim that societal reproduction is inevitable and that mechanisms operate to maintain the established hierarchies and power: “practices can be predicted...this is because the effects of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.77). However, the participants’ experiences in this research challenge this contention. Despite the combination of disadvantaged backgrounds, negative educational experiences and capital shortcomings, all participants displayed remarkable evidence of resilience, personal agency and determination to improve their situation in life. When their planned pathways were blocked, participants did not merely accept this status quo and resign to social barriers and constraints. Instead, they made immense efforts to seek alternative options through enrolling in FET as a means to progress and access opportunities to improve their lives.

The following chapter will explore the experiences of participants after FET enrolment and as they engaged in their course in FET.

Chapter 6. Findings (II): Emancipatory and Transformative Practices in FET

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the various influences, circumstances and motivations that influenced participants' decisions to enrol in an FET College, highlighting the participant perspectives of constraints imposed as a result of their habitus and reduced access to capital. These constraints limited participants' ability to pursue the educational and career trajectories they originally aspired to, hindering their efforts to improve their life situations, thus exemplifying Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction. This chapter now shifts its focus to the period following participants' admission to Riverview College in order to understand the participant experience within the FET learning environment. This chapter will explore the experiences of participants through the lens of the transformative and emancipatory theories of Freire and Mezirow in order to determine how FET can operate as a mechanism to enable students to overcome societal barriers and constraints.

Bourdieu (1990a) contends that we are bound by the constraints of our habitus and therefore have limited opportunity to break free from personal and societal constraints stating that "habitus tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.60). In contrast, Giroux (2021a) contends that Freire's Pedagogy of Hope encourages us "not to surrender to such [pessimistic] events as inescapable facts of fate but to seize upon them as new challenges and opportunities to make politics, hope and education central to the challenge of rethinking politics and the possibilities of collective agency and resistance" (p.2). Contrary to Bourdieu who offers hope only to "the most socially privileged [victims of elimination]" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p.119), Freire proposes ways to bring about these changes, offering hope to *all* individuals. Freire (2005) proposes that his Pedagogy of Hope is "a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation" (p.54).

Freire provides a theory of emancipatory education, advocating for a pedagogy which can enable individuals to overcome structural inequalities and societal oppression through gaining a critical consciousness or “conscientização” (Freire, 2005, p.36). In this way, students develop an awareness of their own circumstances which encourage them to question oppressive societal structures, thus empowering them to become active agents of change. Freire’s work played a formative role in Mezirow’s development of transformative learning theory (Fleming, 2022a) who also proposes empowering individuals to bring about change. Freire is concerned with emancipation through societal transformation while Mezirow is more concerned with empowering individuals through personal transformation as Mezirow is “primarily interested in the perspective of the individual engaged in transformative learning” (Taylor and Cranton, 2012, p.7). Similar to Freire’s ‘conscientization’, Mezirow also advocates a critical awareness but this is more internalised as he proposes students should reflect on their own assumptions which allows them to understand different viewpoints and challenge established beliefs.

As evident in Chapter 5, this thesis highlights that structural constraints exist which act as barriers to progression, particularly for students from marginalised backgrounds. However, rather than resign ourselves to these constraints, this thesis argues that educational experiences in FET can serve as a vehicle for individual and social change through the lens of Freire’s and Mezirow’s theories. Freire and Mezirow both emphasise that facilitating change necessitates a supportive educational environment where pedagogical practices are communicative, reflective and reflexive. This chapter aims to explore the experiences of participants during their time in Riverview College to identify if the environment and practices within FET align with the theories of Freire and Mezirow, fostering conditions that support change as a way to reduce the impact of societal and personal constraints. The following research question will thus be addressed:

RQ2. What are the lived experiences of participants with regard to the learning environment and pedagogical practices within an FET college?

6.2 The FET Learning Environment

Conditions of emancipatory and transformative learning involve the establishment of a supportive environment through positive relationships, a safe learning environment free from fear or judgement which provides opportunities for student voices to be heard. This section will explore the participants' experiences of Riverview College with particular regard to student-teacher relationships, peer relationships and participants' sense of safety in the learning environment.

6.2.1 Supportive Student-Teacher Relationships

As evidenced in Chapter 5, many of the participants discussed negative experiences in secondary school where they felt intimidated or where they experienced control and submission to institutional structures and systems. These participants display evidence of being "oppressed" as a result of rules and restrictions where they have "been denied their right to have their say, having historically had the duty to only listen and obey" (Freire, 2013, p.106). Freire (2005, 2013) notes that such students often lack self-confidence and can be mistrustful of educators due to their previous experiences. The building of trustful and respectful relationships is therefore particularly important for the student body in FET so that students can feel sufficiently comfortable to fully engage in the educational environment. Freire (2013) states that "If education is dialogical, it is clear that the role of the teacher is important, whatever the situation" (p.109) and in this way, positive student-teacher relationships are vital to creating a positive learning environment for students.

Thomas (2002) and hooks (1994) emphasise the importance of getting to know students by name and spending time with them as a way to encourage positive relationships between teachers and students. Developing positive student-teacher relationships is found to be important in building student confidence (The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2016; Sneddon, 2021). Freire (2013) emphasises the importance of observing "not only the "humanitarianism" of an individual but also the structure in which s/he is placed and by which s/he is

conditioned” (Freire, 2013, p.106). All participants felt that their FET teachers took a genuine interest in students and made efforts to get to know each student. Participants felt that they were no longer viewed as a number, but instead were recognised as individuals whose opinions and contributions were valued:

the teachers in Riverview were a little bit more personable [than in university] because they kind of remembered your name, like they knew who you were...in Riverview, they, they knew you... it is a little bit more of a personal experience. And you're not just like a number, you're not your student number (Naomi IV3).

It is clear from participant accounts that despite many reporting negative recollections of their experiences in secondary school, all participants now have positive associations with teachers. When asked to express her thoughts on the word ‘teacher’ in Irene’s first interview, she struggles to come up with word associations for the word ‘teacher’ as she remembers back to her experiences before she commenced her course in Riverview College: “Gosh, I can’t oh...intimidation OK, from way back now from there” (Irene IV1), but by her second interview she associates teacher with “Friend” (Irene IV2) and outlines that:

they listened, they gave feedback, they made suggestions. They encouraged when you felt like you weren't going to make it...They quietly supported you, gave you encouragement. If I needed to talk they were available...[Teachers] would be there to help us through it and do it for us if we couldn't do it...the teachers would do it for you or walk you through it if you couldn't do it. Thankfully, I was able to manage it with help and support from the tutors (Irene IV2).

This study also shows that teachers’ encouragement and continued support aided the development of participants’ ability to adapt and persevere in their studies. Participants highlighted that teachers eased their transition into their learning environment:

It [the course in FET] was difficult...It is very different to second level, even though it's not technically like a third level, it's like two and half...it's still a jump. But we were kind of guided and helped a lot with it (Naomi IV2).

Fleming (2022a) draws attention to Freire's prioritisation of the relationship between students and teachers which Freire believes is more important than the knowledge and information taught in the classroom: "The radicality of Freire's proposal lies in the fact that it argues that subject of education and knowledge is not the teacher or the student, but the teacher-student relationship" (Fleming, 2022a, p.14). Owen recalls advice he received from teachers on how to manage stress during his studies which helped him greatly: "[the teacher said] "Divide your life in sections. It's like once the classes end, switch over something else...Live your own life". So that was a big help" (Owen IV2).

Kevin's experience demonstrates how his challenges were also shaped by the intersection of gendered social expectations and occupational stereotypes as he entered a course in nursing, traditionally associated with women: "Being a male in a nursing course has kind of a stigma to it. I was only one of I was one of three... there's three men out of 80... There was kind of a glaring gender gap" (Kevin IV2). However, when faced with negative or disheartening comments from people in their social circles, participants found reassurance and guidance through the support of their teachers. Kevin encountered unwelcome comments from friends and family about his decision to study nursing due to his gender and stature, however his teacher in FET encouraged him to overcome this difficult situation: "There was a degree of mockery from my friends and from my family about me being a nurse...My teacher [gave] assurance that nothing was going to go wrong"(Kevin IV2).

Participants who faced challenging situations or considered withdrawing from the course, received support from their teachers which motivated them to persist. Irene had seriously contemplated terminating her studies, but her teachers motivated her to continue:

I think it's all around the teachers [in Riverview] and in their support and their belief in me...it's been encouragement...when I'd want to give up, they'd say just give it another month...and anytime I was going to give

up he'd say, 'don't give up today'...that's stuck with me
that and that still sticks with me (Irene IV3).

Providing support to students with learning difficulties plays a vital role in enabling them to overcome learning barriers and to adapt and succeed in the learning environment (Duggan and Byrne, 2013). This is especially important given the challenges faced by students and considering that the number of learners in FET with additional educational needs is significantly increasing each year (SOLAS, 2022b; Alvarez and Sullivan, 2023). As evident from Tables 6.1 and 6.2 below, there has been a substantial increase in learners in FET presenting with a disability which increased by almost 46% in the period 2018-2022, while enrolments by refugees have more than tripled in the same period.

Table 6.1 FET Unique Enrolments 2018-2022

Widening Participation	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Traveller Community	1,212	1,527	1,139	1,130	1,319
Roma Community	302	382	305	270	333
Asylum Seeker	825	1,129	911	709	1,132
Refugee	1,041	1,344	1,212	1,115	3,448
Learner with a Disability	8,644	13,098	11,376	10,588	12,578
Learners aged 50+	45,605	48,284	36,046	35,866	49,618

(SOLAS, 2022d, p.6)

Table 6.2 Summary of changes in FET Unique Enrolments (2018-2022)

FET Enrolments	2018	2022	Change (2018-2022)	Percentage Increase
Asylum Seeker	825	1132	+ 307	37 %
Refugee	1041	3448	+ 2407	231 %
Learner with a disability	8644	12578	+ 3934	46 %

(Calculations are based on Table 6.1)

It is clear from these figures that there is a growing and immediate need to accommodate diverse groups of learners through effective teaching strategies, yet there is a lack of a defined framework to support inclusion in FET institutions and there is little funding, guidance or training provided to FET teachers on inclusive pedagogies (Alvarez and Sullivan, 2023). Despite this, participants felt that teachers attempted to

accommodate all students through the provision of support and flexibility in their communication with students, their teaching styles and their assessment formats and submissions: “I felt like everyone is accommodated in Riverview...and I think that's important...so it's nice to have that” (Nigel IV2). Participants acknowledged the effort that teachers put into their teaching to ensure inclusivity and make classes interesting for students through asking students to provide feedback on the suitability of their teaching styles:

[Teacher 1] was also incorporating new ways of learning, teaching...she used visuals, she was asking ‘does visual work for you’ and always asking the students what they need. Teacher 2 asked us if anyone would want, instead of writing something, using any visual or other aids that would kind of help them (Gemma IV2).

Owen faced many obstacles due to his additional educational needs, but teachers worked with him to find suitable accommodations such as alternative assignment formats and submission methods: “I have dyslexia, so we found a solution where I don't have to type assignments. I record them in the same format as assignment.” (Owen IV2). In addition to emotional and academic support, Riverview College provided a wide range of technological and social support to students which helped them to adapt to the FET environment:

that was a big part of the thing. Like I kept receiving emails about getting laptops and Internet access, and this and that ...for people of an economic disadvantage or from...different disadvantaged areas...and there was also like other things, more social assistance like people who had difficulty with sexuality or with other difficulties in life or in work, so they were very good at providing support” (Kevin IV2).

Freire (2013) asserts that “Education is an act of love” (p.34) which must facilitate the humanisation of individuals. It is notable that participants frequently used the word “love” to describe their experience in Riverview as outlined below (further examples are provided in Appendix 15):

you know, I love it, I look forward to it every day and it's, it's basically, but it's very, it's a great atmosphere in the college (Nigel IV1).

I loved actually going up to [Riverview] college. I loved the lecturers and the teachers (Naomi IV2).

I loved...I was scared and stressed but I loved it at the same time...I loved my Zoom. I looked forward to my tutorials. I liked my tutorials and my Zoom calls and the feedback and the support. I liked all that...Absolutely yeah, loved it (Irene IV2).

This 'love' emanated from the dedication and genuine passion demonstrated by teachers in Riverview, a passion which then transfers into enjoyment for the students:

that spirit that the people in further education have. That they're still alive and they like the subject and they're willing to, they're happy to teach it. But they were they were an older group in Riverview but they still have that same passion for the subject that the young...lecturers in [university] have. They're still happy to learn and all of, all of the enjoyment of the class gets comes from the [teacher] (Kevin IV3).

As a qualified and experienced teacher himself, Nigel feels that the passion of teachers in Riverview is evident in the classroom:

Teachers are brilliant. All are very different, brilliant, yeah. Obviously different people, different personalities and you know and they all support and, they all enjoy it. It's very evident that they enjoy what they do...in my class there's a great atmosphere. People, people are genuinely enjoying the course more and more (Nigel IV1).

Freire (2013) outlines that "mutual trust" (p.42) between teachers and students is vital in order to create an environment conducive for true dialogue and communication, stating that "Faith in people is an a priori requirement for dialogue" (Freire, 2005, p.90). Participants felt that teachers had trust and faith in them, noting that teachers showed empathy to students rather than judgement. Nora mentions that: "they knew how hard it was for us" (Nora IV2) while Naomi states that: "the teachers are really approachable and...they're really understanding of the situation that we're all in and that it can be quite tough" (Naomi IV2). This sensitivity and insight shown by teachers demonstrates their understanding of the "historical-sociological, cultural, and

structural” backgrounds of students (Freire, 2013, p.105). Owen felt that the teachers were supportive and quick to reply to his learning needs related query: “I need help free writing which is basically assignments...I just told my Course Director...Within an hour...the teacher had already got the email, got what I needed” (Owen IV1). Participants also highlighted the responsiveness of teachers, an aspect which participants greatly appreciated:

every time I sent an email I got an answer back...[our teacher] is very attentive. She's always there for us...I think I feel that if I send email now in a few minutes I'll have the answer back (Gemma IV1).

Teachers were brilliant...all the teachers, if you had a problem or you were stuck on something. Every one of them. If I emailed him, every person got back to me, so it was good (Nora IV2).

6.2.2 *Peer Relationships*

This research highlights the importance of peer support in helping students adapt to their new environment and motivated them to continue during difficult periods or times of stress. Motivation and support through social interactions and relationships is an important factor in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978, 2000; English and Irving 2012; Fleming 2018). Mezirow (1978) notes that supportive social relationships are important in order for individuals to feel comfortable in their new environments and to avoid isolation that can be associated with times of change: “Moving to a new perspective and sustaining the actions which it requires is dependent upon an association with others who share the new perspective” (Mezirow, 1978, p.105) and it is crucial for learners to have “support and reinforcement to enable you to take action on the new viewpoint” (Mezirow, 1978, p.105).

Participants developed good friendships as a result of the course: “In general we all got along and we all knew each other, some of us became best friends” (Owen IV2). Positive relationships with fellow students increased the enjoyment of the course: “I actually really did enjoy it, and like being able to like make friends...it was just, so it

was such a good experience” (Naomi IV2). Taylor and Cranton (2012) write that “transformative learning was based on the importance of a community of support” (p.394). This was particularly important for Brenda who had only recently come to live in Ireland on her own and for Nigel who was living in supported accommodation:

we had like a group and we were texting...Yeah we were all in the same boat, like a lot of pressure, so it kinda like released me 'cause I thought I was the only one (Brenda IV2).

we support one another...it just felt...inclusive and networking as part of a team. So I never felt isolated...It's very like an open experience for everyone, so I could tell people were enjoying it...and I was enjoying it too (Nigel IV2).

However, for most participants, the remote learning as a result of the global pandemic negatively affected the ability to develop deep and meaningful friendships which could have further supported students in times of stress. Reay et al. (2010) and Reay (2018) note that isolation can result in students feeling alone and lacking a sense of belonging. The classes for most participants were fully online throughout the year which meant that they did not have physical contact with other students in the college:

it's annoying not knowing anyone from my class. That's the most annoying thing so far...social events indeed are very important. Especially because, doing social studies...we can't actually do certain things in the coursework like meeting face to face...We couldn't help each other with assignments. Like in previous years we could bounce off ideas in assignments (Owen IV1).

Most participants mentioned setting up online communication forums, in particular Whatsapp⁴⁸, which helped them to alleviate the lack of social interaction and where they could chat with other students, both from an academic and a personal perspective: “We have a great WhatsApp group, you know, and if I missed a class,...I would link in with and kind of say listen, what's the story? And they say, they give you the lowdown” (Nora IV3).

⁴⁸ Whatsapp is a free instant messaging application that supports text messages, voice and video calls, group chats and file sharing over the internet

Due to the practical nature of certain courses, a small number of participants did attend classes in the college for part of the year. However, even in these situations, the limited number of students and teachers that were physically in the college resulted in a lack of college atmosphere and an inability to interact with students from other courses:

it's hard, because like at the start, we were the only ones on site with dance [students]...So it was like a dead world for ages and we didn't get to experience a lot of stuff so...Like I think all things considered, they did really well considering Covid and we still got the experience we would have gotten no matter what (Ciara IV2).

6.2.3 *Safe Learning Environment*

Freire emphasises that education should endeavour to be “the practice of freedom” (Freire, 2013, p.131) and in order to achieve this, students must feel free from coercion. Mezirow also highlights the importance of the creation of a safe environment for students, highlighting that safety is a “precondition...for free full participation” (Mezirow, 2000, p.15). Mezirow specifically refers to marginalised students who he believes are “less likely to be able to participate effectively in discourse” (Mezirow, 2000, p.16). FET colleges tend to serve a high proportion of students who are marginalised (Grummell and Murray, 2015; SOLAS, 2023a) and therefore the creation of a safe environment is particularly important for these students. Participants felt emotionally safe in Riverview which helped them to voice their opinions and develop confidence:

it gives you this opportunity, it gives you this chance to see what college is like in a very safe environment (Ciara IV1).

The college are brilliant around coursework and the patience and they explain different things. So everything is, everything is very prepared. So college feels very safe (Nigel IV2).

I don't feel they [teachers] judged me (Kevin IV2).

They [teachers] make you feel comfortable on the course and ask any kind of questions, they don't make you feel like you are asking something awkward or something (Brenda IV2).

Mezirow (1996a) stresses the importance of the role of teachers in creating safe, supportive environments free from power structures and control in order for transformative learning to take place. He believes that teachers must create an environment of equality and inclusivity for all students: “Effective discourse depends on how well the educator can create a situation in which those participating have full information; are free from coercion; have equal opportunity to assume the various roles of discourse” (Mezirow 1997, p.10). Many participants remarked on the approachability of teachers and two-way interaction between students and teachers which, for many, represented a positive shift from past educational experiences. Naomi who previously stated that she had: “Not a lot of great memories associated with school” (Naomi IV1) now speaks differently of teachers in FET: “you could actually, you could come to [teachers]. You could have a chat with them...you could come to them for anything. And yeah, yeah, yeah, I don't have a bad thing to say to be honest” (Naomi IV2).

Feedback from participants points to Riverview College as an environment where power structures and hierarchical controls are less prominent than participants experienced in other educational environments:

it's a very sympathetic, I supposed compassionate, people in the college are very compassionate, or you know, flexible, realistic. It's not like a kind of an authoritarian thing...like years ago [being told] “you need to do this”. So I never felt under threat (Nigel IV2).

Teachers’ willingness to share personal aspects about themselves contributed to a reduction in perceptions of power and hierarchical authority in the classroom.

in Riverview like we knew the lecturers [teachers] a lot better...like we got to know them...and like, I could just learn who [teachers] are really quickly and they're also just really open about it (Ciara IV3).

I think dealing with teachers, you can actually have a good little banter with them and...it's not any more student/teacher...I think we're quite more on level and I think for further education, they're here to help you learn. They want to help you. It's not like being a teacher maybe in the secondary school (Nora IV3).

Mezirow (2000) outlines that students may have feelings of fear, guilt or shame and that these sentiments can inhibit full participation in the learning process. Ginott (1972) believed that barriers to successful learning included fear of criticism, failing or feeling ignorant. Participants frequently spoke of Riverview as a safe space where they felt free from judgement, shame or embarrassment. Participants felt safe and protected when making contributions in class or asking questions. The environment that teachers created for students allowed them to develop confidence in contributing to class discussions and engage in the meaningful dialogue without fear of being ridiculed or belittled: “you never get anybody or any teacher kind of going “oh that’s a stupid question” or dismiss you” (Nora IV1). This is particularly important for participants who suffered from low self-esteem or encountered negative prior experiences in school and for whom education can bring “all the risks of academic failure and shame that many experienced in their earlier schooling” (Reay, 2018, p.532).

theatre studies [is] something that I would never have thought of doing. And like back in September, I remember being like ‘Oh my God like going into an improv class, like I'd never feel OK being silly or being stupid...so it was kinda nice. It's probably something that was like...a universe life lesson for myself that like, it's OK to be silly or it's OK to do these things. And yeah, I really enjoyed it (Ciara IV2).

While safety is important for all students, it features prominently for Nigel who is living in supported accommodation which can be quite volatile at times due to circumstances of other residents. Nigel uses the word ‘safe’ at least ten times in his interviews, highlighting that this is a particular priority for him. However, Nigel states that FET represented an emotionally and physically safe space which was free from fear and hostility: “there was never any sort of aggression or attitude [in Riverview]...So people clearly on some level people are, you know, felt safe and confident” (Nigel IV2).

6.3 Communicative Learning

Both Freire and Mezirow highlight the importance of true and open dialogue between the student and the teacher. Communicative learning views learning as an active

process where students are actively involved in their learning and it seeks to understand perspectives rather than transmit knowledge. Through communicative learning, students can build self-confidence, gain an insight into other peoples' perspectives and learn more about themselves (Mezirow, 1997). The following sections outline participants' experiences and provide evidence of communicative learning in the areas of dialogical learning, collaborative learning, codification and contextualisation.

6.3.1 Dialogical Learning

Freire emphasises the cruciality of dialogue in education, stating that it brings about transformation and humanisation: "dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized" (Freire, 2005, pp.88-89). Open discussions and critical discourse were identified as key elements of teaching practices in Riverview. All participants mention examples of two-way interactions that took place during their classes where they were encouraged to actively participate in discussions, conversations and debates:

They made it as interesting as they could. And some teachers have different styles of teaching. You know, some people like interacting...The teachers liked interacting, [they] did interact a lot (Nora IV2).

Gemma explains that class discussions in Riverview have shaped her perspective and helped her relate education to broader societal and political contexts:

without education you know, we're actually lost. We've been talking a lot about [this] because we always get into this discussion in class of what we do, the future of our country. What we do, with people still voting for certain people and...well, education. You know that's the education (Gemma IV1).

Freire (2013) advocates for teaching methods that avoid rote learning, complicated language and complex concepts. He believes that teachers must use language that students can understand to avoid alienating students from the educational process:

“Our traditional curriculum...Indeed, its own naïve dependence on high-sounding phrases, reliance on rote and tendency toward abstractness actually intensified our naïveté” (Freire, 2013, p.33). While many participants cited dissatisfaction with the over-reliance on memorisation and regurgitation in educational experiences prior to Riverview College, these aspects did not appear to take place in Riverview:

they're [teachers] just happy to go backwards and forwards and just teach, truly teach, not recite, teach (Kevin IV3).

in Riverview...it was more the teaching rather than just listening...which helps in your confidence, I think. And it helps with being able to absorb that information. And when you're writing an essay, you know what you're actually speaking about (Naomi IV3).

Freire proposes that “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but who is himself taught in dialogue with the students” (Freire 2005, p.80). Rather than rote learning and memorisation, teachers in Riverview appeared genuinely interested in participants’ opinions and encouraged students to question and critique the concepts discussed in class, creating an environment where students became active contributors to their own learning:

the teachers...they're just not reading off a board or just talking. They'd be like, “OK”, And then you get into a discussion on your question...Looking at all the teachers, they'd be like, they love when somebody asks a question...I loved the interaction with the class and especially like in the classroom asking questions (Nora IV3).

Teachers are like, they like ask questions...[teachers say] ‘I don't mind if I have to do an extra class on this like five minutes slide. I want to know what you're thinking’ (Owen IV1).

However, while all participants mentioned a large amount of dialogue in the classroom, the remote learning environment as a result of the global pandemic led to a reduced

interactive experience and diminished opportunities for spontaneous discussions that are more easily facilitated in the physical classroom:

on Zoom⁴⁹, I think the overall sharing of experience, you know when you are in the classroom and the teacher says something and then students all raise our hands wanting to say something, I think that is missing in Zoom classes because you don't want to interrupt the teacher...and then the internet doesn't work properly. So I think the social aspects that I miss in relation to education is these moments where we would exchange information, ideas (Gemma IV1).

A further issue with dialogical learning is that it assumes all students are capable and willing to participate. While none of the participants in this study demonstrated a lack of willingness to participate in discussions in Riverview College, research shows that some students may not wish to engage for reasons such as lack of confidence, a lack of experience, language barriers or introverted tendencies (Diamondstone, 1998; Gulko et al., 2024). Even in classes where discussion is encouraged, marginalised students in particular can opt out of active participation in discussions and “choose to remain silent, out of fear of further stigmatization” (Parker-Shandal, 2023, p.2).

6.3.2 Collaborative Learning

Freire advocates collaborative learning where “the agents in the dialogue, not only retain their identity, but actively defend it, and thus grow together” (Freire, 2021, p.121). Mezirow posits that “Education that fosters critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse is learner-centred, participatory, and interactive, and it involves group deliberation and group problem solving” (Mezirow, 1997, p.10). Groupwork emerged as a prominent theme in the academic experiences of participants who felt that groupwork was extremely effective in helping them to learn and to gain confidence together:

They [teachers in Riverview] encouraged groupwork, an incredible amount...the saying goes, if you can teach it, you know it. So if someone didn't know it and I could explain it to them and then they understood the end of it, then it reinforced

⁴⁹ The virtual learning environment used by Riverview College to conduct online classes

my knowledge of the topic. So whether that was intentional or otherwise, I think it was a good thing (Kevin IV2).

You know, from students when we do good work together and that helps me have a greater sense of you know, confidence. Just a purpose. It's so important like. It's as meaningful as... any job...so everyone brings something different to the table, you're learning off other people (Nigel IV2).

Mixing with students of different ages exposed the participants to diverse skillsets and increased their experience and abilities in handling future situations. Gemma discusses the benefits she experienced as a result of interacting with students of different age ranges which has taught her interpersonal and stress management skills:

I've learned to be more flexible with young students, young classmates...working skills I'll say that I've learned. I think the main skill has been when to know how to manage a challenging situation. And I've learned to calm my nerves and not get so into panic stage (Gemma IV1).

The diversity of students in the FET classroom was deemed advantageous to participants as it broadened their understanding of the world through different viewpoints. Nigel appreciates the mix of students in his class and the different skills and diversity of experiences they bring:

There's 13 in my class...one student is 65 and he's retired, but he's written amateur drama for about 20 years. The others are post leaving cert students...This one woman, she would have got into Trinity University...she had you know a lot of points...but she felt she wanted to do something more practical (Nigel IV1).

However, groupwork is not without its challenges. Some participants felt that groupwork was stressful in trying to coordinate time periods to work together, especially due to the fact that participants were working remotely rather than being in the same physical space of college at the same time:

The pressure...was kind of rough and like a lot of a lot of group work...group work is great, but like, majority of the stuff was group work, which meant... it was a lot of like, "are you free this day? Are you free that day?"...I think I had, let's

say fifteen assignments over the year...I think I did two of them on my own. The rest of them were all group based...it's kind of shit that you can't just like buckle down and do something yourself. You have to do it with a lot of people and sometimes it's great...But like, yeah, there was definite moments where it was like 'this is shit' (Ciara IV3).

6.3.3 *Codification and Contextualisation*

Freire (2013) highlights the importance of breaking down educational concepts or codifying them into "learning units" (p.40). Participants report many examples of codification by teachers in Riverview. Ciara felt that her course was divided into smaller pieces of work which helped her to progress towards the end of the course without feeling overwhelmed:

PLC generally feel like they have more of a point or like a destination that makes sense...there's always these little milestones. It's like a little marathon, like you have like your end spot and like you have your little like checkpoints on the way... I work better with like understanding or knowing what's going on or like if I can see I can end of something (Ciara IV3).

Ranci re (1991) speaks of the realisation that teachers should facilitate on the sidelines and encourage their own curiosity to lead their learning. This also exemplifies educational scaffolding where the teacher incrementally guides the student towards their learning objectives (Vygotsky, 1978). Codification and scaffolding facilitated a more accessible learning environment for participants without them feeling overwhelmed or alienated from the educational concepts and environment:

seeing that I actually could achieve it, you know achieving little steps. The way the course was built...it was designed in a very good way that you built little steps...If somebody had said that's me in the beginning, no, I would have left. It was built in little nice little building blocks to build your confidence and that works really well (Irene IV2).

Freire asserted that theory should not be taught in isolation and that it must be brought to life using real word examples that students could understand and relate to. He notes that "these codifications must necessarily represent situations familiar

to the individuals...so that they can easily recognize the situations (and thus their own relation to them)” (Freire, 2005, p.114). FET helped participants to learn more about their vocation and to learn if this was something they really would like to commit to as a career. It gave Kevin a deeper understanding and respect for the vocation he was studying: “I have more of an appreciation of the work that nurses had to do...I have more of an interest and a passion for nursing and medicine” (Kevin IV2). Practical work also confirmed participants’ career choices and enabled Naomi to confirm her career path:

I suppose one thing I wanted was to really solidify in my mind that nursing was what I really wanted to do, that it was for me. Within the first few weeks I knew it was the perfect decision and that it made me know that that this was 100% the way that I was going to go (Naomi IV1).

Freire (2013) notes that “Dialogue and problem-posing never lull anyone to sleep. Dialogue awakens an awareness” (p.110). All participants mentioned that teachers in Riverview College were extremely effective at explaining course material in a clear and accessible way, clarifying concepts, making them easy to understand. Participants reported that teachers in Riverview were “so good at explaining things...making it as easy as possible to learn” (Kevin IV2) and that teachers ensured that classes were “interesting and interactive” (Nora IV2). Teachers in Riverview also provided real-life application and relevance to the concepts they taught which helped increase the participants’ interest in their subject. Mezirow proposes that “Instructional materials reflect the real-life experiences of the learners” (Mezirow, 1997, p.10). Participants valued the practical, professional and real-world experience that teachers possessed which brought a multi-dimensional lens to their teaching:

Teachers especially in Riverview were really interested...they weren't simply academics or they weren't like leaving cert teachers...like they've worked...some of them were nurses, some of them were care assistants, one of them was a paramedic...that's probably the best type of teacher because ...they know the book, but they also have a whole life behind the book to contextualise and to apply it (Kevin IV3).

The fact that many teachers also had vocational experience of the subjects taught gave credibility and relevance to their teaching, thus avoiding “abstractness” (Freire, 2013, p.33). Kevin highlights his appreciation of the practical experience of teachers in every one of his interviews. Across the three subsequent interviews, there is a noticeable progression in how he describes his teachers, demonstrating his growing respect and appreciation for them. In his first interview, Kevin seems reserved in his view about the teachers: “So far they seem confident, capable, well capable and well versed” (Kevin IV1). His views become less reserved in the subsequent interview: “the teachers are all very nice. Intelligent, well qualified” (Kevin IV2). Ultimately, in the third interview, he is extremely enthusiastic and positive in the way he states that teachers in Riverview: “were really interested”, were “probably the best type of teacher” and “if every school was like Riverview...if you had teachers like that everywhere, then you'd be pumping out happy people” (Kevin IV3).

Owen feels he is receiving a superior educational experience in Riverview college due to the practical experience of his teachers: “Most of my lecturers work in the field” (Owen IV1). He was also impressed by the academic and professional achievements of several of his teachers and the fact that they have left established careers to teach in FET: “you're being trained by fully qualified people who have Masters degrees and have done this for 20 years. Doctors who came back and are teaching us having done this for 20, 30, 40 years” (Owen IV2). Ciara also expressed admiration for the professional backgrounds of her teachers, noting the high level of skill and experience they brought to the course: “Our Teacher trained with [international renowned artist and performer]. She's unreal. I've a lot of admiration for her, she's great. I know that she works incredibly hard” (Ciara IV1).

Participants observed that teachers didn't simply teach their subjects, they cultivated a learning space that enabled students to acquire not only technical knowledge, but also skills outside of the core curriculum: “they're very well rounded like they're not just teaching you to be an actor, they're teaching you to do loads of things, and not one of our teachers is just one thing” (Ciara IV2). In many cases, teachers also gave

instruction and guidance on other areas of benefit to students: “Her [teacher’s] experience has been fundamental in tricks that I learned” (Gemma IV2).

6.4 Reflective Learning and Reflexivity

Reflective and reflexive practices are central to Freire’s and Mezirow’s educational theories as they involve ways in which students can reflect critically on their assumptions and perspectives which can lead to a change in their personal understanding, how they interact with others and how they view the world. These processes can provide enhance self-awareness by assessing personal and social experiences which can then result in opportunities to implement positive changes. Practices of reflection and reflexivity regularly took place in Riverview through communicative learning, as earlier mentioned, in addition to constructive feedback and self-reflection, epochal learning and praxis which will be discussed in the following sections.

6.4.1 Constructive Feedback and Self-Reflection

Reflective journalling is a required criteria on all FET QQI courses as part of the compulsory Work Experience or Personal and Professional Development modules. Participants felt that journals were effective in helping them to apply the theoretical aspects to real life environments as well as providing the opportunity to reflect on themselves in personal, educational and vocational capacities.

we did like reflections and things on the days, and you know how would this help in a work setting and I think it was good like...it kind of allowed you to apply to any work situation (Naomi IV2).

So you’ve to journal everything you do, which is great, especially in the long run...so basically you have this very in-depth detailed list of what you're doing...by the end of it, we had seven journals. So like, it's a lot of journals and everyone has a reflection...by the end it was used like a mirror (Ciara IV2).

Constructive feedback is key feature of reflective learning which enables students to critically reflect on their work and their perspectives. Mezirow (2000) outlines that

feedback fosters critical reflection and autonomous thinking which enable students to critically engage with their work whilst also offering insights to help develop and refine their work. Kevin felt that feedback helped him to understand how to improve and to learn independently:

It was like, it was exactly what you needed to move forward. And it wasn't just "here's how to move forward" but it prompted reflection or it encouraged reflection on your own work and saying "Oh yes, I can see now somebody has shown me where I'm wrong but I can see where I'm wrong" because that's the learning (Kevin IV2).

As a result, Kevin felt confident to conduct his own independent learning which demonstrates autonomy, a key outcome of transformative learning: "And I was happy to go and do other learning by myself, which wasn't part of the course...I enjoyed, I enjoyed, I enjoyed it" (Kevin IV3). The course structure and teacher feedback enabled students to become progressively confident in their work and to ultimately create work independently: "Achieved that, next step achieved that, until your final one was self-led and you designed it yourself" (Irene IV2).

Owen states that he is very happy to have chosen Riverview College which he attributes to the flexibility of his teachers, who not only provided additional classes to students, but also allowed students to choose the direction of their learning by selecting topics of personal interest:

Just the teachers in it, and like the way the classes are set up and like, how it, how the teachers can do coursework but also can give you individual extra classes on something like we, we're doing class work and human growth and development. And teacher was like we have a couple weeks before we need to do other work, if any of you wanted look-up [another topic]...like the flexibility of that I find very useful, and so does my class mates (Owen IV1).

Through constructive feedback, teachers actively encouraged participants to engage deeply with their learning, challenging them to move beyond surface level engagement to continually find ways to improve and to learn from their experience. This enabled

participants to develop a deeper appreciation for high quality work which in turn motivated them to elevate their own standards and performance:

the teachers, don't hold back like they don't, they don't make it easy for you...I've more of a much deeper appreciation for actors in their jobs now and it's not as easy...no teacher has ever gone "Oh yeah, that's perfect. You're fine, you don't need to keep going". There's always a way to bury deeper and find something else. So yeah...like they push you to work as hard as you can, which is great (Ciara IV2).

While Mezirow mainly discusses transformative learning in respect of the individual (Taylor and Cranton, 2012), in a further connection with Freire, Mezirow also believes in the importance of autonomous thinking in society: "Thinking as an autonomous and responsible agent is essential for full citizenship in democracy" (Mezirow, 1997, p.7). Mezirow highlights the importance of being "open to alternative points of view" (Mezirow, 1994, p.225) and "be willing to accept an informed, objective and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity until new perspectives...are subsequently established through discourse as yielding better judgments" (Mezirow, 1994, p.225). The feedback from teachers on student work and assignments guided participants on receiving and accepting alternative viewpoints through the form of constructive criticism:

it opened my eyes to where I was going...In what direction I was to go in?...I mean, all criticism was positive. You know you didn't always like to hear what you heard, but I took it all you know, and that's important, I learned to do that as well (Irene IV2).

Teachers' feedback to students also helped them overcome a fear of failing and enabled them to recognise their abilities and strengths which developed their confidence:

I was shocked how in...how good I did because I have this weird thing where I think I'm gonna fail...I still kept that mentality...[but the teacher said] 'Oh Owen, you're a distinction level student', I was like 'mmm am I'?...but the work showed to them repeatedly distinction, distinction, distinction. So like, I know it's in there (Owen IV2).

However, the lack of specific feedback was also a strong theme amongst many participants. Some participants reported varying levels of satisfaction regarding consistency, timeliness and depth of feedback. While Kevin noted that “feedback was excellent” (Kevin IV3), he reported that not all teachers provided feedback which made it difficult for him to improve his assignments: “Some teachers didn't give results for topics at all. And some of them only gave some results, so they were difficult. It was difficult to improve...They did provide feedback, but it was a mixed bag” (Kevin IV2). Other participants noted that the feedback was too generic, lacking specificity and constructiveness, to help them improve: “Most of them were saying, “well done, good work” and stuff but they didn't go deeper into what were my mistakes” (Brenda IV2).

Some participants received prompt feedback while others did not receive feedback until the end of their course. This appeared to be attributed to variations between teachers and courses, thus highlighting the inconsistency of feedback to participants.

Ciara’s experience of feedback contrasts greatly with that of Nora:

It’s that you kind of know pretty instantly how you're doing... you constantly got feedback and even in the class...there's a discussion around it, then afterwards or he'll give you feedback straight after. It's instantaneous (Ciara IV2).

I’m only getting feedback now [at the end of the course]. So assignments I would have done over the year, I am only getting my feedback now (Nora IV2).

6.4.2 *Epochal Learning*

Epochal learning, learning which takes place suddenly and dramatically, has a profound impact on the individual, leading to a substantial change and transformation in their frame of reference (Mezirow, 2006). Reay et al. (2009) note that epochal learning enables students to engage in “self-conscious reflexivity” (p.1105) which can initiate transformative life changes. Gemma reports evidence of this in the “aha moments” (Gemma IV1) she encountered where the information and knowledge imparted by a teacher gave rise to a pivotal moment of realisation, making her feel ready and able for her course and future career:

it's actually seeing the link between all the modules and how this is very applied to whatever the day jobs that I might have in the future, was very, I was like, "the aha moments. Yeah, I'm ready for it" (Gemma IV1).

This type of learning prompts a change in participants' "frame of reference" (Mezirow, 2006, p.92) whereby they became "critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships" (Mezirow, 1981, p.6). Many participants described a shift in their frame of reference where they gained insights into their personal capabilities and potential. Irene, who had been out of education for over four decades, was anxious about returning to education. However, she now has renewed self-confidence and feels that her time in Riverview has been a journey of self-discovery:

I've learned a lot about myself. I've learned...not to be afraid to try, to try. I've learned doing rather than thinking about doing things is how you get things done...how to work on an assignment...how to problem solve...brainstorm...mind map things out, think about and get things done...manage time, which I wasn't great at...I liked finding out that I could do it...I realised I could do it (Irene IV2).

This epochal learning and change in participants' frames of reference also bears similarities to Freire's belief of "education as the practice of freedom" (Freire, 2013, p.131), removing obstacles or "limit situations" thus initiating the agency and free-will of individuals (Freire, 2021, p.208). Participants felt "believed in" (Nigel IV2) which filled them with confidence and a sense of empowerment: "It's a such a, a privilege...I can pursue my ambitions for everything...I'm accommodated to realise more of my potential...I'm believed in from the tutors... and that helps me have a greater sense of you know, confidence" (Nigel IV2).

Mezirow notes "epochal transformations are less common and more difficult" (Mezirow, 1997, p.7), but that they can occur through interacting with groups as well as challenging our misconceptions through critical reflection. He states: "As a result, we may become more tolerant or more accepting of members of that group...we may

transform our ethnocentric habit of mind by becoming aware and critically reflective of our generalized bias in the way we view groups other than our own” (Mezirow, 1997, p.7). Participants in Riverview College demonstrated this epochal learning and transformation of habits of mind. Many participants highlighted the benefit of working with the diverse students in FET which broadened their awareness and understanding, increased their skills and gave them an insight into individuals from different backgrounds:

my group of friends and people that I relate to are usually 30 [years] above and this year I had time to spend time with younger people...it was really nice to get back working with them like side-to-side and see you know, even things like Instagram and...social media. So I think it was really nice to kind of be able to relate with them so that I can kind of get a little bit more from the youth (Gemma IV2).

Participants reported that engaging in groupwork and reflecting on different viewpoints, facilitated a change in their own assumptions and perspectives. It also prompted students to consider the perspectives of others and reflect on commonalities: “so one thing I noticed with the 18-year-olds...they all wanted it done yesterday. And like, I was the same when I was 18. Like, you have that mindset, like you want it done yesterday” (Ciara IV3). Interactions with the diverse group of students in Riverview encouraged communication with students outside their usual social circles and in this way, helped to break down social and cultural barriers:

So I get to see what people think about, like what they've gone through. Like there's this one person who if I met in school I probably would avoid this because of the type, they showed off. I was like I've met your type of people and you usually bully me. But two weeks later I was emailing him going 'Mate, can you tell the teacher I'm out?' and he was like 'yeah no bother' (Owen IV1).

Irene was apprehensive starting the course in Riverview college as she felt that she would be much older than the students and that it would be hard to fit in. However, rather than being intimidated by her, Irene learned that the younger students were eager to talk to her and thought she was “cool” (Irene IV2). This boosted Irene's confidence

for present and future scenarios: “they [younger students] all wanted to talk to me and they thought I was cool, which...gives me confidence for when I go on. I'll be less worried” (Irene IV2).

Reay et al. (2009) found that reflexive practices “rarely work as an impetus for hope and mobility for the vast majority of the working classes” (p.1115). Lash and Urry (1994) referred to ‘reflexivity losers’, (p.143) where reflexive practices can make individuals more pessimistic about their life situations and invoke a sense of utility. This is evident in how Naomi appears resigned about her feelings of the unfairness of the LCE and CAO points system:

I suppose I feel a little bit angry about it...about how other people had to go through that as well and just like the unfairness of it and how it's still going on now...So I suppose it's not just anger, it's just maybe like exhaustion of talking about it and saying how terrible it is and then knowing that it won't change” (Naomi IV2).

Freire offers a more optimistic outlook and emphasises the importance of hope in that “Resignation gives way to the drive for transformation and inquiry” (Freire, 2005, p.85). Due to barriers faced accessing university, Naomi resigned herself to enrol in FET. However, she now feels that FET has benefited her personally and educationally and she is much more optimistic about her abilities to succeed in university:

even as a person, like being more sure of yourself. Like just giving the extra year to adjust from secondary school to this [FET] and then to third level...the jump from second level to college is so big and this is a good way to grow I suppose into it. I think I would be prepared, not to say that it wouldn't be a bit stressful at times or a bit hard...'cause it is a new environment, completely new one...I feel if you were going on to a course after this you have a really good base knowledge and you'd really be able to build on that 'cause you wouldn't be trying to remember all the small little basic things and you could just immediately go in and start to build on it (Naomi IV2).

6.4.3 Praxis: Reflection and Action

Freire notes that: “human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it” (Freire, 2005, p.125). The integration of theoretical knowledge and practical application, not only in the classroom but also in the working environment, facilitated the process of praxis. Work Experience is a compulsory module on all QQI courses in Riverview College, the aim of which is to immerse students into real world scenarios. This module also focusses on the completion of reflective journals as well as discussions regarding student experiences within the vocational setting. Freire (2005) asserts that reflexive practices can lead to a change in participants’ frames of reference in how they view the world: “we studied and then obviously applied. I was able to kind of learn then, for instance, criminology and just the kind of the questioning about seeing criminology and drug use and that from a different perspective” (Gemma IV3). Ciara echoes this sentiment where active participation in the acting environment led a greater understanding of herself as an individual: “it shows me a part of myself that I’ve now learned more about” (Ciara IV1). Ciara mentions that the FET course prompted her to reflect more deeply on her life choices:

it also just gives you an option to like kind of go, “do I really want to do this for the next X amount of years of my life? Do I really wanna be sitting in a law class for the next 10 years or do I really, wanna, like, do this?”...So I think it taught me to like to be more patient, to enjoy it and taught me that I could do it (Ciara IV3).

Mezirow also promotes praxis which “involves transforming frames of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it” (Mezirow, 1997, p.11). FET provided exposure to different social and employment situations which enabled participants to question their career choices. Through her course in further education, Ciara realised that she did not want to pursue her initial choice of acting as the course made her realise: “that I don’t want to be an actor” (Ciara IV2), while Gemma realised that her interests lay in the area of social work:

during the certification in Riverview, my work experience was with homeless people...And I kept volunteering throughout and after the course. I gained experience with homeless in the homeless area and this year said “well maybe why don't I find a job as a support worker within homeless services?” (Gemma IV3).

Freire provides that teachers must create “conditions that enable young people and others to envision alternatives to the existing society, to redraw the map of possible associations, institutional power, and social values” (Giroux, 2021a, p.13). Freire believes that it is only through these conditions, that individuals become empowered to overcome and transform societal constraints. The experience in Riverview College prompted participants to reflect on their place in the world, not only on a personal level but also within broader social contexts:

it kind of connected everything, everything made sense...one thing in doing this, the course in Riverview, I was able to see things in a very...I could see the big picture, that's what...And how the pictures connect and how things are connected, within the individual level and societal level (Gemma IV3).

This is evidence of Freire’s concept of “*Conscientização*” (Freire, 2005, p.125) whereby “investigation of the generative theme... introduces or begins to introduce women and men to a critical form of thinking about their world” (Freire, 2005, p.104). Further examples of this critical thinking are evident in the way that participants reflected on the negative societal perspectives towards FET and acted to change public attitudes. As discussed in Chapter 5, all participants born and educated in Ireland either experienced or were aware of stigma associated with colleges of further education. For those who entered FET directly from second level education, this stigma is still present and has a lingering presence shadowing their experience in further education. However, the experience in FET gives Owen confidence to confront these societal misconceptions: “They [general public] don’t see us being smart, but then you actually explain to them that you're being trained by fully qualified people who have Masters degrees and have done this for 20 years” (Owen IV2).

Irene feels that she herself looked down upon FET, initially viewing it as somewhere you went to only if you didn't get into a “proper college”:

I think this is something you do if you don't, until you get into proper college, you know that way. And I really didn't appreciate it. I think there probably is a stigma like that and I was guilty of that as well (Irene IV2)

Despite initially regarding FET as inferior, Irene's opinions on FET have changed as a result of her experience in FET and she now promotes Riverview College to many individuals:

I have recommended that college [Riverview] to so many people...I think they're [FET colleges] wonderful, and I think they're underappreciated...and I've said it to so many people who I know are interested in different things...I think they're fantastic...They're amazing (Irene IV2).

Ciara also feels that society looks down on the FET sector and on the students who attend FET. Her experience in Riverview caused her to reflect on this issue, leading her to identify strategies to overcome this societal perception:

There's a lot of work at a PLC, and to say that it's a Level 5 I think maybe slightly dumbs it down for the work that the teachers are doing and the work that students are doing...So I think to give people the option to kind of make it a higher QQI or to like to even change the system...Would that not be better getting something applicable to their learning rather than for the rest of their lives being labelled as someone who has a Leaving Cert level QQI thing? (Ciara IV2).

6.5 Challenges Experienced in the FET Environment

Freire advocates for learning that humanises students and “enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism” (Freire,2005, p.86). The responsiveness of teachers to student queries embodies key features of Mezirow and Freire's principles of a student-centred approach to learning. In this way, students feel their voices are heard and that they are involved in their learning. However,

participants who had been out of education for a large amount of time felt that more support could be provided, especially in the area of digital skills. Nora was particularly anxious about her lack of computer skills and felt that there was not enough support and guidance, particularly for students who have been out of education for a long time:

I think there should be a lot more support even for the likes of me. I mean, I haven't gone back to education, so you're talking 26 years, so I had to go and search myself for certain things outside the college...how to use Word, how to put on a computer...So I think the college would need...a pre-course for a week to come in, learn the basics and then start like your college course (Nora IV1).

As a result of the pandemic, there was an increased expectation for students to have the technological capabilities needed for online learning (Bashir et al., 2024; Zou, 2025), placing additional stress and strain on students lacking in digital skills. While some students adapted relatively easily to their new online educational system, it can be difficult for others to adapt to online platforms due to limited digital literacy (Carolan et al., 2020): “I'm lucky in that I really love technology...Now, if it was my husband doing this, he wouldn't be able to do it...somebody my age wouldn't be able to do it. They'd be lost. There's too much” (Irene IV1). The increased digital expectation also arose for teachers, some of whom incurred difficulties with the new online method of delivery:

some of the teachers could use the laptops more confidently than others. It's like we had like one or two younger teachers and they would be able like to show us like powerpoint slides and videos and stuff like that. And then we had one or two of the teachers, like once he forgot to turn on the sound for about five minutes (Owen IV3).

Access to digital technology was limited for Nigel who lived in supported accommodation throughout his studies. This environment was not conducive to study and internet access in the building was limited. However, Nigel spoke with the accommodation staff who were extremely helpful in providing a dedicated room where he could have locked and private access to study: “but now I know I'm going

to be using this room. I'll start doing my work. 'cause yeah, 'cause there isn't Wi-Fi everywhere in the building" (Nigel IV1). The experiences of Nora, Irene and Nigel demonstrate how experiences in FET were shaped by intersecting factors including age, digital literacy, living circumstances and length of time away from education.

Further challenges arose for teachers in adapting their classes and resources to an online format which also impacted on students:

some of the [teachers] have never used Moodle [online learning platform] before...and because Moodle is a new concept for them, so it's very messy in terms of if there's meant to be something up [on Moodle], it's not up, if we need to submit something, there's no submission button...it's just messy...it's very small but...that one thing could just set [students] off (Ciara IV1).

The online environment made it difficult to make friends and interact with other students. This significantly contributed to feelings of isolation and hindered the development of supportive and motivational peer networks:

I think it is difficult having to do everything online. I think for a lot of people it's kind of impacted their mental health because they're not really getting any social, they don't have any experiences to meet new people without it just being on the screen. And like I know people's faces from class and I know their names and things, but like we don't really know each other and we don't really have a lot of I suppose friends in the class because we haven't met yet" (Naomi IV1).

Participants noted that the increased workload arising from the pandemic conditions impacted on teachers' ability to provide the level of support participants desired: "teachers had a lot to do, like a lot of work, so they were just saying "you've got everything on Moodle so just go there" " (Brenda IV2). The online environment also posed difficulties for teachers in building relationships with students and establishing class rapport due to poor attendance and minimal usage of cameras by students: "I think there were 40 enrolled. I doubt if there is even half that many coming regularly

now to the classes. When [teacher] was Zooming [online teaching], he'd say "2 in today, maybe 5 in today?" " (Irene IV1). Teachers shared their opinions on these difficulties indicating they missed the absence of interaction, engagement and dialogue with students:

my teachers also were complaining that you know, they missed having people in the classroom to speak to, and you know, somebody to put up their hand and have a discussion face-to-face and they you can't really do that over Zoom (Kevin IV2).

Participants noted that reduced physical interaction, support and hands-on guidance from teachers can lead to reduced student motivation and withdrawal from courses:

I find there's not enough support because I'm not talking directly to my tutors every day...I'm not clear if I'm doing the right thing or the wrong thing, you know so it's hard that way. I kind of had days in the last week where like well, I was "will I just give this up 'cause I don't know what I'm doing?" And that all comes down to lack of support, and it's not the fault of the teachers, it's the situation (Irene IV1).

Ciara highlighted the work and effort that teachers made to successfully navigate these challenges: "I think the teachers handled it really well...like with improv, she specifically picked games that we could do online" (Ciara IV2). However, the online delivery resulted in increased workload for teachers during the pandemic including replying to student queries and providing support: "[teachers] were very supportive and so the emails, and they were very present. Even though we weren't face to face, they were very present" (Gemma IV1). This is echoed by the majority of the participants who recalled the responsiveness of teachers to their queries: "So communication really wasn't an issue with [teachers], they were great...[teachers] were constantly on their laptop, so it was very easy to get in touch with them each time and chat and stuff" (Ciara IV2). Nora expressed sympathy for the teachers having to respond to the high number of student emails:

to be honest. I feel sorry for all the teachers because we can't just say in class "Can you help us with this?" We have sent emails so I'd say everybody's getting inundated with emails...you could have

hundreds of students asking the same question, but all emailing you in. So I think it's very hard (Nora IV1).

Further challenges identified by participants relate to the guidance counselling facility in Riverview College. Some participants conveyed satisfaction with the level of guidance in terms of information provision on career options, university application processes and the organisation of well-being sessions and on-line coffee mornings. However, several participants felt that the guidance counselling facility did not respond in a timely manner and did not provide sufficient information on financial aid or grants:

There wasn't enough support like...they [guidance counsellor] would take 2-3 weeks for them to get back to you unless you have something serious...Any time I asked to learn about something financial, support was from my old career guidance teacher in my secondary school. Even though in the college they mentioned those grants, they didn't tell you how to get them (Owen IV2).

For several participants, the relationship or contact with the counsellor was lacking: “I know that [the guidance counsellor] exists, but I haven't really been touched with or could have, you know, it could be more close” (Gemma IV1). With this in mind, it is acknowledged that this study took place during the global pandemic when interaction between students, teachers and guidance took place remotely, making it more difficult to establish relationships. Nevertheless, the limited resources allocated to the guidance counsellor facility, of one counsellor to an excess of 600 students, is insufficient and inadequate, especially in an educational setting where students are struggling to gain access to university and where students have limited access to career and educational information outside of the college setting. SOLAS (2020a) acknowledge this inadequacy stating: “The approach to guidance is inconsistent across FET settings and provision, and this must be rectified with an integrated approach to guidance across ETBs. This should ensure that impartial guidance is available to all who seek it” (p.54).

The absence of support from the guidance counsellor facility placed additional burden on teachers who were seen to supplement the role of the career guidance facility by providing information and guidance to students in terms of progression to university, advice on college courses, college application processes, organising visits from universities to Riverview College and career advice:

the guidance counsellor for what my courses needed wasn't helpful, but the teachers were (Owen IV2).

the teacher organized speakers from the different colleges, both teachers and other students, to come into us in the college and talk to us (Irene IV2).

our teacher...put us in contact with one of the deputy managers of the Creche in this case...he already had an agreement with [Teacher] so she was very happy to hear from us (Brenda IV1).

[Teacher] has been amazing on helping us, kind of giving tips of websites where to look for information [on careers] (Gemma IV2).

The lack of clarity in relation to university application criteria for FET graduates, made it difficult for participants to understand the entry requirements for their desired university options. Irene planned to attend University X to undertake a degree in art after completion of her course in Riverview. However, it transpired that the entry requirements changed without her knowledge and her grades were slightly lower than needed to be considered for a position in this university:

What happened was I was told I didn't need results and um, but I still got 4 distinctions and one merit in Riverview. And as I was told by the tutor, because I was a mature student and did leaving cert pre-1985, that I needed no results, just um a personal statement...so I went with that. But I still did the best I could ...but didn't push it, but um. Then University X had so many applicants that they used results and because I only had four distinctions, they needed five (Irene IV3).

This had a significant and negative impact on Irene which could have derailed her plans to continue to university:

So I didn't get in and I was devastated. I was absolutely heartbroken. I was like, I'm not going anywhere else, not going to. I already knew I had [Option B] and [Option C] at that stage and I was like, no, no, that's second best (Irene IV3).

If Irene had been aware of the entry requirements, she would have made more of an effort to obtain the grades needed, which she feels would have been easily achievable.

And like the thing that I didn't get the merit in, because I didn't push it, was the personal development [module] which I could easily have done...to get the distinction. And, and to be honest the personal development felt like it was really for younger people you know, applying for jobs all of this so I didn't push it, not really. Didn't push CV writing and all of that kind of thing. Barely did what I needed to do and if I'd known (Irene IV3).

This further highlights the lack of sufficient guidance resources where the responsibility was placed on the teacher to advise participants of their university options and criteria rather than the college guidance counsellor. This situation placed additional stress and emotional burden on the teacher: "and the tutor, and then she was like, I'm so sorry, I feel responsible, I shouldn't have told you that" (Irene IV3).

Teachers were also seen to be the first support contact to participants in relation to issues arising in their personal or workplace settings but due to the nature of such issues, were required to redirect the participant to the guidance counsellor:

I potentially found a case of abuse...I went to one of the teachers 'cause it's about a case of abuse that was developing...I went to [teacher] and I was like "what can I do here" and she was like "I know you're looking for support, but I'm not pushing you out so go to the Guidance Counsellor" and we had chat (Owen IV2).

There are in excess of 137 FET colleges in Ireland (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2021, p.4). Although Ciara and Gemma report positive previous experiences at other FET colleges, Kevin's contrasting account of his prior FET experience highlights potential inconsistency across FET learning environments.

I had a rather negative experience in my previous PLC course. For multiple reasons. Some just from unprofessionalism from some of the teachers...So this was very much the opposite of the PLC spectrum. So I had a poor PLC experience and now I've had a good one. So this is much better than my previous experience (Kevin IV2).

6.6 Conclusion

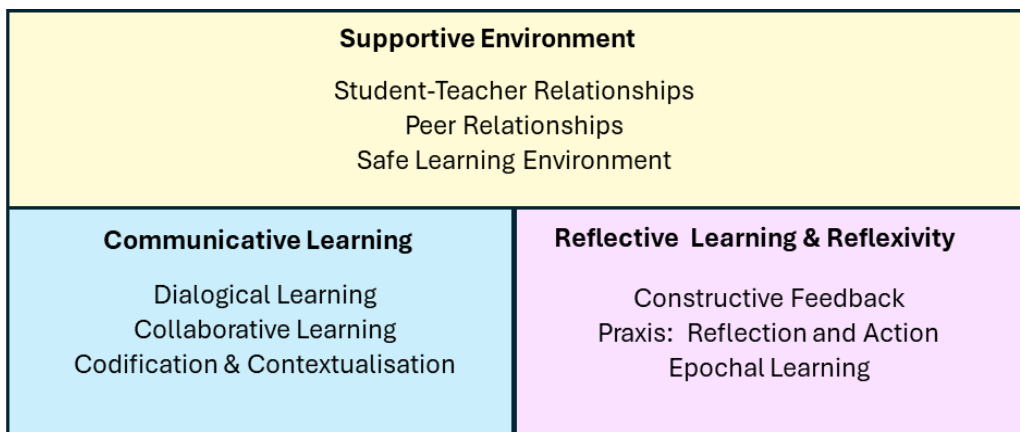
This chapter sought to explore the lived experiences of participants with regard to the learning environment and pedagogical practices within an FET college. Through the exploration of participants' experiences, this chapter has established that changes occurred for participants during their time in Riverview College. Prior to enrolment, many participants associated education with intimidation, control and rigid teaching methods through rote learning and a focus on memorisation. The learning environment was not experienced uniformly across the participant group. For some, age shaped their confidence in an educational setting and a sense of belonging, while for others, migration history, a need to feel safe or previous negative educational experiences influenced their perspectives on and participation in education.

As participants transitioned through their FET course, these associations changed to where they felt ownership and engagement in their learning. Participants became actively engaged in their education which enabled them to gain a deeper insight into their own needs and goals whilst also gaining an awareness and appreciation of the world around them. Participants no longer felt dehumanised and viewed as a number as in earlier experiences, but felt that teachers made efforts to develop positive relationships based on trust and mutual respect. Participants felt that teachers in Riverview supported, reassured and motivated students rather than impose rigid rules and constraints through inflexible teaching and assessment methods.

These changes for participants came about as a result of the pedagogies evident in Riverview College which support Freire's and Mezirow's emancipatory and transformative theories. These pedagogies include the creation of a supportive

learning environment, the practice of communicative learning and the facilitation of reflective learning and reflexivity. The pedagogical processes identified in Riverview College are summarised in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1 Emancipatory and Transformative Pedagogies in Riverview College



This chapter identified the importance of a *supportive environment* for learners where participants feel able to fully participate and engage in the educational processes. Within the FET environment, positive student-teacher relationships helped participants adapt to their new environment and continue their studies, especially during times of self-doubt. Peer relationships also provided an important supportive function for participants, providing encouragement and reducing feelings of isolation.

Communicative learning practices of dialogue and collaborative learning took place which enabled participants to feel involved and invested in their learning. Interaction with students of various ages and backgrounds beyond their typical social circle allowed participants to question their previously held beliefs and assumptions, leading to a change in their viewpoints and perspectives. There was no evidence of rote learning in Riverview College, a pedagogy which many participants criticised from their previous experiences in secondary school. Instead, teaching approaches involved interactive discussions, groupwork and practical application of the theoretical concepts learned. All participants mentioned the real word experience that teachers brought

to the learning environment which not only helped them to understand the concepts more deeply, but which also increased their respect and belief in their teachers.

Reflective learning and reflexivity featured strongly in the FET environment providing participants with the opportunity to engage in critical self-assessment and enhance self-awareness. This was achieved through the communicative learning practices and the completion of reflective journals and provision of constructive feedback. While participants felt that feedback made them more receptive to constructive criticism in order to improve their work and perspectives, satisfaction with feedback varied with some participants receiving prompt and helpful feedback while others reporting that their feedback was too generic or that it wasn't provided in a timely manner which deemed it ineffective.

Many examples of epochal learning occurred where participants described moments of realisation about themselves and their abilities. These moments resulted in participants feeling a sense of readiness to face challenges they once believed were beyond their capabilities. Evidence of praxis was observed which resulted in some participants making the decision to change educational or career paths as a result of reflection. Furthermore, some participants became more aware of societal conceptions of the FET sector and of FET students, leading them to take action to change these conceptions.

Restrictions imposed by COVID-19 negatively impacted the building of peer relationships, discourse and interaction due to the remote learning environment. Students reported mixed experiences regarding the guidance counselling support, which may be partly attributable to circumstances of the global pandemic and the lack of resources allocated to guidance counselling in the FET sector. Participants also highlighted the need for further support in the area of digital skills where the demands of studying in college led to increased stress, especially during a time of remote learning and particularly for those who were already concerned about reduced digital

capabilities. Participants acknowledged the importance of the role of the teacher in Riverview College in providing support and motivation and that an absence of such support could have a negative impact on their experiences, potentially resulting in the withdrawal of students from the course. This highlights the crucial role of teachers in FET. However, there is increased pressure on teachers, not only as a result of the global pandemic, but also due to the requirement of new teaching technologies and level of flexibility and support required for the growing number of students in FET with diverse and additional educational needs (Alvarez and Sullivan, 2023).

Chapter 7. Findings (III): Learner Identity Transformations

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter concluded that transformative and emancipatory pedagogies such as communicative learning, reflective learning and reflexivity are extensively practiced within a supportive learning environment in Riverview College. This reflects Freire's critical pedagogical and Mezirow's transformative learning theories which conceptualise learning as a means through which individuals can achieve emancipation and personal transformation. This chapter proceeds to establish the influence of these pedagogies on participants and their enduring effects over time.

Mezirow points to a shift in personal perspectives which leads to changes in how individuals view themselves and the world around them. The majority of transformative learning theory literature centres on the theoretical and conceptual aspects of transformative learning with little attention given to empirical application and analysis. Taylor and Cranton (2013) state that "There are no (or few) longitudinal studies, studies done in the time when the transformative learning occurs" (p.42) and they ask scholars to investigate "How does experience unfold in the context of transformative learning?" (p.43). This dearth of measurable outcomes is also acknowledged by Rodríguez Aboytes and Barth (2020) and Archer-Kuhn et al. (2021) who stress the urgent need for more empirical research. Similarly, while Freire's emancipatory pedagogy is widely acknowledged for its theoretical contribution, it also provides limited empirical evidence demonstrating specific outcomes (Degener, 2001; Walker et al., 2024). This chapter aims to address this lack of empirical evidence by demonstrating the impact of transformative and emancipatory learning on the participants as a result of their experience in FET.

Kegan (2018) poses the question in relation to transformative learning of "What form transforms?" (p.29). Due to the lack of empirical research aforementioned, it has been

difficult to obtain definitive answers to this question. Cranton and Taylor (2012) however, note that “transformative learning experiences transform our very core identity” (p.25). This identity can be understood as a multi-faceted sense of self, involving the conscious and unconscious sense of self which is shaped by experiences, emotions and social context (Illeris, 2014a). In brief, it is how individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world.

Returning to Kegan’s question of “What form transforms?”, this chapter unveils that participants’ learner identity transformed as a result of transformative and emancipatory processes in Riverview College, with participants identifying more positively with how they feel and perceive themselves as learners. This chapter will provide an insight into learner identity transformations that occurred for participants since enrolment along with an understanding of how these transformations relate to the emancipatory and transformative pedagogies observed in Riverview College. Challenges to learner identity will also be discussed. Consequently, this chapter seeks to address the following research question:

RQ3. To what extent does participation in Further Education and Training transform the experiences and lives of FET students?

7.2 Pre-Enrolment Learner Identity

The participants in this study came to Riverview College as individuals whose life experiences shaped their perceptions of themselves, their capabilities and their potential. They did not come to further education as empty vessels (Freire, 2005) but instead they came with knowledge, experience and emotions gained throughout their lives and from the world around them. Freire (in Horton and Freire, 1990) contends that students “don't come here empty. They arrive here full of things. In most of the cases, they bring with them opinions about the world, about life. They bring with them their knowledge at the level of common sense” (p.157). In this way, learners come to

further education with an identity of themselves which is already framed in how they perceive themselves based on their past experiences.

Identity is how “We define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves” (Illeris, 2014a, p.58). Illeris (2014a) states that habitus affects the identity of individuals through the “unconscious embedding in the individual of the social conditions, cultural inclinations and patterns of behaviour” (p.72). While a person’s identity is multi-faceted, the key themes that emerged from this study relate more specifically to transformations in participants’ *learner* identity. Learner identity is “defined as how an individual feels about himself/herself as a learner and the extent to which he/she describes himself/herself as a ‘learner’ ” (Lawson, 2014, p.343).

7.2.1 The Role of Habitus on Learner Identity

Reay et al. (2010) found that a student’s habitus had the strongest influence on their learner identity. As outlined in Chapter 5, the primary habitus of participants, “that which is acquired through socialization, usually within the family” (Nairz-Wirth and Gitschthaler, 2020, p.401), impacted how participants felt about themselves as learners. Where the primary habitus did not foster educational motivation or encouragement, participants were more likely to display a negative learner identity. This was particularly evident for lifelong learners Irene and Nora who completed their secondary education more than three decades ago, at a time in Irish society when school leavers were less likely to attend higher education, especially if they came from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998; Smyth, 1999): “They’d [my parents had] no interest, they didn’t believe in education” (Irene IV1). Neither participant attended education since secondary school and both demonstrated negative learner identities upon FET enrolment:

my biggest fear is I’m not good enough [for the course], I can’t,
I’m not, I’m not doing it right (Irene IV1).

I would say I’d be poor at education (Nora 1 IV).

Irene and Nora were the more age mature participants in this study and both indicated that family responsibilities restricted their educational possibilities, with Irene concentrating for most of her life on raising her family and Nora caring for her parent who had reduced mobility and ill-health:

“I wouldn't have been in the position to do it [education] before now. I had four kids you know I was married to 22. Had my first child at 22 so I wouldn't have time” (Irene IV2)

“my mom lives with me because she had a stroke... So yeah, so she's depending on me...So I'm restricted on where I can study” (Nora IV1).

These experiences highlight how educational identity was shaped by intersecting generational and gendered expectations (hooks, 1994; Reay, 2003).

Participants whose families prioritised education and supported the pursuit of educational opportunities tended to display more positive learner identities. Gemma, whose parents strongly encouraged education, does not envisage any difficulties with the academic aspect of her studies but instead feels her main challenge “will be to fund my survival and be a student...That's, I think the main challenge” (Gemma IV1). While Irene and Nora demonstrated fear at commencing their studies, Gemma is enthusiastic about engaging in FET and views FET as an opportunity to prepare for university in the future:

I'm very, you know, I'm very dedicated and I'm always pushing myself to be the best. So I think I have higher, very high expectations. But I would love to be able to say ‘ooh I'm ready to face all the stress and then the challenges that come with the third level education’, you know. So that's what I'm really hoping for (Gemma IV1).

A further comparison between Gemma and other participants is regarding their approach to attributing responsibility for outcomes. Kevin completed his Leaving Certificate in 2019 and due to the CAO points inflation, he was 40 points short for his desired university course. Kevin blames himself personally rather than the educational system: “I simply got a few points too low and I had no backup through my own

mistakes...It's not the teachers to blame for the mistakes I made, but my own (Kevin IV1). In contrast, while Gemma views the English language test for university as extremely difficult, she does not attribute this to her personal capabilities or actions, but instead blames the educational system: "IELTS test is so hard it's made for you to not get a good score" (Gemma IV1).

As outlined in Chapter 5, all of the Irish born participants discussed negative emotions and experiences related to their secondary school experience which impacted how they viewed themselves as learners and their ability to succeed in education. Some participants expressed sentiments of failure in their academic ability during their time in secondary education. All of these sentiments weighed heavily on how the participants viewed themselves as learners: "I lost my ability to learn, I lost my ability to remember" (Ciara IV1). Additional education needs or inability to confirm to the memory intensive demands of the secondary school examination system facilitated a negative learner identity: "I'm dyslexic. I feel if, if you would class me, I'm basically illiterate" (Owen IV1). Educational barriers posed by the CAO points system also led participants to view themselves as academic failures: "Not only didn't go [to university] in the first time around, but I didn't make it in second time round. And it's been two years now since I've left school" (Kevin IV1). Low confidence and belief in their abilities and potential, either initiated or reinforced by secondary school, had a profound and damaging impact on participants.

7.2.2 The Effects of Prior Educational Experience

Students who had been out of the educational field for some time felt that college was an unfamiliar environment which induced a sense of apprehension and unease (McNay, 1999; Reay et al., 2005; Adams, 2006). Conversely, Brunton and Buckley (2020) observed that students with prior educational experience exhibited lower levels of anxiety which was largely attributable to their enhanced preparedness and clearer expectations of the learning environment. Participants who had already completed a QQI Level 6 qualification or higher (Ciara, Nigel, Gemma and Brenda) displayed less

concerns about their academic abilities. These participants were more focussed on the opportunities of education rather than apprehension about fitting in. These participants embraced the concept of re-engaging as learners and framed education as a source of new possibilities as well as opportunities for personal and professional development:

going back to school was something that needed to happen...I was really worried about going back to another job that I hated and couldn't wait to go back to college (Ciara IV1).

I hope to gain a lot of knowledge or maybe different approach to children...So I kind of think I need to improve those areas. I think it's tough, but I think it's going to be worth it at the end (Brenda IV1).

Nigel also embraced the chance to study and is positive about his studies. He reflects on the difference in how he feels about learning now compared to when he was younger:

I probably wouldn't have been able for this 20 years ago. I would have been far too self-conscious. So the age I am has worked out really well in terms of where I'm at with Riverview and so it's, it's because it's a good, it's a good time in my life" (Nigel IV1).

These experiences emphasise the intersectional play between age, prior educational experience, socio-economic positioning and learner confidence in shaping participants' readiness to engage with education. This reinforces that learner identity cannot be understood through a singular lens but is shaped through multiple interacting dimensions of biography and structural opportunity.

7.2.3 The Consequences of Peer Comparisons

Comparisons with peers perceived to have higher levels of achievement can contribute to the development of negative self-perceptions (Wang et al., 2023). A perception of feeling 'left-behind' compared to friends who proceeded to university contributed to a negative learner identity for participants. Nora left school twenty-six years ago and

many of her friends had completed degrees or masters: "They never looked down at me, but I always felt it" (Nora IV3). For secondary school leavers, many of their friends commenced their studies in university, resulting in participants feeling left out and lagging behind: "all of my friend group now would have gone straight into university" (Naomi IV1). Comparisons with friends or family can place exceptional pressure on individuals and lead to a sense of underachievement:

I have a sister and she's doing medicine and she's just, you know, going to go and be a doctor and you're...not having gone to college and your little sister comes up and goes off and becomes a doctor and you're still twiddling your thumbs, having x and y happen to you and just a lot of a lot of poor luck and bad decisions having you held back. So definitely, I'm, I'm getting kind of tired. I'm tired, it's a lot (Kevin IV2).

Luthar et al. (2013) found that in affluent groups, family and peers placed excessive direct or indirect pressure on individuals to become high achievers which resulted in a sense of inadequacy when expectations were not met:

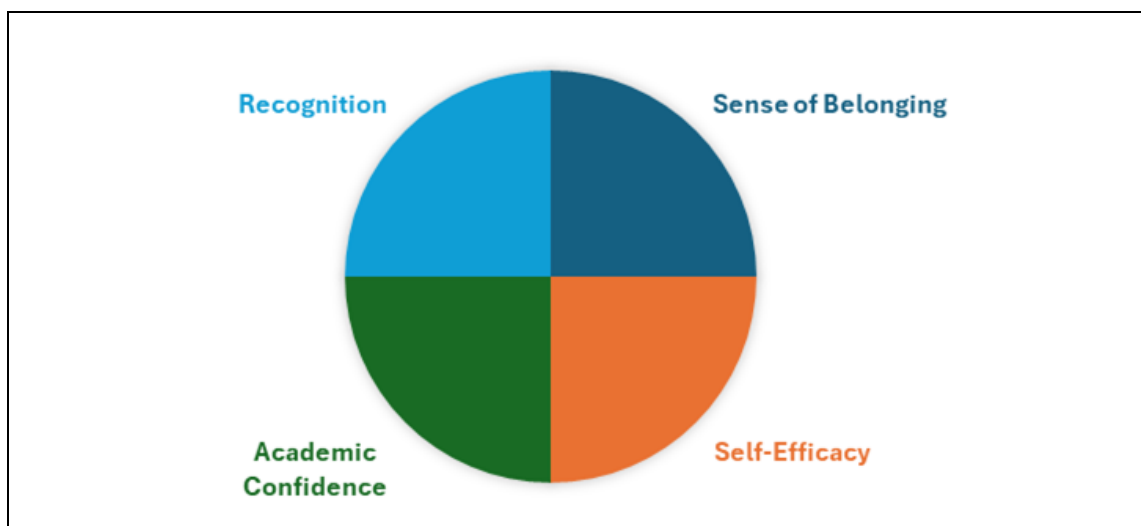
people looked at me and they said to me "Kevin, I thought you were the top of the class. I thought you were XY and Z and I thought you did well". And then at the end of it, you come out with a with a poor with a poor, a poor leaving cert results (Kevin IV2).

Individuals may experience fears about re-entering education and resuming their roles as learners which negatively impacts their learner identity formation, particularly if they have been disengaged from formal education for an extended period of time (Brunton and Buckley, 2020). Lifelong learners Nora and Irene were apprehensive about returning to college due to their limited experience in educational settings, coupled with concerns about perceived differences between themselves and the main student body: "I mean everything in the college is really geared for young people...I feel a bit like an outsider" (Irene IV1).

7.3 Learner Identity Transformation

Education is widely recognised as one of the main catalysts for reshaping learner identities (Baxter and Britton, 2001; Askham, 2008; Fleming, 2024). Learner identity is dynamic and fluid, changing and transforming over time in response to the educational environment, student relationships and encounters within these spaces (Illeris, 2014b). As individuals enter new environments, it is likely that a struggle will ensue as individuals process the changes occurring between their existing identity and their emergent identity in response to their new experiences (Brunton and Buckley, 2020). Mezirow (2006) believes that transformative learning reaches “right into the changes of the identity” (p.90) and that it is a form of “learning which implies a change involving elements of the learner’s self” (Illeris, 2014a, p.xiii). This section will demonstrate the transformations that occurred to the learner identity of the participants as a result of their experience in Riverview College which include changes in their sense of belonging, self-efficacy, academic confidence and recognition as illustrated in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1 Learner Identity Transformation of Participants



7.3.1 Sense of Belonging

Reay et al. (2010) found that the conditions involved in developing a positive learner identity are greatly linked to a sense of belonging and how a student fits in with their new learning environment, stating that the educational environment “exerts a

powerful influence on how they see themselves and are seen by others in terms of both their learner and class identities” (p.5). The level and intensity of identity struggles and shifts will depend on the individual’s existing identity and the degree of disparity or familiarity encountered in the new setting. This variance may lead to a sense of comfort or feeling like a “fish-out-of-water” (Reay et al., 2009, p.1104). Those who experience a sense of belonging are more likely to complete their course whereas those who feel disconnected or excluded are more prone to withdraw (Reay et al., 2005; Smyth and Banks, 2012).

The environment of Riverview College represented a new field for participants as they entered a new educational system comprised of new teachers, new subjects, new systems and new classmates. Despite some initial doubts for some participants and lack of confidence in their abilities to complete the course, throughout all of their interviews for this research, none of the participants expressed a sense of feeling out of place in Riverview College. The vast majority of participants successfully completed their course in Riverview College, with Nigel being the only participant to discontinue his studies⁵⁰. Even participants who expressed substantial amounts of unease prior to studying Riverview College, reported that they felt comfortable and confident during their course. For these participants, their initial trepidation quickly dissolved, resulting in participants feeling at ease in their learning environment.

Nora, who had been out of education for twenty-six years and lacking in confidence to complete a full-time course, notes her feelings prior to commencing her course: “I was so anxious. I was afraid” (Nora IV1). Yet, reflecting on her sentiments during her time at Riverview, she did not experience any situation where she felt uncomfortable or unable to complete the course: “I was comfortable with Riverview...I did not find one challenge. I honestly didn't. That's how much comfortable I felt in myself and in the course” (Nora IV3). Despite her initial fears regarding her lack of digital skills, Nora

⁵⁰ Nigel discontinued his studies late in the academic year (mid-March 2021) due to personal issues but planned to return to Riverview the following year

found that her computer skills are dramatically improving: “the good aspects are, I'm learning my computer skills very quickly. You have to do it” (Nora IV1) and she now believes that there are many benefits associated with online learning: “it's handy because I'm here. So like if I was in (this college), it's an hour and a half each way for me so I don't have travel. So that's like three hours saved each day” (Nora IV2). Nora enjoyed the year so much that she would like it to be extended to a two-year course: “I would love if...you could even do like an extra level next year or even an evening course...I think they could easily make this into a two-year course” (Nora IV1).

Ciara also indicated that she would have preferred to in Riverview College had progression opportunities been available to her. However, due to the limited range of progression opportunities within the college through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), Ciara felt compelled to continue to university in order to advance her studies and obtain a degree:

I feel like it'd be really cool if there was like a grading system...if even you did extra credit so you could get like a Level 6 or something out of it [in Riverview]...the problem with the PLC was that there wasn't necessarily encouragement to stay on...Not that they didn't want us to stay. Like, I think if any one of us had stayed, they would have been delighted. It's just...I know that the thing that stops me from getting better jobs is not having a degree. So my goal was always to get a degree (Ciara IV3).

Lehmann (2007, 2009b) found that students who withdrew from higher education experienced severe habitus dislocation which was evidenced by their feelings of not fitting in their new educational environment. According to Bourdieu (1990a), the levels of variance between the individual's habitus and the field greatly impacts their ability to succeed in this new field. This research shows that FET was viewed as a comfortable and familiar environment by participants in which they wished to remain, indicating an absence of 'habitus dislocation' or variance between participants' habitus and the FET educational field. Participants demonstrated a willingness to remain in FET. Three participants (Kevin, Ciara, Gemma) had previously studied at FET colleges prior to

Riverview College, two participants (Owen and Nora) returned to Riverview to study a Level 6 course, one participant (Nigel) plans to return to the college to complete his course. Out of a total of nine participants, eight participants successfully completed the course and one participant deferred his studies. Even after deferring his course, Nigel is enthusiastic to return in the following academic year: “I love the idea of coming back to college [Riverview]” (Nigel IV3).

Despite the initial sentiments of resignation displayed by Naomi when enrolling in FET: “I just decided that I would try and do like a level 5 PLC course and I ended up in Riverview then” (Naomi IV1), she now feels fortunate to have had an experience in FET and would recommend FET to others:

I would say that if you get the chance to do it [study in FET], that you're actually like, lucky...It's actually like the perfect way to get there...you can learn so much from that year...I think it was a really nice thing that I got to do. And I do feel quite, quite fortunate that I got to experience the PLC (Naomi IV3).

The student body in FET is diverse (SOLAS, 2024e) and as evident in Appendix 1, the participants in this study demonstrate this diversity in terms of age, prior educational achievements, nationality, ethnicity and additional educational needs. Educational environments in Ireland are becoming increasingly diverse, and it is important to meet the needs of students from different countries and cultures (Lalor and Rami, 2008). Migrant learners are more likely to feel out of place or experience “habitus dislocation” due to cultural differences between “their peers and the culture” (Lehmann, 2009b, p.147) and integration difficulties are also attributed to studying through the medium of a second language (Harris and Ní Chonail, 2016). However, Lifelong learners, Gemma and Brenda did not display any of these issues in the FET environment. The inclusive nature of FET contributed to a sense of belonging for all participants. When Gemma discusses her studies in Riverview, she outlines that she thoroughly enjoyed the course: “I tell you what, it's been amazing...You know all, all the staff have been really supportive (Gemma IV2). In addition to the support of teachers in Riverview, Gemma and Brenda developed strong and lasting friendships with fellow classmates

who they remain in contact with: “I still have friends that I made...Yeah, we had a small group of girls...We don't talk every day, but like every 15 days, ‘How's things’?” (Gemma IV3). Brenda feels that the course exceeded her expectations and she actually prefers the educational experience in Ireland compared to that which she had in her home country: “I have the knowledge I wanted and now I know how to deal with children...better than I thought I would...And comparing like for example [my home country] education, and Irish education, I would say, Irish is better” (Brenda IV2).

Secondary school leaver Kevin described how perceptions and judgements from family and friends outside of the college had the potential to undermine his sense of belonging in his nursing course. As a male in a female dominated discipline, he felt negatively compared to the stereotypical image of a nurse. However, he found that the support and constant reassurance from teachers helped to overcome this challenge:

Being a male in a nursing course has kind of a stigma to it. I was only one of, I was one of three in the entire four nursing courses... So there's only three men in 80 [students]. So yeah we had, there was kind of a glaring gender gap...it was kind of a societal thing, so it was. There was a degree of mockery from my friends and from my family about me being a nurse being, being very tall and very big generally. Having a deep voice...saying that I'd be a very scary...My teacher [gave] assurance that nothing was going to go wrong (Kevin IV2)

Participants with additional educational needs or who faced social and personal challenges felt a sense of belonging in Riverview College due to the responsiveness of teachers to students' needs: “I felt like everyone is accommodated in Riverview...and I think that's important...so it's nice to have that” (Nigel IV2). For some students, studying in FET can act as a means to escape from challenging circumstances in their lives and provide the opportunity to embrace their identity as a student rather than viewing themselves as someone who is marginalised, facing hardship or difficult circumstances: “I look at the four walls in the hostel 24 hours a day and it's a tough environment” (Nigel IV1). The ability to have some place to go, to mix with different people in a different environment can provide a huge sense of relief and peace for

students “we support one another...it just felt...inclusive and networking as part of a team. So I never felt isolated...I was enjoying it. (Nigel IV2). Nigel has remained in touch with the staff and students at Riverview College and attended a recent theatre production by his class. For Nigel, the prospects of course activities and opportunities act as a motivation to remain focussed and maintain a healthy lifestyle for the present and the future:

I'm really looking forward to the induction again and getting back into it...I saw a production actually at the college that they invited me to...So I was delighted with it...it just made me more excited. So this is all waiting for me (Nigel IV3).

Lifelong learners often encounter difficulties in establishing a sense of belonging when returning to education which can hinder their engagement with the course and progression within education (Carruthers Thomas, 2015). More than half of all learners in FET are under the age of 34 years of age, with over one third of students aged under 25 years of age (SOLAS, 2020f, p.4). For lifelong learners, Nora and Irene, age was an initial concern and a threat to their sense of belonging as they were conscious of the age difference between themselves and other students. These participants didn't feel that they would fit in with the other students on the course: “for me being an older person in a young person's world...You know, I'm the odd one out” (Irene IV1). However, rather than age being a restriction or an issue, both Nora and Irene found that they integrated well with younger students and that they benefitted from having a mix of ages in the classroom. Irene felt that students “were great. The age didn't matter to me or them” (Irene IV2). Nora also enjoyed the mix of ages in the class and feels that she is now going to miss interacting with her classmates:

I just loved it a lot and I loved the interaction with the class and I love there is such a variety of cultures in our class and like there's all different age groups and there is no, well, 'I'm better than you' or there is no, you know, bad atmosphere or anything in the class. We actually all got on so well (Nora IV3).

7.3.2 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the confidence and self-belief that a student has to “organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura 1997, p.3). According to Bandura (2010), this confidence and self-belief can have a significant impact on their efforts, decision, resilience and perseverance during times of difficulties and challenges. Students with high self-efficacy are more inclined to persist and succeed in situations when faced with obstacles, whereas students with low efficacy may avoid challenging tasks and withdraw from education (Brookfield et al., 2022). Many participants among the secondary school leavers and lifelong learners shared a prevalent concern about their ability to successfully manage and navigate academic environments. However, these concerns were eased as participants began to engage in academic tasks, realising that achievements were possible: “I was nervous that I wouldn’t be able to understand everything or keep up with everything. Yeah, that wasn’t true. I was even the first one to get in assignments” (Owen IV2). A study by Ruegg (2018) found that teacher feedback can significantly increase learner confidence and self-efficacy. Through support and encouragement provided by teachers, students can develop their skills in mastering and taking charge of their learning, which in turn correlates with students’ achievements and progression in education.

[My teacher] said, well, this course would actually prepare you now for getting to university. This is the standard you have to do. So I'm kind of like, OK, I managed to, I didn't fail. I passed everything. And so I was like, yeah, do you know, I think I can do it...I love the course and it just got me into education... Riverview gave me, I think, structure. It got me into education. It got me into thinking (Nora IV3).

Lawson (2014) emphasises the importance of support mechanisms to help students with negative learner identities to adapt to their learning environment in order to assist in their completion of their studies. Owen felt comfortable discussing his additional learning needs with his teachers in Riverview who were then able to provide flexible assessment methods in response to his needs. This responsiveness has increased Owen’s willingness to request support through the recognition that timely assistances can alleviate his academic challenges and in turn, reduce associated stress:

I'm just saying me asking for help was a big thing. Because in my previous school, assignments in secondary school, I'm very stubborn and not asking for people's help for years and then...this year I said if something comes up I'm gonna ask straight away and that's what I did and the stress had gone down and I'm like why didn't I do this earlier? (Owen IV1).

Bandura writes of mastery experience where he contends that successive achievements over time builds self-efficacy in students (Bandura and Schunk, 1981; Bandura, 1997; Hendricks, 2016). Similarly, Taylor and Cranton (2012) suggest that “‘victories’ have inspired confidence” (p.309). Throughout the year in Riverview, participants gained experience in completing assignments and receiving feedback from teachers, which strengthened their belief in their academic capabilities: “I can do the work...I kept getting close to a distinction level in most of my assignments...but the work showed to them repeatedly – distinction, distinction, distinction. So like, I know it's in there” (Owen IV2). Irene believes that the structure and design of the course in Riverview College greatly increased her confidence in her abilities. She feels that the course incrementally added on challenges which enabled students to feel a sense of achievement and increase their faith in their competencies:

seeing that I actually could achieve it, you know achieving little steps...If somebody had said that's me in the beginning, no, I would have left. It was built in little nice little building blocks to build your confidence and that works really well (Irene IV2).

As a way of gaining “*mastery experience* or prior task-based achievement” (Hendricks, 2016, p.33), some participants viewed FET as a practice ground to gain skills in meeting academic demands before proceeding to university:

I would at the moment be a bit terrified of going on to third level, but actually I'll keep my mind open and I'll see how I get on here. If I manage, if they give me good feedback, if they think I can do it, assure, I may...consider it (Irene IV1).

This was also the experience of participants who had recent university experience: “The course [in Riverview] was unreal and it gave me a really good insight to what was like going on and it got me back into like the swing of like being a student” (Ciara IV3).

Brookfield et al. (2022) state that self-efficacy is “a self-belief that people have, or a confidence in the rightness of their decisions or the rightness of their projects they want to pursue or the actions they are engaged in” (p.134). Participants frequently referred to being more equipped to manage and deal with stress as a result of their time in FET which helped them to achieve their goals:

I used to be a very stressful person...I don't get stressed as easy as I was, I would've done before... I think it was being in a, in a place that I actually put myself for and I said this is what I want to do and I'm going to do this and it was completely my decision and if I didn't want to do it anymore, I could stop. And also like realising how stress has such a bad impact on your life, like when you realise that, you kind of you can work through a lot easier (Naomi IV2).

Teachers can positively influence self-efficacy through their interactions and their belief in students' capabilities and learning potential (Henson, 2001). The approachability of teachers in Riverview along with the trustful relationships between students and teachers created opportunities for participants to speak candidly about concerns and provided reassurance to participants:

I liked to contact my teacher...about how I was feeling about the course. Because during like December, January, I couldn't watch any [television] programs without bringing in my course and in one case there was an abuse case and my brain just went [into] work mode...[I asked] the teacher “you been doing this for seventeen years. Do you have any help” and he goes “Divide your life in sections. It's like once the classes end switch over something else. Don't look at social studies or psychology stuff unless we tell you too. Live your own life”. So that was a big help. Figuring out like...work life balance (Owen IV2).

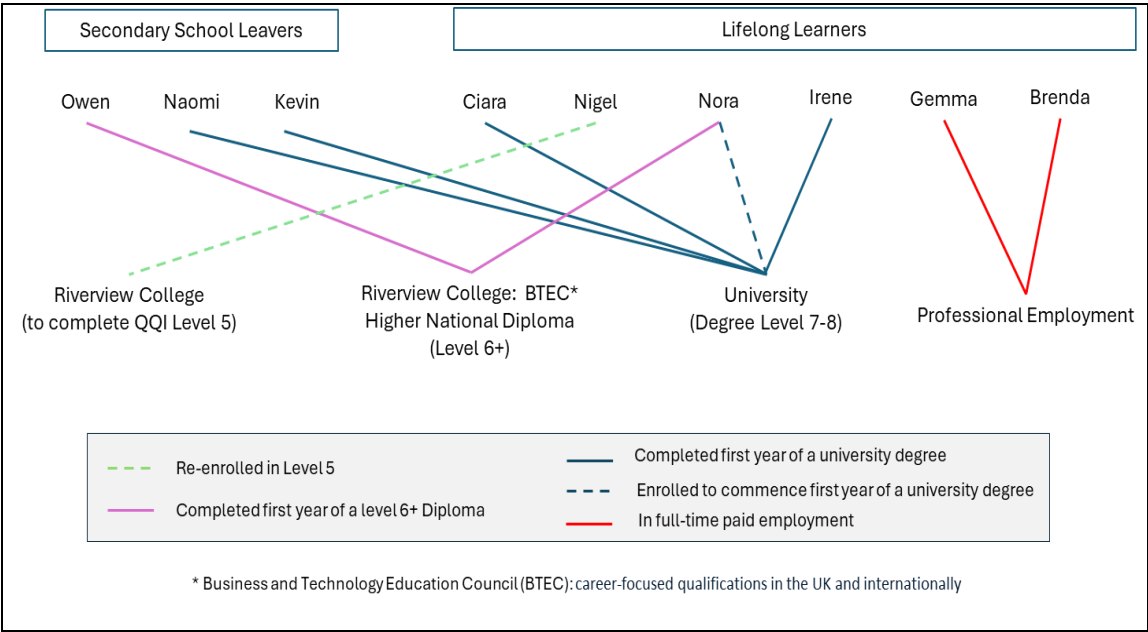
Self-efficacy is promoted when criticism and blame is avoided and teachers have high expectations of students (Shaughnessy, 2004; Protheroe, 2008). Participants felt that teachers had faith in them: “they trusted us” (Owen IV2) and this motivated them throughout their studies: “I'm accommodated to realise more of my potential, and I supposed I'm believed in from the tutors” (Nigel IV2). Rather than criticise students,

teachers were seen to look out for their welfare and to identify times when more support was needed:

Riverview was supportive. I remember the times, sometimes staff would identify, like I remember Teacher X...She'd identify something she'd seen in me, you know that I, I was struggling, you know, I felt a bit overwhelmed...and I'd have conversations with Teacher X sometimes after classes (Nigel IV3).

Elevated levels of self-efficacy can ease the transition to different fields, such as from school to college or university, and has been found to increase students’ abilities to cope with new and demanding situations (Bandura, 1993; Britner and Pajares, 1996). Figure 7.2 provides an illustration of the trajectories of the participants one year after their FET Level 5 course in Riverview College. As demonstrated in Figure 7.2, by the third phase of participant interviews that took place 2022, half of the participants who completed their course in Riverview progressed to university and had completed the first year of their university degree (Naomi, Kevin, Ciara and Irene). Nora and Owen returned to Riverview College and completed the first year of a Level 6+ Diploma and Nora has been accepted to commence a university degree. Nigel enrolled to recommence the Level 5 Theatre Studies course while Gemma and Brenda were in full-time professional employment.

Figure 7.2 Journeys of Participants One Year Post-FET



When Irene began her degree course in university after FET, she felt that her experience in FET built a strong foundation of self-belief which helped her to engage positively with new challenges in a new environment:

I knew I could do it. I knew having been in Riverview I could do it. But I still kind of, the first brief, I was like, 'oh, can I do this? I don't know if I can do this', you know, and we were brought in to the art gallery. We selected the painting and you have to take that painting apart...And you're not told, you know, you work it out yourself...But anything like that that happened, I worked around it and I managed it no problem. Yeah. So I was fine. I was fine, yeah (Irene IV3).

Although failures can weaken a sense of self-efficacy (Hendricks, 2016), the experience of success, especially after doubts in their ability to succeed, builds a resilient self-efficacy that helps to withstand future challenges (Bandura, 2010):

I'm impressed. I'm happy that I've achieved, that I completed the year. I didn't think, that was kind of touch and go midway through so I'm really happy...I'm really impressed that I did the play. I never thought I'd be in a play. I never thought that I would be in a production. I'm really happy. I enjoyed it so much (Ciara IV2).

Low self-efficacy is shown to prevent students from progressing in education due to a lack of confidence in their academic ability and potential (Baird et al., 2009; Bandura, 2011; Smyth and Banks, 2012). However, participants in this study found that rather than being set up to fail, FET set them up to succeed, thus enhancing their self-efficacy. Participants speak of how teachers endeavoured to make the learning process accessible to support student comprehension and success in their course: “teachers made it as easy as possible to learn all of the material and they were all, they were always available...they'd explain it in easier terms than what the document [learning material] would say” (Kevin IV2). This sentiment is echoed by Naomi who states: “There was no time in Riverview where I was like, “oh, I don't know if I'm doing this right” because like I understood everything” (Naomi IV3).

While Owen and Nora remained in Riverview College, they commenced a new course at a higher level (equivalent of QQI Level 6+) with different teachers, classmates and a

different course structure and assessment⁵¹. Despite these changes, confidence in their abilities continued to grow:

I certainly, I certainly use my brain and I've been going "you can do stuff" I can definitely do what I can do (Owen IV3).

I feel like the confidence now if I was applying for a CV [job] I can say yes, I've done this. I've been in Riverview for two years. I've done XY and Z. You know, I just feel better myself. Like I've achieved something. So that's probably the best way. I've achieved something (Nora IV3).

Gemma and Brenda transitioned into full-time employment and found that their experience in Riverview College helped them to successfully navigate their new roles and gave them an "advantage" (Gemma IV3) in their new careers:

I think doing a level 5 and having work experience and then throwing yourself out there, will bring you at least at the start point where people with a degree would have to start as well you know. So what I'm trying to say is...It gives you an advantage. It gives you an advantage and not only of knowledge, but also placement in, in the community (Gemma IV3).

7.3.3 Academic Confidence

Mezirow (2000) outlines that transformative builds "competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships" (p.22). An increase in confidence as a result of their experience in Riverview was a dominant theme throughout the interviews with participants. Prior to their studies at Riverview, some participants never considered applying to university due to their negative learner identity which was related to a lack of confidence in their academic abilities. Illeris (2014a) states that transformative learning is a "*purposeful and heuristic process*" (p.10) which crucially enables "the transition from present circumstances to circumstances of change – that offers growth of experience for the learners and increases their confidence that important changes are possible and worthwhile" (p.10).

⁵¹ This course was a Higher National Diploma course certified by the UK Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and is a higher-level course on the NFQ than their previous QQI Level 5 course

Participants found that teachers in FET enabled them to reimagine their futures through a demystification of the university environment, helping to remove a fear of the unknown. Having completed a year in FET, Irene strongly believes that teachers increased her understanding of undertaking a degree at university:

It [university] doesn't seem as terrifying as I thought it would be. You know the tutors...said, look, it's just gonna be like this, only bigger you know it would be very similar so...I was just doing the course to see if I could do the course...and there's no way I was applying for college...my goal was to, just trying to finish the course and now my goals are go to [university] (Irene IV2).

Taylor and Cranton (2012) state that transformative learning “is a confidence-building process” (p.46). Evidence of this process can be seen by the marked changes across successive participant interviews. When Owen joined Riverview College, he never envisaged that he’d be able to go to university: “College [university] is like a dream, not really an expectation. Something I'll probably never see” (Owen IV1). However, though communication with teachers about educational options and pathways, applying to university is now a consideration for Owen:

talking to like teachers and how they've gone through this [educational] system. They gave us a lot. They gave us a lot more help personally then let's say the guidance counsellor.... talking to like the teachers who have Masters and gone through that system, they gave us all the help...And I want to do a level seven in health work, specializing in youth work if I pass the level 6 plus [BTEC course]...This is what I want to do. I want to help young people and get the degree I want and go through this process and then do a one year in a formal University...Yes, I'm gonna do a bachelor's degree (Owen IV2).

Owen attended Riverview College again the following year to study a BTEC Higher National Diploma, “the Level 6 plus course” (mentioned in the above quotation) and now he is not only considering a degree, but he is also considering completing a master’s degree in the future: “I definitely can see me at least getting a Bachelor’s [degree] whether that be through a top-up degree or going through the three years...I

can see me at least maybe getting the Bachelor's, maybe then my master's [degree]" (Owen IV3).

Owen's experience is echoed by Nora and Irene who had not considered applying to university prior to studying at Riverview College but subsequently chose to continue their education at degree level. At the time of the third interview, Nora outlines that in addition to successfully completing the QQI Level 5 QQI Health and Therapy course in Riverview, she has just completed the first year of the BTEC Higher National Diploma course (also in Riverview), commenced two online courses in Law and Receptionist studies. Furthermore, she has also applied for and been accepted to commence a Level 7 degree in Community Development. Nora is determined to continue her education to achieve a Level 8 degree and she hasn't ruled out continuing on to do a PhD in the future:

Ideally, I think that once I get my level 7, I will get a part-time job but I'm still going to get my level 8. I don't know if I'd go as far you to get a PhD, I'd be happy with my [degree], but you never know (Nora IV3).

Irene who never envisaged herself as a student and felt like an "outsider" (Irene IV1) at the start of her studies in FET, now strongly identifies as a learner. Irene is now studying a degree in university, has arranged to travel to Venice soon with her university classmates to experience art and culture related to her degree and is considering applying to study abroad as part of the university's Erasmus programme. She has also completed a self-portrait art course, completed a teacher training course in yoga and has enrolled in an art course run by an international acclaimed artist. Irene plans to continue her studies well into the future: "I probably don't want it [the educational journey] to end" (Irene IV3).

Reay (2018) states that "even when working class students have sufficient confidence to apply for the more elite universities, our research showed that they were still plagued by ambivalences and an acute sense of being out of place" (p.532). Having successfully completed their one-year course in FET, four participants (Naomi, Kevin,

Ciara and Irene) began studying a degree course in university. However, these participants report that they are actually finding third level less challenging than their course in Riverview College. MacFarlane (2018) recommends that exposing students to the university environment prior to entry is beneficial for the development of a positive learner identity and successful transition to university. Murphy and Fleming (2000) refer to these skills as “*college knowledge*” or “*tricks of the trade*” (p.84) which include skills in the areas of essay writing, study skills, examination skills and independent learning, giving learners a marked advantage when they go to university. It is evident from the participant interviews that FET equipped participants with key skills needed in university. All of the university participants reported an ease at which they adapted to their new educational environment due to the similarity of content and standards between FET and university:

because we weren't, I wasn't going straight from like a Leaving Cert English essay to a college [university] essay. And you had that kind of middle ground really does help and I think I have, to even just with confidence. Like I have the modules that I've done in Riverview helped me understand the modules then that I done in [university]. Like, I think the first couple of months, a lot of the stuff wasn't new to me. A lot of it wasn't. And it wasn't until I kind of went into second semester that it started to be like new information (Naomi IV3).

Naomi's experience was mirrored by all participants who began their degree course in university. In fact, most of these participants found their FET course more challenging than they subsequently experienced in university:

Actually first year university wasn't as hard as Riverview - that was more difficult. There was a lot more work, you know, a lot more physical work (Irene IV3).

It's not necessarily harder this year, it's just how interested I am in it and how much I want to be engaged in it...I don't think it's harder (Ciara IV3).

Participants who already held level 8 degrees coming to Riverview College commented on the rigorous standards of FET in terms of the amount of work and difficulty of the course: “there's a very much an academic side to the course as well as practical...You

know the learning outcomes are, they're set to a high standard" (Nigel IV3). These participants were surprised at the large number of assessments and level of academic intensity of the FET course which they felt equated to their previous degree experiences:

it was a bit of shock when I realized the amount of work that I had to...I did not expect the amount...It's eight modules. Then you've got two assignments each...plus exams...I found a little bit stressing (Gemma IV2).

It's been a very tough year [in FET]...It was like a lot of things coming one after another and I kind of thought it was like a degree or something that we were doing...I would say we have to do more things [in FET] because when I was doing my degree, probably we had less amount of work (Brenda IV2).

The workload and large number of assignments in FET enabled participants to focus on improving their academic achievements whilst also acting as a distraction from the stresses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic: "I feel like, say, Covid...I feel like I have a lot of time to study, do nothing and put in a lot of work and not going out every weekend... so I can stay at home and get my work done" (Ciara IV1)

This actually was very positive for me...I didn't even notice COVID to be honest. Well I did obviously...but I was very, very busy...I was literally working (until) 7 or 8 o'clock at night...even the weekends, so it was really busy. So it was great. It distracted me. I was aware of what was going on, but I wasn't dwelling on it (Irene IV2).

Participants observed a notable difference between students in their university course who had FET experience compared to those who did not, concluding that those with FET experience were more prepared for university and encountered an easier transition to third level:

It wasn't as big a jump because I know, some of the girls who I know have come straight from Leaving Cert, so they found a very big jump. So yeah, I definitely had a bit of an advantage in getting used to it previously [in FET]...I think, having the PLC as well kind of gives you an idea of what it's [university]

like as well. So I think I probably would have struggled a little bit more if I had gone from Leaving Cert just because of how different it [university] is and how like I said, when you're in the lecture hall, it's like 300 people and they're [lecturers] just talking at you and then it's like, "OK, right, see you on Tuesday". And that's just it (Naomi IV3).

The people who are worst at the course are people who've just come from the Leaving Cert...pretty conclusively these are the people who are the worst at the course...I'm the only person from the PLC, but I feel like I'm slightly ahead of all the other people (Kevin IV3).

they [students who came to university from FET] are more confident, you know, like myself, they know they can do it or they refer back to where they talk about it or, you know, they do talk. Everybody found it [FET] really beneficial. And people always say, all of the people that I've talked to about it say, "Oh my God, I can't imagine coming in here without having done a year or two years in the [FET] art course" (Irene IV3).

The smooth transition into university allowed Naomi to feel excited rather than apprehensive about commencing third level, which in turn boosts her confidence for her journey ahead in university:

I really did feel lucky and just really excited to start as well because I knew that I would love it and I knew that it was for me. So there wasn't even any like bit of like nervousness of just starting in a new experience in a new college...just pure excitement, like pure happiness. Like I think I did feel like I had a bit of an advantage having known how to reference and having done college-based assignments before [in FET] (Naomi IV3).

As evidenced in Chapter 6, the strong emphasis on the teacher-relationship in FET is vital to help students adapt to their new environment and to support them throughout their educational journey in FET. However, it may also lead to a dependency on this support which may not always be available in third level. Participants who proceeded to third level remarked upon a difference in the amount of support and interaction with their lecturers in university: "I think I remember one

thing in particular, like the lecturers in in [university]...they just kind of talk at you. It's not interactive" (Naomi IV3). Naomi mentions a learning environment of 300 students which contrasts greatly to her experience in FET: "we were given like...more attention [in FET], but just because everything was like more individualised in a way, because it was smaller" (Naomi IV3). There appears to be less support and guidance in university than participants experienced in FET which can make it difficult to adapt to the challenges of university.

And there's always these little milestones [in FET whereas]...I feel like in the college [university] it currently just feels like..."OK guys here are all the things" and you're like "OK". And that I think is kinda harder to focus on (Ciara IV3).

While Ciara thoroughly enjoyed the individualised and interactive relationship with teachers in FET: "I'm really enjoying it, I'm really loving it, everything about has been pretty amazing" (Ciara IV1), this greatly contrasts how she feels about the environment of university: "I'm quite bored. Like I said, if next year gets more interesting, then I'll stick it out...I am not entirely enjoying the [university] course" (Ciara IV3).

7.3.4 Recognition

Gaining recognition from others is a fundamental aspect of everyday life and shapes our identities and self-worth. Fleming (2022b) states that it is vital that individuals feel that they are "recognised and heard" (p.564). Upon coming to FET, there was a sense of invisibility and insignificance among the Irish born participants who felt overlooked, dismissed with little involvement or control of their educational journey, particularly in secondary school: "I suppose I wouldn't have been like, you know, the most loud person in secondary school anyway, but I think they really tried just to leave it your own devices in a way" (Naomi IV1). Participants also endured negative and derogatory comments in relation to their education in FET. Honneth (1995) states that "the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse" (pp.131-132). These negative conditions, also termed as "misrecognitions" (Fleming, 2022b, p.564) undermine a learner's identity, harming their self-confidence, self-respect and self-

esteem. In order to participate fully in life, Honneth (2012) believes these misrecognitions must be overcome so that humans receive recognition of their needs and abilities.

Recognition by others significantly impacts an individual's self-esteem and how they perceive themselves as "one's attitude towards oneself emerges in one's encounter with an other's attitude toward oneself" (Honneth, 1995, p.xii). Participants expressed sentiments of insignificance and invisibility in society when they first came to Riverview College. Some felt that they hadn't achieved the accomplishments of their peers and this reflected not only in how they viewed themselves but also how others perceived them. Irene married and started a family at a young age which made it difficult for her to consider participating in education. She felt she had faded into the background being a wife, a mother and a grandmother. Irene witnessed a dramatic change in how her family and friends now treated her as a result of her course and achievements in Riverview:

I can see my own kids are looking at me differently now. I'm not just 'Mammy' ...I can see a bit more, respect you know?...I can see my grandkids coming up to me showing me what they're drawing and want to draw with me and they think I'm an expert now...friends even, friends yeah I can see a difference in how people are treating me (Irene IV2).

Participants also expressed feeling more 'important' and more valued by people around them. Nora feels that her friends see her in a very different light and that they now view her as educated, energetic and dynamic. This gives Nora a sense of pride and she feels that she has now been involved in education, reducing previous feelings of inferiority compared to her friends: "one of my friends...she said to me "Nora, I've done nothing. I actually done nothing' she said 'you've done so much in two years, I can't understand how you're still sitting up" " (Nora IV3).

For secondary school leavers, Kevin, Naomi and Owen, gaining recognition for the work they put into learning was important. This had been lacking for them as a consequence of their disappointment with their Leaving Certificate results and because the CAO

system did not recognise these results or LCA qualification for university access: “I was really disappointed with my Leaving cert results...I really felt like they weren't like a true reflection on me and what I had been like over the last two years in school” (Naomi IV1). It was only through their participation in Riverview College that these participants felt that they finally received recognition of their accomplishments. Naomi expresses a sense of educational justice as she now feels that she has received the grades she deserves. This allows Naomi to gain more trust in the academic assessment process: “I got all the distinctions and stuff. So that was another good thing, like the hard work paying off then for the year in Riverview College” (Naomi IV3).

Fleming and Finnegan (2010) note that respect and recognition are gained when an individual is accepted as having “a right and an ability to participate in the discussions and debates of the institution concerned, i.e. state or organisations” (p.4). Owen strongly associated himself with disadvantage, having additional educational needs and attending a DEIS school. During his time at Riverview, Owen’s teacher organised a meeting with government officials to seek recognition for their course from a national health regulatory body. As a result of this meeting, Owen felt seen, heard and listened to as a student. This meeting with senior government representatives gave Owen a sense of pride and respect, which he had not experienced previously.

The politicians and them like, treating us with, respect, which was something I've never seen before...And then there's like, people who are like in control of...government...going...”Great to meet you”. Like what? This does not usually happen people [from my area] (Owen IV3).

Owen explains how others now see him differently and this gives him a sense of esteem and accomplishment. He talks of interactions with previous school friends and it is clear that his identity has changed from that of a disadvantaged student to a proud individual who associates himself with a career and meeting senior officials:

Actually it's funny because a lot of people from my school are in Riverview...and they're like “So what you doing”, I'm like “I'm training to become a social worker” ...they see you in like fancy clothes and I say “we are going to meet politicians” and

they're going "you mean who now?" And it's like "yeah I don't, I didn't expect this either" (Owen IV3).

The academic expertise and vocational professional experience of the teachers in Riverview provided participants with recognition by association with experts in their field. This was particularly evident for participants from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Associating herself with the expertise and fame of some of her teachers in Riverview altered Ciara's learner identity from a learner where "people assume that I'm possibly getting a second-rate education because I'm in a PLC" to one who is now learning with top professionals.

the lecturers in Riverview were like go getters...they were still actively doing all that stuff. And not only were they doing that stuff, but they were also actively writing and directing and producing and engaged in like our councils and all of those things. And like, it's fascinating (Ciara IV3).

they [FET teachers] weren't simply academics or they weren't like leaving certs teachers...like they've worked...some of them were nurses, some of them were care assistants, one of them was a paramedic (Kevin IV3).

7.4 Dynamic Nature of Learner Identity

The previous section revealed that participants transformed their learner identity from a negative learner identity to a positive identity, characterised by increased sense of belonging, confidence, self-efficacy and recognition. However, McAdams (1996) states that identity is a "product or project that is fashioned and sculpted, not unlike a work of art" (p.297). In this way, learner identity is dynamic and can continue to change, depending on the variables and contexts involved.

7.4.1 Regression of Positive Learner Identity

While participants in this study demonstrated a progressive change in their identity during their first year in FET, it is possible that a regression can also occur. Lamb (2011) notes that changes in the educational setting "appear to undermine the learners' identity as learners and agents and, possibly, their motivation" (p.77). Some

participants demonstrated a regression in their learner identity when they encountered a new course or a new learning environment. Aspects of Owen's learner identity changed from just wanting to get through his FET course, to one who believed he was capable of getting distinctions at a QQI Level 5, Level 6 and ultimately studying at university. At the end of Owen's Level 5 course, he decided to progress to the Level 6 course in Riverview College, but although he remained in the familiar surroundings of Riverview College and despite his increased confidence, his fear of failure returned: "I did think I was going to fail for about three weeks" (Owen IV3). This regression in learner identity was also demonstrated by Irene who, at the end of her course in Riverview, felt positive: "I definitely believe that I've got talent...And even if you fail, try but you won't fail. I think, I think if you're drawn towards doing something you know you can do it" (Irene IV2), but she then felt insecure when she began her degree studies in university:

the main challenges for me were starting and feeling like an imposter walking into that college the first day. You know, the first few days, the first few times I almost wanted to become invisible, I felt like, "Oh my God, all those young students are good" ...like there's all these fabulous young people from the other years and they're all...very flamboyant and exuberant and outgoing and I kind of felt, "oh, what am I doing here?" So myself was the biggest obstacle (Irene IV3).

However, for participants, this identity regression was temporary. Owen notes that the continued reassurance and support of teachers helped him to overcome this crisis of identity: "like I have that [fear of failure] sorted now. Even them [FET teachers] saying...you can definitely get distinctions, like I don't see you having any problem" (Owen IV3). Similarly, Irene also notes that support structures in university, including student mentoring and guidance counselling, helped her to adapt to university and feel legitimate as a university student:

But I'm very relaxed around that now and I feel like I have a right to be there now. I feel as much a right to be there as any of them now. And the college [university] helped with that. There was great support and a great kind of, first year supporters, people who showed you around there. There was a lot of support around that (Irene IV3)

Although different context and circumstances conspired to shake the learner identity of participants, the strong foundation in their learner identity gained in FET, in addition to continued support in their new environment, enabled them to withstand and overcome these challenges.

7.4.2 Rigid Learner Identity

While we have established that learner identity can be positively transformed, this research also identifies symbolic violence and experiences of imposter syndrome as factors that may inhibit positive identity transformation, resulting in a persistent negative learner identity.

Kevin experienced repeated symbolic violence as a result of the Irish education system. Initially denied a CAO offer due to his Leaving Cert points, he enrolled in FET as an alternative pathway to university. However, once again he was denied a place in university. Kevin successfully completed a second course in FET in order to try again to gain access to his desired nursing degree in university. Despite achieving an overall distinction award in his QQI level 5 course in nursing, achieving eight distinctions and one merit⁵², he was denied a place on his desired degree for a third time: “I have those results pinned to the wall behind me. I got out of the nine subjects, I got eight distinctions and one merit. The funny thing is that I didn't get into nursing” (Kevin IV3). This demonstrates structural inequities where FET qualifications are viewed as inferior and less valued than traditional routes to university. O’Sullivan (2021) notes that the LCE “pathway is more valued and more advantageous than that provided by QQI” (p.199).

Kevin has since accepted a place on an International Relations Degree in university and is achieving excellent grades in his course: “I got my results for my, for this university course and I got put 12th in my class out of 120 where I got a second-class honours first

⁵² The grading structure in QQI level courses is: Fail (0-49%), Pass (50-64%), Merit (65-79%) and Distinction (80-100%) (Further Education Support Service, 2015)

grade” (Kevin IV3). However, it is clear that the persistent rejection plays a significant role in how Kevin views himself. Despite achieving success, Kevin still feels that this achievement is insufficient: “But that's a ways to go. Like I'm, I'm up there but there's still room for improvement” (Kevin IV3). Blackwell et al. (2007) state: “Negative experiences have lasting negative effects primarily when they affect an individual’s beliefs” (pp.259-260) which contributes to “mental baggage” that individuals bring to learning (Blackwell et al., 2007, p.259). This “baggage” is evident in the way that Kevin regularly describes his sentiments of ‘shame’, even in his third interview, despite his successes in FET and in university. Kevin’s high socio-economic background where he describes family members as high achievers, contributes to this increased sense of shame he regularly refers to. This is an example of “negative self-talk” which is responsible for reinforcing a negative identity (Kolb and Kolb, 2009, p.9). However, while Kolb and Kolb (2009) caution against negative self-talk, Kevin intentionally and purposefully employs it as he also views this shame as a driving motivation to constantly improve while remaining grounded:

But I have the shame. But the shame isn't like I'm just, I'm going to keep feeling it. Like that's just how I manage things and that's how I try and improve. I just feel it. I and I don't let it go. I let it sit, which is it's not healthy, but it keeps me motivated. Yeah. So there is a, there is achievement and there is shame. But the point is they balance each other out. You know if you get too much and not too much, not too little, it's yeah, I don't want to get a big head. You know try and stay a little bit humble. So I keep my, I keep all of the all the reminders that I've. I just came that far and maybe I'll try a bit harder on the next one. And if not then, I add another thing to the wall (Kevin IV3).

Symbolic violence as a result of university entry access systems plays a strong and enduring role in perpetuating a negative learner identity for Brenda. Brenda and Gemma expressed concerns over the English language standards necessary for non-native English speakers to enrol in university which can be viewed as a form of language-based discrimination (Ng, 2007; Back and Piekkari, 2024). Despite Brenda’s degree in English, six years’ professional experience teaching the English language to

children, studying in Ireland for over two years and successfully completing the QQI level 5 course through the medium of the English language, Brenda still doubts her ability to pass the university English language criteria, which undermines her confidence in gaining access to university:

I don't know if my English is good...I would still think I would try to do the course, the English course [in university], and I will probably fail...They, they do an exam about your English and if you don't have the level you don't start the course (Brenda IV3).

Brenda's experience illustrates how structural barriers may be intensified at the intersection of migration history, language status and institutional progression requirements. Although academically successful within FET, linguistic barriers to university access continued to undermine her confidence and perceived legitimacy.

There is little evidence from participant accounts to suggest that Brenda or Gemma received adequate support or reassurance in Riverview in relation to their English language skills, the university application process or the language tests required for university. Both remained uncertain about the procedures and expectations for applicants whose first language was not English:

I don't know, I'm not really, I remember reading, it was like if you want to apply, you have to have been living in Ireland for three years. I don't know if they were checking on somebody who's coming from abroad or like, yeah, apart from the EU, I'm not really sure (Brenda IV3).

Neither Gemma nor Brenda had a relationship with the guidance counsellor in Riverview: "I haven't had a close relationship with mine (Gemma IV2)". When asked if guidance was received from their guidance counsellor, Brenda replied: "No, not really...I didn't find it [the guidance facility] very useful" (Brenda IV3). Therefore, while support was provided to participants in relation to their academic development, there appears to be a lack of support provided to learners on navigating the application process for learners for whom English is not their first language.

The application system for FET graduates to university is intricate and both students and FET teachers find it difficult to understand. O’Sullivan (2021) notes that: “The current system is complex and lacking in transparency. FET professionals find it difficult to navigate. What must it be like for students?” (p.206). This raises a further issue in the lack of adequate resources to provide information on educational progression. As outlined in Chapter 6, participants indicated dissatisfaction with the guidance counselling facilities in FET and reported that teachers were often seen to substitute this service. A report by McGuinness et al. (2018) found that only one third of FET students had access to career guidance during their course and that reduced guidance support had a negative impact on student success. Despite SOLAS’ objective in 2020 to ensure a consistent approach to guidance and that “guidance is available to all who seek it” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.54), it is clear that this inadequacy in guidance counselling remains an issue for participants, placing increasing pressure and expectation on teachers to substitute this role in an environment that is already under-resourced: “Staffing allocation is very inadequate considering the varied and diverse needs of the students” (McGuinness et al., 2018, p.37).

Chow et al. (2025) indicate “imposter syndrome” (p.411) can prevent the transformation of learner identities. Imposter syndrome is where individuals doubt their abilities and “are painfully convinced they are phonies” (Clance and Imes, 1978, p.243). Nora demonstrates signs of imposter system when she reflects on how she felt when she first enrolled in FET: “I probably thought to myself, oh, I'm not an academic, I wouldn't be able to cope with university” (Nora IV3). Despite gaining academic confidence as evidenced in section 7.3.3, Nora appears to intentionally resist identifying as a learner:

he [the teacher in FET] said. “We want students to enjoy college life”. I was like, I'm 47, I don't need to enjoy college life, you know, I don't, I don't see myself as a as a student, if that makes any sense (Nora IV3).

Nora has worked professionally since leaving secondary school over twenty-six years ago and now also has the responsibility of caring for her elderly parents. Nora views

education as a means to obtain the qualifications required to re-enter employment in a new field. Despite enjoying the academic aspect of education and social interactions within the classroom, she rejects self-identifying as a student due to its associations with a young and care-free social life:

I don't see myself going out having shots now with the girls on a Friday at 6:00pm and for two-euro drinks. I just, that's not me. So I didn't care about missing the social life of it because a lot of them are young and I wouldn't have a huge amount socially (Nora IV3).

Nora's resistance to adopting a student identity also reflects the intersection of age, caring responsibilities, employment identity and cultural assumptions about what constitutes a 'student'. This highlights how learner identity is shaped not only by educational participation but by wider social constructs of age and legitimacy.

This highlights the stereotypical views of university students as young inexperienced individuals focussed on social life and relationships, contrasting to mature students like Nora who are already independent and wish to focus on their goals, objectives and personal advancement (Barclay, 2018). Adult learners tend to "consider themselves primarily workers and not students" (Compton et al., 2006, p.74). This highlights the widespread perception of what a learner is, making it more difficult for non-traditional learners to embrace their identity as a learner.

7.5 Challenges to Learner Identity Transformation

Participants came to FET, not only carrying their own personal histories but also the weight of public perceptions regarding the educational institution they were now attending. The type of institution that a student attends impacts on the learner identity of students. Reay et al. (2010) found that students attending what they considered "a really good university" (p.115) had a stronger learner identity than those who attended educational institutions with less perceived status. As outlined in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, FET is often accompanied by a considerable amount of negative stigma (Baker, 1989; Jackson et al., 2010; Flynn, 2012; McGuinness et al., 2018). "FET is seen

by many as stigmatised or somewhere to go “If can’t do anything else” “ (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017, p.37). This sentiment was felt by the secondary school leavers upon enrolling in FET and continues to be a theme for all participants:

You know, some people think “ah they, didn't do well in school, so they’re just doing a PLC course”, so I think there's a bit of snobbery about that, you know. (Nora IV2)

I think they're underappreciated...I think there probably is a stigma. (Irene IV2)

O’Leary and Rami (2017) state that “traditionally, for those completing second level education in Ireland, HE has been the preferred destination for further study or training” (O’Leary and Rami, 2017, p.76). The majority of participants felt that FET was regarded as academically inferior to other educational options but felt that its educational value was not fully recognized. Nigel believes that negative societal views of FET are linked to a form of “social snobbery” especially from individuals who attended more elite educational institutions: “there would be certainly a social snobbery [regarding FET]. I think a lot of people have a sense of maybe entitlement as well, and they may have gone to things like [Private College]...which cost a huge amount of money” (Nigel IV2).

The prevalence of negative public perceptions points to a lack of understanding among the general public concerning FET, its students and the services it provides. Societal perceptions of FET were felt by all of the secondary school participants which made them feel inferior to students in university settings: “They [people in general] don’t see us being smart...I still see, even when people my age, when I say I do a PLC course...they always think I can’t make it to university” (Owen IV2).

Sartori and Bloom (2023) show that FET students are “critically aware of a negative comparison between FET and HE” (p.48) resulting in feelings of embarrassment, low self-esteem, low confidence or anxiety for some students. Corrigan and Watson (2002) highlight that individuals who accept these prejudices may result in diminished self-

esteem and self-efficacy. This is evident in Kevin's story where it is clear how his self-perception and academic self-worth are shaped by the shame associated with a PLC college: "and then I'm in the PLC and just like, [associated with] that stigma that people had...the stigma can probably bring ...a great amount of shame. I know that it did bring me quite a bit of it" (Kevin IV2).

Smith and Duckworth (2022) highlight that symbolic violence is about "what is valued and what is de-valued in educational contexts" (p.162). The low value and inferiority associated with FET inflicted additional symbolic violence on the secondary school leavers when they chose to enrol in FET: "It's just that because, you think of further ed and it's like PLC is not like a proper [qualification], they don't treat you as much respect" (Owen IV3). Freire claims that "Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence" (Freire, 2005, p.85). While FET does offer a pathway to university, it is not automatically guaranteed that FET graduates will be offered a place in university as there is a limited number of places allocated to applications from FET graduates (Central Applications Office, 2025b). As discussed in Chapter 2, the CAO and university admission criteria prevent thousands of students from accessing higher education each year as entry requirements for FET graduates are complex and restrictive, often resulting in a lottery or random selection for places. This process objectifies and dehumanises students as it removes their ability to make decisions concerning their own lives and their futures (Freire, 2005). Furthermore, low confidence in students is reinforced if they fail to gain access to educational institutions or courses that they wished to attend (Reay et al., 2010): "I got, out of the 9 subjects, I got 8 distinctions and one merit. The funny thing is that I didn't get into nursing [in university]" (Kevin IV3).

FET qualifications are deemed as an inferior qualification within the Irish education system (O'Sullivan, 2021) and that "FET awards continue to lack parity" to the secondary or third level qualifications for educational progression opportunities (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2023c, p.50). This further contributes to the stigma

experienced by participants. Grimes et al. (2020) assert that “stigma is a barrier to the necessary steps to fulfilling academic potential” (p.32). The secondary school leaver participants expressed a greater awareness and personal experience of societal stigma associated with FET than was expressed by the lifelong learners who were significantly older and who had several years’ experience in employment.

There's all this thing about oh, why would you want to like stay there [FET]? Why would you want to go to college there [FET]...And I think PLC's are kind of seen as like this...like if you can't go to college [university], you just do a plc. Or if you have no ambition, you do PLC. If you don't care enough to try in a way (Naomi IV2).

When the lifelong learners were asked if there were any drawbacks to attending FET, they indicated an awareness of societal stigma but reported no direct personal experience:

I think there could be [stigma]...I didn't hear it (Nigel IV2).

Not that I can see. I think there probably is a stigma (Irene IV2).

I don't know if there's any snobbery with this from colleges who just don't like PLC. I don't know (Nora IV2).

Ashraf (2024) found that individuals who displayed low confidence levels were more affected by stigma while those with higher confidence levels were less affected. Ashraf (2024) refers to this concept as the “buffering effect” (p.5) which suppresses the negative impacts of stigma. While all the secondary school leavers had personal encounters related to the stigma associated with FET, the lifelong learners who were born and educated outside of Ireland were not aware of any stigma at all. This correlates with their reduced length of time in Ireland and a lack of familiarisation with the FET system (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017).

FET is frequently viewed as an inferior educational institution compared to university (O’Leary and Rami, 2017) with the “perception of FET as of low value” (Mooney and O’Rourke, 2017, p.18). Mooney and O’Rourke (2017) link the low value placed on FET to the lack of promotion and awareness of the sector while the Education and Training

Boards Ireland (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2019) highlights that the “Lack of awareness of Further Education and Training” act as a barrier and challenge to education (p.3). The physical image of an educational institution and access to course materials and resources can also influence students’ sense of belonging, confidence and engagement (Closs et al., 2021). Although most participants were not physically present in Riverview college for their studies due to the global pandemic, observations were made on the deteriorating condition of the college’s physical environment. Irene, for example, describes the physical building of Riverview College as: “a bit old-fashioned and a little bit run-down” (Irene IV1), while Owen highlighted the disparities in the physical resources and equipment: “we had an open day and they brought in, we got lended certain equipment that we didn't have throughout the year...But most equipment we actually didn't have” (Owen IV3). These observations can lead to a reinforcement of the perception that FET is a lower status sector, particularly when compared to the more modern or historically prestigious physical environments associated with universities. This in turn influences how learners perceive themselves through their association with the college, potentially diminishing their self-perceptions and aspirations as learners (Shahid and Qureshi, 2021).

7.6 Conclusion

Tennant writes that adult education is strongly associated with “the development and transformation of the self” (Tennant, 2006, p.53). This chapter revealed that transformative learning approaches in the FET education environment led to positive shifts in the learner identities of participants. This is a significant finding as evidence shows that a positive learner identity is important to student retention (Russell and Jarvis, 2019), student success in academic and social contexts (MacFarlane, 2018) and that it is strongly associated with increased motivation, engagement and achievement (Ng, 2021).

The vast majority of participants arrived at Riverview College with negative learner identities derived from their habitus and characterised by low confidence, self-doubt and feelings of alienation or failure in academic settings. Their experiences highlight how different educational histories, personal circumstances and social positioning including age, prior educational experiences, responsibilities, cultural assumptions and personal challenges influenced their learner identity as they began their journey in FET. However, due to the transformative learning and emancipatory pedagogies employed by teachers in Riverview College, changes occurred for these identities resulting in an increased sense of belonging, improved self-efficacy, enhanced academic confidence and the development of self-esteem as a result of social recognition and validation. However, this research also found that learner identity is dynamic, not only can it progress but it can also regress or remain rigid. This dynamic nature is influenced by factors outside of students' control such as entering new environments or repeated symbolic violence by educational institutions continually rejecting students. It can also stem from factors socially shaped but within the student's control such as imposter syndrome, retaining negative thoughts as a driving force for improvement or rejecting student associations due to the stereotypical connection with immaturity and social activities rather than professionalism and goal orientation. This research finds that learner identity regression was temporary for most participants, due to the foundation and learner identity gained in FET and due to continued support of teachers and guidance. It also found that a rigid learner identity may be intentionally adopted and consciously maintained.

FET is often perceived as an inferior institution in the Irish educational landscape and as an alternative pathway for students with lower academic attainment (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017; O'Leary and Rami, 2017). Most participants experienced a substantial amount of stigma and symbolic violence both in their secondary educational experiences, but particularly in relation to the FET participation which had the potential to devalue their experiences, progress and success. All participants who were educated in Ireland were aware of these sentiments of inferiority and negative perceptions

surrounding FET. These perceptions of FET shape learners' identities and negatively impact their sense of academic worth, confidence and self-esteem prior to, during and after their engagement in FET, posing challenges to identity transformation.

In response to Kegan's question of "what form transforms" Kegan (2018, p.29), this chapter finds that as a result of transformative and emancipatory pedagogies, aspects of the learner identity can transform with particular regard the learner's sense of belonging, self-efficacy, academic confidence and recognition. The following chapter will continue to address this question in relation to the emancipatory outcomes for students as a result of the transformative and emancipatory pedagogies in Riverview College.

Chapter 8. Findings (IV): FET as a Pathway to Emancipation

8.1 Introduction

As evidenced in Chapter 6, critical pedagogical practices advocated by Freire, including collaborative teacher-student relationships, supportive environments and critical dialogue were widely implemented in Riverview College. This chapter now seeks to determine the potential outcome of such practices and if these pedagogical practices in FET act as a means of emancipation for students as indicated by Freire.

Participants in this research suffered prior negative educational, institutional or life experiences which led to the situation where they ["ended up in Riverview"](#) (Naomi IV1) as a means to move forward in their personal, educational and vocational lives. According to Freire, critical pedagogy positions education as a practice of freedom which makes "oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation" (Freire, 2005, p.48). In this way, education facilitates students to the "awakening of their consciousness" (Freire, 2013, p.41) which makes them more aware of their environment and the injustices and inequalities therein. Through supportive education, Freire believes that students are empowered to reflect on issues and actively work towards solutions. Teaching practices which involve students in their education enables them to move from passivity to activity, resulting in a more democratic society where students act as critical agents empowered to achieve freedom and emancipation, not only for themselves but also for others (Freire, 2005).

This chapter will commence with a brief summary on the status of participants at the time of the third and final interview - one year after the conclusion of their FET QQI Level 5 course. This chapter will then proceed to determine the impact of Freire's critical pedagogy on participants as a result of their one-year course in FET and in the year post-completion, thus aiming to address the following research question:

RQ4: To what extent does participation in Further Education and Training lead to emancipation in the experiences and lives of FET students?

8.2 Situating the Participants one-year post-FET

One year after concluding their Level 5 QQI course in Riverview College, Owen and Nora had completed the first year of a BTEC Higher National Diploma (QQI Level 6+), also in Riverview College. Owen has just completed an interview for a full-time paid position in the local community centre where he volunteers. He is confident of being successful in this interview and hopes to commence employment there in the coming weeks. Nora has been accepted to commence the first year of a university degree in Community Development. Nora has been volunteering in a community organisation teaching English as a second language throughout the summer months. She has also commenced two separate online courses in reception and legal studies and she is considering undertaking a short-term course to qualify as an ESOL teacher.

Naomi, Kevin, Ciara and Irene have all completed the first year of a degree in university. Naomi and Kevin are studying in the fields of Nursing and International Relations respectively while both Ciara and Irene are studying Art and Design. Naomi is thoroughly enjoying university and feels that she is finally on the path to achieving her life-long dream of being a nurse. Kevin is receiving excellent results in his university degree, placing his grades in the top 10% of his class. He was elected Class President in university, he plans to work abroad for one year as part of the university Erasmus programme and considers working for the United Nations in the future. Ciara has not enjoyed her first year in university as much as she enjoyed her studies in Riverview College and feels at times that she is bored in university. She plans to continue in university but is contemplating returning to the workforce once she has achieved a Level 7 degree. Irene is thoroughly enjoying her university studies and in the year post-FET, she has also completed courses in the areas of art and teaching yoga. Irene plans to apply to study abroad as part of the Erasmus programme and she is active on social media where she proudly displays her paintings.

Gemma and Brenda both commenced full-time professional employment immediately after their course in Riverview. Brenda is working in the area of childcare which she enjoys immensely but furthering her studies in the English language remains a goal, either as part of a master's degree or to qualify as an ESOL teacher. Gemma began her career assisting children with disabilities after her course in Riverview. However, she felt drawn to work with the homeless due to her work experience in Riverview College and she is now employed as a support worker in the emergency homeless sector which she finds extremely fulfilling. Nigel was unable to complete his Level 5 QQI course in Riverview due to personal circumstances but he has remained in contact with his teachers in Riverview College and is committed to returning to recommence the course in the next academic year. Nigel has also moved from supported accommodation to his own independent apartment where he is increasingly taking greater control over the management of his life.

A visual representation of the participants journeys is provided in Figure 7.2 and a more detailed overview on the participant journey's post-FET is provided in Appendix 2.

8.3 Critical Consciousness

Freire stresses the importance of cultivating a critical consciousness or “conscientização” as a means to overcome constraints and oppression experienced by individuals (Freire, 2013, p.41). Critical consciousness is the awareness of factors which impact on the lives of individuals and an ability to reflect on these factors, culminating in the identification of ways to remove impediments. From the first interview with participants, it was clear that many had already possessed a level of consciousness through an awareness of forces which greatly affected their lives and ability to achieve their goals. Secondary school leavers were cognisant of the unfairness and injustice of the rote system and stress involved with secondary school examinations, the lack of recognition and lack of acceptance by the CAO educational institutions, and the stigma surrounding FET education. All lifelong learners were conscious of the financial barriers to education and those whose first language was not

English were also aware of the barriers posed also by the English language assessments required for university. This highlights that barriers were not experienced in isolation but often intersected through multiple influences that intensified disadvantage. Freire views these barriers and constraints as “limit-situations” (Freire, 2005, p.99) and acknowledges that such limit-situations can “create a climate of hopelessness” (Freire, 2005, p.99). However, he also asserts that as “critical perception is embodied in action, a climate of hope and confidence develops which leads men to attempt to overcome the limit-situations” (Freire, 2005, p.99).

During their first interview in 2020, participants appeared resigned to enrol in FET as a last resort, but they still held hope that FET would help them achieve their goals:

At the very beginning of this course, I was having a chat with a few students. They were, they just left, just left school and they didn't get such a high score in the leaving cert to have access to third level so they actually, it's like, it's the option that they have to, you know, the same thing as I'm doing. You know, going to further education to actually then access third level (Gemma IV1).

Contrary to their experiences of rote learning in secondary school and a lack of meaningful involvement in education, as evidenced in Chapter 5, participants now experienced education in FET which fostered active engagement and participation. This helped them to realise that education can have sustainable and lifelong benefits, rather than merely preparing students for exams:

[Assignments in FET are] Definitely an improvement and I think it was, it's probably a better way of doing it. So it was more framed on research and interpretation rather than just regurgitation of facts and quotes...you're making someone who can think. And if you teach someone to think, then they can think for the rest of their life and they think better in everything that they do (Kevin IV2).

Freire outlines that systems can operate in a way that “blinds a person to objective reality” (Freire, 2021, p.89), thus preventing them from seeing the world as it is. On the contrary, FET provided participants with a different insight into the world, with

participants commonly referring to FET as 'opening their eyes' on both personal and societal levels:

It **opened my eyes** to where I was doing...In what direction I was to go in? (Irene IV2).

I think it's kind of **opened my eyes** maybe to like that not everything is the perspective that everyone else is going for (Ciara IV3).

The course itself...kind of **opened up my understanding** for other things...And it really kind of provided me with a different skill set... Within homeless services, you basically see everything. You see mental health issues, you see drug use, you see children, you see families, you see others. So it's, it's very holistic...It gives you an advantage. It gives you an advantage and not only of knowledge, but also placement in in the community...the course in Riverview, I was able to see things...I could see the big picture...within the individual level and societal level...we looked at our society as a whole and from different perspectives...That kind of kind of really **opened up my eyes**. And maybe in the past I had those preconceived ideas and very limited understanding (Gemma IV3).

Kevin speaks of FET as a place where people can develop and grow as human beings. He feels that FET promotes humanisation where education is about having the freedom to develop as a person, rather than an experience of just memorising facts and information:

you actually have time to develop as a person and not just a receptacle for facts to be used in two weeks. And PLCs, further education gives you that. Like I considered my time at Riverview to be...it's learning and life. Not just learning. You're out doing stuff...And then at the end you're a person. You have, you've just all these little benefits like patience, understanding how like the bureaucratic process of...life skills that secondary school doesn't teach you. Like how to communicate with people...but people who don't do TY [Transition Year⁵³] and don't do further education don't have...There's a lot more of a psychological aspect to it, not just skills but people being happy (Kevin IV3).

⁵³ Transition Year is an optional one-year programme in secondary school which takes place prior to the final two years of secondary school education and offers opportunities for students to explore career pathways, develop vocational skills and engage in self-directed learning (Citizens Information, 2025c)

In this way, Kevin reflects Freire's contention that learners need the temporal time and psychological space to become "a being of ongoing, curious search, which "steps back" from itself and *from the life it leads* - it is because we are this being, given to adventure and the "passion to know" for which that freedom becomes indispensable" (Freire, 2021, p.102). Kevin believes that this humanisation through education enables students to broaden their perspectives, which in turn helps students approach university life with greater confidence and success. Kevin observed this difference in students who progressed to university via the FET pathway when he began his studies in third level:

This is another thing when you go into university...People who don't do...further education...just go in to university, go completely narrow minded on the one, on the subject and then go mad because it's just so much work and...it just hits them in the head like a truck and then they drop out. But if you, if they can go in happy and confident, relaxed with all the skills to both have a university life, go out with your new university friends and do other things and then also have the skills to do well in university and to not waste any time just learning futile things (Kevin IV3).

Participants constantly engaged with the diverse student body in FET, which allowed them to gain valuable insights into different lives, cultures and worldviews that they may not otherwise have encountered: "So I get to see what people think about, like what they've gone through" (Owen IV1). The process of interaction with teachers and the communicative learning approaches used by teachers in Riverview, as outlined in Chapter 6, also encouraged participants to think critically while also giving them the confidence to share their opinions and ideas:

Teachers [in Riverview] are like, they like ask questions...[teachers say] "I don't mind if I have to do an extra class on this like five minutes slide. I want to know what you're thinking" (Owen IV1).

I think now, looking at all the teachers [in FET],...they love when somebody asks a question...and then you get into a discussion on your question. I think, "yes", I think "that's prepared me" (Nora IV3).

Several FET programmes included critical thinking as a specific subject module while it was also embedded as a key assessment grading criterion across other subjects: “One of the things was, one thing they [FET teachers] always say is that for a distinction was [you needed] critical thinking. So it's like...when people try to kind of think. They would want your opinion” (Owen IV3).

The Work Experience module, compulsory on all QQI Level 5 and Level 6 programmes, also enabled participants to gain an understanding of different industries and professions, the demands of work and a respect for employees engaged in this work:

Let's say I have a more of an appreciation of the work that nurses had to do (Kevin IV2).

I've more of a much deeper appreciation for actors in their jobs now and it's not as easy as just...turn up and learn their lines. It's really not that. It's, it is a lot more (Ciara IV2).

I worked one day in the nursing home and I was like, “Oh my God”, I fainted because it was, it was so understaffed. You were constantly going, going, going, going like for 12 hours (Nora IV3).

8.4 Praxis (Reflection and Action)

While participants demonstrated an initial level of awareness through recognising institutional barriers and choosing FET as a means to navigate these barriers, there was limited evidence of action to challenge or confront these barriers when they enrolled in Riverview College. Instead, participants demonstrated a lack of empowerment and sense of futility as they succumbed to institutional constraints which they believed were beyond their control. In this way, participants held a “consciousness which “housed” oppression” (Freire, 2013, p.22) rather than an imaginative and critical consciousness required to bring about change. Freire contends that submitting to constraints renders individuals complicit in perpetuating these forces, resulting in a continuous cycle of oppression (Freire, 2005). This is evident in the way secondary school leaver Kevin not only felt helpless and disempowered but also assumed self-blame, thereby reinforcing the very structures that oppress him.

I didn't get any of my CAO choices...I simply got a few points too low and I had no backup through my own mistakes...I'm like everyone who didn't get their choice...and I'm at the very bottom of that list. So I'm not going to protest it. I'm just simply going to put up with it, but... But I felt as though we were ignored. Yeah, but there's nothing I could do about it (Kevin IV1).

This sense of futility is deemed by Freire to be the outcome of the banking model of education that many participants experienced in secondary school which “directly or indirectly reinforces men's fatalistic perception of their situation” (Freire, 2005, p.85). Through a lack of action, Kevin demonstrates that he withdrew from challenging the imposed situation. However, this futility can be overcome through the process of praxis. Freire states that in order to overcome oppressive situations, one must “no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 2005, p.51). Though engaging in praxis, students come to realise that they can move beyond passive acceptance to a realm of empowerment where they can bring about change. While Kevin states in his first interview that he’s “not going to protest it [barriers]” and is “just simply going to put up with it” (Kevin IV1), by our second interview, Kevin has reflected on his situation and is taking action in attempt to change his outcomes: “I reapplied my CAO recently enough...I'm in a very inconvenient position with my CAO...because I didn't have inflated points⁵⁴. I tried speaking with a couple of TDs to see if they could do anything” (Kevin IV2). By our third interview, it is clear that Kevin has further reflected on the barriers which impede access to university and not only has he reflected, but instead devises a way to overcome restrictions and feelings of helplessness as he is determined to insist on the need for change:

It doesn't matter what background you have. There's no point picking people over the CAO and then picking the PLC options. That's just elitist...Like if you want to walk in off the street and if you can do the tests and you have the willingness to do it, let them do it...[otherwise] you've

⁵⁴ In 2020, the State Examinations Commission has applied post-marking adjustments to Leaving Certificate results as a response to pandemic disruption, resulting in a degree of grade inflation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023)

wasted 80 people, 80 willing nurses, which is, you know, nothing short of a crime to the country...I'm one of three people in my [university] course that came from PLC because there was only three spaces, which is pretty, pretty strange...I don't, I never understood that. I'm just, I'm going to keep talking about, complain about spaces in university, but I'm going to do that (Kevin IV3).

Conversion from passivity and inaction to reflection and action occurs frequently among participants in this research and is demonstrated in ways that are practical and achievable. For Freire, all consciousness ultimately leads to action rooted in reality: “It so happens that to every understanding, sooner or later an action corresponds. Once man perceives a challenge, understands it, and recognizes the possibilities of response, he acts” (Freire, 2013, p.42). Due to the stigma associated with FET, Owen acknowledges that people avoid mentioning that they were a student in FET: “that's why people don't say “I do a PLC course” and that's why they say “I'm going to college for my classes” ” (Owen IV1). However by the third interview, Owen has considered the impact of societal disadvantages and identifies ways to reduce this disadvantage through promoting FET:

OK. Firstly, if you come from like a disadvantaged place like Ballybrim, it [FET] gives you like a like UCD level lecturers but like a fraction of the costs. So then in Ballybrim, 5% of people have a degree. We can increase that in a way where people can be able to afford it. Like Further Ed should be shown everywhere (Owen IV3).

Freire argues that solutions “cannot be achieved in idealistic terms” and that individuals begin to “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire, 2005, p.49). Having experienced first-hand symbolic violence through derogatory comments from others in relation to his LCA studies, the experience in FET strengthens Owen’s conviction that his FET education has equal standing to other qualifications.

I still see, even when people my age that when I say I do a PLC course and I'm doing social studies, they always think I can't make it to University to do psychology or any doctorate degree. I was “no I chose this because this is what's gonna

help me. This is what I want to do". I want to help young people and get the degree I want and go through this process and then do a one year in a formal University (Owen IV2).

Smith and Duckworth (2022) propose that "the oppressed need consciously to become part of the resolution of injustices brought about through structural inequality and symbolic violence" (p.98). Having attended FET, participants were keen to challenge misconceptions of FET and to create an awareness of the value of FET, not only among their friends and family but also among the general public. In this way, participants worked towards reestablishing respect for themselves, for other FET students and for FET graduates. This act of correcting false assumptions can liberate participants from the stigma experienced and release them as victims of negative stereotypes. Where Owen was initially reluctant to mention his FET education, he now actively promotes FET in an attempt to educate the general public. He recalls a time when FET advertisements were displayed on public transport but passengers were unsure of what FET was:

I saw like the posters for CDETB.ie [FET]...I saw them on Luas and people are going "what is that?" I was like "oh I do that. I'm trying to become a social worker from them...and because of them [FET], I'm becoming a social worker...yeah, like we have nurses, we have social workers, we have psychologists, we have artists. We have everything from them [FET]...How about the next time you ask them [workers] what course they did". I would never see them [passengers] again but one...literally ran over [to me] and goes "the nurse who is helping my mother - she's level 5 in Social Care"...And then she went "thank you"...She thanks me for being in further ed (Owen IV3).

Participants became aware of their own biases and misinformation as a result of studying in Riverview College. Prior to attending FET, Irene held a dismissive view of FET, thinking it was only "for kids who didn't get into college, isn't it"? (Irene IV1). However, having studied at Riverview College, she realises that FET is underestimated and misunderstood and acknowledges her complicity in perpetuating this viewpoint: "I really didn't appreciate it [FET]. No, I think there probably is a stigma like that and I

was guilty of that as well” (Irene IV2). As a result of reflection, Irene changes her view of FET as an inferior education and becomes an advocate of FET. In this way, Irene demonstrates a change from “*Naïve transitivity*” (Freire, 2021, p.14) whereby she viewed FET in a simplistic and uninformed way to “*critical transitivity*” (Freire, 2021, p.15) as she subsequently acquires an in-depth understanding of FET so that she is able to problematise its challenges and effect solutions:

I've said it to so many people who I know are interested in different things...Some are interested in social care, in nursing, as mature students, in creative writing in all kinds of things, woodworking and I know one man who's really interested, and I think he's going to go for it in a couple of years when he retires (Irene IV2).

I've actually been messaging a friend I haven't seen for a while...and she has said she didn't know I was in college...and I said to her I'd highly recommend it. I said it's literally a whole new life and a new you as well. You know it's a different you (Irene IV3).

8.5 Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility

Freire proposes that all education is political and that education has the power to overcome societal inequalities through democratic learning. He states that: “Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in men, on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself” (Freire, 2013, pp.33-4). In this way, education can nurture a critical consciousness, whilst also motivating individuals to take action to achieve social justice and equality.

Social engagement was evident in participants’ willingness to pursue solutions by engaging with the general public, educational leaders and politicians. In doing so, participants sought to transform systemic societal structures, aligning with Freire’s view that critical transformation enables individuals to move from passive adaption to active social change:

And as those who have been completely marginalized are so radically transformed, they are no longer willing to be mere objects, responding to changes occurring around them; they are more likely to decide to take upon themselves the struggle to change the structures of society (Freire, 2005, p.33).

Rather than accept the status quo and be “mere objects” (Freire, 2005, p.33), participants acknowledged the inadequacies in the awareness of FET and identified solutions that could increase public recognition of FET:

I just think there isn't enough advertising on further education...They do a little bit on FETCH⁵⁵ courses and stuff, but I still don't think there's enough out there (Nora IV3).

I think something needs to be done or it needs to be promoted more as it just another step in education (Irene IV2).

I know it's harder for mature students in their 20s and 30s and 40s. They're working, but maybe are there part-time courses? I'm not even sure if there is part time for them (Irene IV2).

Freire advocates that through recognising causes of inequality and realising that they can have an impact and influence on society, students can change from that of powerless to powerful: “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (Freire, 2005, p.47).

Participants also became aware that there were inconsistencies with progression opportunities and advanced entry to degree programmes, highlighting the inequality that remains between FET and third level:

Riverview used to have agreement with IT Tallaght, IT Sligo and IT Waterford [for advanced entry]” (Owen IV3).

I'm being told, well I've done three years now in total [in post-secondary education] and you still have to start from day one [of a degree course] (Nora, IV3).

⁵⁵ FETCH refers to the Further Education and Training Course Hub - a website developed by SOLAS in conjunction with the ETBI and Further Education and Training providers to provide information on FET courses (Further Education and Training Course Hub, 2024)

The “transforming action” proposed by Freire (2005, p.47) is evident in the way that participants made efforts to overcome the lack of recognition for FET courses and decided to take action to change this situation. Disappointed at the limited possibilities to gain advanced entry from FET to a university degree, Nora met the Dean of Education in a Dublin university to raise this issue:

I was actually talking to the Dean of Education in University X, where I was at a meeting through my work placement and they were saying that before they retired, they're going to try to get better or easier access for further student education to get into third level (Nora IV3).

As Owen continued his studies in Riverview College for a second year, he also became aware of restrictions imposed on his ability to work in the social care sector as his FET qualification was no longer recognised by the sector's national regulatory body⁵⁶. As a result of this realisation, Owen became actively involved in seeking accreditation for his FET course, meeting with government officials, educational institutions and the regulatory body concerned, in an attempt to gain industry recognition for the diploma in addition to advanced entry to degrees in third level:

we're doing the Level 6 plus and it's QQI. We had a lot of head butting with [the regulatory body] and our certification in what we can and can't do. And then this year especially because like we're trying to get over [regulatory body] and be registered in other ways. All class reps, including me for the social care course, met with politicians to see if we could try to see can we improve it in the future because it used to happen before [regulatory body] certified courses. Riverview used to have agreement with University X, University Y and University Z [for advanced entry] (Owen IV3).

A further issue identified by Owen was the inequality of funding provided to universities compared to FET. To highlight this problem, he again met with political figures and is planning to meet with the head of FET to seek funding for his course:

⁵⁶ A regulatory body responsible for maintaining standards of professional conduct, competence, training and education in the social care sector

We met with TD representative of Sinn Féin⁵⁷ to discuss what, how could we improve the college [Riverview] in general, plus to see if we could...try to meet the head of Further Ed...and basically show him the difference between what the popular universities from the government get funding wise and equipment wise to what we get. Because the week prior we had an open day and they brought in, we got lended certain equipment that we didn't have throughout the year...But most equipment we actually didn't have (Owen IV3).

Freire states that “The more people participate in the process of their own education, the more the people participate in the process...the better the democracy” (Freire in Horton and Freire, 1990, p.145). Owen is a student on a social studies course in Riverview and as such, his interest in societal issues may be expected. However, Owen was not the only participant to engage with the political process in order to bring about change. As mentioned earlier, Kevin, who was a nursing student in Riverview College, also met with government representatives to challenge the unfairness of the CAO points system: “I tried speaking with a couple of TDs to see if they could do anything” (Kevin IV2). In fact Kevin is now studying a degree in International Relations and plans a career in the United Nations, an international organisation charged with promoting human rights and social justice on a global scale.

Further examples of engagement in democracy are provided through student participant in the college Student Council. Owen confirms that he was class representative for the Social Studies course. Naomi, Kevin and Nora, participants on Nursing and on Health and Therapy courses, were also representatives on the Student Council in Riverview College. The Student Council serves as a representative body for students, providing a platform to voice opinions, concerns and suggestions and work with students, staff and college management to drive improvements. Class representatives hold meetings throughout the year and work towards resolving issues with students, staff and management. They also sit on the Board of Management of the college. The Student Council bears resemblance to Freire’s “culture circles” (Freire,

⁵⁷ Sinn Féin is a political party in Ireland

2005, p.120), interactive dialogical groups where individuals are free to discuss issues and problems, the purpose of which is for “people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades” (Freire, 2005, p.124).

As a result of their studies in FET, participants increased their awareness of social injustices and cultivated a sense of social responsibility which motivated them to engage in community-orientated initiatives focussed on supporting people who faced inequalities and injustices in society. This gave rise to a sense of empowerment as participants realised their ability to make a difference, not only to their own lives but also to others through their work with the homeless, children with disabilities, refugees and migrants.

Freire states that “When cultural action, as a totalized and totalizing process, approaches an entire community...the former leaders grow along with everyone else, or they are replaced by new leaders who emerge as a result of the new social consciousness of the community” (Freire, 2005, p.143). Gemma was a student of Psychology in Riverview College who viewed her FET enrolment as a means to gain access to university and become a psychologist. As part of the work experience module in Riverview College, Gemma worked with a voluntary food provision charity for the homeless. By our third interview, not only does Gemma still volunteer with this organisation but she has changed her career direction from becoming a psychologist to now being employed on a full-time basis as a Support Worker in the Homeless Emergency Services. Gemma strongly believes that the work experience module was the motivation for the change in her career aspirations as it opened up her understanding of social issues:

I think it has to do definitely with the work experience. Because, I mean, I think that was the trigger...During the certification in Riverview, my work experience was with homeless people. And I kept volunteering throughout [and] after the course...I gained experience with homeless in the homeless area and this year said, well maybe why don't I find

a job as a support worker within homeless services? I think doing a level 5 and having work experience...it gives you an advantage and not only of knowledge, but also placement in the community (Gemma IV3).

In a similar way, Nora also conducted voluntary work for a community group in a disadvantaged area of Dublin as part of her work experience module in Riverview College. Nora thoroughly enjoyed this work and felt it gave her a sense of purpose and accomplishment as well as an understanding of the societal issues faced by those living in the area. By the time of our third interview, Nora is volunteering as an ESOL⁵⁸ Teacher in a local library:

I have met a lot more contacts in the social community and like social community and developments and I have a lot more skills. I have, I think a lot more, how would I say it, confidence in myself... if somebody said that to me two years ago, I'd have went "Oh my God, maybe I shouldn't be teaching beginner's English. Oh, I'm not educated enough. No, they're right". But now I'm like "no, I can do it"...For somebody like who hated primary school, hated secondary school, didn't had any interest in going to university or college, look at me now (Nora IV3).

This ESOL work is not simply about teaching linguistic skills but it is also about enabling individuals to engage in a full and inclusive society and thus bears a parallel to Freire's literacy work with Brazilian farmers which enabled them to participate and vote in democracy, a right which they were previously denied⁵⁹. Although Nora finds the work demanding, she also finds it profoundly rewarding as it provides her with the opportunity to positively impact the lives of others. Consequently, Nora decided to alter her career pathway and is now planning to complete a degree in Community Development in order to work with community organisations: "I just want to get out, finish my education and do really what I want to do in the community. You know, I'm doing it for free now...I want to better myself as a person" (Nora IV3). Owen has also

⁵⁸ ESOL: English for Speakers of Other Languages

⁵⁹ "Only with the 1985 elections did the illiterate win their suffrage. They might vote if they wished: they were not, however, obliged to do so, as were all literate citizens of Brazil, native or naturalized, from the age of eighteen" (Freire, 2021, p.234)

been volunteering in a local community centre and has applied for full-time position working with children with disabilities in the near future:

I never thought I would be great at like helping kids like learn things. Turns out, I am especially, especially when you have the crazy ones, like the ones that like everyone thinks it's weird. I got along great with them (Owen IV3).

8.6 Educational Emancipation

As evidenced in Chapter 5, many participants encountered oppressive experiences in secondary school where they felt dehumanised as objects of the education system, having little power or control. However, Freire emphasises that education can bring about humanisation, helping individuals to take ownership for their lives. In this way, education “is the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination” (Freire, 2005, p.81). This research demonstrates that through their engagement in FET, participants experienced education as a healing process, leading to a sense of educational emancipation:

My fire has been lit...It's my little candle that I keep as I go through my cave and I know where I've come from. I know the way out and I don't know where I'm going, but I don't care because I have my candle...It doesn't matter how dark it is. My candle will still be there and that's something that you don't get if you go from CAO straight into university. You don't (Kevin IV3).

Lange et al. (2015) notes that most low-income learners are wounded from their previous participation in school which leaves them reluctant to continue or return to education. Despite being wounded from previous educational experience, this research shows a noticeable and positive difference in the emotions of participants throughout their time in Riverview College. The secondary school leavers felt that they “ended up in Riverview” (Naomi IV1) as a last resort due to barriers accessing third level. Naomi believed that school is “Not the best experience of anyone's life” (Naomi IV1). However, in the second interview, Naomi enthusiastically expresses how much she enjoys FET: “it [Riverview] was just, it was such a good experience and I loved

actually going up to the college. I loved the lecturers and the teachers” (Naomi IV2). Naomi’s view of education completely shifts from one where she only thought of “bad times” (Naomi IV2) to a more favourable positive focus on education: “I do think of happy times now when I think of education now. I think so, because if you'd asked me a couple of years ago, like my whole experience of education would have just been like secondary school” (Naomi IV3). Naomi feels fortunate to have had the chance to study in an FET college and that it is not a last resort as she originally conceived, but is in fact the “perfect way” (Naomi IV3) to achieve your goals:

I would say that if you get the chance to do it, that you're actually lucky. And that it's not at all for if you don't succeed in doing what you want to do. It's actually like the perfect way to get there. And...you're not sure if something is for you, like you can try it. You can learn so much from that year...So I would just say that if someone had a problem, like a problem with PLC...I'd feel sorry for them because like they wouldn't get to experience it. And I think it was a really nice thing that I got to do. And I do feel quite, quite fortunate that I got to experience the PLC. Yeah (Naomi IV3).

Freire states that “dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors” (Freire, 2005, p.44). In this way, Freire shows that change is possible and that individuals can recover from oppressive past experiences. The participants in this study illustrate that recovery and restoration from wounds inflicted by the negative educational systems and structures is possible and that while these wounds may impact students for a sustained period of time, positive educational systems can heal students in a relatively short period of time. Less than one year after Naomi experienced stress, sadness and disappointment throughout all of secondary school, she is now overjoyed and jubilant as she recalls the day she received a university offer as a result of her course in FET: “And I was so happy. It makes me happy because it's where I want to be, college. Yeah and then opportunities as well” (Naomi IV3).

Kevin’s emotions and thoughts of further education have also changed since starting college at Riverview. Initially Kevin experienced a sense of shame enrolling in FET,

perceiving it as a necessity rather than a choice. Commenting on his opinion on further education at the start of his course, Kevin is quite measured on expressing his sentiments: “I have yet to be proven otherwise, or shown otherwise, but overall it's been pleasant” (Kevin IV1). Yet, by the end of his course in Riverview, Kevin outlines that FET has been a lifeline for him, providing him with hope and the possibility of a promising future that would otherwise seem bleak:

PLC's, I don't know what I would do if they did not exist, or what I'd be doing now...I really don't know what I'd be doing if I didn't have it [FET]...It's, it's an important part of the system and it does catch, it does give people an opportunity to better themselves and for people like me it does. It is a ledge that I can grab instead of falling all the way to unemployment and no future (Kevin IV2).

Instead of speaking about shame and the negative aspects of education, Kevin now displays positive emotions connected to school and education: “I liked Riverview. I liked it in Riverview...you know, I, I liked psychology, I liked anatomy, I liked all of that stuff. I enjoyed, I enjoyed it” (Kevin IV3). Kevin feels that FET has given him an advantage and that he is better off now than his peers who did not attend FET prior to university. FET has taught him a valuable life lesson that life is not about rushing to the end goal or “destination”:

I'm not racing to get my life...I take every day and I'm taking the day. And I think that's what further education gave me...I have the idea that I can take my time and I'm, I have a life outside of education... It's not the destination...but it's also not the filling of a bucket. It's the lighting of a fire. And I think, I think it's [FET's] absolutely incredible (Kevin IV3).

Intellectual violence in the form of bullying and intimidation, can inflict psychological, intellectual and institutional wounds on students (Lange et al., 2015). When asked in the first interview, Irene associated education with intimidation. This experience scarred Irene so deeply that she even found it hard to think about the times when she was in school: “Gosh, I can't oh...intimidation OK, from way back” (Irene IV1). However, Irene thoroughly enjoyed her experience in Riverview and has now transformed from someone who found it difficult to speak of education to someone who is:

looking forward to going back [to education]. I can't wait... I probably don't want it to end. Being educated is amazing. Getting education is amazing. Like it changes you so much. It makes you think in and see in a different way, you know, appreciate things and appreciate people in a different way (Irene IV3).

Lifelong learner Nora also expressed negative emotions surrounding school, stating that she: “hated primary school, hated secondary school, didn't had any interest in going to university or college” (Nora IV3). As a result of her experience in FET, Nora has grown to love learning and education: “I loved that there is such a variety of cultures in our class and like there's all different age groups...that's what I loved about this year, being in Riverview, the class...I love learning” (Nora IV3).

The educational healing that Nora experiences is evident as she now feels learning is an “addiction” (Nora IV3). After successfully completing her Level 5 QQI course in Health and Therapy, Nora continued her studies in Riverview and enrolled in the BTEC Higher National Diploma. By our third interview, Nora has successfully completed year one of this diploma, commenced two separate online courses in Receptionist Studies and Law and applied to study a degree. From one who hated school, Nora is now working voluntarily as an ESOL teacher and plans to gain qualifications as an educator:

I want to be here [in Riverview] if that makes any sense. Yeah, I want to learn. So give it to me. It's an addiction. I love it. I'm like, I don't think I could go a month now without getting online and doing something [in education]. I know I can't because I've actually signed up to do law. Now that's next week. It's only short course. I've actually signed up to do that...I love it...I wasn't ready for university leaving secondary [school] but I need it now. I enjoy it and I'm like looking for things to do... I'm in the buzz. That's the best way I can describe it. I'm in the buzz of learning (Nora IV3).

According to Freire, hope is “an ontological need” (Freire, 2021, p.17) but “we must take every care not to experience it in a mistaken form, and thereby allow it to slip toward hopelessness and despair” (Freire, 2021, p.17). While hopelessness is initially evident among some participants in their passivity and perceived inability to change

the system, FET provides participants with the hope of bypassing the institutional barriers and gaining entry to university: “hopefully I'll be able to get on to some kind of university course next year” (Naomi IV1).

Most participants enrolled in FET as a last resort because their pathways to their educational or career goals were unattainable. However, instead of limiting their options, FET gave participants the freedom to explore education in a supportive environment. Some individuals are concerned about the financial costs involved in education (Callender and Melis, 2022; Hudson, 2025), some may already have decided on their educational goals but were declined a place in university, while others may lack clarity or certainty on their options or desired objectives (James et al., 2021). FET provides a low-risk pathway for these learners to experience education, explore different disciplines and obtain a qualification within a relatively short period of time and a lower financial cost compared to university:

I still remember talking to classmates and very few people knew what they wanted to do for a living. So I think PLC...can show people that she does have strength there or a weakness here and they might go “you know I'm going to try this subject”...It [FET] just gives people options that way you know... the majority of GPs who begin to study medicine, say Trinity or UCD...they come from...quite affluent areas and I don't think that can just be a coincidence...That's why colleges of further education are wonderful because a lot of people get a start in life which they otherwise would be deprived of you know...So further education is, it's vital...to give people a fair footing (Nigel IV2).

Nigel's reason for choosing a Level 5 course is because he wants to study drama for the first time and he feels that enrolling in a further education course is: “A means to not to make a huge commitment to something, maybe to find out whether you're interested in something” (Nigel IV1), a sentiment echoed by Nora: “especially if you don't want to commit before your degree, you don't know how to call it, what the course is going to turn out like” (Nora IV1). Ciara highlights that FET benefits students who leave school at a young age who may not be ready or prepared for university or employment:

people want like a taster for a course to kind of decide...if you want to try your hand at acting and you're not sure it's what you want to do and you want to see what acting is like. It's a really good way to dip your toe in...Another reason is one of the kids in my course is 17. He has a year to fill before he's 18 and he thought this a really good opportunity...these courses are a really good opportunity to find a stepping stone in a really nice way (Ciara IV1).

Research highlights that students may lack confidence about their academic abilities or subject interest which deters them from enrolling in education (Dynarski et al., 2021; Weissman, 2022). FET acts as a transitional space between secondary education and third level allowing students to gain skills, knowledge and an insight into different course options in a supportive environment, enabling them to make informed educational choices for the future:

it's something everyone should do, like go to for their education because it bridges the gap between secondary and third level really, really nicely. And it also just gives you an option to like kind of go, "do I really want to do this for the next X amount of years of my life? Do I really wanna be sitting in a law class for the next 10 years or do I really, wanna, like, do this?" (Ciara IV3).

However, the reduced time and financial commitment required in FET may lead some students to withdraw from FET which can negatively impact the morale and motivation of the remaining students (Steenberghs et al., 2021). Furthermore, student withdrawal leads to reduced retention metrics which impact FET college funding as indicated in the Outcomes Based Funding Model (SOLAS, 2022b). Low student attendance was observed at some of the classes: "I know numbers are down in the attendance in the classes" (Irene IV1). Although this was in part due to the online learning environment and lower student motivation during the global pandemic, participants reported that low attendance by class members reduced the level of engagement and interaction within the class.

FET provides an opportunity for students to advance their education and qualifications up to QQI Level 6 within the FET college environment. Some FET programmes at Level 6 award are considered for advanced entry into the second year of degree programme or as part of tertiary degrees (National Tertiary Office, 2025a):

So a part of me is like having a backup plan that if I was not to get into University A next year, to do a Level 6 [in FET]. I really enjoy it and then use that [Level 6] for advanced entry into maybe University B (Ciara IV2).

Kevin views the time in FET to be a beneficial way to prepare students for university. However, even if students don't gain access to third level, he feels there is still a benefit as it allows students to continually progress in their educational journey:

If you have any doubt in your ability to do a subject, then the practical pre-preparedness further education gives you could be a real confidence booster...And if not, it's always good. It's a good place to fall back on if you don't reach your goals the first time. It's a good landing pad 'cause you can launch yourself from there and not just from where you were at the end of secondary education, but one step higher and maybe you'll get it the next time (Kevin IV1).

Advanced entry opportunities⁶⁰ offer many benefits to students, including continued progression through the NFQ, additional time in the FET environment to prepare for university and a reduction in the overall costs of education for the student as they will avoid the university costs associated with the first year of a degree. However, advanced entry is not standardised and varies from institution to institution depending on a number of factors including the FET college, the FET programme, the university and the degree course being applied for. This causes confusion and frustration among students:

I rang her [registrar] and she said it makes no difference if you do your diploma, they won't take it. I'll have to start from day one...Like University C won't take me till next year and I have to do the four years. So I said no, I'm not doing another four years (Nora IV3).

⁶⁰ Advanced entry is where there is a recognition of prior learning (RPL) achievements by students and where these students may be eligible to bypass year one of a degree and gain direct entry to the second year of a university degree programme (Higher Education Authority, 2023b).

8.7 Vocational Emancipation

Freire was critical of the banking concept of education, where learning is reduced to the sole purpose of education directed at specific outcomes, such as employment, as opposed to viewing learning as a process of inquiry (Freire, 2005). However, Freire also acknowledged that employment can contribute to people's sense of dignity and empowerment:

"Tomorrow," said a street-sweeper in Brasilia, "I'm going to go to work with my head high." He had discovered the value of his person. "I know now that I am cultured," an elderly peasant said emphatically. And when he was asked how it was that now he knew himself to be cultured, he answered with the same emphasis, "Because I work, and working, I transform the world" (Freire, 2013, p.44-45).

Further education qualifications are widely recognised and accepted in vocational sectors, enabling students to obtain employment or volunteer as a result of these credentials: "the community need very specific FETAC levels [QQI qualifications]. Having this certification allows me to be a support worker or a health care assistant" (Gemma IV2). Owen also notes the high employability resulting from a QQI Level 5 qualification: "Most, most people I spoke to had done the Level 5 and then got jobs" (Owen IV1).

The aim of FET is not only to assist students to access higher education, but also to "facilitate immediate entry to careers and employment" (SOLAS, 2020a, p.38). The development of work-related skills throughout the course, enables students to be more proficient in the working environment and provides them with more confidence and the ability to work successfully. Following her course in Riverview, Brenda obtained a full-time position in childcare which she believes she wouldn't have obtained without the knowledge and qualification she gained during the Level 5 Childcare course:

It made me progress at work, yeah...I'm very happy after doing that course. And I feel like I achieved something like finishing the course for me like was already an achievement. And then getting work. Because if I wouldn't have done the

course, I, I wouldn't get my job. So I kind am grateful for all I've learned (Brenda IV3).

The composition of further education courses provides information on different career pathways as well as skills and guidance for working in the sector. FET provided an opportunity for participants to gain an insight into the vocational environment and to understand the different skills and qualifications needed for different roles and positions. This knowledge equips participants to become the “owner of one’s own labor” (Freire, 2005, p.183). When Gemma first came to Ireland, she had no understanding of the career, paths, vocational avenues and criteria required to gain employment in different sectors. Gemma found that the course in Riverview College expanded her knowledge of career requirements and options:

in the beginning I struggled to understand the different levels. What was level 5, what was level 6...What the jobs are requiring? what level do I have to do to be able to work as a social worker...I had a bit of struggle understanding that (Gemma IV1).

Nora believes that her course in Riverview has helped her to understand the requirements of different professional roles and has helped her make informed and realistic decisions on a change in her career and future direction:

If I didn't go to Riverview, I'd be afraid to think what my life would be like...because I think after working 25 years in the same place and doing nothing, I don't think I would have been in a great headspace. Riverview gave me, I think, structure. It got me into education. It got me into thinking, oh, what do I really, really want, you know...I wasn't thinking realistically, you know. I think Riverview definitely taught me what's out there (Nora IV3).

Illeris (2014a) states that the practice of alternating theoretical study with periods of professional practice allows students to gain a deeper understanding through the application of theory to practical contexts and vice versa. Further education post-leaving certificate courses offer “a mixture of practical work, academic work and work experience” (Education and Training Boards Ireland, 2026). Work Experience provides planned experiential learning and is a compulsory module on all QQI courses

in Riverview College, the aim of which is to immerse students into the vocational aspect of the discipline that they are studying. Naomi and Owen believed that their course helped them approach work with more confidence:

having the whole work experience module...like you know, doing things even in communications as well. Like doing CV and doing the interviews...those are skills that I think are just really good, really helpful to have...And yeah, I think a lot of the content of the course like, you would just do it and then afterwards you actually would be able to apply it to a situation where you, that you could get in work, like in a hospital or like a health care setting (Naomi IV2).

Through engaging in work experience, participants felt they were a position to meet new people, create professional contacts and increase their social networks. Ciara expanded her social and professional network as a result of her time in Riverview College:

I have met a lot more contacts in the social community and like social community and developments and I have a lot more skills...I think education is great to get you jobs you need because you need a certain form of education (Ciara IV3).

When Nora joined Riverview College, she was extremely anxious and concerned about her lack of computer skills. However, by the second interview, there was a dramatic improvement in Nora's skills in this area as she confirms: "Definitely like my computer skills is improved. I think PowerPoint and things like that. So I've learned a lot and I've learned, I got more knowledge" (Nora IV2). Nora has changed from a learner who feared technology and felt restricted in her future options, to someone who feels digitally competent. This newfound digital competency has created possibilities for Nora, enabling her to feel confident using computers and to search for employment vacancies and courses that she could complete online whilst being at home to assist her dependent parents:

My computer skills have got a lot better...Like I couldn't do nothing like that when I started Riverview in 2020. Nothing. You know I feel, like the confidence now if I was applying for a [job] I can say yes, I've done this (Nora IV3).

As a result of the qualifications and skills gained through their course in further education, students are in a better position to access higher income employment, representing a way to equalise the opportunity of social mobility and release the constraints of social reproduction (Whelan and Layte, 2004). If Owen did not complete his course in further education, he strongly believes that his earning potential and employment choices would be limited to apprenticeships. Freire argues that employment can help people to see themselves as subjects who can shape the world, now viewing themselves “as transformers of reality (previously a mysterious entity) through their creative labor. They discover that—as people—they can no longer continue to be “things” possessed by others” (Freire, 2005, p.174). Owen’s outlook on life and on his prospects have changed greatly as he feels that he is no longer limited in what he can do in life. When asked what he thinks he’d be doing now if he hadn’t gone to Riverview, he responds:

Probably like my dad, like just going to the job, just going to work over there, either going to the factory or site, just doing an apprenticeship...But now like I have like a, a degree coming. I'm going “Oh my God, I can see so much. I can help. I can do so much. I can help people”. I don't know what to do next. I have too many options (Owen IV3).

Career and education uncertainty can have a substantial negative effect on self-confidence and can affect psychological well-being, leading to stress and anxiety (Campagna and Curtis, 2007; Kwok, 2018). Attending FET afforded participants the freedom to evaluate different career trajectories and to identify pathways best aligned with their interests and motivations, thus alleviating these negative effects. In this way, participants are empowered to take control of their careers: “for a person to be in the world of work is to be totally dependent, insecure, and permanently threatened— if their work does not belong to them—the person cannot be fulfilled” (Freire, 2005, p.145):

I suppose one thing I wanted was to really solidify in my mind that nursing was what I really wanted to do, that it was for me. Within the first few weeks I knew it was the perfect decision and that it made me know that that this was 100% the way that I was going to go (Naomi IV1).

I done work placement in a nursing home and I said “Oh my God”...I fainted because it was, it was so understaffed. You were constantly going, going, going, going like for 12 hours. And I said, “Oh no”. And then when I had (started in the Dublin community group), I knew straight away that's what I wanted (Nora IV3).

Participants had the freedom to change their interests as a result of the experience and knowledge gained through work placement. While Ciara thoroughly enjoyed her theatre studies course, insight gained through the course enabled Ciara to realise “that I don't want to be an actor” (Ciara IV2). Similarly, while Gemma initially planned to go to university to become a psychologist, by the second interview, Gemma’s interests changed to social care and she has decided to postpone her university ambitions and work in the field instead:

But throughout course, and throughout my work placement, I've just realised that my interest now is in groups and dynamics of groups...My interests moved to another area which is the social aspect...that's why I decided so this year. I'll take it easy work a little bit more and then see what happens (Gemma IV2).

While some individuals may feel tied to work with little autonomy, FET provides a way for them to take ownership of their career path by enabling them to learn new skills and change careers. Freire contends that:

Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people...no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom (Freire, 2005, p.49).

Reflecting on her achievements since joining Riverview College, Irene discusses the freedom she feels as a result of her FET education: “It's like I got rid of the boring work I hated and life started proper. Life started proper when I retired” (Irene IV3). Ciara discusses her previous employment which impacted her health as a result of work-related stress:

Words cannot describe my last job and how horrifically awful it was. We were like micromanaged and bullied, overworked and underpaid and stressed every single day. I got gastritis from it I was so stressed, my body went into a total inability to work (Ciara IV1).

With a few months of starting her course in Riverview, there is a clear difference in how Ciara feels: “I love it [the course]...I’m really enjoying it, I’m really loving it, everything about has been pretty amazing, our teachers are unreal” (Ciara IV1). Following her FET course, Ciara commenced a degree in Art and Design at university and feels that her health has improved and that her future is more optimistic. If Ciara hadn’t attended Riverview, she feels she would be on a never-ending cycle of work, unable to progress due to lack of a degree:

I probably would have gotten a job and I probably then would have just been like, “oh, I can't afford to go back to college because I'm now working” just be back into a circle of life. I can't get a job that I'd like because I don't have a degree. And then I would have started a circle again. So yeah, I think it gave me a really nice perspective that like, I could do it (Ciara IV3).

The opportunity to change careers allows individuals to gain back control of their lives (Brazier et al., 2024). Where individuals once felt confined to their vocation, they feel a sense of freedom to learn new skills and/or change careers. Kevin recommends FET to his friends as a way to learn new things and gain new skills, even if they have already gone to university: “they can retrain. They can go back and they can learn something new” (Kevin IV2). Being in a position to embark on a career changes can be life-changing and liberatory, providing a renewed sense of purpose (Vogelsang et al., 2018). Irene is recently retired having followed a life-long career in an administrative role in the civil service. However, as a result of her course in Riverview College, she is now a university student studying art and design, and can avail of expanded opportunities through selling her art and running art classes:

I think people are interested in what I do and I'm kind of thinking about, like some of the younger students go to market and sell their stuff...like they go to markets in the city and Dublin and advertise it and they sell their stuff or they

do commissions... there's no reason why in the future if I knew people who really wanted to try it that we could set up a little thing around the kitchen table even or something like that...so yeah, I'm more open to doing that...there is potential in the future (Irene IV3).

8.8 Personal Emancipation

Freire states that “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming” (Freire, 2005, p.84). While the vast majority of participants initially entered Riverview College with low self-confidence and self-belief, their stories suggest an emerging sense of freedom and liberation as a result of increased self-confidence.

Nora had been out of education for twenty-six years and felt restricted, living at home and caring for her elderly parents with ill-health and impaired mobility. However, her success in Riverview provides a significant sense of achievement and makes her “feel better” (Nora IV3) in herself: “I've been in Riverview for two years. I've done X, Y and Z. You know, I just feel better myself.” (Nora IV3). Kevin who displayed sentiments of shame surrounding his education, now shows pride in his results and accomplishments in FET: “I have those results pinned to the wall behind me. I got out of the 9 subjects, I got 8 distinctions and one merit” (Kevin IV3). Owen had experienced feelings of inferiority as a result of his dyslexia, completing the LCA and then attending FET which was surrounded by stigma. However, FET helped Owen overcome the sense of inadequacies:

I literally went from never go on to college, to maybe go on to archaeology to Yeah, I will help people for the rest of my life. I can definitely do what I can do... I certainly use my brain and I've been going “You can do stuff. You got this” (Owen IV3).

When Naomi first came to Riverview, she displayed a sense of powerlessness during our first interview with regard to her experiences secondary school, the LCE and the CAO process. In our second interview, Naomi states that her course helped her to “put [herself] out there more” (Naomi IV2). By the third interview, Naomi highlights

a change from feeling powerless to feeling driven and determined as a result of attending FET:

I think I do feel like I'm more prepared for the world ...I don't think I'd be as driven... I probably wouldn't be as determined because when I made that decision to do the PLC and not just do something for the sake of it that I wasn't 100% you interested in...So I think, yeah, it's more I've shown myself that I am driven and I don't think I would maybe be like that if I hadn't done it [FET] (Naomi IV3).

Naomi who was unable to go to university due to the barriers of the CAO, successfully completed her Level 5 QQI Nursing course in Riverview and subsequently received a university offer of a place on a Nursing degree. Naomi describes the happiness she felt the day she received the offer:

Like I couldn't even put into words. I was feeling like it was so surreal and it was, it felt real full circle and I was, I did feel so, so lucky. Like on that day, like I'll never forget it. Everyone wishing me luck and like, you know, like everyone also sharing that happiness for me as well (Naomi IV3).

Shortly after commencing her course in Riverview College, Irene noticed an increased self-confidence and associated benefits: “It’s [FET’s] giving me the confidence to go ahead and try new things. I think it definitely...it will open up possibilities” (Irene IV1). By the second interview, Irene has noticed that increased confidence is visible to those around her and has influenced how others, including how her family members, perceive her:

So OK. Better confidence generally...I can see it reflecting in my everyday sort of contacts for other people. I can see my own kids are looking at me differently now. I'm not just “Mammy ah do you hear her, she's embarrassing”...I can see a bit more respect do you know?...I can see my grandkids coming up to me showing me what they're drawing and want to draw with me and they think I'm an expert now (Irene IV2).

This confidence continues to grow as expressed by Irene during our third interview: “I feel better about me...I feel in social situations, I feel more confident when I’m talking to strangers...just in myself, I feel more worthy I suppose is, that is what I feel” (Irene

IV3). Comparing herself to the person she is now versus how she viewed herself before she started in Riverview, she believes that: “I don't feel a need to put myself down...I'm kind of really proud of myself. Which is another thing I never would have said before. You're allowed to be proud of yourself” (Irene IV3). Now studying a degree university, Irene is also looking forward to a trip to Italy with her friends from university, considering studying abroad as part of the university Erasmus programme in university, and entering national art competitions. Without having gone to Riverview College, Irene doesn't believe she would be doing any of the things she is doing now:

I would not [have done any of these things], because I wouldn't have had the confidence. I wouldn't have known I could do it. So Riverview gave me that, you know, it. It gave me the confidence to know that I could do it (Irene IV3).

Nora hadn't spoken to her brother for a number of years but when they recently reconnected, she told her brother that she was now teaching English to speakers of other languages. She recalls how shocked and surprised her brother was as he didn't think that was possible given Nora's previous lack of education and her strong “Dublin accent” (Nora IV3). Nora discusses the change she has undergone in how she handles such questions and highlights her confidence in facing such doubts, not only from others but also from herself:

You know, usually if somebody said that to me two years ago, I'd have went “Oh my God, maybe I shouldn't be teaching beginner's English. Oh, I'm not educated enough. No, they're right”. But now I'm like “no, I can, I can do it and fair play”...I do my own little class planning sheets so I have all my material so I'd be like, “I can do it!” ...And like if you said that to two years ago, I'd be like, “I could teach? I can barely speak!” (Nora IV3)

While Freire acknowledges that education should not be reduced to “entertainment” (Horton and Freire, 1990, p.171), he finds it difficult to “understand a school that makes children sad about going to school” (Horton and Freire, 1990, p.172). Noddings (2003) advocates that the ultimate aim of education should be happiness, both “personal and collective happiness” (p.1). Participants who previously associated education with negative connotations, revealed a profound transformations of their emotions as a

result of their experience in Riverview College. Secondary school leavers, Kevin and Naomi associated education with sentiments of shame, sadness, disappointment and frustration due to their secondary school experiences. As a result of her course in Riverview, Naomi was accepted into university. Naomi who, prior to coming to Riverview associated school and education as “Not the best experience of anyone's life” (Naomi IV1), now feels: “very lucky... pure excitement, like pure happiness. And I was so happy. It makes me happy because it's where I want to be, college” (Naomi IV3).

Instead of speaking about shame and the negative aspects of education, Kevin now displays positive emotions connected to school and education. In his third interview, he mentions the word ‘happy’ on thirteen different occasions and feels that he is better off now than his peers due to the experience he has had in Riverview College. Kevin feels that: “there’s a lot more of a psychological aspect to it [FET] not just skills, but people being happy” (Kevin IV3) and that FET has taught him a valuable life lessons:

I feel like I feel like I'm the tortoise to the hare. I feel like I'm, I'm actually, I'm in a better place had I kept pace with them [friends who went to university]. I'm happier now than I would have been if I had, if I, and I wouldn't trade it (Kevin IV3).

Lifelong learner Brenda, who only moved to Ireland in the months prior to studying at Riverview College, found that her achievements and results from college contributed to her happiness, stating she is:

Delighted. Yeah, yeah, [course results were] more or less expected...very happy. Very happy...Like all that sitting in front of the computer for so many hours, All that is paying off. Yeah, I was very, very happy...I learned a lot like working in a team, it made me progress, yeah, yeah at work, yeah. I'm, yeah, I'm very happy after doing that course (Brenda IV3).

Naomi echoes this happiness as a result of her accomplishments in Riverview College:

I'm still happy with the things I have planned. Yeah. Yeah, really, really happy. That was another really good day as well [receiving her course results from Riverview]. Because I remember being in work and one of the girls

from Riverview texting me saying that she had gotten her results. And like, I was sitting there and I was like, “Oh my God, they're literally at home, like in a letter”. And I had to wait all day then to get them. And I was so happy with those. Like I got everything that I needed (Naomi IV3).

As evidenced in Chapter 6, the supportive environment in Riverview played a significant role in the shift of participants’ emotions regarding education. Ciara believes that teachers in Riverview care strongly about the happiness and wellbeing of students: “I do think they care. I think Teacher Z really cares, like when she cries at every production and she wants to make sure we're happy” (Ciara IV2). Nigel also highlights how teachers showed their care for student’s wellbeing: “sometimes staff would identify, like I remember Teacher X...she'd identify something in me, she'd see in me you know, that I was struggling” (Nigel IV3). Kevin feels that if all teachers were like the teachers in Riverview College, that society would benefit as a result of increased happiness and productivity among people:

if every school was like Riverview...if you had teachers like that everywhere, then you'd be pumping out happy people. Like people would come off the education assembly line, happy, willing to work, not only willing to work, but willing to work well, and then still have a passion for life outside of work. They have the passion they have for life. And they're just happy. That should be how people come out of education (Kevin IV3).

"Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming...it affirms women and men as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead” (Freire, 2005, p.84). The supportive environment of FET can provide liberation from identifying as an individual with social issues, to someone who is successfully reintegrating into society. Nigel came from a place of emotional and physical violence, where his main focus was on survival. For Nigel, Riverview College offered respite from the burden of life challenges and helped re-establish his identity among others where his past was not a defining feature.

for me personally, without further education, as it turns out like I look at the four walls in the hostel 24 hours a day and it's a tough environment as it is. So it's given me a

tremendous opportunity. So I would say, for me it is vital, essential, you know. I want to hold on to this and do the best I can on any given on a daily basis (Nigel IV1).

it's [FET] given me a sense of purpose, a willingness to adapt, you know, to try new things as well. And to kind of let go of the past, realise that there is still a future there. And despite my past, you know to realise that you know dreams or... ambitions...It also takes me away from my problems as well in many ways, because a lot of my personal problems have nothing to do with college or nothing to do with, you know, what I'm studying, you know? (Nigel IV3).

Nigel notes the sense of freedom he gains from attending FET: “I’m getting great experience and I enjoy it...I’m doing something enjoying...I feel like there's a lot of freedom with it” (Nigel IV2). At the time of the first interview, Nigel was living in supported accommodation, feeling restricted in terms of his living situation and his opportunities for the future. Nigel feels FET liberated him from identifying as an individual with social issues, to someone who is successfully reintegrating into society. By the third interview, Nigel has just moved into an independent apartment and is taking increased ownership and control of the day-to-day management of his life. He plans to return to Riverview College to complete his course and this gives him a sense of purpose and direction:

[at Riverview] there's a lot of freedom involved...There's so much choice and there's so much to explore....[Riverview] furthers a kind of self-belief as to increase feelings of self-worth, you know and opportunity. So yeah, purpose as well...seeing a future for myself not just in terms of a career but...how to support it instead of always looking backwards...you have the ability to have something to feel motivated to go forward with. So I think opportunity is probably the biggest, biggest one (Nigel IV3).

Nigel's experience highlights the importance of recognising how educational participation is shaped by intersecting structural disadvantage, including housing precarity, age, social exclusion and difficult life circumstances. In this context FET functioned not only as an educational environment, but as a stabilising emancipatory social space away from his personal and social challenges.

FET created opportunities that altered Owen's sense of identity and the way others perceived him. He is no longer positioned through past limitations of his dyslexia and disadvantage but through new roles and achievements: "I'm like "I'm training to become a social worker"... I didn't expect this" (Owen IV3).

Freire insists that emancipation is not only essential for the oppressed, but also important that the oppressed emancipate the oppressor: "This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well" (Freire, 2005, p.44). While it could be easy for Nigel to blame society for his circumstances, Nigel absolves others on a personal and societal level from blame:

I think success comes easily to people who have more opportunities than others. You know? I mean success 'cause they just [have] more at their disposal, they've more to choose from. So absolutely so that's not their fault. You know. It's just that that's where they're at... It's a kind of class system (Nigel IV1).

I just really need to focus on [remaining healthy] and not doing it for anyone else, do it for me. And not kind of blaming other people or being a victim of this either (Nigel IV2).

Through educating people about FET, Owen helps those who once oppressed him to overcome their ignorance, which in turn empowers Owen through a sense of responsibility and explanatory abilities: "It's just that because you think of further ed and it's like PLC is not like a proper [qualification], they don't treat you with much respect. But like once, you can show like your knowledge, you have no problems" (Owen IV3). FET allowed participants to escape from the symbolic violence and lack of respect experienced as a result of their education to them previously. Respect was not a familiar experience for Owen: "with the LCA no one took us seriously" (Owen IV2). However, along with teachers and students from Riverview College, he met with organisations and politicians in order to educate them regarding FET and thus help politicians to identify ways to remove structural barriers. In doing so, mutual liberation

took place as Owen received what he regarded as genuine respect from the government and a sense that he helped the government to become aware of issues:

The politicians and them like, treating us with, respect, which was something I've never seen before...And then there's like, people who are like in control of like major government...going:

"So who are you?" [politician]
"I'm a social worker" [Owen].
"Great to meet you" [politician]

Like what? This does not usually happen people from Ballybrim (Owen IV3)

Participant reflections on the impact that FET has had on their lives are summarised in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1 Participants' Reflections on the Personal Emancipation Impact of FET



8.9 Conclusion

Many participants in this research enrolled in FET as their only means to overcome the structural constraints imposed by the educational system in Ireland. These participants entered Riverview with sentiments of powerlessness, inadequacy and resignation over their lack of personal control:

As the situation becomes the object of their cognition, the naïve or magical perception which produced their fatalism gives way to perception which is able to perceive itself even as it perceives reality, and can thus be critically objective about that reality (Freire, 2005, p.85).

However, this “fatalism” changed for participants once they began their studies in Riverview College. There, participants realised that change is possible and that life is not predetermined, but instead is “seen not as inexorable but as something that is constructed by people engaged together in life” (Freire, 1998, p.72). Participants state that FET “opened their eyes” (Irene IV2) which developed their critical consciousness and awareness. Rather than feeling dehumanised as many did in secondary school, in FET they now experienced humanisation where they were encouraged to take ownership and play an active role in their own education and in the world around them. As a result of this humanisation, participants reported an awakening and development of their critical consciousness through gaining a deeper understanding of their own situation, the situation of others and of society as a whole. Subsequently, many participants demonstrated praxis through reflecting on issues and challenges and identifying democratic ways to work towards resolving these problems.

Freire states that “human beings emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing can understand it and transform it with their labor” (Freire, 2005, p.125). This work and transformation are evident in the way that participants demonstrated civic engagement and social responsibility during and after their FET engagement through their involvement with community organisations, volunteering in charities and support groups, welcoming people who recently moved to Ireland and teaching them English language skills. Participants also met with politicians, academic leaders and regulatory

bodies to address the lack of recognition of FET courses within the Irish educational system and to raise awareness of the lack of funding provided to FET compared to that afforded to third level institutions. Several participants also became actively involved in Riverview College's Student Council, thereby representing their class groups and addressing issues with students, staff and FET senior college management. Through these activities, participants exemplify that "The fulfilment of humankind as human beings lies, then, in the fulfilment of the world" (Freire, 2005, p.145).

Where once participants felt restricted by the education barriers imposed on them, FET enabled participants to heal from wounds inflicted by previous educational experiences, which in turn enabled them to avail of future educational opportunities. FET gave participants the freedom to explore educational and vocational options and determine their interests and motivations in a low-risk setting, whilst also providing options to transition into careers which they found more fulfilling and enjoyable.

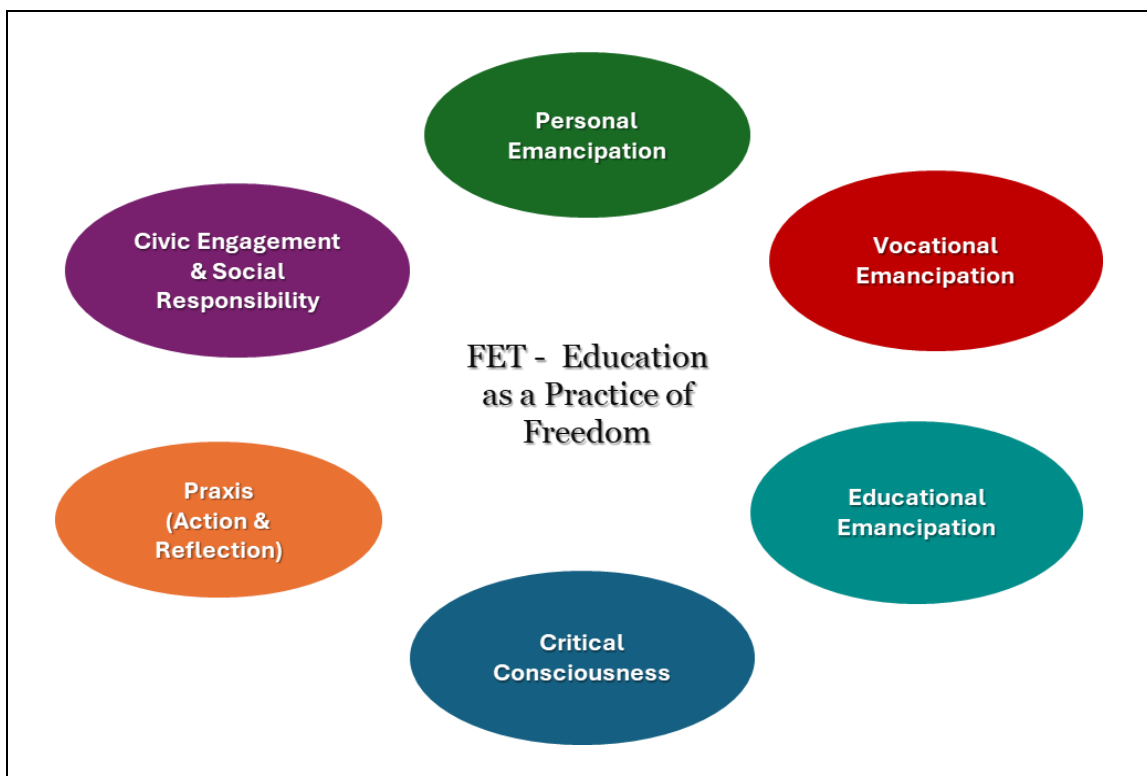
A sense of personal emancipation was also highlighted by participants due to a renewed sense of purpose in their goals and direction along with an enhanced self-confidence due to their achievements. Where participants expressed sentiments of shame and sadness upon enrolling in FET, they now expressed happiness as a result of their FET experience, which Noddings (2003) proposes is a fundamental outcome of education. Riverview College also provided a safe and supportive environment where participants were afforded the space and time to grow, shedding the burden of past experiences.

Participants did not experience emancipation in a singular manner. Instead, the form and meaning of emancipation differed according to participants' prior lived experiences, socio-economic backgrounds and their individual motivations for enrolling in FET. Emancipation was experienced in different ways through enhanced personal, academic and vocational confidence and an increased ability to navigate constraints and exercise agency and choice. These findings therefore suggest that emancipatory experiences are possible through FET engagement and that these

experiences are experienced in differentiated ways, shaped by the intersecting realities of participants' lives.

As a result of their experience in FET, participants no longer feel oppressed but instead have become “transformers of reality...no longer continue to be "things" possessed by others” (Freire, 2005, p.174). This chapter therefore demonstrates the capacity of FET to deliver an emancipatory experience as illustrated in Figure 8.2, leading to equity and autonomy which empowered participants to move beyond hardships and inequalities and enabling them to achieve a profound sense of freedom and liberation from personal, social and structural constraints.

Figure 8.2 FET - Education as a Practice of Freedom



Chapter 9. Conclusion and Discussion

9.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis was to gain an insight into the experiences of participants who enrolled in FET, to explore their reasons for enrolment, their experiences during their studies at FET and their outcomes post completion. This research was prompted by several motivations. Firstly, despite its long history spanning almost a century, the FET sector in Ireland has received comparatively less research attention than other areas of education (McGuinness et al., 2014; Grummell and Murray, 2015; Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017) particularly in relation to learners and their lived experiences. This paucity of literature and knowledge is reflected in the ambiguity among the general public regarding the nature, purpose and objectives of FET (Hearne et al., 2022). Furthermore, as a newly qualified teacher in the FET sector, I observed that various shifts occurred for students throughout their FET journey, yet there was insufficient research providing insight into these shifts and their underlying causes.

FET provides a wide range of educational and training opportunities to students, particularly those who are marginalised and face barriers in accessing education (SOLAS, 2022g; Sartori and Bloom, 2023). These barriers represent societal constraints aligning with Pierre Bourdieu's framework of social reproduction in which our lives and trajectories are shaped and conditioned by social hierarchies and structures of determinism. Bourdieu's tools of habitus, capital and field thus provide an important lens for understanding the structural barriers and enduring constraints experienced by participants. Societal constraints are also acknowledged by theorists, Paulo Freire and Jack Mezirow. However while there is general agreement among these theorists that dominant forces exist and influence the lives of individuals, Freire and Mezirow diverge from Bourdieu in their perspectives on agency and autonomy. Mezirow and Freire both advocate that transformative and emancipatory pedagogies, which are supportive, dialogical and reflexive, can help to navigate and transcend societal barriers

rather than reinforce them. This research applies Bourdieu's framework of social reproduction to the experiences of participants as a means to explore the effects of constraints on participants' educational choices prior to enrolment in FET. The experiences of participants were further interpreted through the application of Mezirow's transformative learning theory in conjunction with Freire's critical pedagogy, providing a transformative and emancipatory framework to explore the pedagogies practiced in an FET college, their significance for participants and the outcomes participants associated with these experiences.

In conducting this research, a longitudinal methodological approach was adopted whereby participants were interviewed at three separate time points; the first interview took place in the first term of their FET course in November/December 2020, the second interview took place at the end of their course in May/June 2021, with the third and final interview taking place one year later in May/June 2022. This longitudinal approach facilitated the observation of change in the participants' experiences over time and identified changes that took place as a direct consequence of their FET participation. An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was also used to facilitate a deep insight into the participants' perspectives, capturing the complexities of their emotions, perceptions and experiences. In this way, IPA provided a voice to the participants, a voice which participants indicated had frequently been denied to them in earlier educational environments.

This research aimed to address the paucity of insight into the lived experiences of students within an Irish FET context. It sought to address the limited understanding of how students' prior academic and life experiences shape their pathways into FET, how they experience teaching and learning within an FET environment and whether participation in FET can generate transformative or emancipatory outcomes that may challenge social reproduction.

The empirical chapters (Chapter 5-8) were organised around specific research questions, each of which is addressed in the concluding section of its respective chapter.

- RQ1. Why do students enrol in a college of FET and to what extent do prior academic and life experiences shape their educational decisions? (*Chapter 5*)
- RQ2. What are the lived experiences of participants with regard to the learning environment and pedagogical practices within an FET college? (*Chapter 6*)
- RQ3. To what extent does participation in Further Education and Training transform the experiences and lives of FET students? (*Chapter 7*)
- RQ4. To what extent does participation in Further Education and Training lead to emancipation in the experiences and lives of FET students? (*Chapter 8*)

This chapter now moves beyond those chapter level conclusions to adopt a thematic approach to synthesising and integrating the findings across the study. This section will consolidate key patterns and challenges that emerged from the participants' lived experiences prior to their enrolment in FET, during their participation in FET and in the year that followed. In this way, this chapter draws attention to the broader structural, societal and pedagogical processes that shape learners' journeys as a result of undertaking a course in FET in Ireland and will identify four key themes that emerged from this research:

- FET Enrolment: Influences, Motivations and Decision-Making (RQ1)
- Navigating Public Perception and Stigma Associated with FET (RQ1 and RQ2)
- Transformation Experiences: During and Beyond FET Engagement (RQ2 and RQ3)
- Enduring Emancipatory Experiences as a Result of FET Engagement (RQ2 and RQ4)

The following section will discuss these themes and their influence on social reproduction alongside policy implications and limitations. Collectively, these themes position FET as a vehicle that disrupts societal reproduction, empowering individuals

to transcend societal constraints through positive transformations in learner identity while providing pathways to personal, educational, vocational and societal emancipation.

9.2 FET Enrolment: Influences, Motivations and Decision-Making

This research demonstrates that attending FET was not a planned goal or primary aspiration of participants. For the majority of participants, FET served as an alternative pathway to HE due to barriers posed by institutional structures. For other participants, FET served as a low-cost alternative to meet personal fulfilment needs or to provide the skills necessary to facilitate a career change. For all participants, FET was viewed as a 'back-up option' or a contingency plan rather than a deliberate or intentional destination.

The primary goal for many participants was to attend university. However due to barriers posed by institutional structures such as the Irish secondary education system, the CAO or university entry requirements, participants found that their pathway to higher education was blocked, resulting in FET being their only avenue to gain access to university. All participants who attended secondary school in Ireland reported negative experiences which had long-lasting impacts on their lives, opportunities and life-decisions. Although almost fifty years have passed since Irene completed secondary school, she still finds it difficult to speak of school due to negative memories. In the Irish secondary education system, the demands for students to perform in a high-stakes exam and decide on their future life and career is a source of extreme stress and anxiety. This impacts 65,000 students annually who sit the LCE examination (Casey, 2025). Pedagogies employed in the Irish secondary school and the assessment structure of the LCE rely strongly on the "banking concept of education" (Freire, 2005, p.72). The emphasis on rote learning can present difficulties for students who have difficulty with high pressure memory-based assessments. This approach to education objectifies and dehumanises students, reducing them to mere receptors of information as opposed to active critical thinkers who are involved and engaged in their learning.

Every year there are nation-wide calls for changes to the LCE format with critics deeming the LCE unfit for purpose due to its singular high stakes focus which ignores diverse and inclusive educational needs (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2018; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2019; O'Brien, 2020). While changes are planned as a result of the Senior Cycle Redevelopment (2025-2029) (Department of Education, 2025), participants' lived experiences reveal the profound stress and enduring negative impacts of secondary education and assessment in Ireland. Ciara reported feeling completely overwhelmed by the pressures of the senior cycle, to the extent that she felt that she had lost her ability to learn, resulting in feelings of depression and a six month absence from school.

Calculated grades introduced as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic also acted as a constraint whereby students were unable to participate in their own LCE examination. Instead, teachers were responsible for assigning grades to students' work, thereby influencing educational outcomes outside the control of the student. Naomi felt disempowered as a result of this institutional change which she felt removed her agency and control in determining the outcomes of her secondary school education. The arbitrary CAO point system places further stress on students who struggle in the race to obtain a place on their desired course in university. Students completing the LCA are not recognised by the CAO and are therefore denied the option to attend university directly after secondary school. Owen was acutely aware that he would not be able to attend university directly after secondary school because he completed the LCA.

Further institutional barriers were also evident in the form of English language requirements imposed by universities on those whose first language is not English. In this way, university matriculation application criteria can act as a discriminatory process for many migrant learners to Ireland (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017). The experiences of participants demonstrate how these institutional structures in the Irish education system perpetuate social reproduction by creating barriers to those seeking to progress

their education, further marginalising those who are already marginalised. The Irish education system thus reveals a framework dominated by control mechanisms which make it exceptionally difficult for individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, those with diverse educational needs or those for whom English is not their first language, to overcome these deeply entrenched institutional barriers that work towards promoting social reproduction.

Secondary school leavers viewed FET as a necessary alternative pathway rather than an aspiration. Their enrolment in FET was marked by sentiments of shame, frustration and disappointment. Their perception of FET, framed through their experiences in secondary school, fuelled sentiments that FET was an inferior education. Conversely, lifelong learners embraced FET as an opportunity for self-development, personal fulfilment or career reinvention and they expressed a sense of relief and happiness upon enrolment in FET. However, the more mature participants in this group, who had been absent from education for several decades, also discussed fears relating to their lack of digital skills or advanced age compared to the average student population. These participants advocate that an introductory or familiarisation course could have been provided to alleviate some of these fears in advance of commencing their FET studies. This highlights an inadequacy in the SOLAS policies for FET which fail to address the digital literacy gap which face mature learners returning to education. Moreover, while SOLAS promotes FET as accessible to all individuals throughout their lives, SOLAS' lifelong learning metrics confine the age category of lifelong learners to 25-64 years (SOLAS, 2020e, p.3). This measurement policy reveals a contradiction through restricting the measurable age category to 64 years, disregarding learners beyond this age and excluding these learners from their targets. Mature learners like Irene, who was 67 years of age upon enrolment, may be deterred from educational participation as they perceive themselves to fall outside of the typical or considered age category.

Participant demographics varied greatly in terms of age, gender, nationality, prior educational achievement and socio-economic backgrounds. Despite a perception that

FET is for low achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Eichhorst et al, 2012; McGuinness et al., 2014; Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017), a perception also echoed by participants in this study, the findings of this research challenge this assumption. In this research, 56% of participants report circumstances of disadvantage while 44% of the participants indicate markers of affluency. Bourdieu writes: “‘Connaître, c’est naître avec’, to know is to be born with” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.67), highlighting that privilege confers innate advantages through one’s family circumstances. However, Kevin was *born into* a higher socio-economic environment which provided ample access to various forms of capital, yet Kevin was unable to overcome the barriers imposed by the CAO process to gain access to university. Other participants, Gemma and Brenda have backgrounds which appear to have access to cultural capital and symbolic capital through attaining degrees and having established employment histories. Yet, they felt they were unable to surpass the CAO and university admission rules. This research therefore demonstrates that possessing sufficient levels of capital does not guarantee immunity from the impediments imposed by institutional barriers. This research also finds that institutional constraints were found to have a greater impact on enrolment decisions than socio-economic positioning of participants or perceived academic abilities.

While participants possessed varying amounts of capital, economic capital was a common deficit amongst the vast majority of participants. The lack of economic capital played a key role in the enrolment decision of many participants. For lifelong learners, the low costs associated with the FET course featured strongly in their motivation to enrol in FET. This group of participants were more likely to rely on their own finances and were responsible for funding their own education and living expenses. When participants enrolled Riverview College, the course fees were approximately €450 per year, which is significantly lower than costs associated with private colleges or higher education. The shorter time commitment involved with an FET course compared to university was also a motivating factor for some participants as it enabled them to determine their interest in a discipline prior to committing to

more costly or longer term studies. The low fees of FET relative to higher education and the provision of the funding through the VTOS scheme are important supports to students, the absence of which would make it more difficult for some individuals to consider education.

A recent policy measure has removed FET course fees with effect from September 2024 (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2023) and this is a positive step which is likely to broaden access to FET for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the future. Nevertheless, while course fees have been abolished, registration fees and course materials still remain to be paid by applicants and these costs vary between courses and also between colleges. Furthermore, VTOS, a vital scheme which both Nora and Nigel depended on, is currently in the process of being discontinued. VTOS offers a full wrap-around support package beyond tuition fees, such as meal allowance, childcare and transport costs to eligible students (Citizens Information, 2025d) while other financial supports such as Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) operate as income support only (Citizens Information, 2025e). Learners feel that wrap-around supports play a crucial role in supporting disadvantaged learners (Meyler et al., 2024). According to the National Association of VTOS Co-ordinators (2021), the decision taken to discontinue VTOS was based on a report by an economic consultancy which admitted that it did not consider the benefits of social inclusion and education offered as a result of the VTOS scheme (Indecon, 2020). This decision to discontinue VTOS is likely to negatively impact vulnerable learners who rely on this support to engage in education and reflects a move by SOLAS towards a neoliberal policy orientation where value is framed in terms of economic return rather than in terms of benefits for vulnerable learners and society.

This research highlights the importance of informal and social networks, or social capital, in relation to participant decisions to enrol in FET. Information received through word-of-mouth and recommendations from friends and family who had previous experience of FET, not only helped participants to understand the courses and

services provided by FET, but also provided reassurance in their enrolment decisions. This form of knowledge which is gleaned through informal and social sources is also termed as “Hot knowledge” (Ozga and Jones, 2013, p.204) and was found to strongly influence the aims and aspirations of participants. Studies show that there is a strong reliance on hot knowledge by individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds and that hot knowledge increases students’ capacity for navigating education pathways, especially when sourced through valued and trustworthy sources (Hutchings, 2006; Smith L., 2011). In fact, it was only through informal and social networks that many participants became aware of FET. This emphasises the importance of social capital (Bourdieu, 1991), especially for individuals who have been out of education for some time, for those who did not attend secondary school in Ireland or those who have moved to Ireland from abroad.

On the other hand, this research found little evidence of the influence of “cold knowledge” on participants’ decision-making processes. Cold knowledge refers to knowledge obtained through more formal and official sources, such as university websites, prospectuses and government publications (Slack et al, 2014). While participants who came to FET soon after secondary school had access to information and documentation provided by their school guidance counselling service, all participants mentioned that there is a lack of information on FET in the public domain, with many participants calling for increased promotional efforts to better inform potential learners. This research therefore points to a significant knowledge gap that exists regarding FET’s role, purpose and provisions. Despite acknowledgement by SOLAS in its first FET strategy (SOLAS, 2014a) of a “lack of clarity on what comprises FET in Ireland” (SOLAS, 2014a, p.50) and the ongoing objective of SOLAS to “build a more powerful identity within communities and potential learners” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.8), this objective appears to remain unrealised. Inadequate access to cold knowledge disproportionately disadvantages isolated individuals and recent migrants, who may lack access to reliable and established social networks.

This persistent information gap hinders access and informed decision-making for individuals seeking access to education. The extensive and often confusing variety of programmes and services that FET offer throughout Ireland is likely to contribute to this information gap. Attempting to address the diverse needs of such varied cohorts across multiple domains risks creating a system that is broad in scope but lacking in identity. While SOLAS recognise that the number of “FET programmes is incredibly complex and confusing for the potential learner and undermines the credibility of FET as an option” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.52), this creates a real and serious issue for potential learners in terms of accessing information on educational options.

The lack of consistency in terminology used to describe the FET sector, in addition to the numerous changes that have occurred to the sector since its inception, is likely to exacerbate this issue. Recent policies to raise the profile of FET have led to a rebranding of some FET colleges and the creation of additional terms such as “CotF” or “College of the Future” (SOLAS, 2024c, p.17). However, this rebranding has been orchestrated in a localised fashion giving rise to an increased variation in college names and logos, which can further reduce the identifiability of FET colleges, locally and nationwide. The combined lack of identity and public awareness may lead to public confusion and diminished recognition of the FET sector, which not only constrains decision-making for learners, but also reinforces existing hierarchies between academic and vocational routes, ultimately undermining the sector’s capacity to act as a “driver of social inclusion and social mobility” (SOLAS, 2014a, p.5).

The findings also suggest that stigma is a social process that shapes identity, confidence and decision-making. In this study, stigma was felt most strongly by school leavers who were more likely to experience FET as a route associated with disadvantage rather than a valued educational choice. This demonstrates the importance of recognising that students may arrive in FET with negative learner identities, harmed from previous negative personal, social or educational experiences thus burdened by prior experiences of academic failure, stigma or reduced confidence. These findings have important implications for how FET enrolment is understood in policy and practice.

The participant narratives indicate that enrolling in FET is rarely due to free educational choice but that it is shaped by structural constraints and blocked pathways. This research indicates that FET is not solely an alternative pathway but that it is a responsive educational space for individuals whose opportunities have been blocked or constrained.

9.3 Navigating Public Perception and Stigma Associated with FET

A lack of knowledge and awareness is strongly associated with negative attitudes and increased stigma (He et al., 2024; Plackett et al., 2025). The lack of understanding about FET, its students and the services it provides can result in the cultivation of social elitism, leading to stigma surrounding the FET sector (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017) which can manifest in the form of symbolic violence. Smith and Duckworth (2022) highlight that symbolic violence is about "what is valued and what is de-valued in educational contexts" (p.162). The low value and inferiority associated with FET was seen to inflict symbolic violence on the secondary school leavers as a result of their decision to enrol in FET.

Due to a lack of information and understanding of FET, many misconceptions are perpetuated in the public sphere revealing a substantial mismatch between societal prejudicial perceptions of FET and the real experiences of the participants. FET is often misconstrued as a pathway for students who are unable to obtain sufficient points for university with the assumption that FET students are those who are incapable of making it to university (Ade-Ojo and Duckworth, 2019; Sartori and Bloom, 2023; Ní Chorcra et al., 2025). However, this research demonstrates that participants who study in FET are indeed capable of academic success in university. Almost half of the participants in this study (Ciara, Brenda, Gemma and Nigel) had successfully completed courses in university prior to their FET engagement, several of whom found the academic demands in FET to be more challenging than their previous experiences in university. Following their FET course, participants Naomi, Kevin, Ciara and Irene all completed their first year in university successfully. Kevin's first year university results

are in the top 10% of his class and he has been elected Class President to represent his class of 120 students at university. Moreover, participants who subsequently attended university after FET reported that the academic challenges and standard of education in FET were equivalent to the first semester of their university degree. This demonstrates that the academic demands of FET are comparable to those encountered in the initial semester of university and calls into question the deficit-based characterisations of FET as an inferior form of education.

Stigma has a controlling influence which works to maintain the status quo (Bourdieu, 1987). Attributing a higher social status to university while deeming further education as inferior is a mechanism seeking to perpetuate social reproduction. This stigma also devalues the symbolic capital of FET students as FET education and qualifications are viewed as inferior. Stigma is a form of misrecognition (Huda, 2021) which can significantly undermine a learner's identity, harming their self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (Fleming, 2022b). These effects were felt most deeply by the secondary school leavers, illustrating that stigma and misconceptions are potentially rooted in secondary school. All of the secondary school leavers reported a pervasive school discourse framing FET as an inferior option rather than a desired choice. FET was never portrayed as a first option in secondary school but always deemed as a last resort if students' plans did not materialise. While lifelong learners who were born and educated in Ireland reported an awareness of stigma, they did not report any personal or direct experiences of stigma, and lifelong learners who were born and educated overseas were completely unaware of negative perceptions of FET. An intersectional lens further enriches understanding of these differing experiences, suggesting that stigma was not encountered uniformly but was shaped by participants' social positioning, educational biographies and cultural contexts. For secondary school leavers, their proximity to secondary school participation and peer comparison appeared to intensify experiences of stigma, whereas mature learners and those educated outside Ireland appeared to be more distanced from these dominant narratives. This highlights how perceptions of FET are mediated through overlapping

dimensions of age, educational trajectory and migration background rather than experienced in a singular manner. The framing of FET as an inferior choice perpetuates educational inequality by reinforcing class-based hierarchies that limit social mobility and devalue non-university pathways for disadvantaged learners (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017; Smith and Duckworth, 2022).

Participant narratives demonstrated discomfort and challenges in naming or addressing their FET teachers. Participants interchangeably used the terms 'teachers' 'tutors' and 'instructor', but this terminology evokes secondary school dynamics reinforcing a sense of being left behind and lacking the ability to progress beyond secondary school where 'teacher' is the dominant term. This is another example of how FET students experience symbolic violence and was evident in participant narratives where their friends attending university discussed their 'professors' or 'lecturers', while participants used the terms 'teachers' or 'tutors', thus deepening the educational status divide.

Rami and O'Kelly (2021) note that articulating their roles and titles can also be a challenge for FET staff, further underscoring the lack of identity that is associated with the FET sector. As established, FET is frequently viewed as an inferior educational institution compared to university (O'Leary and Rami, 2017) with the "perception of FET as of low value" (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017, p.18). This inconsistency of terminology reinforces perceptions of FET as a lesser educational pathway compared to university. Participants also referred to the perceived assumption that teachers in FET lacked educational skills and qualifications. Similar assumptions are noted in the literature, often linked to historical issues of status, professional recognition and marginalisation of the FET sector (Gleeson and James, 2007; HEI FET Forum, 2021; Kavanagh et al, 2024). However, the FET teaching profession is highly regulated and since 2013, new teachers in FET must hold at minimum, a degree qualification, a recognised teaching qualification *and* registration with the Teaching Council (The Teaching Council, 2024). These assumptions further highlight the lack of knowledge and awareness that pervades within the public sphere and which negatively impacts

FET students who are perceived to have poor quality teachers and inferior teaching experiences. This lack of identity is further emphasised by the absence of a clearly defined place for FET within the Irish educational landscape is notable. While other sectors are clearly and routinely recognised as primary, secondary or third level education, FET lacks an equivalent, widely recognised designation. This marginal positioning is further illustrated by a forthcoming national education event described as the “only education event for all levels in Ireland”, while stating that it is an “event for pre-school, primary, secondary, 3rd level” (The National Education Show, 2026). The omission of FET from such representations underscores its limited visibility and recognition as a distinct educational sector in its own right.

While stigma and misconceptions significantly affected participants’ sentiments coming to FET, as a result of their participation in FET, participants demonstrated willingness to correct these misconceptions and to reduce the public negativity associated with FET. The act of correcting false assumptions liberates participants from the stigma experienced and releases them as victims of negative stereotypes (Smith and Duckworth, 2022). Having attended FET, participants were keen to increase awareness of the value of FET, not only among their friends and family but also among the general public. Many participants actively encouraged friends to enrol in FET and were eager to highlight the benefits of FET participation. Owen challenged common misconceptions about FET in conversations with strangers on public transport while actively promoting FET and the expertise of its teachers. Irene frequently recommended FET to her friends. In this way, participants worked towards reestablishing respect, not only for themselves, but for current and potential FET students and graduates.

SOLAS strategy documents repeatedly state that FET needs to change⁶¹ (SOLAS, 2014a; 2020a; 2024a), signalling a sector deficiency and inadequacy. This persistent critique

⁶¹ “FET needs to change” (SOLAS, 2014a, pp.32, 115, 118)

“FET has to change...This will mean transforming FET” (SOLAS, 2020a, p.8)

“Fundamentally change the way FET is delivered” (SOLAS, 2024a, pp.5, 33)

legitimises the very stigma that devalues the sector and can deepen public perceptions of inadequacies within the sector. Despite the consecutive policies by SOLAS aimed at raising the profile and identity of FET, it is clear that more work is required to raise awareness of the value of FET, minimise the potential of stigma attributed to FET students and the stresses incurred by FET students who feel obliged to continually work against the prevailing negative public perception of FET.

The persistence of stigma surrounding FET has practical implications for learner decision-making, self-confidence and educational aspirations. Participants' accounts suggest that negative public perceptions of FET can shape how learners view themselves prior to enrolling in FET, reinforcing sentiments of shame and educational inferiority. This indicates a need for a clearer identity of FET and a reframing of the sector from deficit-based narratives to opportunity-focussed perspectives in order to bring about a shift in how the FET sector is understood and valued.

9.4 Transformation Experiences: During and Beyond FET Engagement

Positive learner identities are strongly linked to student retention, increased engagement, motivation and academic success (MacFarlane, 2018; Russell and Jarvis, 2019; Ng, 2021). This research reveals that participants experienced a profound and positive transformation in their learner identity, which not only underpinned their success in FET, but also facilitated subsequent educational achievements. This research also finds that these positive transformations took place as a result of pedagogies practiced in Riverview College.

Student withdrawal from education is linked to a negative learner identity (Russell and Jarvis, 2019). When participants arrived in Riverview College, their identity of themselves as learners had been shaped by embedded dispositions and internalised beliefs stemming from their primary and secondary habitus. For many, previous educational experiences manifested as a negative learner identity characterised by sentiments of low self-esteem, low self-efficacy and academic inadequacy. This

negative learner identity prevented these participants from conceiving education as a sphere of achievement and fulfilment. Bourdieu contends that “Habitus change constantly in response to new experiences” (Bourdieu, 2000, p.161). New experiences can involve entering into a new field or social space (Wacquant, 2007). The environment of Riverview College represented a new field for participants as they entered a new educational environment. If the difference is too great between habitus and the field, individuals are more likely to struggle, which may lead to a sense of feeling like a “fish-out-of-water” (Reay et al., 2009, p.1104). This struggle often hinders students’ ability to see themselves as learners and to fully engage in education, potentially culminating in course disengagement or withdrawal (Reay et al., 2005; Smyth and Banks, 2012). In this study, none of the nine participants fully withdrew from their course. Eight participants successfully completed the course while one participant deferred the course with plans to return to Riverview College the following academic year to recommence his studies.

The strong student retention of this participant group contrast with studies indicating that high levels of disadvantaged or marginalised students withdraw from education for reasons of not fitting in or habitus dislocation (Crawford, 2014; The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2015; Hillman, 2024; Ianellii et al., 2024). Although some participants in this research expressed initial doubts and lack of confidence in their abilities to complete the course, none of the participants displayed a sense of feeling out of place in Riverview College at any time throughout their interviews. Despite initial fears or uncertainty upon commencement of their FET course, all participants expressed sentiments of happiness and accomplishment throughout their studies at Riverview College which also allowed them to move beyond emotional wounds inflicted as a result of prior negative secondary school experiences.

A positive learner identity is strongly connected to a sense of belonging in the learning environment which motivates students to persist and complete their studies (Reay et

al, 2010). Participants report that support and reassurance from teachers eased them into the FET environment which in turn, helped to increase their sense of belonging. Brenda had only arrived to Ireland a few months prior to commencing her course in Riverview and had limited social support. However, she found the teachers in Riverview to be attentive and encouraging. She also felt that the strong emphasis on group work enabled her to quickly form lasting friendships which she continues to maintain after the completion of her course. Concerned that her mature age might make her feel out of place, Irene received continuous encouragement and affirmation from teachers which motivated her to remain on the course. Kevin was keenly aware of a gender disparity in his course, being one of just three male students in a cohort of 80 nursing students. However, ongoing encouragement and reassurance provided to him by his teachers helped to alleviate these concerns and strengthened his conviction in his course choice.

Participants reported an increase in self-efficacy as they gained confidence and belief in their abilities to overcome challenges. Owen, who has dyslexia, had low expectations of his academic abilities when he began his studies in FET. However, repeated high grades in his assignments demonstrated to him that he was capable of success. This demonstrates mastery experience (Bandura, 1997) where victories inspire confidence (Taylor and Cranton, 2012). Positive teacher-student relationships and collaborative pedagogies were found to be important in developing participants' self-efficacy in their learning environment. Owen also attributes much of his success to being able to openly discuss his learning needs with his teachers who worked with him to develop alternative assessment methods better suited to his requirements. Teachers regularly incorporated new teaching and learning methods and frequently sought feedback from the class to ensure these methods aligned with learners' needs. Gemma outlines that her teachers frequently enquired about the suitability of their teaching approaches and actively sought feedback from students on ways to improve their pedagogical styles. Kevin explained that he learns best through non-traditional approaches and that rote learning in secondary school negatively affected his exam

performance, leaving him disappointed with his LCE results. However, he feels that the teaching and assessment style in Riverview enabled him to excel in his course, achieving eight distinctions and one merit in FET, results which he proudly framed and displays prominently at home. These inclusive practices enabled participants to achieve success which had evaded them in previous education environments.

As a result of engagement in FET, a transformation of participants' learner identity occurred which enabled them to bring about a "transition from present circumstances to circumstances of change" (Illeris 2014a, p.10). During their studies in FET, participants began to consider opportunities which they never thought possible prior to their FET enrolment. Several participants had never anticipated attending college and viewed university as an unachievable goal. These participants included individuals who had been out of education for several decades as well as those who had just completed secondary school. Yet by the end of their FET course, participants' educational ambitions evolved significantly, leading to intentions to achieve university qualifications. Nora described how she always felt left behind her friends who studied at university and how she lacked the desire or confidence to pursue her education post-secondary school. She states that she "hated" school based on previous negative experiences and that she had no interest in education. However, during her studies in Riverview College, Nora discovered a passion for learning which she now feels is an "addiction", balancing multiple courses at the same time while working voluntarily as an ESOL teacher and commencing a degree.

Transformation of their learner identity reframed participants' outlook of education, demonstrating a considerable increase in their sense of belonging, self-efficacy and academic confidence, shifting from a source of negative memories and connotations to ones associated with satisfaction, happiness and achievement. Participants who had previously experienced education as a mark of failure, not only succeeded in their FET course but were contemplating advancing their educational journey in the future or were now thriving in university. Naomi who frequently expressed sentiments of

disappointment, dissatisfaction and resignation when she commenced her studies in FET felt “pure happiness” and “pure excitement” when she received her FET results and subsequently, when she was offered a place on her chosen nursing course in university. This happiness extended beyond Naomi to her friends and family and is something she says she will never forget.

Throughout this research, support provided by teachers in Riverview College was identified as a key factor in transforming the learner identity of participants, helping them to move from a place of anxiety or sense of failure to a place of confidence and success. The pedagogical practices evident in Riverview included the establishment of supportive learning environments and communicative learning, reflecting key aspects of transformative and emancipatory education advocated by Freire (2005, 2013) and Mezirow (1991, 2000). Unlike the banking approach experienced in prior educational experiences, participants found that FET teachers engaged in communicative and dialogical learning, talking *with* participants, rather than *at* them. Rather than position themselves as authoritative experts wielding control, teachers in Riverview were viewed as collaborators in the learning process, working together in partnership with participants, thereby establishing a more equitable power dynamic. Rather than criticise and punish students for a lack of performance in examinations and assessments, teachers in Riverview provided constructive feedback helping participants to improve, viewing errors as learning opportunities rather than sources of embarrassment and shame. Rather than leave participants to find their own way in isolation, FET teachers supported and guided them through their learning process. Instead of treating participants as numbers, FET teachers took the time to get to know students and establish positive relationships. Moreover, the vocational experience of teachers cultivated respect and trust in the subject knowledge and was highly valued by participants. Teachers codified knowledge into less overwhelming chunks while contextualising academic theories through real-world applications. Participants confirmed that these pedagogies greatly contributed not only to the acquisition of theoretical and applied academic knowledge, but also to an enhanced self-awareness,

a deeper sense of their connection to society and the world around them, increased personal agency, and ultimately, a love of learning and a belief and faith in education.

This research further reveals the fragility inherent in learner identities and that even after developing a positive learner identity, a regression of learner identity is possible. When moving into new environments, such as university, or new courses in the same environment, aspects of a negative learner identity re-emerged for some participants, manifesting in a lack of confidence or imposter syndrome through feelings of displacement or lack of legitimacy. This was especially the case for Irene as age related concerns resurfaced when she began her university degree. However, unlike the steadfastness of the negative learner identity evident at the commencement of their FET journey, this regression was temporary and short-lived. The ability to reflect on previous FET experiences reminded participants of their proven resilience in comparable challenges and gave participants the confidence to succeed in the new environment and overcome doubts incurred during moments of crises. Continued support from teachers, lecturers and guidance counsellors in their new settings further reinforced their positive learner identities, underscoring the importance of supportive, dialogic and transformative pedagogies in sustaining change. In addition, this research shows that some learners may deliberately retain a fixed position on their learner identity as a source of motivation. Despite acknowledging his successes, Kevin intentionally persists in “negative self-talk” ((Kolb and Kolb, 2009, p.9) as a means to drive self-improvement.

Participants also raised shortcomings which have the potential to curtail or undermine FET’s capacity to enable positive learner identity transformations. This study took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 global pandemic, during which the majority of teaching and learning took place online. Participants felt that the learning experience and the quality of communicative learning for participants was negatively impacted, compounded by the online learning environment and reduced attendance of students for online classes. The absence of social engagement was a dominant

adverse effect reported by participants as a result of the pandemic which participants felt had a negative impact on them socially, psychologically and academically.

There was an increased expectation for students to have the software, hardware and internet capabilities needed to participate in the learning environment online (Bashir et al., 2024; Zou, 2025). While Riverview College operated a laptop loan scheme for a limited time as a means to mitigate these issues, participants still encountered problems with internet access, adapting to a new form of learning and the lack of personal interaction. Social inequalities were heightened for those who were already marginalised in society such as the homeless, those on low income and individuals deemed to be at psychological and physical risk (Giroux, 2021b). This was evidenced in the case of Nigel, who was living in supported accommodation where access to the internet was limited and suitable study places, free from noise and disturbance, were scarce. While online learning challenges persisted during the pandemic period, many are equally relevant today. The growing technological integration of teaching, learning and assessment requires students to have reliable technological resources in addition to digital literacy competency and access to appropriate places to study. This risks increasing the digital and economic divide and constitutes barriers for existing and potential students who may lack the required digital competencies, infrastructural access to the internet, adequate study environments or financial resources to purchase essential computer software and equipment.

Participants noted that the online environment also presented challenges for some teachers in Riverview College. Skills and technical ability of teachers varied and while some teachers performed well in this new environment, others struggled to adapt to the new online teaching methods. The steep and sudden rise in the learning curve, alongside increased demands for digital skills and reliable internet access, placed additional strain on teachers (Bashir et al., 2024; Zou, 2025). Research shows that IT support to teachers was found to be minimal, if at all (Ahmed and Opoku, 2022) and this lack of support impacted participants through issues experienced in the online

teaching environment. It is clear from the participants' reports that the workload on teachers also increased during the pandemic due to online learning and responding to student queries outside of normal working hours. Yet there is little evidence from participant accounts or from the literature of additional support being provided to staff to manage this extra workload (Fitzsimons et al. 2022).

Participants also reported dissatisfaction in the level of support provided by the guidance counselling facility which resulted in insufficient information and support alongside slow responsiveness. A lack of responsiveness can lead to students feeling ignored or unimportant and negatively impacts their self-perception, thus presenting challenges to learner identity transformations. Furthermore, the FET student population is composed of a high level of marginalised students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds (SOLAS, 2022b; Alvarez and Sullivan, 2023), highlighting the importance of timely guidance and support for students in order to help them succeed within the FET field and beyond. This also raises serious concerns for disadvantaged students who may have limited access to educational and career information which is particularly pertinent given the substantial increase in the number of vulnerable students enrolling in FET each year including refugees, migrant learners, learners with disabilities and students with literacy or language support requirements (SOLAS, 2020a, p.47; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2024; SOLAS, 2024f).

While Gemma and Brenda did not report a difficulty completing their course through the medium of English, their accounts indicate that they perceived the language entry requirements for university as challenging and difficult to achieve. From their accounts, it appears that no additional support was provided by the college to speakers of other languages, either through language provision or dedicated culturally responsive teaching (CRT) pedagogies⁶². This may also point to an absence of structured assistance in navigating the Irish education system and university application process

⁶² CRT pedagogies draw on students' prior experiences, frames of reference and cultural and linguistic knowledge to make learning more relevant and effective for diverse cohorts (Gay, 2000)

which are important supports for migrant learners to overcome barriers to educational, vocational and societal progression and participation.

In addition to the challenges reported by participants, recent policy reforms by SOLAS have the potential to negatively impact the transformative and emancipatory possibilities of FET. Since SOLAS assumed responsibility for FET, there has been an increase of commodification and neoliberalism in the sector (O'Brien, 2018) and a noticeable shift from a student-centred focus in FET towards a focus on measurement and performativity. Freire criticises situations where there is “no time to lose”, “there is a syllabus to be completed” “ (Freire, 2013, p.109) which result in the alienation of students. The participant interviews strongly illustrate the short, medium and long-term non-economic benefits of FET, yet SOLAS has instigated an “outcomes-based funding model” (SOLAS, 2022b, p.33) where funding is provided to colleges based on enrolment and completion metrics rather than on meeting the holistic needs of the students.

Smith and Duckworth (2022) found that many teachers in FET practise a “pedagogy of care” (p.171) focussing on the provision of pastoral care to students and restorative practice which not only provides academic support but also facilitates the emotional development and well-being of students through supportive and genuine teacher-student relationships (Noddings, 2005). The flexibility and responsiveness of teachers, in addition to the inclusive and learner-centred ethos at the heart of FET, is crucial to meeting the needs of learners (Grummell and Murray, 2015). However, the intensification of teachers’ workload, characterised by “needless meetings and a box-ticking culture” (Teachers’ Union of Ireland, 2024, p.4), together with the growing emphasis on measurement, accountability and performativity evident in recent SOLAS policies (including the Strategic Performance Agreements (SOLAS, 2018) and Outcomes Based Funding (SOLAS, 2022b), may constrain the time, energy and professional goodwill that teachers can devote to transformative and emancipatory pedagogies. More broadly, there is a risk that this neoliberal example logic which prizes metrics,

performance and economic utility can detract from the student experience, leaving learners overlooked amid target-driven agendas (Grummell, 2023; Knoetze, 2023; Morley, 2023).

As evident in this thesis, pedagogical approaches, grounded in Freirean critical pedagogy and Mezirow's transformative learning theory, are fundamental in supporting learner identity transformation, critical consciousness and student empowerment. Consequently, reduced capacity to engage in these pedagogies may not only diminish the quality of students' educational experiences within FET, but also constrain their longer-term personal, academic and social outcomes.

These findings suggest that transformation within FET is specifically linked to pedagogical practices rather than purely as a consequence of participation. Participants consistently identified supportive teacher-student relationships, dialogical learning, support and encouragement, a sense of safety and meaningful engagement as significant factors which contributed to the transformations experienced. This suggests that transformation is not an automatic outcome of FET participation, but that it emerges as a result of pedagogical practices which actively support learner belonging, confidence and agency. This highlights the importance of protecting learner-centred pedagogies within FET, particularly in policy contexts increasingly shaped by performance metrics, employability targets and statistical measurability. The experiences of participants during the COVID-19 pandemic also highlight inequalities as a result of educational disruption. Challenges relating to digital access, teacher and student digital literacy in addition to isolation and the reduced relational capacity and ability to fully engage in the learning environment, suggest that rather than assuming that all learners have the equivalent capacity for adaptation, educational institutions must remain attentive to learner diversity at all times.

9.5 Enduring Emancipatory Experiences as a Result of FET Engagement

Freire contends that emancipatory teaching approaches encourage individuals to examine and reflect on their life situations, the outcome of which will bring about their “necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation” (Freire, 2005, p.48). In this research, participants’ initial *struggle for liberation* is evident when presented with significant institutional barriers restricting their ability to achieve their educational and professional goals in life. These barriers functioned as mechanisms of oppression, seeking to limit their educational pathways and life choices. For participants, these “limit-situations” (Freire, 2005, p.99) were also indicative of “disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow, 1978, p.103) which prompted participants to reflect on their circumstances and identify solutions, resulting in their enrolment in FET. In the face of these constraints, each of the participants demonstrated agency through seeking alternative pathways to overcome these “limit-situations” (Freire, 2005, p.99). Participants could have chosen to withdraw and submit to societal reproduction but instead, they forged ahead and engaged in education by enrolling in FET despite the challenges faced. Throughout their time in FET, participants continued this struggle for liberation and worked towards improving situations for themselves personally, educationally, vocationally and also for society in general.

Stories of personal emancipation were evident throughout participant narratives. Upon enrolment in Riverview College, Irene, who had recently retired, felt invisible and low in confidence, believing that her mature age prevented her from considering pursuits beyond taking care of her family. Irene decided to attend FET purely as a means to reignite her interest in art from when she was a child. During her time in Riverview College, Irene gained a sense of pride and accomplishment that motivated her to continue to university, where she has successfully completed the first year of an art and design degree. As a result of FET engagement, Irene feels that her life is more enriched than she ever imagined and she feels that she is viewed differently and more positively now by family and friends. She has organised a cultural visit with her new university friends to Venice, set up an Instagram page where she displays her art,

competed in the prestigious Royal Hibernian Academy art competition where she achieved success and she intends on applying to study abroad for one year as part of the university Erasmus programme. Irene attributes this change to the belief that FET teachers had in her and their ongoing encouragement to continue her studies, even when she experienced doubts and crises of confidence. Irene's account represents one of many where participants described FET as opening a door, not only to education, but to expanded life opportunities and possibilities.

The environment of Riverview College provided a space where participants felt emotionally safe, enabling them to voice opinions without fear of judgement. In order to fully engage in education, students need to feel free from coercion or derision (Mezirow, 2000; Freire, 2013). Participants reported that there was a minimisation of power hierarchies in Riverview College which allowed them to openly contribute to debates and discussion, safe from mockery or ridicule. Ciara found this to be extremely important as during her theatre studies course, she participated in improvisation activities that were entirely new to her. Although Ciara initially experienced a sense of vulnerability, this soon dissipated through the support and encouragement of her teachers. Participants also felt that FET teachers provided them with a platform to use their voice within the classroom through debates and discussions, within the college through the Student Council, and externally through visits to institutions and government organisations where they shared their views and perspectives. For many participants, these represented opportunities of involvement and expression previously closed to them prior to studying in FET. This sense of safety also extended to physical safety and emotional well-being. Participants felt secure in Riverview College, which was particularly vital for Nigel who was living in supported accommodation. Nigel experienced the college as a stable and reassuring environment as well as a place of relief from the daily challenges posed by his personal and accommodation circumstances where he often witnessed physical violence. Riverview College provided him with the opportunity to escape from the immediate pressures of

his everyday struggles, allowing him to focus on positive goals and future oriented pursuits.

FET also offered vocational freedom, providing skills to bring about new career directions or as a means to try different vocational interests without a substantial time or financial commitment. Participants felt empowered to make informed decisions about their future while also receiving vocational reassurance in terms of their career objectives. In this way, FET provided participants with “a feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.64) which greatly assists in overcoming societal constraints. As a result of their course in FET, some participants secured full-time paid employment, some were positioned to consider different employment routes while others were advancing towards their desired profession. Participants also reported a sense of individual freedom which released them from the constraints once felt, enabling them to exercise autonomy and make choices over their life direction. This newfound freedom brought significant relief to participants, alleviating the burden of constraints once endured, fostering hope and possibilities for a better future.

The dialogical nature of the learning environment in Riverview College and interaction with fellow students and communities facilitated the development of participants’ critical consciousness which increased participants’ awareness, not only from an individual perspective but also in relation to the world around them. Positive and transformative educational experiences encouraged learners to become “wide-awake” (Fleming, 2023, p.9), opening the learner to be more responsive to situations in their community and society at large. Through gaining an insight into personal and collective challenges, participants began to comprehend issues and seek solutions, both individually and within the broader societal context. Although Gemma initially planned on becoming a psychologist, her work experience module in Riverview College introduced her to volunteering in a food provision charity. Gemma felt that this experience provided her with exposure to the homeless community where she believed her true interests lay and which prompted her to pursue a career in working

with homeless charity organisations. Similarly Nora originally intended on becoming a nurse, however, as a result of her FET course, she gained an interest in community work and is now volunteering in a local library teaching English in an ESOL capacity and embarking on a degree in community development.

The pedagogies employed in Riverview operated as a “revolutionary process” (Freire, 2005, p.127) which empowered students to overcome constraints and to “redefine the game and the moves which permit one to win” (Bourdieu, 1988, p.172). FET teachers redefined the game for participants by broadening access to educational opportunity, extending it beyond the privileged to encompass all learners, including those marginalised and constrained by the power of gatekeepers and dominant structures such as the CAO or university entry criteria. This in turn can lead to a “break in the circle of expectations and opportunities” (Bourdieu, 1988, p.172). When they began their studies in FET, many participants felt powerless and dictated to by institutional restrictions. They felt they had no choice but to enrol in FET and as a result, felt resigned and disempowered. Despite initial disappointment upon enrolling in FET, there was a clear shift participants’ sentiments as a result of their FET studies. Naomi initially expressed unhappiness at “ending up in Riverview”. However, this sense of disappointment evolved into enjoyment, with Naomi frequently using the word “love” to describe how she feels about Riverview. These positive sentiments persisted as she continued her studies in university. Naomi felt that her FET experience had provided her with an advantage, equipping her with the knowledge, skills and confidence that allow her to fully enjoy and embrace the university experience.

Throughout their studies in FET, many participants described their experiences as a healing process where they discovered a passion for education and where, for the first time, they felt in control of their educational path. Prior to enrolling in FET, Irene found it difficult to speak about school due to the “intimidation” she experienced when she was younger, Nora “hated” school, Kevin experienced deep sources of “shame” as a result of his secondary education, Owen encountered insults due to completing the

LCA, being told that the LCA is for “drop-outs” and Ciara felt that her school experiences completely undermined her capacity to learn. Despite these negative experiences, participants developed a new found enjoyment of education in FET which also inspired them to continue their studies after their FET course. In this way, FET can play a restorative role, helping participants to address and overcome the negative effects of prior educational experiences (Wachtel, 2016; Smith and Duckworth, 2022).

Reflexive practices in Riverview College encouraged students to critically reflect through writing journals, discussing experiences and sharing their opinions with others in a supportive class environment. These practices prompted participants to gain different perspectives, identify societal issues and develop ways to take action to overcome these issues. Nora was frustrated at the absence of university recognition of prior learning (RPL) which she became aware of during her course in Riverview. Rather than resign herself to this fate, Nora took action by meeting with a university Dean of Education in an attempt to organise improved access for FET students. Owen also described a similar experience where a regulatory body made the decision to remove accreditation from his Riverview course. Along with his teacher, Owen met with government officials, educational institutions and the regulatory body concerned in an active attempt to have this accreditation restored. These situations exemplify democratic participation where participants actively engaged in ways to reduce inequalities and injustices, not solely for their benefit but also with the intention of improving circumstances for others.

The complexity of the college application system can, however, undermine the educational emancipatory impacts of FET. Participants expressed concerns regarding the FET-HE pathways and the lack of clarity and consistency around the university entry criteria, making it difficult for students to navigate their educational routes. Irene was denied a place in her first choice university due to a lack of transparency of university criteria for FET graduates. As a mature student applying for FET-HE progression, Irene believed that she only needed to provide a personal statement and that her application

was not dependent on the number of distinctions achieved. Irene passed her course achieving four distinctions, but due to the high demand that year, the university changed their requirements and five distinctions were required. As a result, Irene was not offered a place on her first choice course. Irene was deeply affected by this and experienced it as rejection, leading her to seriously consider abandoning her FET course prior to completion. This demonstrates the limitations for transformation and emancipation outcomes beyond FET as power and control continues to be maintained by institutions who dictate “the rules of the game laid down and the goals proposed by the dominant class” (Bourdieu, 1988, p.172).

Despite the strategic objective of the Irish Government to increase progression opportunities for FET graduates to HE (SOLAS, 2014a, Higher Education Authority, 2015; SOLAS 2020a; Higher Educational Authority, 2022b), there remains a limited number of places allocated to FET-HE admission, often resulting in a lottery process of random allocation (Central Applications Office, 2025c; University College Dublin, 2025). This mirrored Kevin’s experience as he attempted for a third time to access university. Although he successfully completed his course in Riverview College with eight distinctions, he was yet again, denied a place on his first choice university programme due to the random allocation process.

This research shows that participants were content to remain in Riverview and that some participants wished to continue their studies in Riverview rather than study in university. However, due to the restricted number of courses offered beyond QQI Level 5, participants felt that they had no option but to leave FET and move to a third level institution. Ciara would have preferred to remain in Riverview and suggested that FET should provide the first two years of a degree, after which students could complete their degree in university. Ciara’s suggestion is an example of a tertiary degree, a recent initiative by DFHERIS to extend FET-HE pathways (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022). However, limited provision of tertiary degrees meant that this option was not available to Ciara. The lack of tertiary

degrees across all FET colleges, in addition to the inconsistency of universities accommodating FET advanced entry, make it difficult for FET students to progress their education. Expansion of these degree programmes and increased advanced entry opportunities would alleviate this challenge and could help reduce the stigma associated with FET through the recognition and acceptance of educational standards in FET.

The focus by SOLAS on significantly increasing enrolments points to an emerging commodification of the FET sector. In 2019, unique FET enrolments totalled 179,058, rising to 229,000 in 2024 (SOLAS, 2024a, 2025c). SOLAS plans to further increase student enrolments to 250,000 in 2026 (SOLAS, 2024a). While expanded access to FET represents a positive development for learners, it would be important to ensure that adequate resources are in place to support high quality learning experiences. Participants described the FET building as “old-fashioned” and “run-down” and highlighted the lack of physical equipment necessary for their course. As enrolments increase, there is a risk of intensifying pressure on teaching staff as they strive to meet the diverse needs of a growing student population. Moreover, rising FET participation may place additional strain on the limited number of progression routes from FET to HE. Consequently, any expansion in the FET enrolments is likely to pose challenges in the absence of a corresponding increase in progression opportunities to ensure learners can continue their educational pathways. Without appropriate investment in both resources and progression opportunities, the potential of expanded FET access to positively impact the learner could be limited.

In this study, participants highlighted constructive feedback as one of the key mechanisms which helped to develop their critical consciousness. They described feedback as a learning event in its own right as it identified areas for improvement and also showed them how to critically analyse their own work and ideas. Bourdieu, Freire and Mezirow all point to the importance of consistent and constructive feedback as key elements of reflection and dialogical learning, tools which can help students to

overcome societal constraints (Mezirow, 1991; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Freire, 2005). However, participants reported inconsistency in the level and frequency of feedback received in Riverview College. Some participants received excellent and timely assessment feedback which strongly contributed to their development and improvement, while others received generic feedback that was unhelpful or untimely, rendering it ineffective. In some cases no assessment feedback was provided at all. The absence of meaningful dialogical learning through feedback can greatly inhibit the effectiveness and transformative potential of education.

Recent reforms introduced by SOLAS may contribute to this deficiency experienced by participants. As discussed in Chapter 2, several of these reforms reflect a neoliberal orientation, prioritising economic goals over social inclusion and over the needs of the learner (O’Leary and Rami, 2017). The lack of frequent and detailed feedback reported by some participants may stem from heightened pressures and workload demands on teachers (Ball, 2016; Ade-Ojo and Duckworth, 2017). Teachers report that they are overworked due to significant increases in bureaucratic and administrative duties outside of the teaching role (Fitzsimons, 2017) which deflects from their ability to attend to learner-centred pedagogies and provide support to learners (O’Brien, 2018; Teachers’ Union of Ireland, 2024).

Recent policies by SOLAS which prioritise measurable outputs such as course completions, progression to HE and employment outcomes, can inadvertently disadvantage learners whose educational journeys are non-linear or whose goals extend beyond these metrics (Glanton, 2023; Fitzsimons and O’Neill, 2024). Participation in FET had a profound impact on Nigel, providing him with a sense of hope and opportunity, acting as a key motivation for improvements in his health, well-being and independence. Although Nigel did not complete his course or continue to HE or employment, the influence that FET had on him and those around him was substantial. The increasing focus on instrumental outcomes reinforces the framing of FET as primarily oriented towards employment or educational progression, rather than as a

“process of inquiry” (Freire, 2005, p.85) - a holistic space for personal development and fulfilment, vocational and educational growth and meaningful societal engagement and participation. These wider benefits were evident through participants’ stories of transformation and emancipation and through their contributions to society, illustrated by their engagement and voluntary work in the community. Consequently, policies which are restricted to metrics and outcomes may lead to a situation where “teachers and students are being reduced to producers and consumers of learning outcomes” (Glanton, 2023, p.787). This can result in teachers feeling compelled to narrow their teaching to measurable outcomes, while learners may experience increased pressure to perform to meet targets, ultimately suppressing the transformative and emancipatory potential of FET.

The findings also suggest that outcomes were not experienced uniformly for all participants, but that they were shaped by individual histories, previous educational experiences in addition to personal, social and professional circumstances. For some, FET offered healing from previous negative educational experiences or social misrecognition including stigma, for others it removed barriers related to age, language or additional learning needs, while for others it provided a release from difficult personal, vocational and social circumstances. Furthermore, emancipation was experienced through increased confidence and a renewed positive learner identity for some participants while for others, this manifested through expanded educational or vocational opportunities, civic participation or increased agency. This has practical implications for FET as it suggests that meaningful outcomes cannot be reduced solely to standard progression or employment metrics and that a more responsive understanding of the complexities of learner success is required, recognising the diverse and differentiated forms of emancipation that may emerge as a result of FET participation.

While this study has discussed the increasing influence of neoliberal policies within the FET sector, the findings indicate that these policy shifts did not significantly manifest in

negative learner experiences in Riverview College. On the contrary, participants consistently reported positive relationships with teachers in addition to strengthened learner identity and emancipatory outcomes. This suggests that the lived experience in Riverview College may not depend on broader policy changes, but is more closely associated with the role and influence of transformative and emancipatory pedagogies employed by teachers in the college. However, it is also important to recognise that many of the neoliberal policies, including the Strategic Performance Agreements (SOLAS, 2018), Outcomes Based Funding (SOLAS, 2022b) and increased performance assessment of FET settings (SOLAS, 2024a), are relatively recent developments within the FET sector, and as such, the full impact of these policies on the learner may not yet be fully realised.

9.6 Contribution of this Research

9.6.1 Contribution to Literature

This research provides empirical contributions in relation to the FET sector in Ireland, adult learning and educational inequality. This thesis contributes to existing FET research by offering a longitudinal learner-centred qualitative perspective on the lived experiences of students over time. Despite the long history of FET in Ireland spanning almost a century and the wide reach of the sector with enrolments reaching almost 219,000 unique learners annually⁶³ (SOLAS, 2024a, p.14), it is argued that the FET sector in Ireland is chronically under-researched (Hardiman, 2012; McGuinness et al., 2014; O’Sullivan 2018; Mulvey, 2019; Maloney, 2021). More specifically, there is a surprising lack of research on the learner experience during their time in FET and thereafter. Although studies have been conducted which followed children throughout their education⁶⁴, while others have focussed on post-school transitions in

⁶³ Excluding construction schemes, e-college and apprenticeships

⁶⁴ Williams et al., 2013; McNamara et al., 2019; O’Mahony et al., 2022, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2025

general or within the university setting⁶⁵, there has been a limited number of studies specifically on learners in FET (McGuinness et al, 2014; SOLAS, 2020f, Sartori and Bloom; 2023). Nevertheless, none of these studies follow the experiences of FET students throughout their studies in FET and beyond. While more recently SOLAS and the CSO have begun to track learner destinations post-FET, this information takes the form of quantitative data and does not follow the lived experiences of students over time.

This research also facilitates an insight into the learners who enrol in FET, their reasons for enrolment, their experience during their studies in FET and their experiences in the year post completion. This vital information demonstrates the impact FET has on students and also highlights the role that FET can play in disrupting processes of social reproduction. In addition, this research was conducted against the backdrop of the COVID-19 and therefore offers valuable insights into participant experiences in FET in the midst of a global pandemic.

In summary, this thesis makes an empirical contribution to literature by offering a longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis of learners' lived experiences with an Irish FET context, capturing participants' perspectives as they begin a course in FET, during their course and at completion in addition to one year following their studies. In doing so, this research provides insight into how prior educational experiences shaped participants' engagement with FET, how they experienced teaching and learning with the FET environment and how they interpreted the significance of these experiences in their subsequent personal, educational and professional pathways. In this regard, this research contributes detailed empirical insight into learner experiences within Irish FET while also extending methodological understanding through the innovative use of a longitudinal interpretative phenomenological approach. The integration of Bourdieu, Freire and Mezirow further

⁶⁵ Mooney et al., 2010; Byrne and McCoy, 2017; McCoy et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2023

provides a theoretically informed framework through which issues of identity, transformation and educational engagement can be interpreted and understood.

9.6.2 Contribution to Practice

This study is the first of its kind to apply a longitudinal interpretative phenomenological approach (LIPA) to the FET context in Ireland and therefore provides a contribution to the practice of research. Longitudinal studies regarding education have been undertaken in Ireland, however, they rarely centre on the FET sector, instead concentrating on progression from secondary school to higher education (Williams et al., 2013; McCoy et al., 2014; McNamara et al., 2019; Symonds et al., 2025). This study follows learners across three temporal stages; when they begin their course in FET, upon completion of their FET course and in the year that follows thus offering methodological insight and guidelines into the practicalities of longitudinal and interpretative phenomenological research. As a result, this research provides insight into how students experience FET over time and what factors support, constrain or enable meaningful educational participation and engagement, thereby offering practical insight into how FET provision can better respond to learner needs over time. While much policy attention focusses on progression outcomes and employability, the findings of this study highlight the importance of recognising the broader pedagogical and relational dimensions which contribute to a holistic perspective of learner success, including that which cannot be confined to performance metrics or quantitative measures.

A further contribution is made to the practice of teaching and learning in the FET environment. This research highlights the vast needs and diversity of FET students and also emphasises the impact of pedagogical approaches on students, outlining the importance of prioritising a learner-centred pedagogy which provides a supportive environment to students and focusses on communicative learning and reflexivity. The findings highlight the importance of supportive pedagogies, timely feedback and positive teacher-student relationships in enabling learner confidence and engagement.

This study shows that relational, supportive, dialogical and reflexive pedagogies are a central mechanism through which transformative and emancipatory experiences can be cultivated. This study also illustrates that students do not enter FET at equivalent starting points and that they bring diverse histories, levels of confidence, life experiences and constraints which shaped how they engaged with education. For teaching practitioners, this reinforces the importance of responsive, adaptive and differentiated pedagogical approaches that acknowledge the complexity of student circumstances. These findings are particularly relevant for institutional strategies aimed at supporting non-traditional learners, including those returning to education after a prolonged absence, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, mature students, migrant learners and those with additional learning or personal support needs. These findings suggest that effective support extends beyond academic provision alone and requires institutional responsiveness to the broader realities shaping learner participation, progression and personal outcomes.

The empirical research for this thesis took place in the years 2020, 2021 and 2022, a period when Ireland was navigating the global COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the effects of the pandemic on the participants provides not only a unique insight into educational experiences during a COVID-19 pandemic but also highlights the implications for both online teaching and education during a time of a global emergency. This research also provides practical applications of the work of Freire and Mezirow which heretofore have been limited, both from a contemporary perspective and with regard to the FET sector (Azaola, 2012; Christie et al., 2015; Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022; Karaoulas, 2025).

9.6.3 Contribution to Policy

This research provides an insight into the public perception of FET as expressed by participants and in literature. In highlighting the public perception and its effect on FET students, this study emphasises the importance of learner-centred pedagogies on FET students and the wider effects of stigma and structural inequality on learners. The

growing demands that are placed on FET professionals which may detract from the capacity of teachers to commit to the development and delivery of such pedagogies are also highlighted. While work is ongoing by government officials in the area of widening access to HE, this research also highlights the challenges that remain for those wishing to advance their education and gain access to university. This reinforces the importance of broader policy discussions concerning access, progression and educational equity, particularly for learners whose educational pathways have been shaped by structural disadvantage, exclusion or interrupted educational participation. It also draws attention to recent SOLAS policies and the potential impacts of these policies in relation to learners and those working within the FET sector.

The findings show that FET cannot be understood through a single lens of progression or disadvantage. Participants' experiences were shaped by intersecting social positions such as age, gender, class, migration, previous educational history and personal circumstances. This highlights the requirement for FET to be responsive not only to educational needs of students but also to the broader social and institutional conditions that shape student access, confidence, engagement and progression over time. As a result, different forms of support such as guidance counselling, cultural responsiveness and institutional support are necessary to meet the diverse and evolving needs of the FET student population. Furthermore, policy discourse frequently frames FET through progression, employment and vocational development objectives. While these outcomes are important, this study suggests that such framing may insufficiently reflect the broader social, personal and emancipatory value of FET for learners. More responsive policy approaches should also recognise learner well-being, confidence development and social participation as legitimate indicators of success.

Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that this thesis offers not only empirical insight into the learner experience within FET, but also practical and policy relevance

for understanding how educational systems can better support diverse learners over time.

9.7 Suggested Areas for Further Research

This research followed a longitudinal interpretative phenomenological methodological approach, interviewing participants across three time points. Building on this research, further investigation would be beneficial to explore the longer-term impact on FET students following FET completion. This research would be conducted over a minimum of five years post-FET completion with the following objectives:

- Identify the longer-term enduring impacts of FET participation on individuals.
- Provide insight into the outcomes for FET students who progress to university.
- Examine the impact of FET students in higher education incorporating considerations such as diversity impacts and retention rates.
- Facilitate a comparison of experiences and outcomes of FET students in university towards students who entered university directly from secondary school.
- Explore the longer-term influence of FET on students' external engagement in society.

This research was conducted within one FET college. While the majority of participants who had attended FET previously reported positive experiences, Kevin's prior FET experience in Woodrock College was significantly different to his recent experience in Riverview College. Therefore, conducting research across FET colleges throughout Ireland (and internationally) would reveal patterns of shared and unique characteristics across the FET environment. Such research could also highlight centres of excellence and facilitate the sharing of best practices across all FET colleges.

As this research was conducted during the COVID-19 global pandemic, it is therefore reflective of the participant experience during that time. Further research is recommended to explore experiences of FET learners in post-pandemic contexts. This

research could also be expanded to compare the FET sector in Ireland to its counterparts in the UK, Europe and internationally with the aim of identifying areas of similarity, differences and improvements that could be implemented to further strengthen the Irish FET sector. Given the increasing focus by SOLAS on metrics and the recent introduction of Strategic Performance Agreements and Outcomes Based Funding, it would also be beneficial to research the impact of these policies on teachers and on FET students in the future.

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Appendix 1. Demographic Profiles of Participants

In 2020, 151,630 learners were enrolled in FET in Ireland (SOLAS, 2021c, p.1). The participants in this study were among those learners. All participants in this research attended Riverview College of FET, one of the largest colleges of FET in Ireland.

In order to facilitate a contextualisation of participants relative to the broader FET student population, this Appendix builds on the participant introductions in Chapter 4 and provides an overview of the socio-economic and demographic background of the participants, whilst also referring to the national FET student population statistics in the following areas:

1. Socio-Economic Background of Participants
2. Age of Participants
3. Gender
4. Nationality
5. Courses Selected by Participants
6. Prior Levels of Education
7. Summary of Participants

1. Socio-Economic Background of Participants

In this study, 56% of the participants report circumstances of disadvantage (Owen, Naomi, Nigel, Nora and Irene) while 44% of the participants present with circumstances indicating some markers of affluency (Kevin, Ciara, Gemma and Brenda).

Among the secondary school leavers, Owen lives in a disadvantaged area in Dublin (Pobal, 2022) and attended a DEIS secondary school (Department of Education, 2022). His parents are separated and there is just one income in the household. Owen is eligible for the full SUSI award (maintenance grant and student contribution/fees). Naomi lives in a single income household with her sister and her mother, who is in receipt of some government supports. She regularly mentions the pressures of

funding education although she was not eligible for SUSI. Nigel is unemployed, living in supported accommodation and is receiving VTOS payments. Nora attended a DEIS secondary school (Department of Education, 2022) and is unemployed. Both Nigel and Nora were receiving Job Seeker's Allowance which transferred to VTOS when they began studying at Riverview College. Irene lives in a disadvantaged area in Dublin (Pobal, 2022) and is retired, receiving what she describes as an extremely low pension.

Kevin (Secondary School Leaver) and Ciara (Lifelong learner) do not show markers of disadvantage. Kevin comes from a university family where every family member has a level 8 degree at least. Both parents are in high income jobs and his sister is training to be a doctor. Finance was never an issue in his educational decisions and Kevin is able to study without needing to work to fund his education or lifestyle. Ciara attended a private secondary school and completed a journalism course at a private Dublin college. She was working on a part-time basis but resigned from this job prior to enrolling in Riverview College. She lives at home with her mother who is a university lecturer and her father who is a business owner. Neither Kevin nor Ciara live in areas deemed as disadvantage (Pobal, 2022).

Lifelong learners, Gemma and Brenda display commonalities to each other. Neither are in receipt of government funding, both were employed on a full-time basis prior to living in Ireland and both are funding their own education, accommodation and living costs. Gemma and Brenda are living in rented accommodation in areas of Dublin that would not be deemed disadvantaged (Pobal, 2022). Neither are working and both are able to finance their college and lifestyle based on savings and money earned from previous employments.

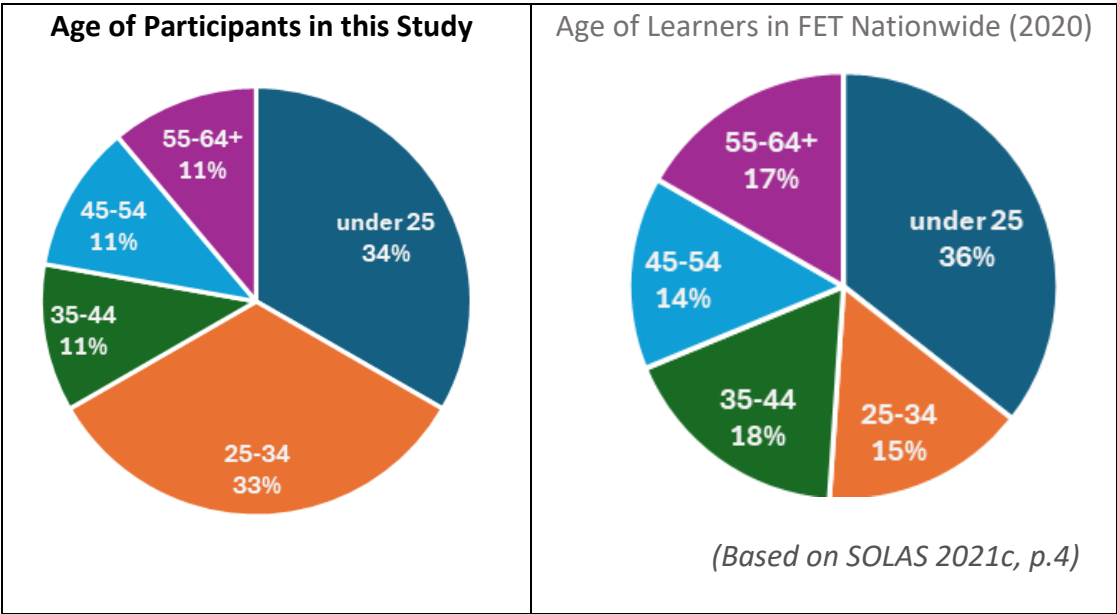
In this study, 71.5% of Irish participants present evidence of disadvantage, with 28.5% demonstrating levels of affluency (Kevin and Ciara). However, the lifelong learners who were born and educated abroad (Gemma and Brenda) exhibit markers of affluency. These findings are relatively consistent with the SOLAS Key Insights Report

(SOLAS, 2019) which notes that almost two-thirds of FET students indicate levels of disadvantage and that migrant learners are generally more affluent than their Irish counterparts. According to SOLAS (2019, p.2), 23% of learners in FET are disadvantaged (ranging from disadvantaged, very disadvantaged to extremely disadvantaged) with 36.57% classed as marginally below average, totalling 60% of learners. SOLAS (2019, p.2) report that 8.9% of learners are affluent (ranging from extremely affluent, very affluent and affluent) and 31% are marginally above average, totalling 40% of learners.

2. Age of Participants

The ages of participants ranged between 19–67 years of age at the time of the first interview in 2020. Three participants were nineteen years of age (Owen, Naomi and Kevin), three participants were aged between 26-33 years (Ciara, Gemma and Brenda) and three participants were aged 42 years or more (Nigel, Nora and Irene). In comparing the age groups of participants to the FET student population statistics (SOLAS, 2021c, p.4), there is a similarity between both groups with the largest proportion of students being under 25 years of age (Figure A.1).

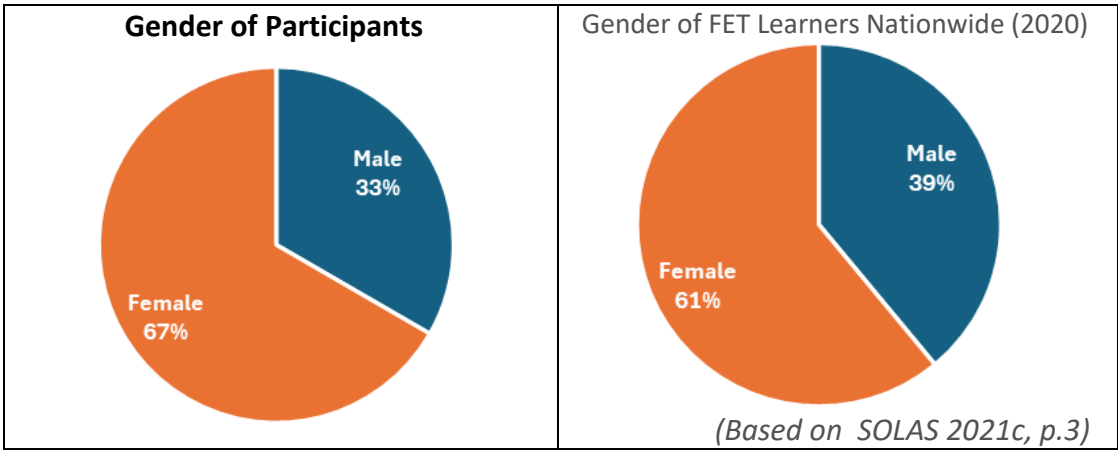
Figure A.1 Age of Participants compared to Age of FET Learners Nationwide



3. Gender

With regard to gender representation of participants, six students are female and three participants are male (Figure A.2). This correlates with the national gender breakdown of FET learners where 61% were female and 39% were male (SOLAS, 2021c, p.3).

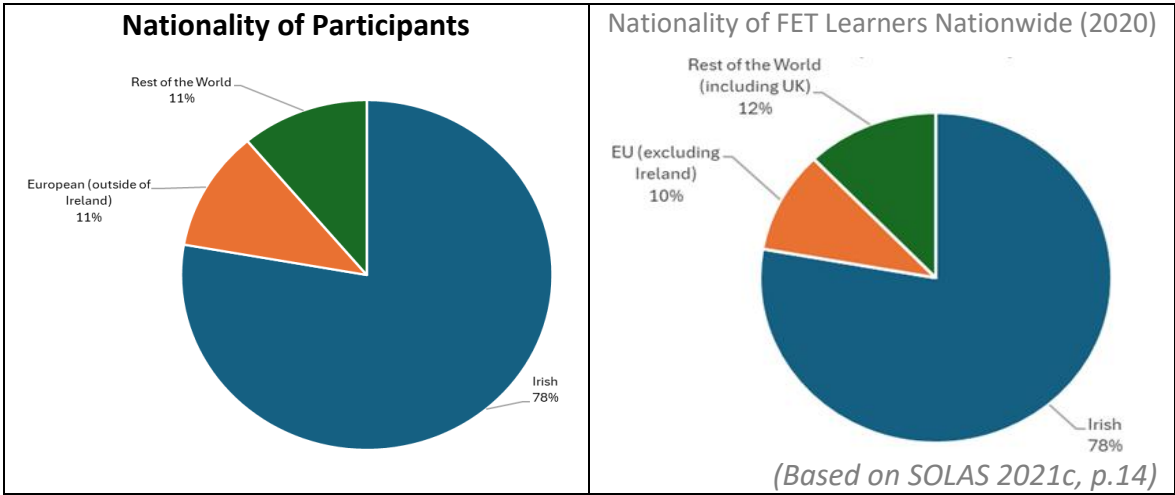
Figure A.2 Gender of Participants compared to Gender of FET Learners Nationwide



4. Nationality

Seven participants on this study were Irish (78%), one participant was an EU national (Brenda) and one participant was born and educated in South America (Gemma) (Figure A.3). This demonstrates that the nationality of the participants bears similarity to the national learner statistics recorded by SOLAS (SOLAS, 2021c, p.14).

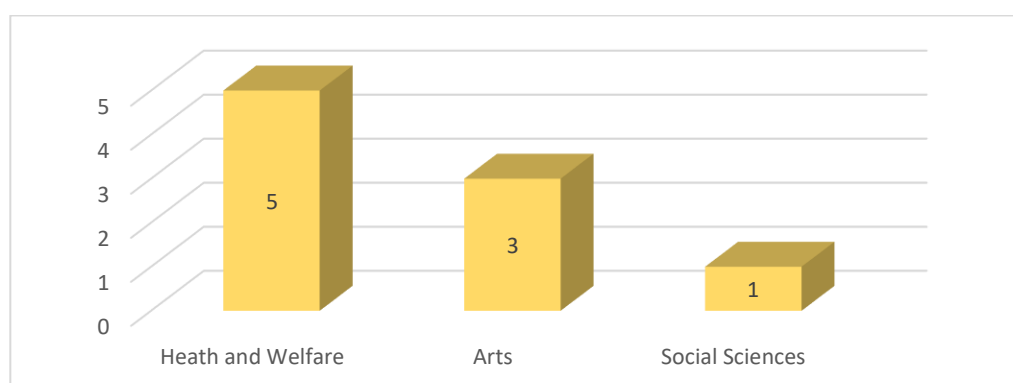
Figure A.3 Nationality of Participants compared to FET Learners Nationwide



5. Courses Selected by Participants

All participants in this study commenced a Level 5 QQI one-year course at Riverview College with 55.6% of participants undertaking a course in Health and Welfare (Naomi, Kevin, Nora, Owen and Brenda), 33.3% of participants studying a course in the Arts (Irene, Nigel and Ciara), with 11% studying Social Sciences (Gemma) (Figures A.4 and Table A.1).

Figure A.4 Courses Selected by Participants



There are over 800 different courses provided in the FET PLC sector in Ireland with the majority of full-time enrolments taking place in Health and Welfare, Services, Business/Administration/Law, Arts, General Programmes and Qualifications⁶⁶ and Humanities, (SOLAS, 2021c, p.8).

Table A.1 Courses Selected by Participants

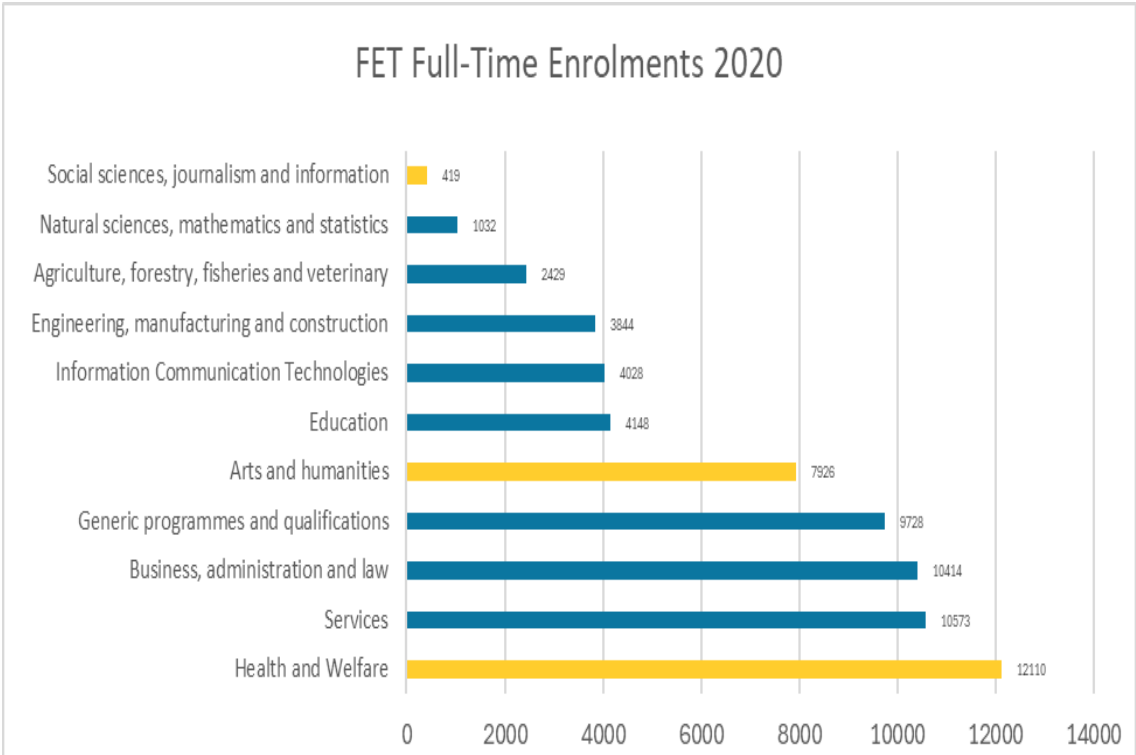
ISCED Field ⁶⁷	Course Title	Participants
Health (091)	Nursing Studies	Naomi and Kevin
	Health and Therapy	Nora
Welfare (092)	Social Studies	Owen
	Childcare	Brenda
Arts (021)	Art	Irene
	Theatre Studies	Ciara and Nigel
Social Sciences (031)	Psychology	Gemma

⁶⁶ Generic Programmes and qualifications include Employability skills ESOL English Language, Health and Wellbeing, Arts and Crafts (SOLAS, 2021c, p.12)

⁶⁷ Fields are classified according to ; International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Codes (Europa, 2013; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2013)

The national full-time enrolment figures on the various course areas are provided in Figure A.5, with course areas undertaken by the participants shaded in yellow. None of the participants were undertaking a course that is shaded in blue, however, while Riverview College offers courses in many of these areas⁶⁸, for ethical purposes it was not possible to include learners from these courses in the study as the researcher was a teacher and assessor on those courses (See Chapter 4).

Figure A.5 Nationwide PLC Learner Enrolments according to ISCED Field⁶⁹



(Based on SOLAS 2021c, p.12)

6. Prior Levels of Education

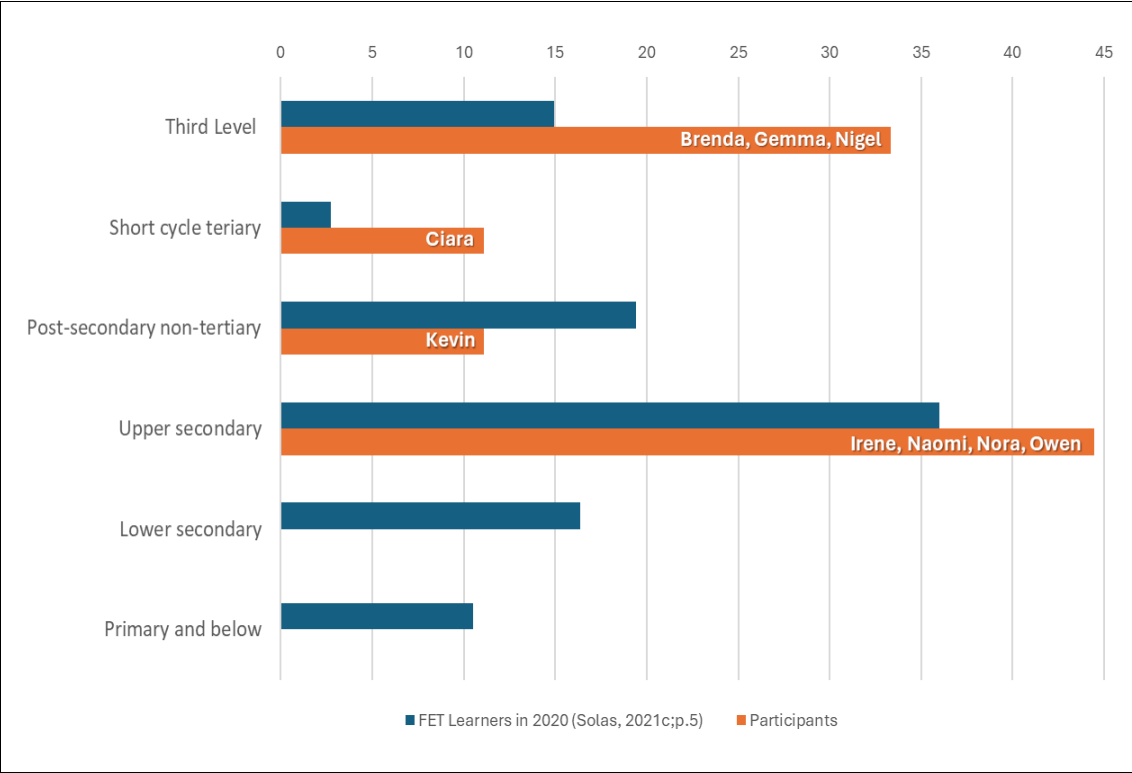
Participants in this study came to FET with various levels of previous education and while the traditional view of education is that of progression from a lower level to a higher-level qualification, this is not necessarily the case of the participants. In

⁶⁸ Riverview College also offers courses in the area of: Services (sports, travel and tourism), Business, Administration, Law and Information and Communication Technologies

⁶⁹ Fields are classified according to International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Codes (Europa, 2013; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2013)

comparing the highest levels of education amongst FET statistics (SOLAS 2021c), 44% of participants (Owen, Naomi, Nora and Irene) have completed secondary school senior cycle qualification compared to 36% of national FET students. 22% of participants (Ciara and Kevin) have completed post-secondary non-tertiary and short cycle tertiary qualifications which mirrors the national figures. A higher proportion of participants (33%) in this study hold Level 8 qualifications (Nigel, Brenda and Gemma) which is almost double that of FET learners nationally (Figure A.6).

Figure A.6 Highest Levels of Formal Education upon Enrolment in FET: Participants compared to national FET Enrolment (%)



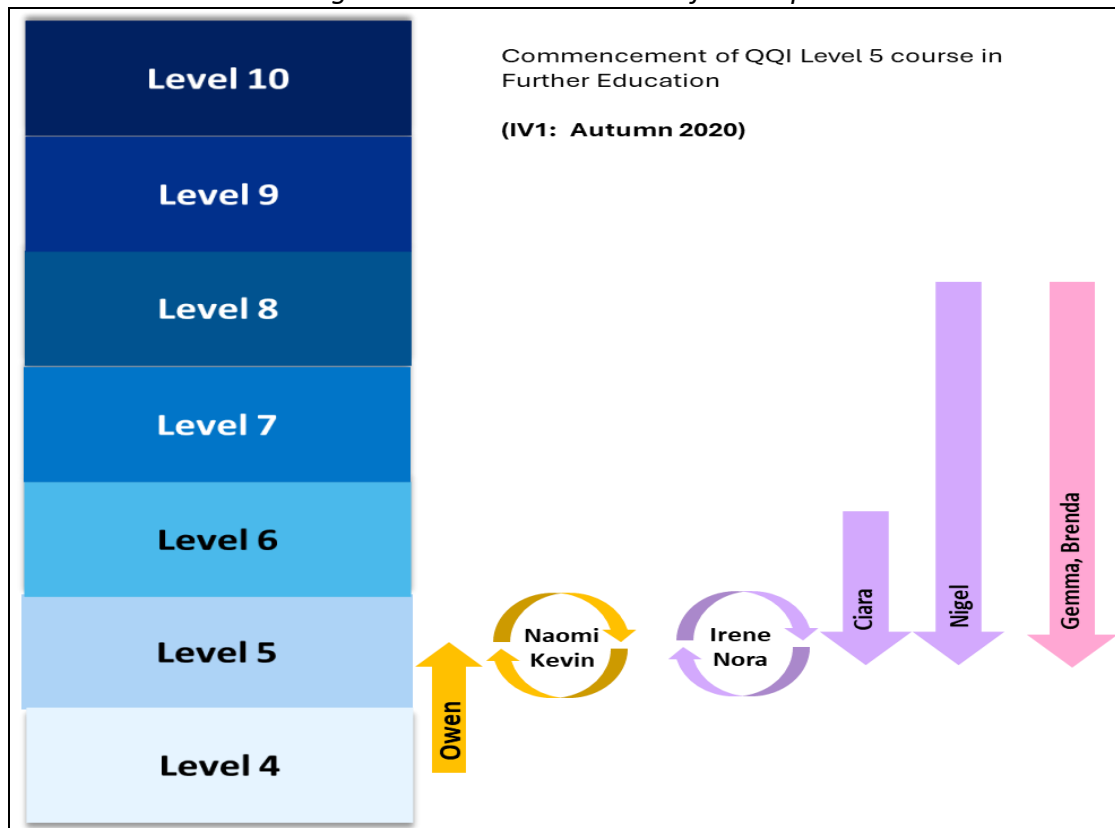
(Based on SOLAS, 2021c, p.5)

All secondary school leavers held a NFQ Level 4-5 qualification prior to studying at Riverview College. Owen completed the LCA (NFQ Level 4) , Naomi completed the LCE (NFQ Level 5) and Kevin completed the LCE and a Level 5 course in Woodrock College (Figure A.7). This is the first time that school leavers Owen and Naomi have enrolled

in FET. However, it is Kevin's second time in FET, having previously completed a course in at Woodrock College. Kevin chose a different college of FET this time because of the convenient location, because it was close to a hospital where he wanted to obtain work experience and because he did not enjoy his previous FET experience: "I found it to be incompatible with my mindset and intentions. Didn't have a lot in common with the people who partook in the course and I didn't see much of a future for me in it" (Kevin IV1).

The lifelong learners possessed the greatest variety of qualifications ranging from Level 5-Level 8. The highest educational qualification that Nora and Irene hold is the LCE (Level 5) while Ciara has completed a Level 5 QQI course and a one-year short course in a private third level college (NFQ Level 6). This is Ciara's second time in FET with the aim of exploring new career options. Ciara's previous FET experience was at Oaklawn College studying hospitality which she thoroughly enjoyed: "It was the most interesting, the most fully formed...it was actually focussing on history etc which I loved ...That was really good. I loved that course" (Ciara IV1). This time she returned to FET in Riverview College and enrolled on the theatre studies course as a way to explore a different subject area after recently leaving a very stressful employment. Nigel who was a secondary school teacher holds a NFQ Level 8 Degree in Arts and a Level 8 Higher Diploma in Education. All of the lifelong learners who were born and educated abroad, Gemma and Brenda, have degrees obtained in their respective countries of origin which are the equivalent of Level 8. This is Gemma's second time in FET as she previously completed a Level 5 course in Redwood College. While she enjoyed her experience in Redwood College, she subsequently chose to apply to Riverview College as they offered a specific course in Psychology which she wanted to study.

Figure A.7 Education Levels of Participants at Enrolment in FET



CSO figures (Central Statistics Office, 2024b) show that 34.4% of FET learners who graduated in 2021 were in higher education one year after graduating from their FET demonstrating vertical upward movement of FET learners through the NFQ levels. However, movement within educational sectors and institutions is not always linear (Harris and Rainey, 2012). Educational movement can also be cyclical as a result of learners studying a different subject at the same level as before or choosing to jump to any level allowed according to the institution's entry requirements. According to the Central Statistics Office (2024b) approximately 31% of all FET learners re-enrol in another FET course one year after graduation, with 21% of these learners choosing to enrol on another level 5 course which is indicative of cyclical movement within education (Central Statistics Office, 2024b). Reverse movement can also occur where students choose to study a lower qualification than they already possess. SOLAS (2022, p.5) figures report that 22% of FET were Level 8 degree holders and 3% of learners had completed a short-cycle course in third level.

7. Summary of the Participants

The participants of this study are a diverse cohort of individuals with reference to socio-economic background, age, gender and nationality, reflecting characteristics commonly found among many FET students (SOLAS, 2021c). In summary, the participants in this study are as follows:

Table A.2 Diversity of Participants

- Aged between 19-67 years old
- Secondary school leavers who completed the LCE (Naomi, Kevin)
- Secondary school leavers who completed the LCA (Owen)
- Mature students (Ciara, Nora, Nigel, Irene, Gemma, Brenda)
- Returning to Learning (RTL), having been out of education for at least a decade (Irene, Nora, Nigel)
- Previous students of FET (Kevin, Ciara and Gemma)
- Students with additional education needs (Owen)
- Degree holders (Nigel, Gemma, Brenda)
- Unemployed individuals (Nigel and Nora)
- Retired (Irene)
- In receipt of government funding such as unemployment benefit, VTOS or SUSI (Nora, Nigel, Owen)
- Experienced professionals who had careers prior to enrolling in FET (Nigel, Nora, Irene, Brenda, Gemma)
- From lower socio-economic backgrounds (Owen, Naomi, Nigel, Nora, Irene)
- From higher-economic backgrounds (Kevin, Ciara, Gemma and Brenda)
- Experiencing social and housing challenges (Nigel)
- Individuals born and completed secondary level education in Ireland (Owen, Naomi, Kevin, Ciara, Nigel, Nora and Irene)
- Individuals born and educated in Europe (outside of Ireland) (Brenda)
- Individuals born and educated in South America (Gemma)

Appendix 2. Participant Journeys Post-FET

An introduction to each of the participants was provided in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 discussed the motivations which influenced their enrolment in FET while an overview of the participants' experience in FET was provided in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. The following section provides a brief overview of participant outcomes.

Secondary School Leavers

Owen: When we first met Owen, his goal was to pursue a career in the field of social work. However, the LCA he completed was not recognised by CAO for entry to university so FET was Owen's only option to achieve the credentials necessary for this career. Owen successfully completed his Level 5 QQI qualification in Social Studies in Riverview College and progressed the next academic year to the BTEC Higher National Diploma (QQI Level 6+ equivalent), also in Riverview College. Throughout his studies in Riverview, Owen worked in a voluntary capacity in a community youth centre. Upon completion of his second year in Riverview College, his manager in this youth centre asked him to apply for a full-time paid position there. Owen is confident that he will soon be offered full-time paid employment in the community centre, a pathway that contrasts significantly different to his options prior to FET as he states: "if I didn't go to further ed [FET]...I would have been an apprentice because I come from a family of tradesmen" (Owen IV3). Owen also plans to complete a degree on a part-time basis in the near future and has not discounted continuing his education beyond degree level.

I definitely can see me at least getting a Bachelor's [degree] whether that be through a top up degree or going through the three years...I can see me at least maybe getting the Bachelor's, maybe then my master's [degree] (Owen IV3).

Naomi: At the first interview in 2020, Naomi discussed her lifelong dream of becoming a nurse and studying in a university in Dublin but she was unable to achieve that dream as a result of the barriers posed by CAO system. By the third interview, not only had Naomi been awarded the QQI Level 5 qualification in nursing studies with distinction, but as a result of this FET qualification, she was offered a university place in a nursing school at a Dublin university which she happily accepted:

I do feel quite, quite fortunate that I got to experience the PLC... if I hadn't done it because like I said, I probably would have just done something else and not actually been in the position that I wanted to be in (Naomi IV3).

Naomi has just completed her first year as a university nursing student which she enjoyed immensely. From initially associating school and education with stress and disappointment, Naomi expresses the excitement she experiences after being offered a university offer on her desired nursing degree:

Like I couldn't even put into words. I was feeling like it was so surreal and it was, it felt real full circle and I was, I did feel so, so lucky. Like on that day, like I'll never forget it. Everyone wishing me luck and like, you know, like everyone also to sharing that happiness for me as well...I felt very, very fortunate and very lucky about it. And I think the shock took a while to come down from (Naomi IV3).

Kevin: Having completed the LCE in 2019, Kevin's CAO points were insufficient to gain access to his desired university course so he enrolled in Woodrock FET College. Upon successful completion of that course, he found himself again unable to access university due to restrictions of the CAO system, leading him to enrol in Riverview College of FET in a third attempt to obtain a university place. By our final interview, Kevin had not only successfully completed his QQI Level 5 qualification in nursing studies with distinction in Riverview College, but he was now enjoying his experience as a university student on a Level 8 degree. At university, Kevin was elected Class President, began studying a European Language for the first time and plans to study and work abroad for one year as part of the university's Erasmus programme. Kevin

also intends on completing a Master's degree after his current course and hopes to work in the United Nations in the future.

My fire has been lit...It's my little candle that I keep as I go through my cave and I know where I've come from. I know the way out and I don't know where I'm going, but I don't care because I have my candle... It doesn't matter how dark it is. My candle will still be there and that's something that you don't get if you go from CAO straight into university. You don't (Kevin IV3).

Lifelong Learners

Ciara: Ciara initially applied to Riverview College with the intention of escaping from a stressful period in her previous employment and viewed her enrolment in FET as a means to “get direction for next year...it was genuinely just a pathway to see where I wanted to go, see what I wanted to do” (Ciara IV1). Ciara enrolled in Riverview as a way to seek clarity on her career path. She now feels that her future is clearer and her employment prospects are vastly improved: “I think it [FET] taught me to like to be more patient, to enjoy it and taught me that I could do it” (Ciara IV3). At our second interview, Ciara expressed that she had enjoyed her time in Riverview College so much that she decided to continue her education and apply to university. By our third interview, Ciara had successfully completed her Level 5 QQI course in Theatre Studies and was offered a place on a degree in Art and Design at a Dublin university where she is now a full-time student. However, Ciara is not enjoying university as much as she enjoyed her studies at Riverview College. She found the course in Riverview to be more engaging and interactive than university and finds that she is “quite bored” in university. She states that “if next year, [university] gets more interesting, then I'll stick it out” (Ciara IV3) and will aim achieve a Level 7 degree at minimum prior to seeking employment.

Gemma: Having lived and worked in Ireland for over five years, Gemma decided to change career and gain experience and a qualification in the area of psychology. As a result, she enrolled in the one-year full time QQI Level 5 Psychology course in Riverview College which she hoped would make her eligible to study at a university in Ireland. Gemma successfully completed her Level 5 QQI course in Psychology at Riverview College with distinction, however, her volunteer experience at a community food provision charity sparked her interest in pursuing employment in the social services sector. During our second interview, Gemma stated that she had obtained a full-time paid position working in the home services helping children with disabilities. By our third interview, Gemma realised that, as a result of her voluntary work experience during her time in Riverview College, she was more driven to work with the homeless services and she decided to apply for a position in this sector. She is now working full-time as a support worker in the emergency homeless services, where she hopes to progress her career and move into a managerial position: “during the certification in Riverview, my work experience was with homeless people. And I kept volunteering throughout and after the course...I think it was a very rounded course that provides you with that understanding of people and community” (Gemma IV3).

Brenda: At the time of our first interview, Brenda had recently moved to Ireland to gain employment in the childcare sector. However, due to the global pandemic, she was unable to secure a position. Instead, she decided to enrol in Riverview College to gain a qualification in childcare through the medium English which she hoped would facilitate options to gain access to university. By the second interview, Brenda had successfully completed a Level 5 QQI course in Childcare at Riverview College and was considering enrolling in the Level 6 childcare course in Riverview College or applying for work in this area. At the time of our final interview, Brenda had obtained a full-time position in childcare which she believes she wouldn't have obtained without the knowledge and qualification gained during the Level 5 childcare course:

It made me progress at work, yeah...I'm very happy after doing that course. And I feel like I achieved something like finishing

the course for me like was already an achievement. And then getting work. Because if I wouldn't have done the course, I wouldn't get my job. So I kind am grateful for all I've learned (Brenda IV3).

Brenda still would like to apply to study English on a Master's programme in the future and is also considering obtaining a qualification to teach English as a second language to adults.

Nigel: Nigel previously qualified as a secondary school teacher in the UK and worked there until his return to Ireland a number of years ago. Nigel's decision to return to Ireland was precipitated by personal issues and he wanted to seek stability and security in his living situation. Nigel enrolled in Riverview College in order to pursue his interest in acting and to provide him with the skills and experience to become a professional actor in Ireland. Due to personal challenges, Nigel was unable to complete his course in Riverview College and he withdrew from the QQI Level 5 Theatre Studies course in March 2021, two months before the end of the course. At the time of the second interview, Nigel indicated that he was planning to return to the course in next academic year. While this did not materialise, by the third interview, Nigel had moved from supported accommodation into an independent apartment where he is progressively taking more ownership and control of the day-to-day management of his life.

Teachers in Riverview College have maintained contact with Nigel and recently invited him to a play by college students. Nigel has enrolled to recommence his Theatre Studies course in September 2022 in Riverview College with plans to continue the following year to the BTEC Diploma in Theatre Studies (NFQ Level 6). Nigel is looking forward to returning to Riverview College, a plan which he considers to be the motivation and incentive needed to maintain his personal progress and growth: "I saw a production actually at the college that they [Riverview College] invited me to back in...around March...it just made me more excited. So this is all waiting for me" (Nigel IV3).

Nora: Nora completed her Leaving Certificate over twenty-six years ago and was working full-time in the family business since that time. Prior to enrolling in Riverview College, Nora had left this employment due to the owners' retirement (her parents) and because she also felt it was time for a change in her life. Nora decided to enrol in the Health and Therapy course at Riverview College Riverview College, both as a means to support her mother who has restricted mobility and as a means to explore alternative career directions. Riverview College was Nora's first time in full-time education since secondary school. By our second interview, Nora successfully completed her QQI Level 5 QQI Health and Therapy course with distinction. Nora decided to remain in Riverview College and enrolled on the BTEC Higher National Diploma course (equivalent of QQI Level 6+). By the third interview, Nora successfully completed year one of the BTEC diploma and has commenced two separate online courses in Receptionist Studies and Law which she hopes to complete during the summer months. Nora is eager to obtain a degree and she has been accepted to study a Level 7 Community Development degree which commences in the coming months. Nora is also working on a voluntary basis for a community organisation teaching English as a second language and she plans to complete a TEFL course to qualify as a teacher of English as a second language. Nora encapsulates how she feels about the changes in her life since enrolling in Riverview College: "For somebody like me who hated primary school, hated secondary school, didn't had any interest in going to university or college. Look at me now" (Nora IV3).

Irene: Almost fifty years have passed since Irene completed the Leaving Certificate and Riverview College was her first time in education since secondary school. Recently retired, Irene decided to enrol in the Art Course in Riverview merely to reignite her interest in art: "I just would like to get through the whole course. That's all" (Irene IV1). By the second interview, Irene decided to apply to university and was keen to obtain a place on a degree in Art and Design. By the third interview, Irene had successfully completed her QQI Level 5 Art Course in Riverview College and was offered a place at a Dublin university in the Art and Design degree where she has just completed the first

year of this degree. Irene is now considering applying to travel abroad on Erasmus as part of her degree and she is also travelling to Venice soon with her classmates. In addition, Irene has completed a short self-portrait course, a teacher training course in yoga and she has enrolled in a short-term art course which is run by an internationally acclaimed and award-winning artist. Irene is active on social media and has created her own social media accounts where she displays her art. She is also considering selling her work at exhibitions throughout Ireland. Irene entered the prestigious Royal Hibernian Academy art competition, progressing through the first round and she intends on entering similar competitions in the future. Having studied at Riverview College and now at university, Irene feels that: “being educated is amazing. Getting education is amazing. Like it [FET] changes you so much. It makes you think in and see in a different way, you know, appreciate things and appreciate people in a different way” (Irene IV3).

Appendix 3. Institutional Approval (anonymised)

ETB Chief Executive Approval Form

Date: 02 November 2020

Research Title: The relevance of Further Education Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses to students in the context of the Irish Education System

I have read the Research Information Letter and I understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I have also received a copy of the Participant Information Letter that will be given to students and the Participant Consent Form. I understand that the identity of the participants and the college will not be revealed in the reporting of this research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of the participants are:

- Participation is entirely voluntary
- Participants are free to withdraw from the research at any time without any penalties or pressure to continue.
- Participants are free to withdraw or retract their information at any time prior to the data anonymisation stage.
- The interviews will be strictly confidential and information obtained from these interviews will be available only to the researcher and her supervisors.
- Under no circumstances will any names or other identifiable information be included in the published report.

I hereby give my approval for Edel Griffiths to carry out this research in the 

Signed (CE of the ):

Name (Block Capitals):

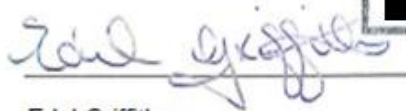
College Name:

Date:

21/11/2020

Education And Training Board

Signed (Researcher):



Name (Block Capitals):

Edel Griffiths

University Name:

Maynooth University

Date:

03/11/2020

College Principal Approval Form

Date: 23 October 2020

Research Title: The relevance of Further Education Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses to students in the context of the Irish Education System

I have read the Research Information Letter and I understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I have also received a copy of the Participant Information Letter that will be given to students and the Participant Consent Form. I understand that the identity of the participants and the college will not be revealed in the reporting of this research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of the participants are:

- Participation is entirely voluntary
 - Participants are free to withdraw from the research at any time without any penalties or pressure to continue.
 - Participants are free to withdraw or retract their information at any time prior to the data anonymisation stage.
 - The interviews will be strictly confidential and information obtained from these interviews will be available only to the researcher and her supervisors.
 - Under no circumstances will any names or other identifiable information be included in the published report.
-
- I confirm that participants in this research may avail of the support and services provided by the college Guidance Counsellor if required and that Edel Griffiths can provide details of the college policy for accessing the Guidance Counsellor to the participant.
 - I hereby give my approval for Edel Griffiths to carry out this research in this college.

Signed (Principal):

Name (Block Capitals):

College Name:

Date:

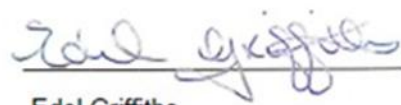


Signed (Researcher):

Name (Block Capitals):

University Name:

Date:


Edel Griffiths
Maynooth University
23 October 2020

Appendix 4. Maynooth University Ethics Approval Certificate

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY,

MAYNOOTH, CO. KILDARE, IRELAND



Dr Carol Barrett

Secretary to Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee

18 May 2020

Edel Margaret Griffiths
School of Education
Maynooth University

Dear Edel,

The Social Research Ethics Sub-committee has reviewed the ethical protocol for your project: "The relevance of Further Education Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses to students in the context of the Irish Education System" 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 31/08/2024.

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 Delma Byrne, Department of Sociology
Dr Katriona O Sullivan, School of Education

Reference Number GRESC-2020-2402171

Appendix 5. Information and Consent Form for Research Participants



SRESC TEMPLATE

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Participant Information Sheet

Purpose of the Study. My name is Edel Griffiths and I am a doctoral student, in the Department of Education Maynooth University. I am also a Teacher in the City of Dublin Education and Training Board.

As part of the requirements for the PhD in Education, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Dr Delma Byrne and Dr Katriona O'Sullivan.

The research study is concerned with how students are getting on in Further Education, how this experience has influenced their decision on what to do next and if there is any influence of the college or course on your experiences during the year in further education and in the year that follows.

What will the study involve? If you agree to participate, you will be asked to talk to me in the form of a semi-structured interview which will happen three times over the next two years. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a general list of topics and/or questions to be discussed or asked. The order and timing of these questions may differ, depending on the response of the participant and the amount of time the participant needs to answer each question. Each of these interviews will last approximately 50 minutes and will take place over the following timeframe:

- 1st semi-structured interview: November/ December 2020
 - The purpose of this interview is to gain an insight into why you chose to study in a further education college and what your expectations are from this course and college.
- 2nd semi-structured interview: May/June 2021
 - This interview will ask about your level of satisfaction with the course and if/how the college has had an impact on you during the year.

- 3rd semi-structured interview: May/June 2022
 - In this interview we will chat about options that were open to you after the course, what decisions you made in relation to areas such as education and/or employment and if further education had any impact on these decisions and activities for you.

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.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked to take part in this study because your experience as an FET student will provide important insights into why FET students study in further educational colleges and the influence that further education has on later decision-making and choices after college, whether it be the workplace, the home or another educational pathway.

Do you have to take part?

No, you don't have to take part in this research. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. If you decide to do so, before each interview, you will be asked to sign a Consent Form and be given a copy of the Consent Form and this Information Sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. You are also free to withdraw your information up until such time as anonymization of the data has occurred. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships with the college that you are studying in.

What information will be collected?

Information that will be collected from you includes:

- Personal and Family Details (eg. Name, age, general location, family background)
- Educational Details (eg. Schools and colleges you attend/attended, reasons for choice of schools, opinions and experiences in education, availability of information on options for education and supports available).
- Plans for the future (eg. educational/career/life plans)
- Information on any areas or topics related to the research that you would like to discuss, mention or introduce.
- At the end of the interview, I would also like to ask for your feedback on feedback on the interview in terms of the process, questions, techniques and suggestions you might have for improvement. Your feedback will help to improve the process for future interviews.

Where will the interviews take place?

Where possible, the interviews will take place within your college or university environment in order to ensure that you are more familiar and at ease in the interview setting. A private room will be available for each of the interviews so that the interviews are conducted confidentially

and without any distraction. However, if it is more convenient for you, or if you prefer the interview to be conducted in a different location, an alternative location for interview can be agreed and arranged. An alternative location for this interview could include a private meeting room within a different college of further education, education facility or community centre which may be local and accessible to you. Alternatively, if it is not possible to conduct the interview at any of these locations or if you prefer to conduct the interview in an online setting (via the internet), the interview could take place online. For online interviews, I will be using the computer application called Microsoft Teams. In advance of the interview, I will email you a link for the meeting, which when clicked, will bring you into the online interview. You will not need to download any software for this. The only technological requirement from you is good internet access and an inbuilt microphone on your device (you may also use video if you wish, though this is not a requirement). For an online interview, it is recommended that you are based in a private room, where you feel free to talk openly and without distractions and interruptions.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

In the week after the interview, I will type up all of the questions and the responses you gave during the interview along with any notes that I may have made. I will assign a fictitious name to your interview in order to create anonymity for you. I will keep a record of the fictitious name and assign a code to it. This means that anything you say – any identifiable information including your name – will be removed during transcription. Identifiable follow-up information will be accessed only by the research team: Edel Griffiths (researcher), Dr Delma Byrne (Research Supervisor), Dr Katriona O’Sullivan (Research Supervisor).

If you so request, the transcripts of your interview/s can be made available to you.

Limits to Confidentiality:

- If information is provided by you during the interview which includes illegal behaviour, or behaviour that could or has caused harm to yourself or, in this instance, I may have a statutory obligation to report this information to the relevant authorities. If the conversation appears to begin to discuss such information, I shall remind you of this requirement. If any such information is shared with me, I will advise you at the time of my requirement to discuss the context of the information with my supervisors in order to decide if it is to be reported.
- 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 the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

What will happen to the information which you give?

The anonymised interview transcript and consent forms will be held on a secure server which is encrypted and password protected. Once the transcriptions are finalised, the audio recording of the interview will be deleted. All hard copy information will be scanned by the researcher in the researcher's office, uploaded to the MU secure server and shredded immediately after. All electronic/digital data and files will be encrypted, password protected and stored on a Maynooth University secure server.

This data from the interview(s) will be accessed only by the research team⁷⁰. This data will then be analysed and included in the research. This means that when the research is completed, your anonymised data will form part of the thesis publication which will be publicly available. It is expected that this research will be completed within a maximum time period of 6 years from now. Once the thesis has been finalised and published, all data that could identify you in any way will be destroyed by Edel Griffiths. Manual data will be shredded confidentially and electronic data will be erased and disks reformatted in order to permanently delete this information.

There may be occasions in the future when the fully anonymised dataset for secondary data analysis may be used only by those named in the research team for separate projects in the future. Secondary data analysis is whereby the anonymised information that you provide for this project may be used for different projects and can include anonymised information provided by you for statistical purposes and/or anonymised quotations or extracts from your interview.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up and presented as a thesis document to Maynooth University, supervisory team, an internal examiner from Maynooth University and an external academic examiner. It is planned to share and present the findings of this research to Principals and staff within the ETB. I also intend to submit the research findings to the Directors of the ETB and SOLAS for their review and consideration. There may also be opportunities to present and publish the findings of this research at national and international conferences and in educational journals or publications.

If you wish, I can keep you updated throughout the research process. If you let me know during the interview that you are interested in receiving updates, I can email you an update on the study in terms of what progress has been made and what work is planned. If there are any interim findings or results that are to be published, prior to the final submission of the thesis,

⁷⁰ Edel Griffiths (researcher), Dr Delma Byrne (Research Supervisor), Dr Katriona O'Sullivan (Research Supervisor)

if you wish, I can send you on a summary of these findings also. Once the thesis has been finalised, if you would like to receive information on the findings and recommendations of the study, I can arrange a meeting whereby you and the other participants would be invited to a presentation and discussion.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? While I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part, it is possible that talking about your experiences may cause some emotional discomfort. If you become upset, you are free to stop, pause or cancel the interview. If there is a question that you do not wish to answer, we can leave that out of the interview and move on to the next question. You can take a break from the interview at any time or you can cancel or reschedule the interview. You are also free to change or delete any part of the interview questions or responses as you wish within the timeframe outlined in the Participant Consent Form (point 10). I will also discuss the college policy with you and the supports available within the college. Details of these supports are included in your college student handbook and can be provided to you upon request.

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 avail of the supports available in your college. Details of these supports are provided in your college student handbook and a copy can also be provided to you upon request.

If you feel the research has not been carried out as described above, you may contact my supervisors: Dr Delma Byrne [email address] ; Dr Katriona O'Sullivan [email address]

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Edel Griffiths, at Email: [email address]

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the Participant Consent Form overleaf.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Participant Consent Form

I.....agree to participate in Edel Griffiths' research study titled "The relevance of Further Education and Training courses to students in the context of the Irish Education System".

Please tick each statement below as applicable / if you are in agreement with the statement:

1. The purpose and nature of the study have been explained to me verbally and in writing and I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. I am participating voluntarily. ☐
3. I understand that I am being asked to participate in three interviews for this study ☐
(Interview 1: November/December 2020 Interview 2: May/June 2021 Interview 3: May/June 2022)
4. I understand that the location of the interview will be online via MS Teams. However, if this is not convenient for me or if I wish to meet at a different location for the interview (or attend the interview online via MS Teams), I will contact [email address] in order to agree and arrange a suitable alternative location. ☐
5. I understand that it may be necessary to conduct the interview online and I consent to being interviewed online (via MS Teams) if required. ☐
6. If my contact details change during the course of this study, I shall forward my updated contact details to [email address] ☐
7. I give permission for my interviews with Edel Griffiths to be recorded on MS Teams ☐
8. 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. ☐
9. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to anonymisation of the data. ☐
10. Anonymisation of data will take place on the dates below. If I wish to withdraw permission for

the use of my data from an interview, I will do so by emailing [email address]
before these dates:

☐

Interview 1: 16 January 2021

Interview 2: 31 July 2021

Interview 3: 31 July 2022

11. It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request.

☐

12. I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the Participant Information Sheet

☐

13. I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects
and any subsequent publications by the research team⁷¹ if I give permission below:

☐

Select as appropriate:

14a. I agree to for anonymised quotations/ extracts from my interview to be used in the dissertation

☐

OR:

14b. I do not agree for anonymised quotations/ extracts from my interview to be used in the
dissertation

☐

15a. I agree for anonymised quotations extracts from my interview to be used in future research
projects

☐

OR:

15b. I do not agree for anonymised quotations/extracts from my interview to be used in future
research projects

☐

⁷¹ Edel Griffiths (researcher), Dr Delma Byrne (Research Supervisor), Dr Katriona O’Sullivan (Research Supervisor)

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 EDEL GRIFFITHS

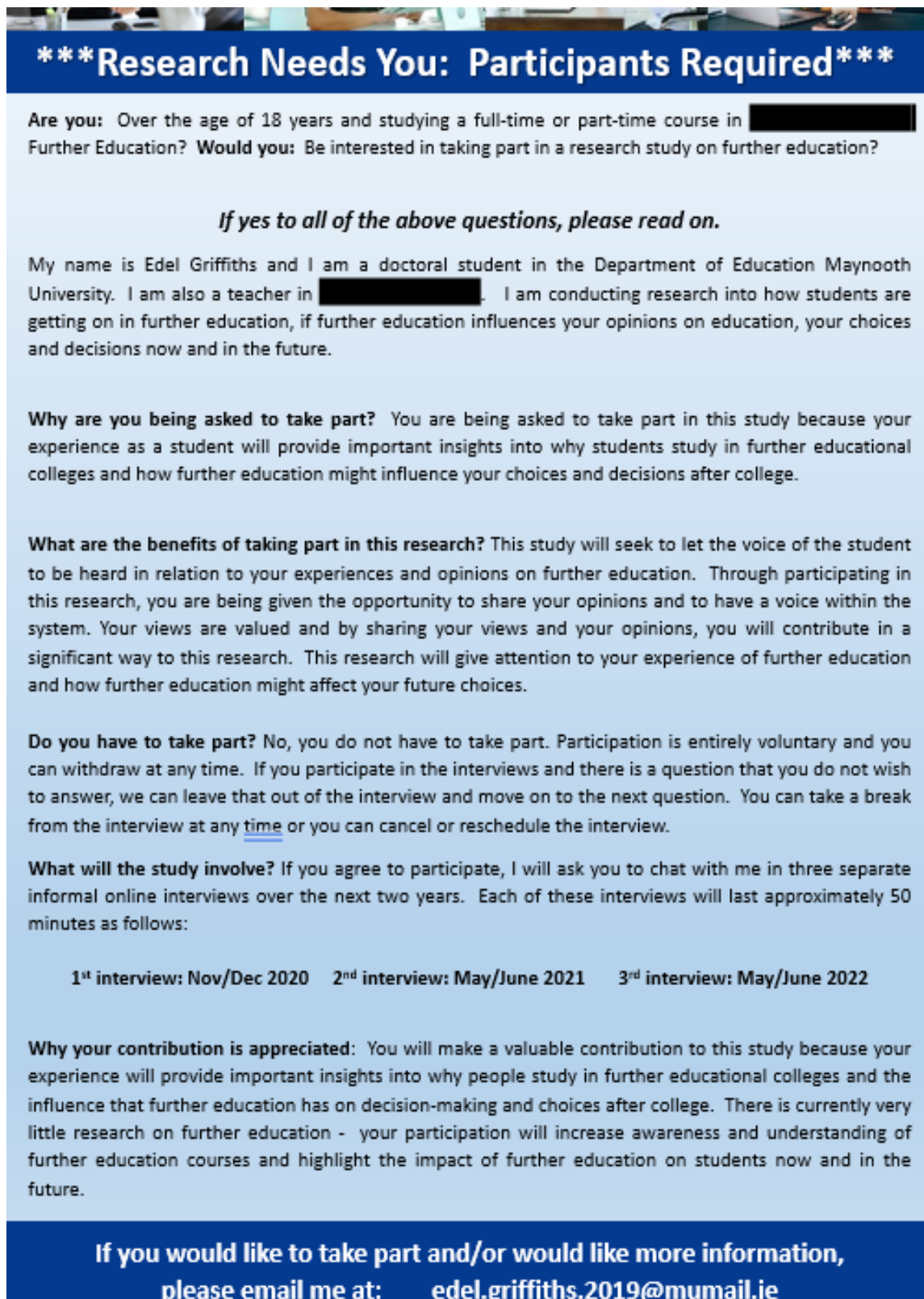
If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the [position title] at [research ethics email] or [telephone number]. Please be assured that your 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 [name and MU office location], who can be contacted at [email address]. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at [website address]

Two copies to be made: 1 for participant, 1 for PI

Appendix 6. Participant Recruitment Poster

Figure A.8

The poster is titled '***Research Needs You: Participants Required***' in white text on a blue background. Below the title, it asks if the reader is over 18 and studying, and if they would be interested in a research study. It then says 'If yes to all of the above questions, please read on.' The main text is in black on a light blue background. It introduces Edel Griffiths, a doctoral student and teacher, who is conducting research on further education. It explains why the reader is being asked to take part, the benefits of taking part, and the requirements for participation. It also lists the dates of three interviews and explains why the reader's contribution is appreciated. The poster ends with a blue bar containing contact information in white text.

*****Research Needs You: Participants Required*****

Are you: Over the age of 18 years and studying a full-time or part-time course in [redacted] Further Education? **Would you:** Be interested in taking part in a research study on further education?

If yes to all of the above questions, please read on.

My name is Edel Griffiths and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Education Maynooth University. I am also a teacher in [redacted]. I am conducting research into how students are getting on in further education, if further education influences your opinions on education, your choices and decisions now and in the future.

Why are you being asked to take part? You are being asked to take part in this study because your experience as a student will provide important insights into why students study in further educational colleges and how further education might influence your choices and decisions after college.

What are the benefits of taking part in this research? This study will seek to let the voice of the student to be heard in relation to your experiences and opinions on further education. Through participating in this research, you are being given the opportunity to share your opinions and to have a voice within the system. Your views are valued and by sharing your views and your opinions, you will contribute in a significant way to this research. This research will give attention to your experience of further education and how further education might affect your future choices.

Do you have to take part? No, you do not have to take part. Participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. If you participate in the interviews and there is a question that you do not wish to answer, we can leave that out of the interview and move on to the next question. You can take a break from the interview at any time or you can cancel or reschedule the interview.

What will the study involve? If you agree to participate, I will ask you to chat with me in three separate informal online interviews over the next two years. Each of these interviews will last approximately 50 minutes as follows:

1st interview: Nov/Dec 2020 2nd interview: May/June 2021 3rd interview: May/June 2022

Why your contribution is appreciated: You will make a valuable contribution to this study because your experience will provide important insights into why people study in further educational colleges and the influence that further education has on decision-making and choices after college. There is currently very little research on further education - your participation will increase awareness and understanding of further education courses and highlight the impact of further education on students now and in the future.

**If you would like to take part and/or would like more information,
please email me at: edel.griffiths.2019@mumail.ie**

Appendix 7. Interview 1 (IV1) Question Guide (Phase 1)

Proposed Interview 1 (IV1) Question Guide

- **MS Teams - Consent to Record**
- **CONSENT FORM**
- I shall ask the participant if they are happy with the set-up style of the room (or comfortable with the online platform in terms of quality and sound, if conducting the interview via MS Teams)
- Background to myself in terms of my career and education (including that I am currently a teacher in a further education college, that I am originally from a local/nearby area and that I attended a full-time plc course in a local college of further education).
- I will introduce the topic of the research and discuss the purpose, objectives and expected outcomes of the research. I will confirm that this research is to fulfil the requirements of a PhD in Education and mention that while it is hoped that this thesis research will bring more attention to the further education sector, that this is not a guarantee. I will state that while this research can provide more information to stakeholders on the relevance of further education, the main purpose is to contribute to the body of knowledge on the further education sector in Ireland.
- Nature of the Study discussed and the 3 interviews involved
- I shall thank the participant for their time and contribution to the study.
- I will also advise the participant that if they say something they regret saying and did not mean to share, that I will not include this information in the research and that there will be no inclusion of that information in the transcription or any part of the research
- if there was any question that they would like to return to and amend or give more information on.
- I will advise the participant that I shall not disclose information to third parties, and that if there is a requirement for such disclosure, that this will not be done without their explicit and written permission (exception if there is information provided which includes illegal behaviour, or behaviour that could or has caused harm to the participant or others)
- Where possible refrain from using specific names of staff. These will be anonymised in the transcript.

- I shall also advise the participant that during the week following each interview, they may wish to reflect on the interview. If during this time period, they feel that there is any additional information they wish to discuss, expand upon, erase or amend after the interview has taken place, that they may contact me and we can arrange a follow-up interview to discuss these topics.
1. Ask the participant if there is anything that is unclear or for which they need more information. Discuss and go through Consent Form (or confirm signed)
 2. Participant Name:
 3. Age:
 4. College:
 5. First time in a further education?
 6. Course Name:
 7. Course Duration:
 8. Course Level (NFQ):

Socio-economic and cultural perspectives influencing participant's academic choices

1. Have you come to this college directly from completing secondary school? If no, explore with the participant their highest level of educational education, what year they left school.
2. Are you living / located close to the college?
3. Tell me why you chose the course you are studying?
4. Why did you choose this college? Probe to identify the main reasons
5. What secondary school did you attend?
6. Did you find secondary school helpful in trying to guide you or help you in deciding what you wanted to do or could do after school? Expand.
7. Was plc ever mentioned. Probe
8. Was it easy to learn about options available to you for courses in education (either at FE, HE etc)
9. Was it easy to learn about funding options available to you for courses in education ?
10. What is your mother's occupation?
11. What is your father's occupation?
12. Did your parents have any influence on your decision to choose this course / college. Expand
13. Do you know many people who went/are going to university? Expand
14. Was the cost of college a factor in your decision to choose this course? Expand

Student involvement, academically and socially, which can affect their retention and progression

1. Are you in employment at the moment? Expand
2. Do you have any family commitments (eg. Children, elderly parents etc). If yes, how did these commitments have any impact on your decision to attend a further education college? If yes, do you think that these commitments affect your participation and/or continuation on the course (if yes, please discuss)

3. What do you hope to achieve / gain / learn from this year at FE
4. What do you want to do when you finish your course here at FE
5. Support from college in terms of applying to university (or employment)?
6. Do you think social activities (eg. Sport clubs, social events etc) are an important aspect of college? Expand

Motivation, resilience and achievement during challenging academic transitions

1. What are your goals for the future?
2. Do you think that your course in FET will help you achieve these goals? Expand
3. What do you think will be the main challenges for achieving your goals?
4. Is there anything you do that helps you to overcome challenges in college? Expand
5. On a scale of 1-10, where 1 = very easy and 10 = very difficult, how challenging do you think this course will be? Probe and discuss further
6. What do you think will be the easiest things / the hardest things on the course?
7. Tell me what you think of the statement: "Intelligent people are born that way and success comes easy to them"

Students' consideration of educational options and their perceptions of their academic accomplishments

1. Did you consider going to other colleges / Universities? Expand
2. Did you apply to university on the CAO? Expand
3. Was there much support or encouragement at school to go to university? Expand
4. Are you happy with your choice of a) college b) course? Explain (probe to see if the student feels that they 'fit in', impressions of the teachers, fellow students, support systems)
5. Why do you think students choose to attend a college of further education?
6. If points weren't a requirement which option would you advise (eg. University, Institute of Technology, Further Education, Private College or other), what would you choose and why?

Changes in Attitudes / Opinions of Participants over time in relation to aspects of education

1. What are your impressions so far of the course
2. What are your impressions so far of the college (probe to see if the student feels that they 'fit in', impressions of the teachers, fellow students, support systems)
3. What are your experiences of college Support Systems?
4. I'm going to mention some words and I'd like you to say what words / ideas / thoughts / feelings come to mind when you hear or think of these words:
a) Education b) School c) College d) University e) Teacher f) Lecturer
g) Guidance Counsellor
5. Do you think that FET courses are a good choice for students? Tell me why you think that ...
6. Do you think students should go straight to university, work, do a further education course or other? Expand

Covid / Impact

1. Do you think that the covid situation influenced your choice to come to FE? If so, why and in what way? (eg. prompts Leaving Cert change – were the results

lower/higher than anticipated / had you planned to attend FET or university) CAO Points increase?

2. How do you think Covid-19 has impacted on your experience as an FET student?
3. Are you satisfied with your college experience so far? Expand

Supports, Technology

1. Are there any difficulties you are experiencing with college this year (prompt if needed eg. technology, access to the college, access to teachers, college supports etc?)
2. What college supports are available to you and do you think there are sufficient college supports available to you?
3. What technology / devices / equipment do you currently use for your course ? Do you feel you have sufficient technology to attend classes online, complete your assignments and complete the course ?
4. Do you feel you have sufficient training in technology to attend classes online, complete your assignments and complete the course
5. Do you think your experience in FET could be improved? If so, how
6. What do you think you will do next year? A) Attend another FET course in the same college B) attend another FET course in a different college C) Attend university D) Get a job E) Other (explain) F) Don't know

Close

- At the end of each interview, I will thank the participant for their time.
- I also ask the participant for feedback on how they feel the interview went. The feedback I will seek involves how comfortable they felt, their thoughts on the questions (wording, timeliness, relevance), their thoughts on how I came across in the interview and if there are any suggestions they have for improving the process.
- I shall also ask the participant if there was any question that they would like to return to and amend or give more information on. The option will be given to the participant to listen back to the audio recording of any section of the interview
- Reminder to change, amend any answers within the timeframe (see consent)
- Remind of next follow up interview at the end of the term and that I will be in contact nearer the time.

Appendix 8. Interview 2 (IV2) Question Guide (Phase 2)

Proposed Interview 2 (IV2) Question Guide

CONSENT RECORDING MSTEAMS

CONSENT FORM

SEE PAGE 1 OF PHASE 1 INTERVIEW

SEE INDIVIDUALISED NOTES FOR THIS PARTICIPANT – AREAS TO REMEMBER/DISCUSS/FOLLOW UP FROM PREVIOUS INTERVIEWS

Nature of the Study discussed and the number of interviews involved

Consent Form discussed and signed

Participant Name:

Age:

College:

What course are you studying?

Course Name: Course Duration:

Course Level (NFQ):

Impact of FET college / course and preparedness for life after college

1. What are your experiences of your course? Probe and expand
2. Are you happy with your choice of college? Probe and expand
3. Is the course or college what you expected it to be? Probe and expand
4. Do you think that this course prepares you for employment? Probe and expand
5. Do you think that this course prepares you for university? Probe and expand
6. Do you think that this course prepares you for life in general? Probe and expand
7. Do you feel you have changed in any way since starting the course ? Is any of that related to the course?

Student involvement, academically and socially, which can affect their retention and progression within education.

1. Have you applied to other colleges / Universities after this course? Probe and expand
2. Do you think that this course or college has helped you improve your skills in assignments or exams? Probe and expand
3. Are you happy with the information provided in further education on your choices after college? Probe and expand
4. Did you find it easy to 'fit in' / to feel comfortable in this college? Probe and expand
5. Do you think that your experience in FET has changed your opinion on what it would be like to go to university? If so, how has your opinion changed and what contributed to that change?
6. Are there many think social activities in the college? Probe and expand
7. In your opinion are social activities an important aspect of college life? Probe and expand

Growth mind-set, motivation, resilience and achievement during challenging academic transitions

1. What are the main things you have learnt from the course or college? Probe and expand
2. On a scale of 1-10, where 1 = easy and 10 = very difficult, how challenging is this course?
3. Was it more difficult than what you had previously expected from a FET course and if so, in what way
4. Tell me about main challenges you have experienced during the year?
5. Have your teachers or the college helped you to overcome these challenges in any way? Probe and expand
6. Is there anything you do differently as a result of your time in FET that helps you to overcome challenges? Probe and expand
7. Are there ways that the college or teachers or other staff in the college help students to succeed?
8. At our last meeting we discussed the statement: "Intelligent people are born that way and success comes easy to them" and you said x. Do you still agree with that?
9. Do you think that the teachers in the college motivate students to achieve their goals? If yes, in what way
10. Are there any supports provided by the college to help students who are struggling and finding it difficult to come to college / submit assignments / do exams etc? Discuss further

Students' beliefs and how they perceive their academic accomplishments (self-efficacy, reflexivity).

1. Are you surprised at what you have achieved so far this year in terms of assignments, grades, learning? Probe and expand
2. Do you receive information in the college on options open to you after this course? Probe and expand
3. Do you receive feedback on your assessments or progress in the course? If yes, does this help you in any way with future assessments? Probe and expand
4. Do you think that having done this course, that you might be more able or prepared for third level / university?
5. Having completed x months in FE, are there any skills you have learned that would help you with future studies?
6. Do you think there is any stigma / negative perceptions of PLC/FE?

Socio-economic and cultural perspectives influencing participant's reasons regarding application/ gaining entry to higher education

1. Do you receive any financial support for this course? If yes, may I ask what type of financial support do you receive?
2. Do you think that the financial support is enough to allow you to continue on in college or to university? Probe and expand
3. Is the cost of college a factor in your decision for the future? Probe and expand
4. Are you in employment at the moment? Full/time Probe and expand If going to college in the future, full time?
5. Do you have any family commitments (eg. Children, elderly parents etc). If yes: did these commitments have any impact on your decision to attend a further education college? do you think that these commitments affect your participation and/or continuation on the course (if yes, please discuss)

Changes in Attitudes / Opinions of Participants over time in relation to aspects of education

1. At our last meeting, you mentioned that you wanted to achieve X from this year at FE? Have your goals changed? Probe and expand

2. I'm going to mention some words and I'd like you to say what words / ideas / thoughts / feelings come to mind when you hear or think of these words: a) Education b) School c) College d) University e) Teacher f) Lecturer g) Guidance Counsellor
3. Do you think that FET courses are a good choice for students? Tell me why you think that
4. Do you feel that there are any drawbacks to students doing a Post Leaving Certificate course? Discuss
5. Would you recommend a plc course in FET to your friends? Probe and expand
6. Are you happy with your choice of a) college b) course? Explain
7. Do you have any regrets about your educational choices to date?

Covid

1. What was the impact of covid on the course and on you as a student
2. What was positive /negative
3. How did the course adapt in light of covid
4. How did you keep in touch with students / teachers
5. Technology – follow up on discussions from last interview and identify if any changes occurred
6. Did you find the year more or less stressful than you thought? How did you manage stress during the year
7. Do you feel that it affected your overall experience
8. Impact on physical / mental health online:
9. Was there support for you in this regard

Close

- At the end of each interview, I will thank the participant for their time.
- I also ask the participant for feedback on how they feel the interview went. The feedback I will seek involves how comfortable they felt, their thoughts on the questions (wording, timeliness, relevance), their thoughts on how I came across in the interview and if there are any suggestions they have for improving the process.
- I shall also ask the participant if there was any question that they would like to return to and amend or give more information on. The option will be given to the participant to listen back to the audio recording of any section of the interview
- Reminder to change, amend any answers within the timeframe (see consent)
- Mention timeline of thesis and planned date for completion

Appendix 9. Interview 3 (IV3) Question Guide (Phase 3)

Proposed Interview 3 (IV3) Question Guide

CONSENT RECORDING MSTEAMS

CONSENT FORM

SEE PAGE 1 OF PHASE 1 and 2 INTERVIEWS.

SEE INDIVIDUALISED NOTES FOR THIS PARTICIPANT – AREAS TO REMEMBER/DISCUSS/FOLLOW UP FROM PREVIOUS INTERVIEWS

Nature of the Study discussed and the number of interviews involved

Consent Form discussed and signed

Participant Name:

College of Further Education:

Course Name:

Course Duration:

Course Level (NFQ):

Prob further on changes between Interview 1 and Interview 2: INTERWEAVE INTO THE INTERVIEW)

Impact of FET college / course and preparedness for life after college

- Tell me about what you have been doing since we last met last year of this interview
- Last year you said that you would like to do x,y,z. Have your plans changed from when we spoke last year? If so, why
- Did you complete the course in Further Education? Can I ask how did you do in terms of results? How do you feel about these?
- Do you think that the Further Education course has helped you from an educational perspective If so, in what ways. If no, why not / discuss / Probe and expand
- Do you feel Further Education helped you to achieve the goals that you wanted. What were these and how did FET help or constrain you?? If so, in what ways. If no, why not / discuss / Probe and expand
- Do you think that the Further Education course has helped you from a career perspective? ? If so, in what ways. If no, why not / discuss / Probe and expand
- If in employment how does your job relates to their FET experience/skills/knowledge/competencies; if there is anything that would have been particularly beneficial for this job; any direct support from FET in securing the employment or from friends from college in securing employment or other routes...

- Are you involved in the community / civic engagement (keeping up with current affairs, politics, and participation in volunteering/political or community organisations). Expand and probe
- Do you think that the Further Education course has helped you from a general life / social perspective? If so, in what ways. If no, why not / discuss / Probe and expand
- What impact do you think Fe has had on you (negative and positives)? (probe)
- Did you receive enough information in FET on options open to you after this course? Probe and expand
- If you were able to go back in time, would you choose the same college and course again or would you choose something different? (probe)

• **Socio-economic and cultural perspectives influencing participant's academic choices**

- Probe the broader context now and if differences – if living situation is the same or changed, if so, in what way. Living costs.
- Do they feel they are better off now than before? Probe and expand and probe

Student involvement, academically and socially, which can affect their retention and progression within education.

- Do you think that Further Education courses prepare students for further studies? If so, in what ways and how Probe and expand
- Do you think that FET prepares students for employment? Probe and expand
- Do you think that FET prepares students with life skills? Probe and expand
- Thinking back on your experience in FET years, how academically engaged do you feel you were
- Thinking back on your experience in FET years, how socially engaged do you feel you were. Probe and expand
- Do you plan to do any further courses in the future? If so, what type of courses and timeframe. Probe and expand
- If you plan to do any further courses, did your time in FET impact on your decision to continue your education in the future? Probe and expand

Growth mind-set, motivation, resilience and achievement during challenging academic transitions

- What are the main things you learnt from the course or college? Probe and expand
- Tell me about main challenges you have experienced during the year? Probe and expand
- Did your teachers or time in college helped you to overcome challenges in any way? Probe and expand
- Are there ways that the college or teachers or other staff in the college help students to succeed?
- Do you think that teachers help to motivate students to achieve their goals? If yes, in what way
- Were there any supports provided by the college to help students who are struggling and finding it difficult to come to college / submit assignments / do exams etc? Discuss further
- At our last meeting we discussed the statement: "Intelligent people are born that way and success comes easy to them" and you said x. Do you still agree with that?

Students' self-belief and how they perceive their academic accomplishments (self-efficacy, reflexivity).

- Are you happy that you chose the a) college b) course you attended? Explain / discuss
- If you had the choice again, would you choose the same path that you have chosen? Would you have chosen something different? Probe and expand
- Are there any skills you have learned in FET that help you in your life now? Probe and expand
- Do you have any regrets about your educational or life choices to date?
- Are there any key moments/experiences/occasions that were important to you during your time in FE? Expand and probe
- What skills/knowledge/abilities/experiences that they acquired during FET that were most beneficial to your current situation

Changes in Attitudes / Opinions of Participants over time in relation to aspects of education

- I'm going to mention some words and I'd like you to say what words / ideas / thoughts / feelings come to mind when you hear or think of these words: a) Education b) School c) College d) University e) Teacher f) Lecturer g) Guidance Counsellor
- Do you think that FET courses are a good choice for students in general? Tell me why you think that
- Do you feel that there are any benefits to students doing a FET course prior to university? Discuss
- Would you recommend a course in FET to your friends? If yes, why. If no, why not

Changes– full lockdown / partial lockdown coming out of the pandemic

- Check things said earlier about the tone changing when he came in
- What was the impact of covid on the course
- What was positive /negative
- How did the course adapt in light of covid
- How did you keep in touch with students / teachers
- Technology
- More or less stressful?
- Do you feel that it affected your overall experience
- Impact on physical / mental health online:
- Was there support for you in this regard

Close

Thank the participant for their time. I also ask the participant for feedback on how they feel the interview went. Ask the participant if there was any question that they would like to return to and amend or give more information on. The option will be given to the participant to listen back to the audio recording of any section of the interview. Reminder to change, amend any answers within the timeframe (see consent). Outline schedule for completion of thesis.

Appendix 10. Code System for Data Analysis (MAXQDA)

Figure A.9

Code System	Frequency
Code System	2162
Background and Demographics	2
Age	9
Work - fulltime/ part-time/ unpaid	17
Learning Difficulties	5
Other commitments	30
Knowing others in university	16
Parents/Family Occupation	24
Reason for choosing FE	44
Home location	21
Further Ed Education	7
Previous Education	29
Finding out info on courses	20
Guidance Counsellor Secondary School	12
Funding	49
Influence on Choices	12
Course / College in Riverview	2
Recommend to others?	16
Course Type	14
External Engagement / Community Activities	30
Prepares for Life	50
Prepares for University	100
Prepares for Work	81
Supports in Riverview	145
Difficulty of the Course	32
Riverview Course / College - Bad	29
Riverview Course/ College - Good	174
Experience in Further Education	0
Challenges in Further Ed	11
Negative Experiences	7

Positives Experiences	29
Extra-curricular / Social Activity	19
Negatives Extra Curricular	9
Positives - Extra curricular	17
Future Plans	0
What if didn't go to FE?	13
Future Plans IV1	30
Future Plans IV2	20
Future Plans IV3	44
Difference/similarity between HE and FE	8
Emotive words phrases	92
General Challenges to the Student	33
Challenges Overcoming	12
Changes in Participant between Interviews	78
Changes due to college (change from previous)	29
Education Choice	7
Changes due to course learning	31
Shame / despondence / annoyance	29
Confidence / Happiness / Excitement	116
Compare Words / Connotations - changes over time	2
Education	25
School College University	41
Teacher vs Lecturer	31
Guidance Counsellor	39
FE looked down upon or unknown	29
Barriers to Education or University	107
Resilience, motivations	0
No evidence of Resilience, motivations	2
Evidence of Resilience, motivations	34
Covid Related	0
Did Covid influence Course choice	8
Covid Benefits	58
Covid Drawbacks	182

Frequency of Codes per Participant Interview

Figure A.10

MAXQDA 2022		
Document System		
Documents		
		2162
• Nigel IV1	✗	84
• Nigel IV2		73
• Nigel IV3		60
• Gemma IV1		55
• Gemma IV2		59
• Gemma IV3		67
• Brenda IV3		49
• Brenda IV1		50
• Brenda IV2		40
• Nora 1 IV		69
• Nora 2 IV		63
• Nora 3 IV		128
• Kevin 1st IV		85
• Kevin 2nd IV		99
• Kevin 3rd IV		138
• Naomi IV1		87
• Naomi IV2		82
• Naomi IV3		96
• Owen IV1		99
• Owen IV2		116
• Owen IV3		116
• Irene IV1		82
• Irene IV2		95
• Irene IV3		58
• Ciara IV1		64
• Ciara IV2		82
• Ciara IV3		66

Relevance of Coding System to the Conceptual Framework

Figure A.11

Code System	Frequency	Coding Related to Theory		
Code System	2162	Bourdieu	Freire	Mezirow
Background and Demographics	2	y		
Age	9	y		
Work - fulltime/ part-time/ unpaid	17	y		
Learning Difficulties	5	y	y	
Other commitments	30	y	y	
Knowing others in university	16	y		
Parents/Family Occupation	24	y		
Reason for choosing FE	44	y	y	
Home location	21	y		
Further Ed Education	7	y		
Previous Education	29	y	y	
Finding out info on courses	20	y	y	
Guidance Counsellor Secondary School	12	y	y	
Funding	49	y	y	
Influence on Choices	12	y	y	
Course / College in Riverview	2	y	y	
Recommend to others?	16	y	y	y
Course Type	14	y	y	
External Engagement / Community Activities	30		y	y
Prepares for Life	50		y	y
Prepares for University	100		y	y
Prepares for Work	81		y	y
Supports in Riverview	145		y	y
Difficulty of the Course	32		y	y
Riverview Course / College - Bad	29		y	y
Riverview Course/ College - Good	174		y	y
Experience in Further Education	0			
Challenges in Further Ed	11	y	y	y
Negative Experiences	7		y	y
Positives Experiences	29		y	y
Extra-curricular / Social Activity	19			
Negatives Extra Curricular	9		y	y
Positives - Extra curricular	17		y	y
Future Plans	0			
What if didn't go to FE?	13	y	y	y
Future Plans IV1	30	y	y	y
Future Plans IV2	20	y	y	y
Future Plans IV3	44	y	y	y
Difference/similarity between HE and FE	8		y	y

Emotive words phrases	92	y	y	y
General Challenges to the Student	33	y	y	y
Challenges Overcoming	12	y	y	y
Changes in Participant between Interviews	78	y	y	y
Changes due to college (change from previous)	29	y	y	y
Education Choice	7	y	y	y
Changes due to course learning	31	y	y	y
Shame / despondence / annoyance	29	y	y	y
Confidence / Happiness / Excitement	116	y	y	y
Compare Words / Connotations - changes over time	2	y	y	y
Education	25	y	y	y
School College University	41	y	y	y
Teacher vs Lecturer	31	y	y	y
Guidance Counsellor	39	y	y	y
FE looked down upon or unknown	29	y	y	
Barriers to Education or University	107	y	y	
Resilience, motivations	0			
No evidence of Resilience, motivations	2	y		
Evidence of Resilience, motivations	34	y	y	y
Covid Related	0			
Did Covid influence Course choice	8	y	y	y
Covid Benefits	58	y	y	y
Covid Drawbacks	182	y	y	y

Appendix 11. Text Condensation of Participants Interviews

Figure A.12 i (Owen)

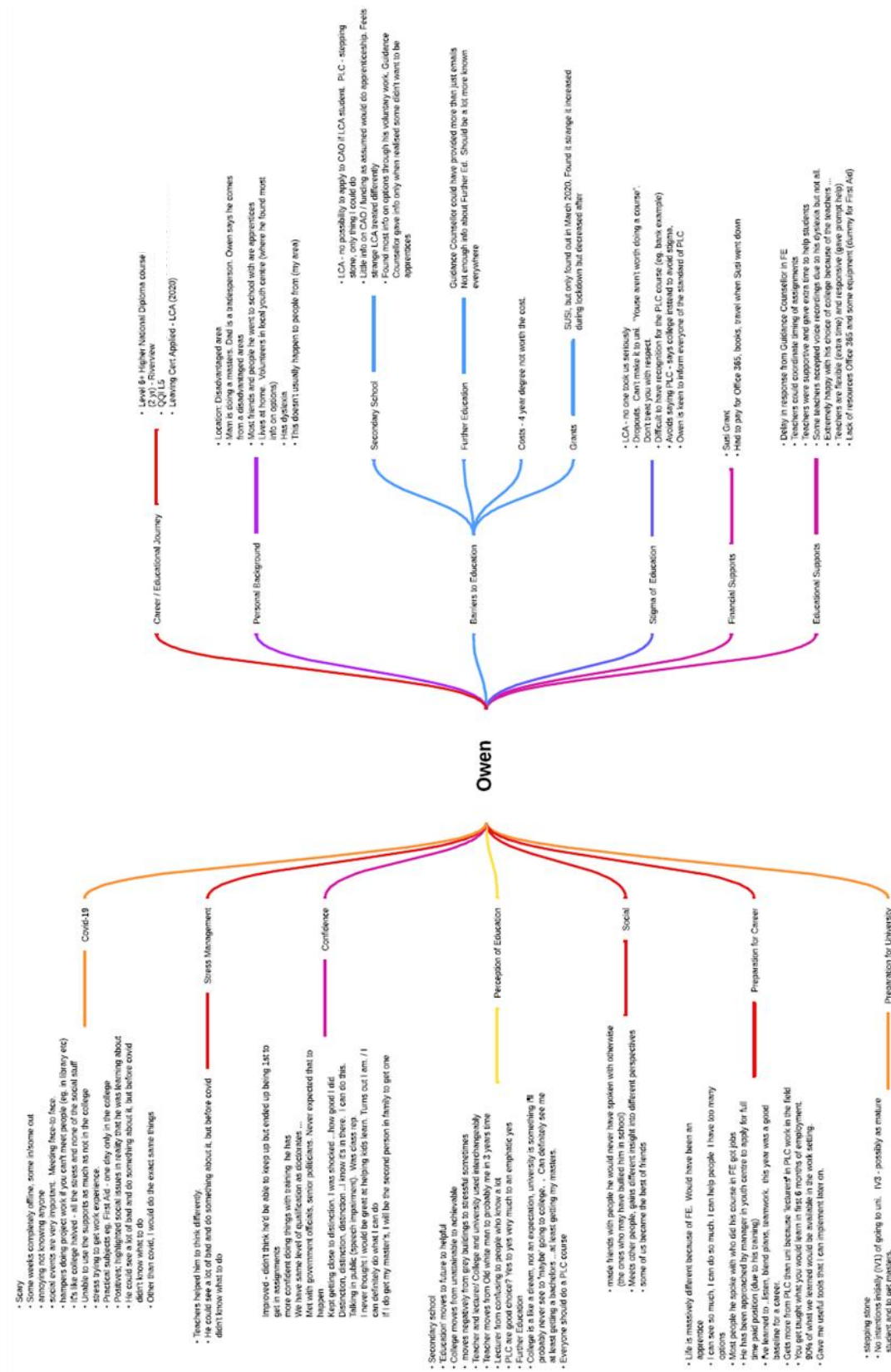


Figure A.12 ii (Naomi)

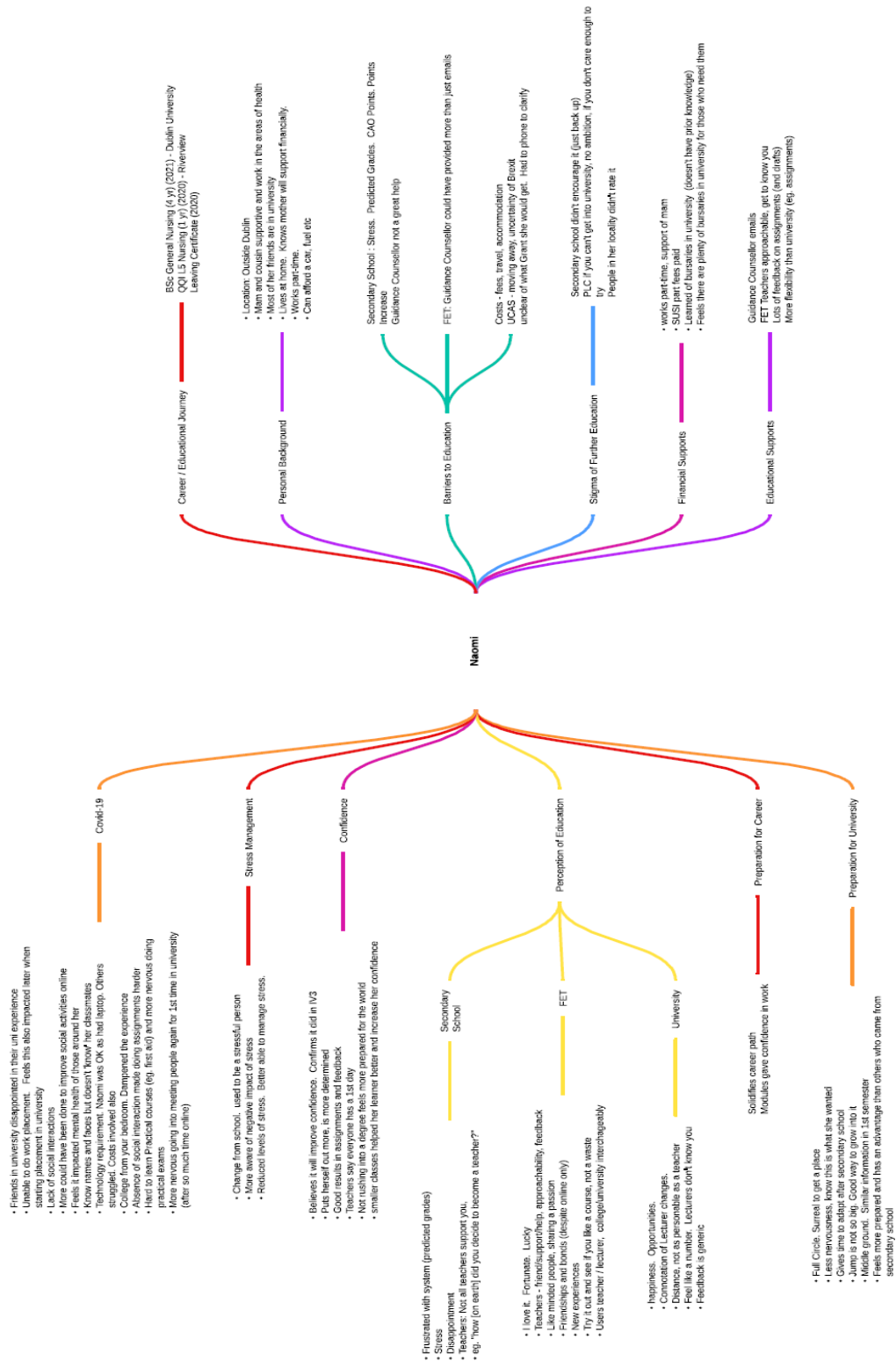


Figure A.12 iii (Kevin)

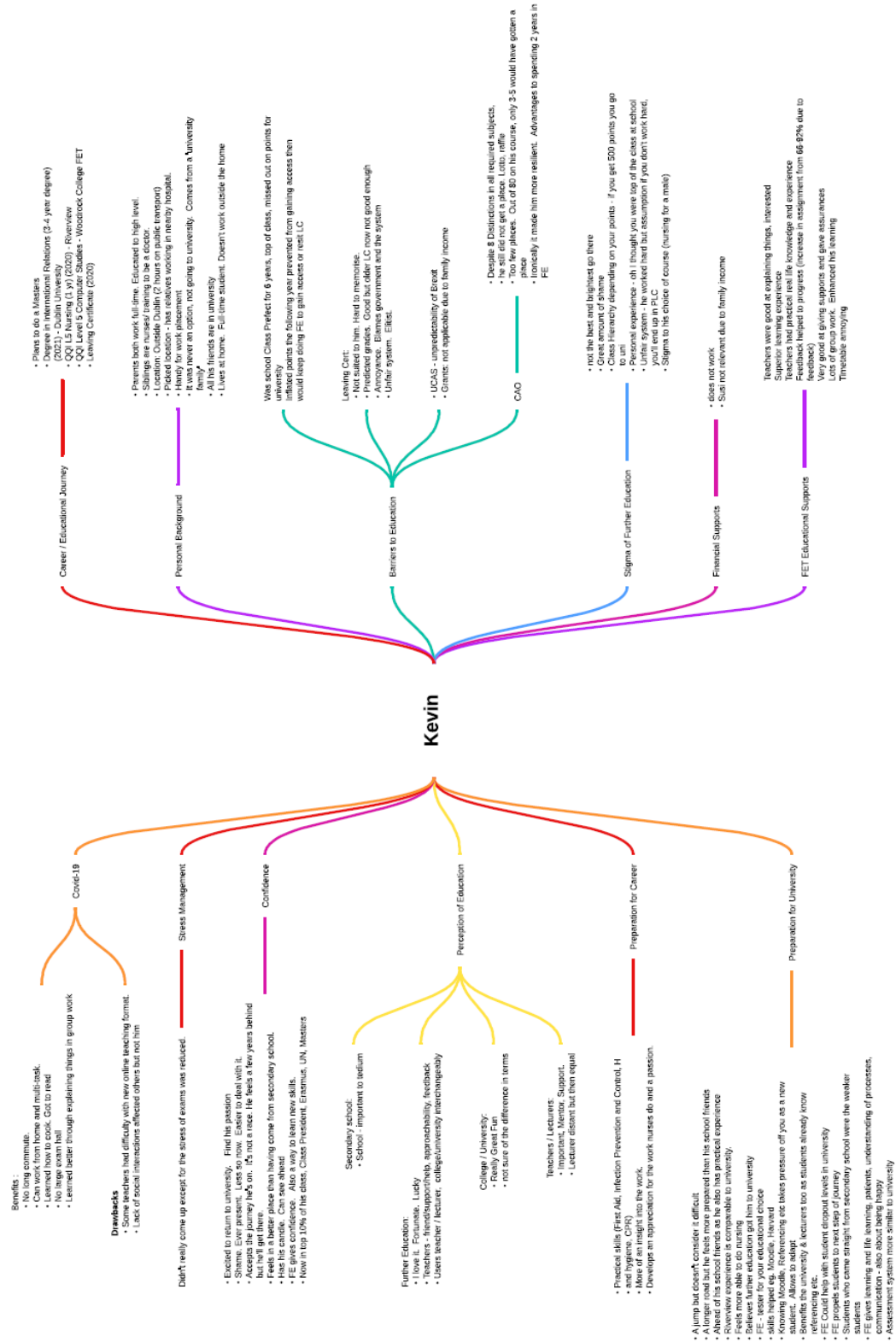


Figure A.12 iv (Ciara)

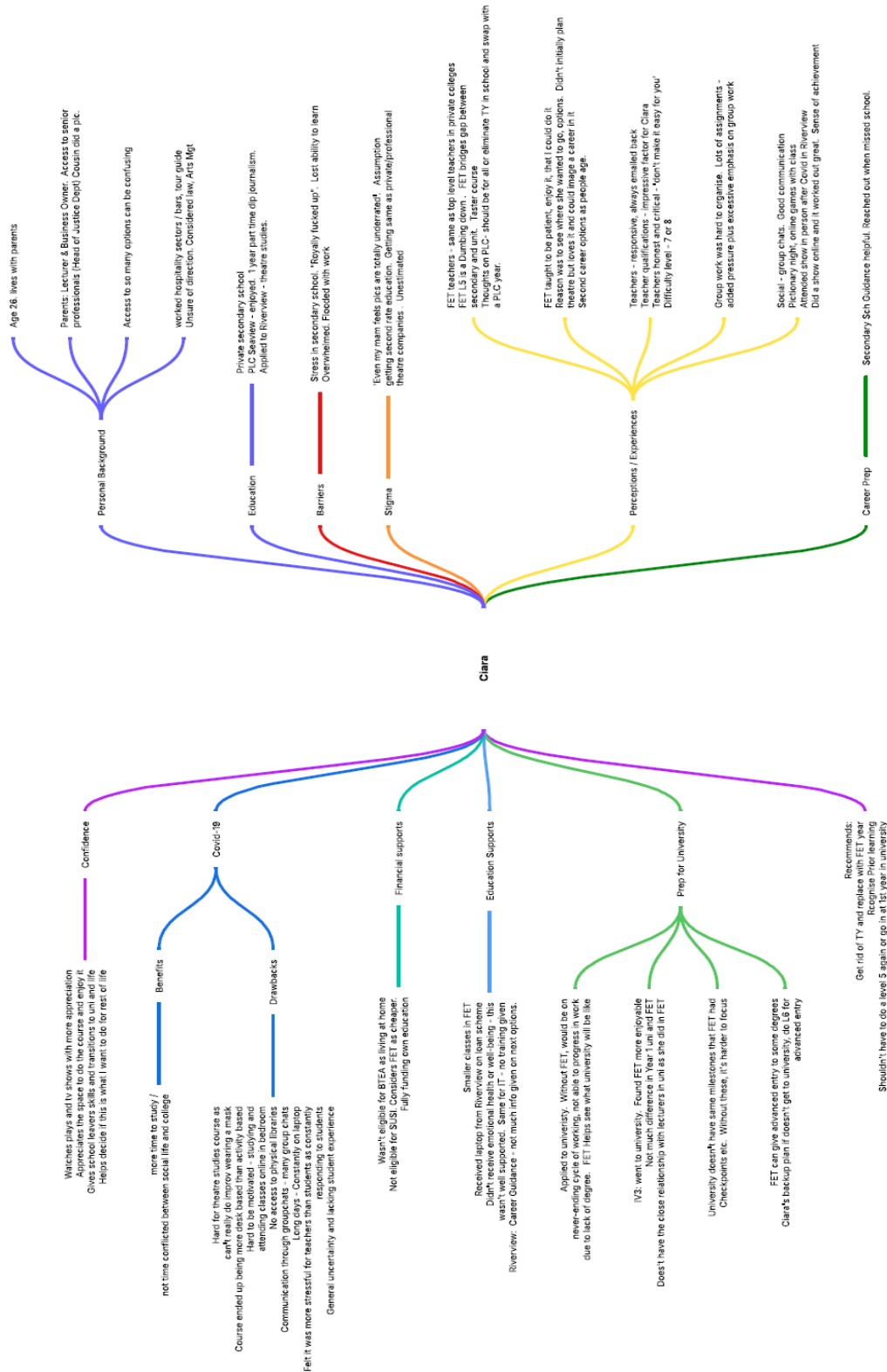


Figure A.12 v (Gemma)

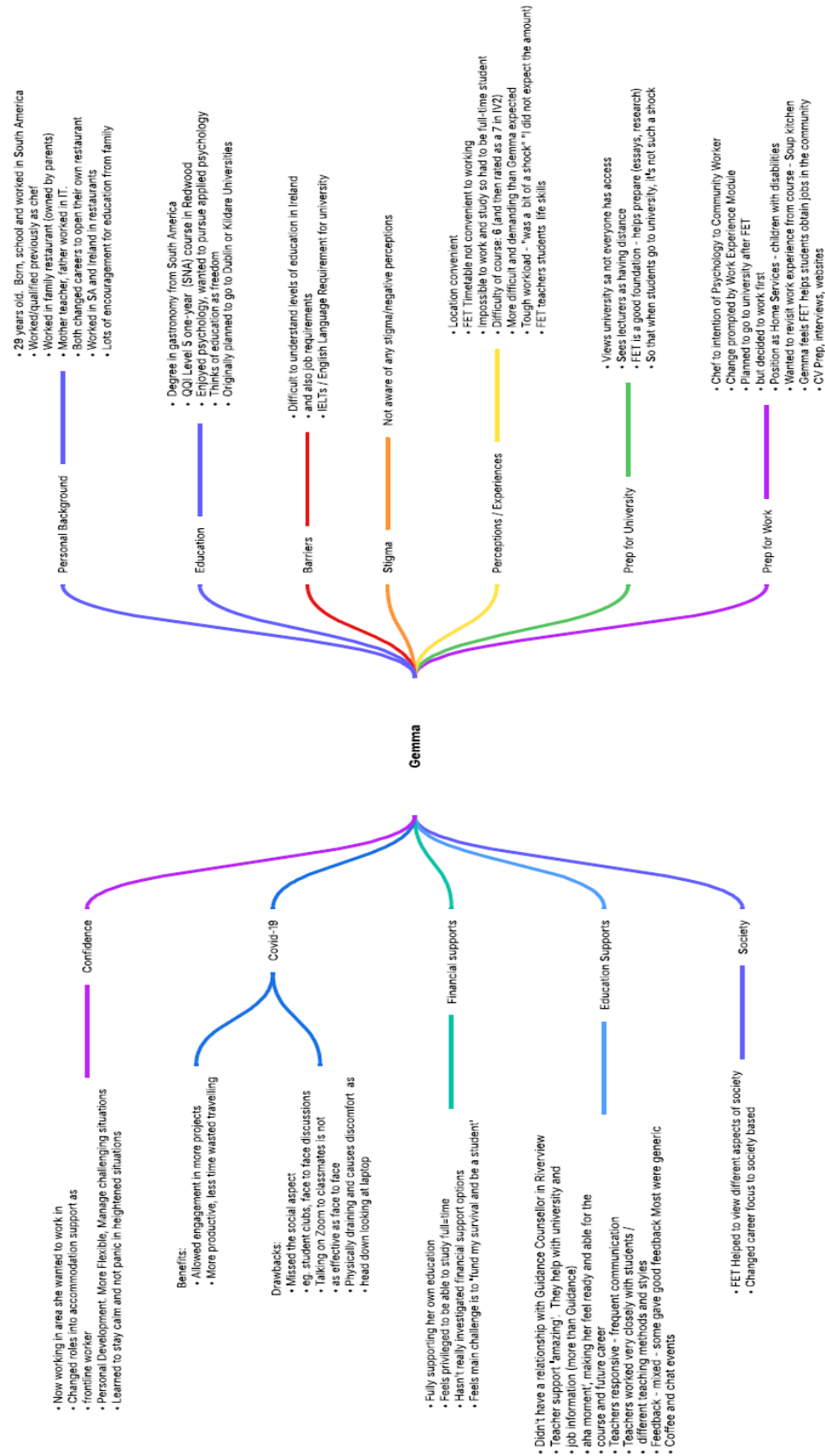
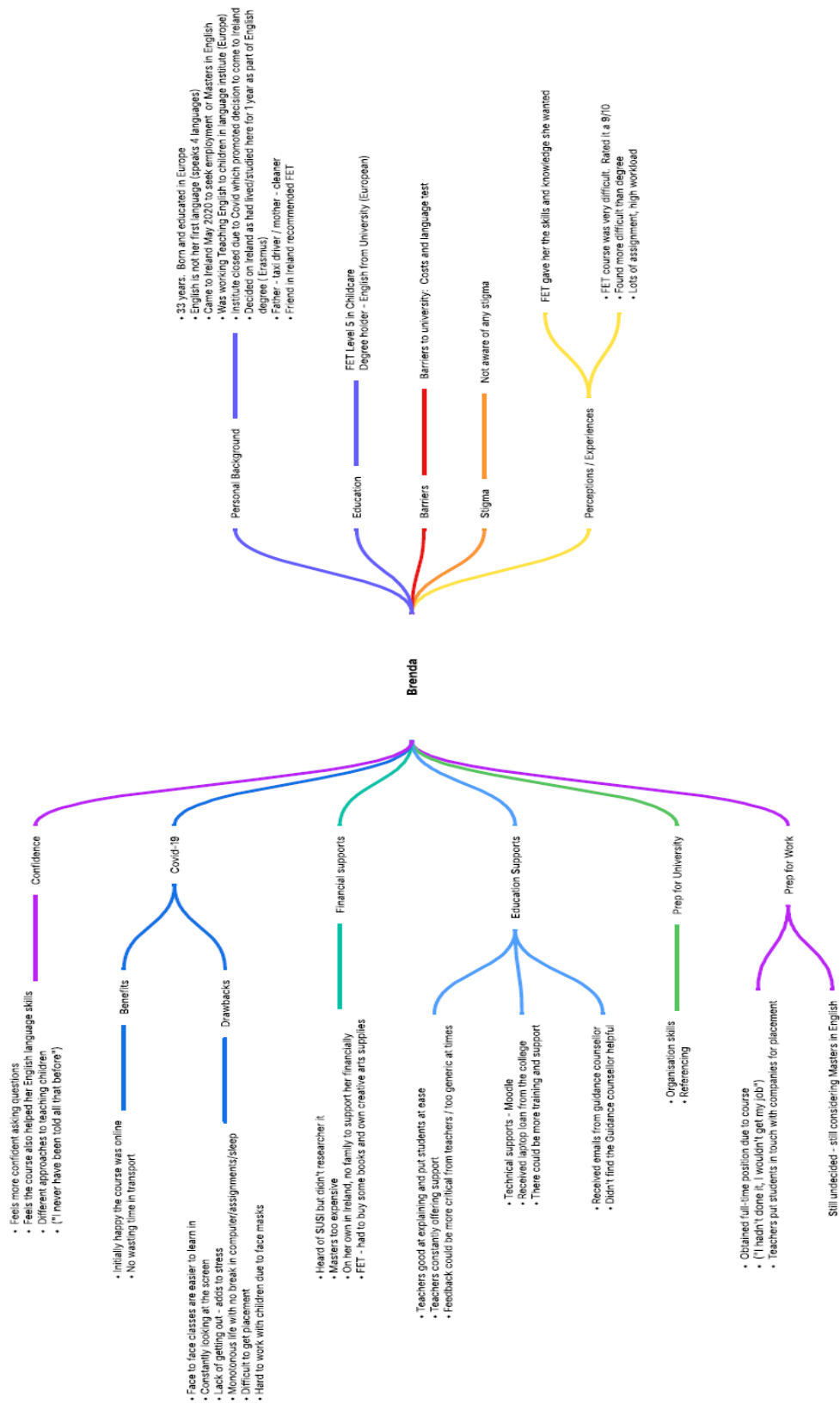


Figure A.12 vi (Brenda)



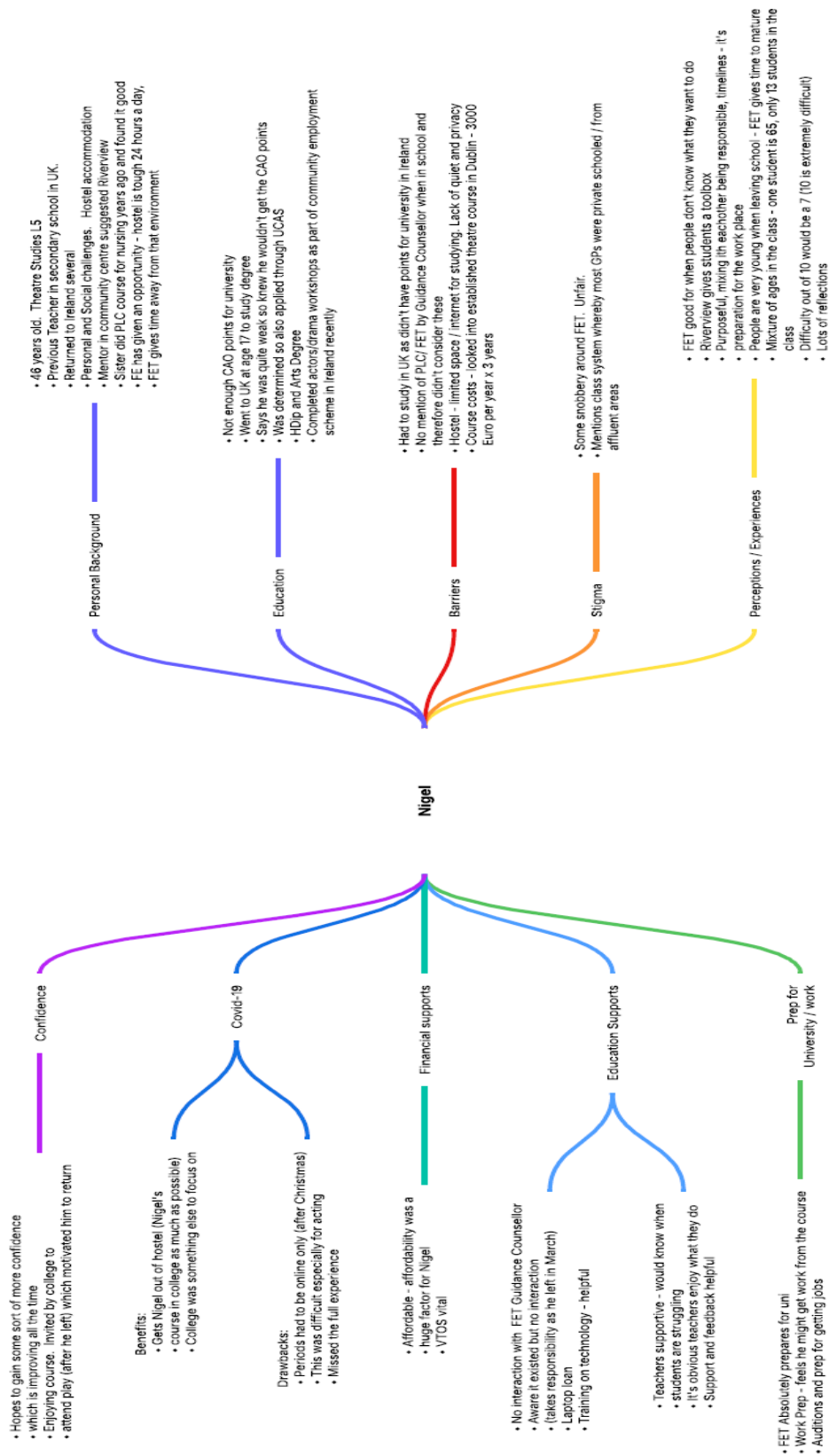


Figure A.12 vii (Nigel)

Figure A.12 viii (Nora)

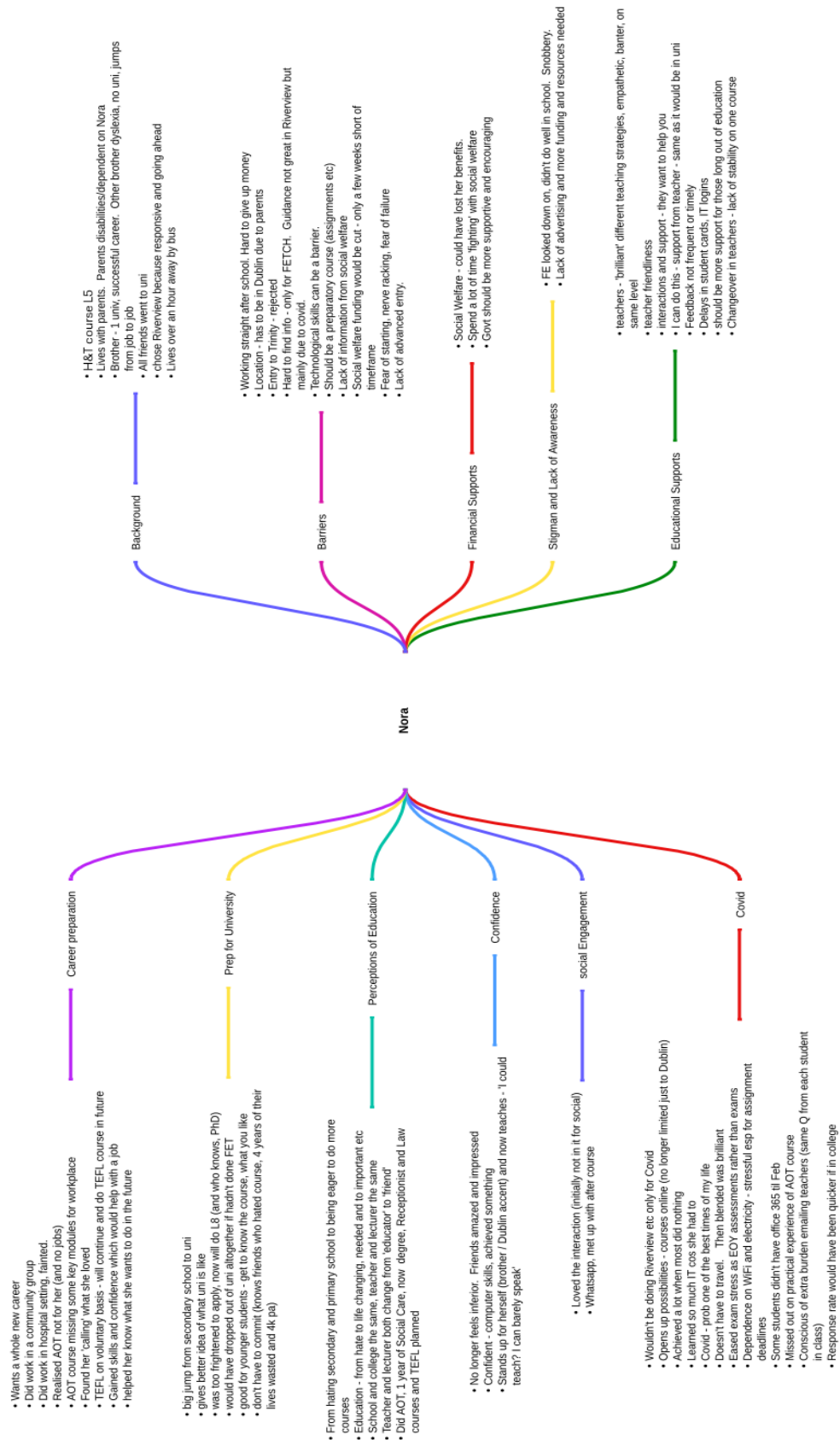
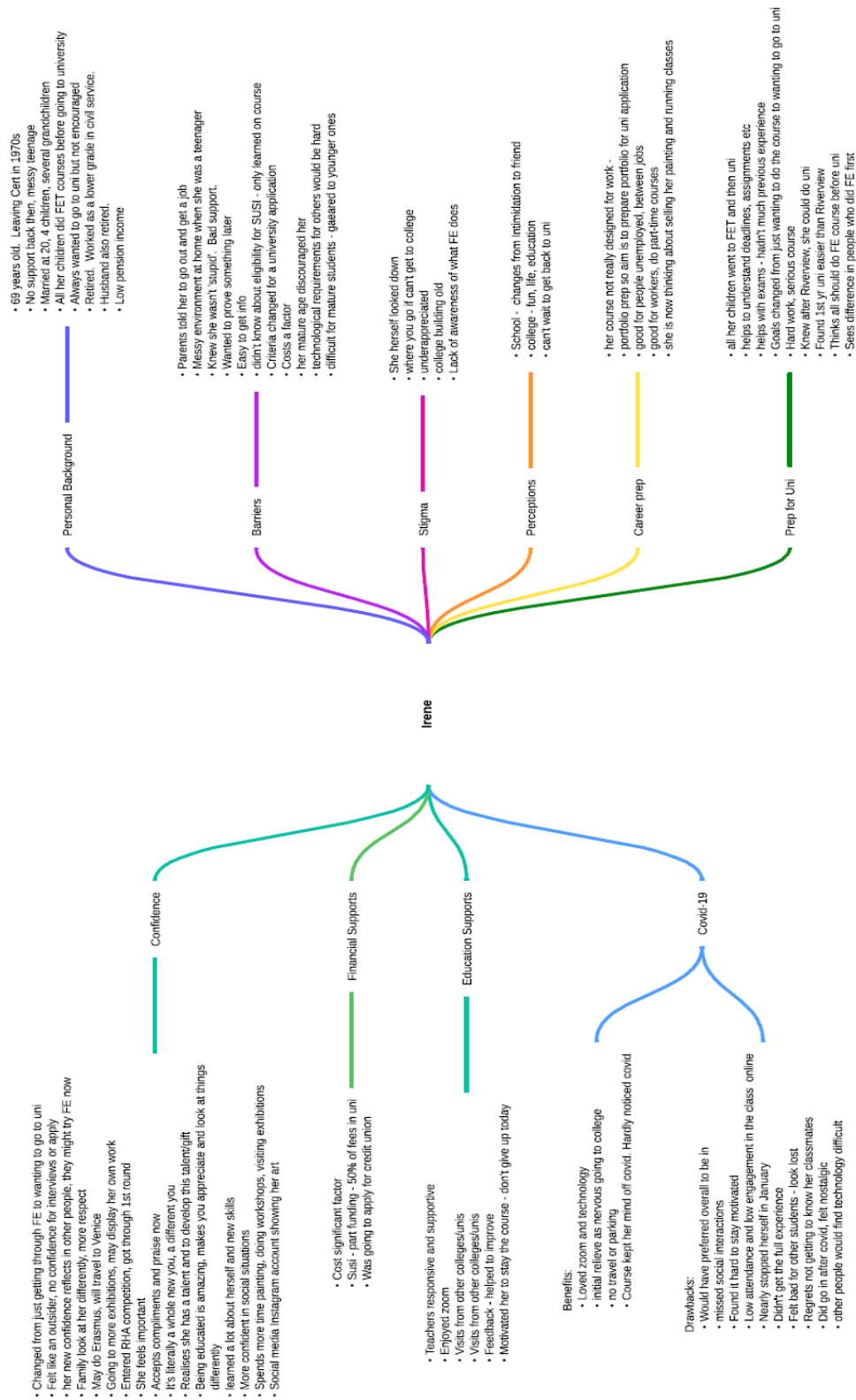
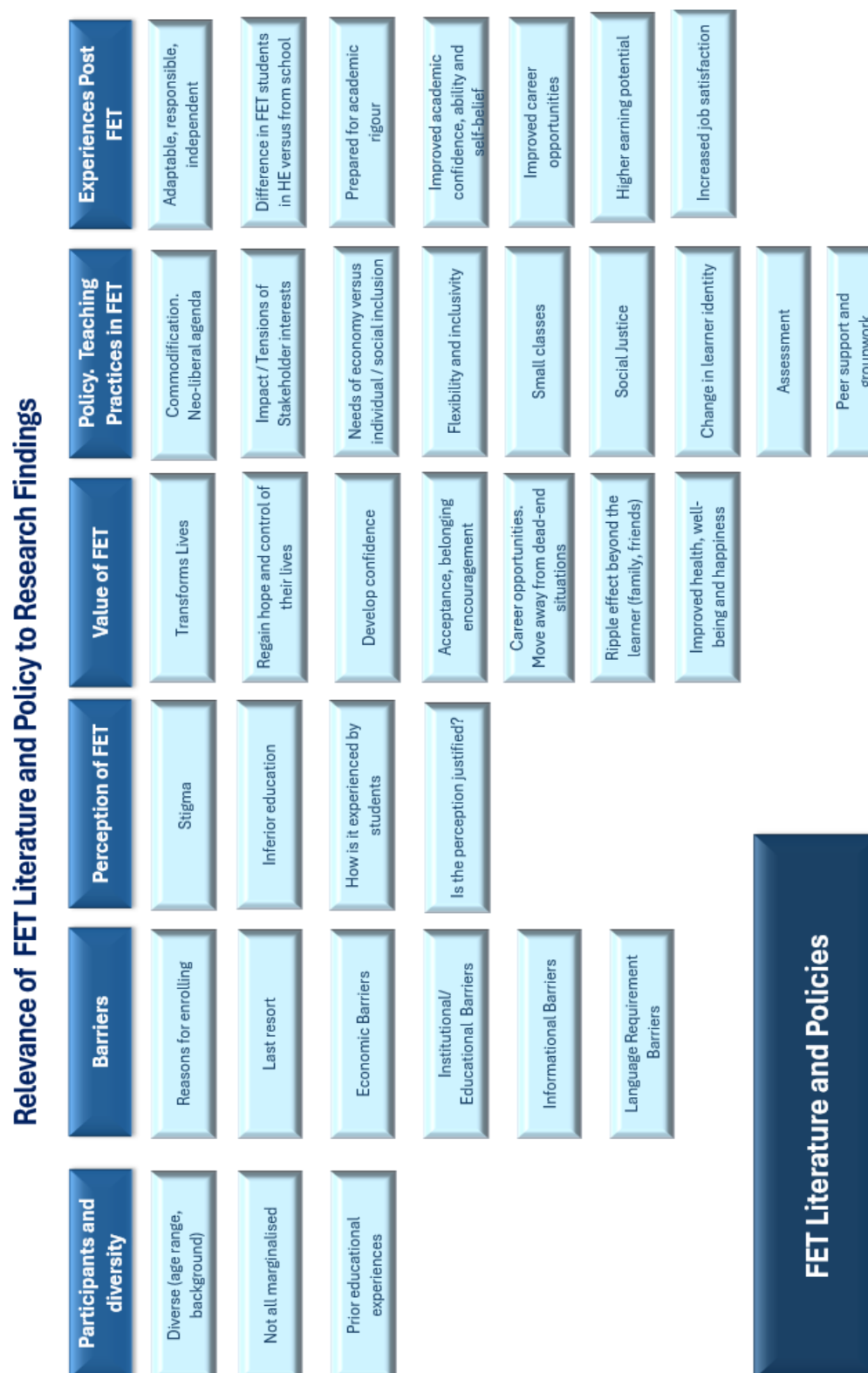


Figure A.12 ix (Irene)



Appendix 12. Intersection of Conceptual Framework and Research Findings

Figure A.13



Relevance of Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction to Research Findings

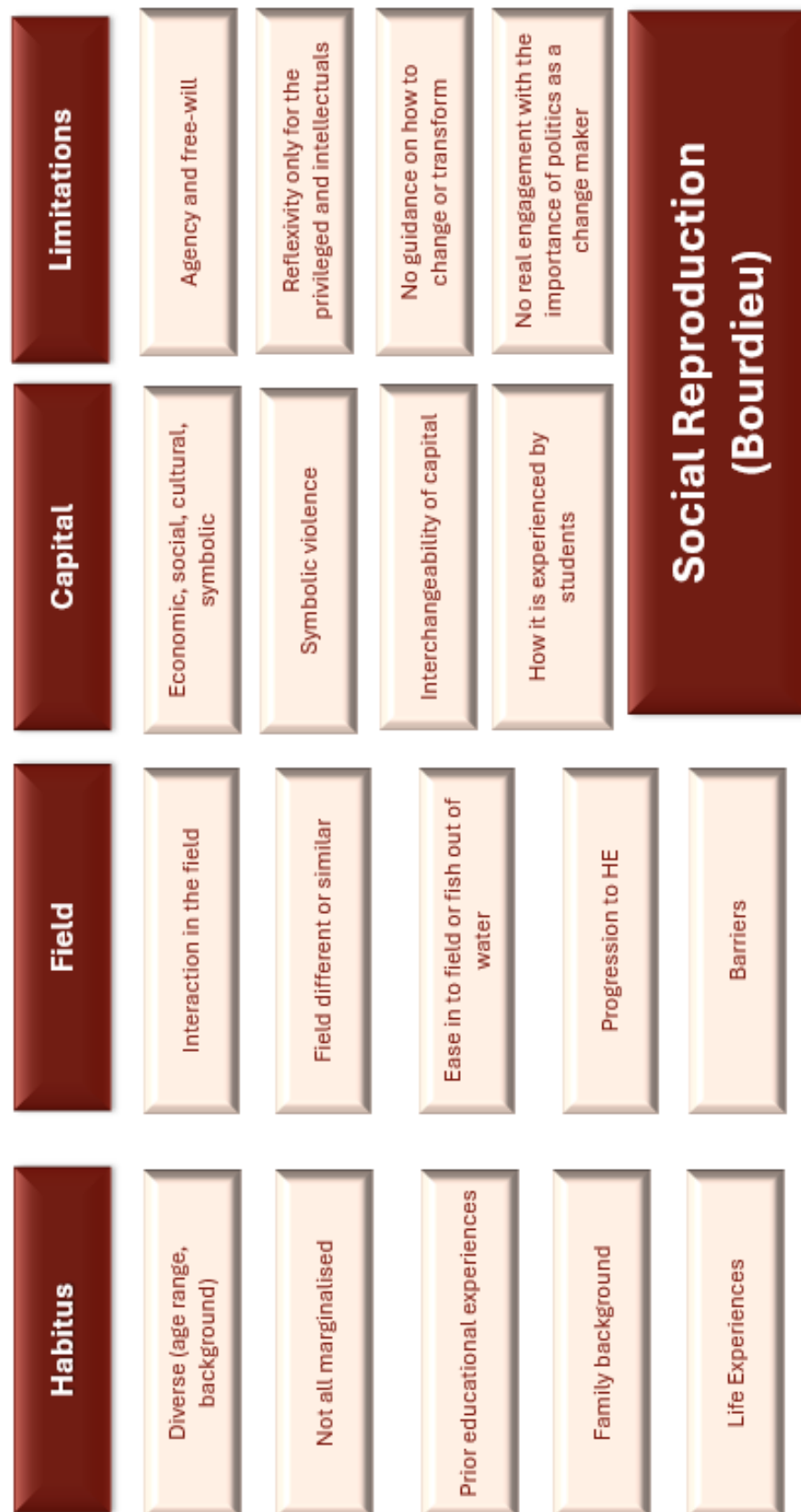


Figure A.14

Relevance of Freire's Critical Pedagogy to Research Findings

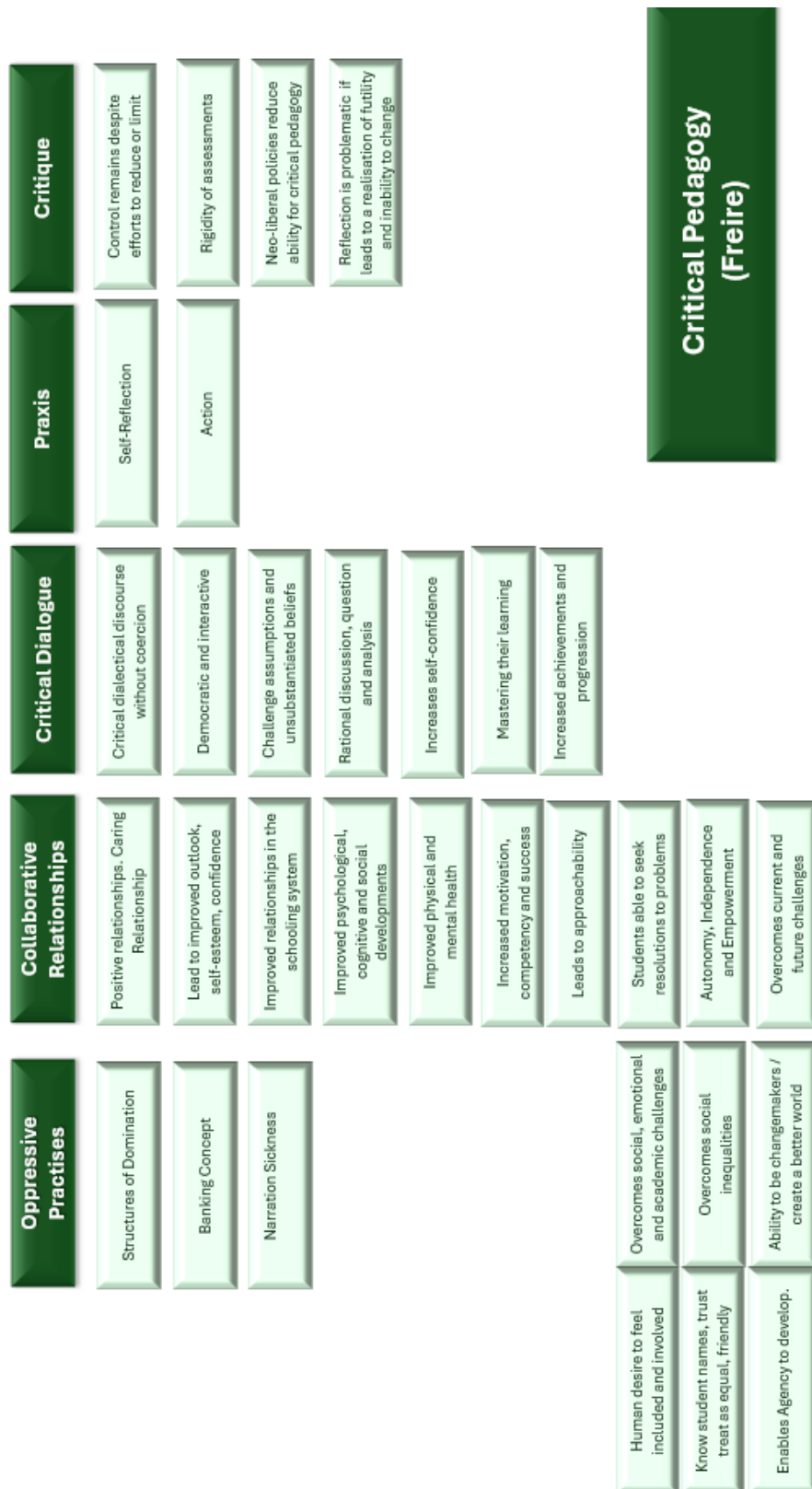


Figure A.15

Relevance of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory to Research Findings

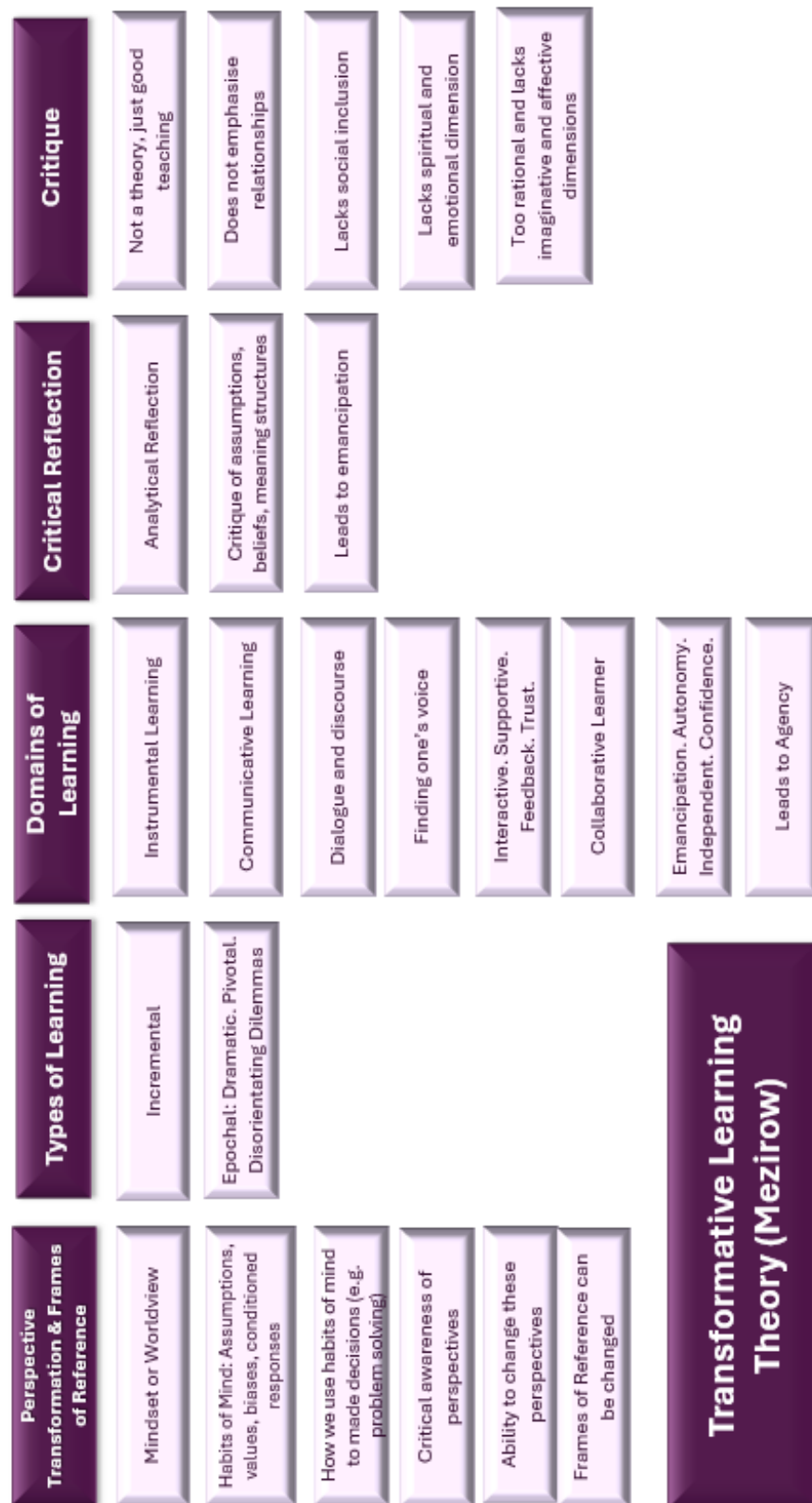


Figure A.16

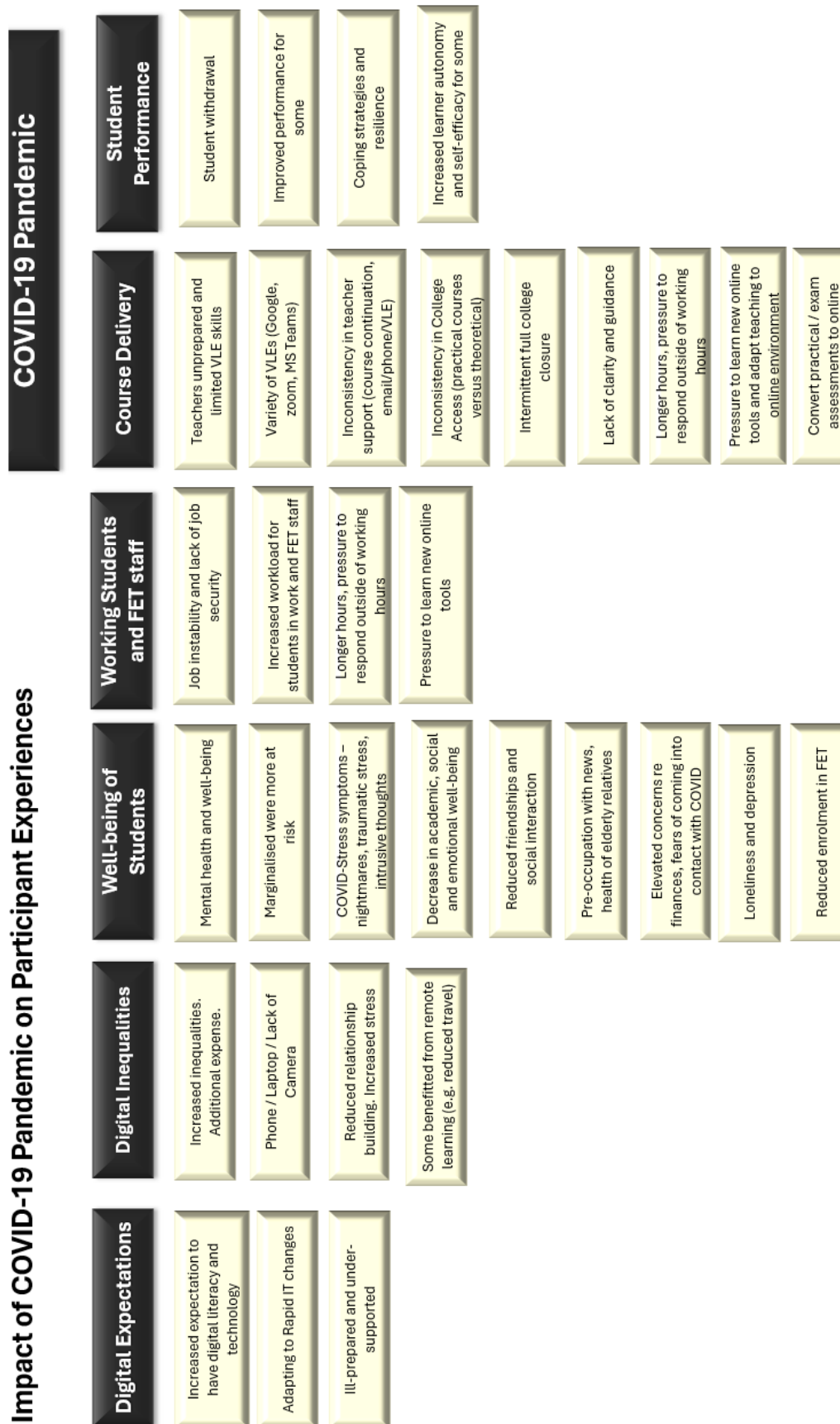


Figure A.17

Appendix 13. Participant Feedback on the Interview

Figure A.18



Appendix 14. Research Timeline

Figure A.19

Timeline for the Part-time PhD in Education											
Project Area	Tasks	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3		Year 4		Break	
		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	
Modules Completed	Key concepts and traditions in educational research ED803	Sept - Dec	Jan - May	Jun - Dec	Jan - May	Jun - Dec	Jan - May	Jun - Dec	Jan - May	Jun - Dec	Jan - May
	Educational research and methods ED802										
	Qualitative methods: SO620A										
	Making sense of educational research ED879										
	Academic Writing Module GST3										
	Social Inequality: Exploring Mechanisms of Social Stratification (Summer School: Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, Germany)										
	Research Placement FM803										
	Work Placement FM802										
	Prepare and Submit Ethics Application. Approved										
	Prepare consent and information / participation forms										
Qualitative Data Gathering	Prepare interview questions / consider structure										
	Liaise and meet with College Principal and obtain agreement / permission from principal and CE										
	Recruit participants										
Research	Carry out interviews										
	Research methodology and methods										
	Write up methodology and methods section										
Literature Review	Research relevant literature (theory / studies / policy)										
	Write up literature review (theory / studies / policy)										
Secondary Data Analysis	Review statistics on student entry to FE, student progression to HE, new policies etc.										
Analysis of Data & Results	Transcribe, Code and Analyse results										
	Draft findings from interviews										
Write up Findings Chapters, Conclusions &	Finalise findings chapters. Write up conclusions and recommendations										
Finalise Thesis	Draft & Redraft thesis										
	Submit Finalise Thesis										
Viva Voce	Prepare for Viva Voce										
	Vive Voce / amendments										

Appendix 15. Participants' use of the word "love" regarding Riverview College

Oh yeah, I love it. It's, it's really good. Yeah, I love being around like everyone who, who is interested in nursing (Naomi IV1)

I loved actually going up to the college. I loved the lecturers and the teachers (Naomi IV2)

And yeah, I loved it [my course] (Owen IV2)

I love psychology...Assignments...I love I love doing them. You know, I love them...I love studying (Gemma IV2)

I just loved a lot. I loved the interaction with the class and I loved there is such a variety of cultures in our class and like there's all different age groups...that's what I loved about this year, being in Riverview, the class...I love learning. (Nora IV3)

While Kevin doesn't explicitly use the term love, he states that: I liked Riverview. I liked it in Riverview enough that, you know, I liked psychology, I liked anatomy, I liked all of that stuff... I enjoyed, I enjoyed, I enjoyed it (Kevin IV3).

Similarly Brenda notes that: "I enjoyed a lot...I really enjoyed, definitely the teachers, the structure of the course as well (Brenda IV3).

I love it [the course in Riverview]... I'm really enjoying it, I'm really loving it, everything about has been pretty amazing, our teachers are unreal (Ciara IV1)

I love the PLC (Ciara IV3)

I loved... I was scared and stressed but I loved it at the same time... I loved my Zoom. I looked forward to my tutorials. I liked my tutorials and my Zoom calls and the feedback and the support. I liked all that...Absolutely yeah, loved it (Irene IV2)

you know, I love it, I look forward to it every day and it's, it's basically, but it's very, It's a great atmosphere in the college (Nigel IV1)

I love the idea of coming back to college [Riverview] as much as having a place to live (Nigel IV3)

Appendix 16. Strategies, Plans and Reports Produced by SOLAS Since 2020

(SOLAS, 2026)

SOLAS Annual Reports and Corporate Plans

1. Corporate Plan 2024-2026
2. Gender Pay Gap 2024
3. Annual Report 2023
4. Annual Report 2022
5. Annual Report 2021
6. Corporate Plan 2021-2023
7. Annual Report 2020

FET Strategies and Plans (2020-2024)

1. Memorandum of Understanding between SOLAS and QQI 2024-2027
2. Green Skills 2030 - The 1st National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy for the Green Transition
3. Community Education Framework
4. Strategic Performance Agreements Annual Report 2022
5. FET Services Plan 2022 / FET Services Plan 2022 - Infographic
6. FET Funding Model Review 2022
7. Future FET ezine
8. FET Provision Summary 2021
9. Future FET - Transforming Learning Update 2021
10. FET Services Plan 2021
11. Professional Development Strategy
12. 2020-2024 FET Provision Summary 2020
13. FET Services Plan 2020
14. SOLAS People Strategy 2020 - 2024

15. SOLAS Corporate Social Responsibility Statement
16. Transitions Reform Working Paper: Resource E
17. Transitions Reform Working Paper: Resource D
18. Transitions Reform Working Paper: Resource C
19. Transitions Reform Working Paper: Resource B
20. Transitions Reform Working Paper: Resource A
21. Further Education and Training (FET) Progression to Higher Education (HE).
22. Transitions Reform Working Paper – June 2020
23. Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-2024

Strategic Performance Agreements

1. Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
2. City of Dublin Education and Training Board 2022 -2024
3. Cork Education and Training Boards 2022 - 2024
4. Donegal Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
5. Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
6. Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
7. Kerry Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
8. Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
9. Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
10. Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
11. Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
12. Longford and Westmeath Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
13. Louth and Meath Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
14. Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
15. Tipperary Education and Training Board 2022 - 2024
16. Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board 2022 – 2024

Evaluation Reports

1. The Future of Green Skills - An Irish Perspective
2. Evaluation of Specific Skills Training
3. Evaluation of Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS)

Labour Market Research

1. Recruitment Agency Survey on difficult-to-fill vacancies - November 2024
2. National Skills Bulletin 2024
3. Autumn Skills Bulletin 2024
4. Summer Skills Bulletin 2024
5. Lifelong learning amongst adults in Ireland
6. Hospitality Skills in Ireland: Supply and demand in the aftermath of COVID-19
7. Regional Profile Infographic - West Q3 2023
8. Regional Profile Infographic - Southwest Q3 2023
9. Regional Profile Infographic - Southeast Q3 2023
10. Regional Profile Infographic - Midwest Q3 2023
11. Regional Profile Infographic - Midlands Q3 2023
12. Regional Profile Infographic - Mideast Q3 2023
13. Regional Profile Infographic - Dublin Q3 2023
14. Regional Profile Infographic - Border Q3 2023
15. Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2023 /Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2023 - Infographic
16. Recruitment Agency Survey on difficult-to-fill vacancies
17. Winter Skills Bulletin 2023
18. National Skills Bulletin 2023 - Summary Findings
19. National Skills Bulletin 2023 Infographic
20. National Skills Bulletin 2023
21. Summer Skills Bulletin 2023

22. Lifelong Learning Among Adults in Quarter 4 2022
23. Spring Skills Bulletin 2023
24. Spring Skills Bulletin 2023 Infographic
25. Difficult-to-fill vacancies survey 2022
26. Autumn/Winter Skills Bulletin 2022
27. Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply
28. Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2022 Infographic
29. National Skills Bulletin 2022
30. National Skills Bulletin 2022 - Infographic
31. Summer Skills Bulletin 2022
32. Summer Skills Bulletin Infographic 2022
33. Lifelong Learning Among Adults in Ireland Q4 2021
34. Shifting Sands Report
35. Shifting Sands Infographic
36. Spring Skills Bulletin Infographic 2022
37. Spring Skills Bulletin 2022
38. Difficult-to-fill vacancies survey October 2021
39. Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2021
40. National Skills Bulletin 2021
41. Summer Skills Bulletin 2021 Infographic
42. Summer Skills Bulletin 2021
43. Lifelong Learning Among Adults in Quarter 4 2020
44. Spring Skills Bulletin 2021 / Spring Skills Bulletin 2021 Infographic
45. Regional Profile Infographic - Southeast Q3 2020
46. Regional Profile Infographic - Southwest Q3 2020
47. Regional Profile Infographic - West - Q3 2020
48. Regional Profile Infographic - Midlands - Q3 2020
49. Regional Profile Infographic - Midwest - Q3 2020

50. Regional Profile Infographic - Mideast - Q3 2020
51. Regional Profile Infographic - Dublin - Q3 2020
52. Regional Profile Infographic - Border - Q3 2020
53. Monitoring Ireland's Skills Supply 2020
54. Autumn Skills Bulletin 2020 - Infographic
55. Autumn Skills Bulletin 2020
56. National Skills Bulletin 2020
57. Summer Skills Bulletin 2020 / Summer Skills 2020 Infographic
58. Future of Jobs in Ireland
59. Future of Jobs in Ireland - Infographic
60. Spring Skills Bulletin 2020 / Spring Skills Bulletin 2020 Infographic

Appendix 17. COVID-19 Operations Timeline: Riverview College (2020–2022)

Figure A.20

