

**Lifelong Learning: The Unheard  
Voices**

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## **Abstract**

Mature Students are a unique group of individuals because they share common characteristics that are distinct to this group. They have many other roles and responsibilities and therefore, have to 'fit' education into their lives unlike the traditional student who comes directly from secondary school. Mature Students have need for specific supports that need to be addressed particularly so in a 'Knowledge Based' Economy where the 'Employability Factor' dominates; namely learning is for life. Consequently, specific adjustments need to be put in place for the successful route to, in and through education for adult students.

The north and west of Ireland is mainly rurally populated and many individuals from the stated group live in isolated communities; and because of this the reality is countless numbers are given little or no opportunity to avail of further education; it is beyond their reach.

This study has been carried out using qualitative and quantitative methods of research. The primary research made use of Focus Groups with volunteering students, followed by student Questionnaires and finishing with Interviews with Educator/Mentors from different educational settings.

The findings show that Mature Students face and ascend many internal and external barriers and obstacles and addressing these barriers will make the path in and through education an easier and less pressurised one. However, the delivery of education has to be tailored to meet the educational needs of those most in need of further knowledge.

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Lastly, I would like to acknowledge not only my immediate family but also extended family members, of which there are too many to name, for their words of encouragement and constant support that sustained me throughout my time as a student.

## **Dedication**

**‘No question’s foolish ... and there’s always an answer ...’, Mature Student,  
(Part-time), Sligo I.T., 7<sup>th</sup> February 2005.**

**‘A great many people have a strong interest in higher education since they  
understand that educational attainment and achievement may be one of the most  
important assets a person can acquire in a lifetime’ (Moxley *et al*, 2001:73)**

**For my children, Paula, Damian, Jamie, Lavina, Kalem and Siún.  
And for Liam.**

## Declaration

I confirm that the enclosed is all my own work with acknowledged exception.

Signed Marie Mc Gloin

**Marie Mc Gloin**

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research Topic

The research proposes to focus on an exploration of the experiences of mature students in further and higher education in the northwest and west of Ireland. As this region is mainly rurally populated, the research explores the educational needs of a largely rural population.

Mature students are a unique group of individuals because they tend to have similar background experiences. The reality is 'real life impacts on their education' (Cappleman-Morgan, 2004:9), and mature students may 'face many barriers in their quest for third level education' (Walters, 1997:21). These include the fact that mature students return to study after being out of the educational system for a substantial period whereas the traditional student's transition is seen as a normal progression from secondary to tertiary education. Secondly, mature students may have established roles and responsibilities. Two such examples are parental and financial responsibilities. Thirdly, mature students have established life experiences. These criteria make the educational supports and needs of mature students unique and warrants the investigation to raise awareness of the boundaries that confront mature students in order to make the transition easier and less pressurised.

As the research is specifically focusing in the northwest region which has a mainly rurally based population, additional ways of reaching people need to be adopted in order to benefit the region and to benefit those most in need of upgrading their skills, or education, particularly as there are pockets of high unemployment in this region.

Individuals choose to educate or re-educate themselves for different reasons which include personal development, career opportunities and developing a more secure route to employment. Making the decision to return to study is a serious consideration because the individual must adapt and incorporate the new student role and all it entails into their pre-existing roles and responsibilities. However, people living in rural isolation are in a much more serious position in regard to further education because of the fact that living in rural communities means, they are less likely to be given the opportunity to avail of further education. Therefore, the delivery of education itself needs to be examined to address these specific issues.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Research**

The aim of the overall research is to create an understanding of the experience of mature students in this region, not only as the onus is on re-engagement in further education and training for every individual who will benefit, but it is relevant, timely and warranted that the transition into and through education is more user friendly. This is an essential component in succeeding in adapting to the changing demands of the western economies, such as the up-grade of skills and knowledge.

Mature students may want a qualification for employment opportunity enhancement, however, their mindset expresses the need to understand knowledge and use this in work based settings but also use education as a form of both self development and academic development. Furthermore, there is a very real need for the working population to increase their knowledge and skills as Ireland is a 'Knowledge Based' economy dependent on an adaptable workforce in a competitive world market. Therefore, there are a number of specific strands of investigation within the research brief.

These include

- An examination of the experience of adult learning.
- An examination of different learning needs of adult students.
- An exploration of the negative influences from internal (private and/or individual roles) and external (institutional and/or geological sources) that confront adult students.
- And lastly, creating a greater understanding of the extra pressure on mature students in relation to other significant commitments in their lives.

In addition to the above areas of investigation, another important aspect to this research is to document the original sources of initial contact of where mature students are coming from as a guide for others; but also as a directory of direct testimony for interested bodies who wish to know the direction people are moving in.

Furthermore, course design, implementation and delivery may need to be re-examined in order to address more comprehensively the needs of those individuals, and the pockets of unemployment specific to this region where educational needs are not being met. One of the critical objectives of education is to create social inclusion for all; therefore it is vital education addresses social exclusion in the north and west of Ireland.

## 1.2.1 Significance of the Research

Combining study with one's adult roles and responsibilities means mature students have to 'fit' study into their lives giving rise to specific supports needs for mature students. This is a warranted investigation because it is creating an understanding under three headings.

These are:

1. To create an understanding of the mature student experience making the transition easier and as successful as possible,
2. To raise awareness of the different learning styles of mature students in and through education,
3. To raise awareness for the purpose of course design and delivery so that internal and external barriers can be re-addressed and resolved.

The fact that the research is focused on the northwest means it is a purposeful examination of a mainly rural area and a purposeful examination of the specific needs of rural dwellers and the communities they belong to.

In the light of Lifelong Learning the research is essential to create an understanding of the barriers that confront students in further and higher education, in order to address these issues and concerns. Individuals return again and again to education to upgrade skills and knowledge because this is part of a knowledge economy. However, failure to understand and address the learning experience of mature students is in conflict with the concept of Lifelong Learning as 'Lifelong Learning emphasis that one is never done with absorbing new knowledge, skills and competence' (Bergan, 2003:4).

### **1.3 Research Proposals Developed in the Literature Review**

The Literature Review synthesises and critiques, the major bodies of theory which are explored in detail in Chapter 2. The research Questions developed out of the Literature Review concern the barriers that confront students in their access to and passage through education. The review examines the historical development of Education in Ireland and the defining characteristics of mature students along with the concept of Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Learning according to Keogh, is ‘any learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences ....’ (2004:21). Education is a key driver to modernisation in adapting to current needs in the labour market and maximising employability.

It examines the barriers to and through education including student role and status, styles of learning, teaching and delivery are all considered. In addition, an exploration of internal and external barriers has been documented. These include a student’s other roles and responsibilities and the impact of combining family responsibilities with the student role, for example as Walters’s points out, ‘some mature students may also face difficulties in meeting assessment deadlines due to family and other commitments’ (1997:24). Or as Lenzand and Hansen report, ‘women with families who are continuing their education occasionally complain of fatigue and cite conflicting demands on their time as their number one problem’ (1977:207). On top of which there is the financial impact of student life, in fact argues Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, ‘financial considerations arise even before students enter higher education, and can influence their decision’ (2002:8).

The current position of the European Union and its increasing impact in relation to development in Ireland has also been examined. The impact of the recognition

and development of the Qualifications Framework has been detailed and recorded as the most recent advancement in Irish education.

The 'Employability' concept means individuals constantly need to re-engage with further education and training in order to adapt to today's competitively based economy. Employability is regarded as 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations' according to Yorke, (2004:410). Therefore and in conclusion, an exploration of models of best practice of reaching and re-training those in isolated communities that have been successful in other parts of Ireland and in other countries have been examined.

### **1.3.1 Recommendations**

The research made recommendations that are detailed in chapter 6. However, in summary, these include

- The development of in-house supports that meet the unique needs of mature students in tertiary education such as the provision of templates for academic assignments.
- Government funding for a National Lifelong Learning Campaigning Agency with the monopoly of all relevant stakeholders under its auspices working together to agreed targeted actions.
- An introduction of 'Tax Credits', 'Individual Learning Accounts', and 'Means Tested' benefits for part-time students.
- Raising awareness of the needs of the rural and isolated communities where education is inaccessible by consultation with the 'Grassroots', i.e. consulting the ordinary people in the community.

## 1.4 Methodology

The first strand of the primary research was developed through Focus Groups. Full and part-time students volunteered to take part in one of four Focus Groups held during January 2005. Two groups were held during the lunch period and two at 6 p.m. to accommodate both full and part-time students. The advantage of a focus group allows the researcher to observe 'how people respond to each other's views and build up a view out of the interaction that takes place within the group' states Bryman, (2004:346). The process took from under one hour to one and half hours each. The Focus Group findings formed the basis of the Questionnaire.

A pilot study was conducted in St. Angela's College outside Sligo City. St. Angela's is a Third Level College with a sufficient number of mature students enrolled on courses to ensure the studies integrity. I was advised by staff at St. Angela's to carry out the pilot study in the canteen as this is where most of the mature students congregate. The most valuable function of the pilot study is the adequacy of the questionnaire and nearly 'always results in important improvements in the questionnaire and a general increase in the efficiency of the enquiry' argues Moser and Kalton, (1979:51).

Following the pilot study, I enrolled the help and assistance of the Access/ Mature Student's Officer in the National College of Ireland Galway, Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology, and Letterkenny Institute of Technology to distribute Questionnaires to participating students. In Sligo Institute of Technology I personally distributed Questionnaires in a number of ways. These included distributing to volunteering students in the canteen and in the library. I also enrolled the help of some of the lecturing staff who distributed Questionnaires to part-time students and to students attending Outreach courses in Counties Sligo and Donegal.

The final part of the primary research was qualitative and involved a series of interviews with Educator/Mentors. Participants are selected according to Baker, 'who are knowledgeable about a specific subject because of their experiences' (1994:188). They were chosen specifically because of their educational or mentoring background. The first was chosen because their background experience involves lecturing both full and part-time mature students at Third Level. The second individual was chosen because their experience is more 'mentoring' oriented through PLC (Post Leaving Cert Courses). The third has a history of teaching mostly female students and the fourth is based in a rural and community educational setting. The interviews were designed to draw on the opinions and knowledge of the educationalists on the ground. 'In qualitative interviewing, there is much greater interest in the interviewee's point of view' argues Bryman, (2004:319).

Even though the research is both qualitative and quantitative in nature, qualitative responses tended to dominate. Therefore using the content analysis method of analysing the data was deemed the most appropriate through the creation of categories and the development of themes. 'Content analysis is a very transparent research method. The coding scheme and the sampling procedures can be clearly set out so that replications and follow-up studies are feasible' argue Bryman, (2004:195). There was very little need for statistical analysis except for example the age groups of participants or the college year etc.

## **1.5 Outline of the Thesis**

Chapter 1 provides a presentation of the introduction of the study. Chapter 2 presents a detailed layout of previous literature and research in the specific area. Chapter 3 is the methodology and design carried out in the process of completing the research study. Chapter 4 is the presentation of the data and



findings. Chapter 5 is a detailed presentation of the discussion of the findings. Chapter 6 is the conclusion and recommendations. Following this are the references, and appendices including Questionnaire design, Interview questions, Educator/Mentor interviews and Focus Groups interviews.

## **1.6 Limitations/Problems Encountered in the Research**

The aim of the research is to explore and examine the supports and needs of mature students. One of the limitations was that the Focus Group research was confined to Sligo Institute of Technology as participants had to volunteer. However, time constraints are one of the major concerns for mature students so lack of time was an issue on their part. Nevertheless, the deciding factor included the fact that I had access to video and audio recording equipment and room space at Sligo Institute of Technology which I did not have in any of the other Educational Institutions. The main issue here was getting full and part-time students to volunteer to take part in the Focus Group research.

Problems encountered include it was not possible to have equal numbers of male and female student participation from each academic year, including students on part-time courses because participation was on a voluntary basis. With result the response was largely uneven with fewer numbers of students from third and fourth year in full and part-time education. However, there appears to be no apparent or startling revelations arising from these particular restrictions.

Another problem encountered was the fact that I had to rely on the discretion of the Access or Mature Student Officer of the other Institutes with regard to the distribution of the Questionnaires. Each had their own suggestions on the means of distribution resulting in differing means of delivery and differing numbers of participating students from each Educational Institution. This however, did not have a negative impact on the overall research findings.

Alternative methods of conducting this research were investigated but were found to be either unreliable or unsuitable for this particular study. These include case study research, secondary analysis research and ethnographic research. According to Hakim, 'case study research is concerned with obtaining a rounded picture of a person's life, a situation or event from the perspectives of all the persons involved, usually by using a variety of methods and sources of information' (2000:10). However, the main weakness of case studies is that the researcher's interests can 'strongly' shape the results.

Secondary analysis research is, 'any re-analysis of data collected by another researcher or organisation .... Most commonly, secondary analysis is applied to quantitative data from previous studies' states Hakim, (2000:24). Although the costs are relatively low compared to other research methods, the disadvantage is that the 'scope and depth of the study will be constrained by the material already available' (2000:31). However, no previous research on mature students in higher education has been conducted in this region, secondary analysis research is therefore incompatible with this study.

Finally, ethnographic research observes the participant and enables the researcher 'to share the same experience as the subjects and so to understand better why they acted in the way they did' according to Bell, (1993:10). However, the approach is time consuming and the researcher's interpretation is open to criticism, and therefore considered unreliable for this research study.

## **1.6.1 Key Assumptions**

Key assumptions in conducting the study include the criteria for a mature student.

These are

1. The traditional classification which states that a mature student is someone over the age of 23 years.
2. The fact that the students have been out of the educational system for a number of years and,
3. Having similar background experiences with various roles and responsibilities.

In addition, another key assumption includes the fact that there is an onus on re-engagement in further education and training i.e. the employability factor.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

To conclude, the purpose of this chapter has been to lay the foundations of the research through an introduction of the purpose, significance and the reason that the research is justified. A short introduction to the Literature Review is presented. This is followed by a brief description and justification of the methodology used in the research process. A short description of limitations and problems encountered in the research were also provided. The following chapters present a comprehensive description of the whole research process finally ending with a number of recommendations. Leading on from this chapter is Chapter 2 the Literature Review which provides a detailed account of previous research and literature and a critical foundation for this study.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to explore and examine the experiences and support needs of mature students within the framework of current debate and theory. I intend to explore the experience of learning for adults, by examining different learning styles and models that may accommodate the learning needs. I also intend to create an understanding of the extra pressure placed on adult students in combining the student role with their other important roles<sup>1</sup> and responsibilities, along with developing a greater understanding of the assumed student role for the mature student.

This also includes creating a greater understanding of the transformations<sup>2</sup> that will occur during the course of their student life. Adults return to education specifically to increase their knowledge whether to create job opportunities or develop their own knowledge or both. However, the learning process particularly the thinking process, is an experience that may change and develop for the student and is one specific process that I intend to explore.

Because of the significance of 'Lifelong Learning' and the importance of its place in society and in relation to mature students, I will focus on the concepts of lifelong learning as education is considered and understood as a valued ongoing life long process. In addition to providing a brief history of Third Level Education in Ireland, and the mature student's role in this, I will look at possible future developments of the role and direction of mature students in further and higher education in the Northwest including counties in the BMW (Border

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<sup>1</sup> Other responsibilities that need to be fulfilled such as work and family and financial commitments.

<sup>2</sup> Changes that may occur in family, or work situations (the external environment) and/or changes that may transpire during the individual learning process.

Midland and Western) Region. Counties in the BMW Region such as Leitrim, Cavan, Longford and Donegal have a mainly rural population and are much more isolated. Furthermore, according to Lónra, the national average of the population who have no formal education or only primary education is 25.1%. This percentage is much higher in the BMW Region with Donegal and Cavan the highest in the region, 37.8% and 36.4% respectfully, (2003). Education and training needs to be specifically targeted to reach those isolated in rural and underdeveloped areas. Therefore, it is essential that strategies are put in place to develop areas, by reaching people who can use education to retrain and develop themselves and their own communities.

### **2.1.1 Definition of Lifelong Learning**

The following is a definition of lifelong learning provided by the European Commission when adopting ‘the *Communications, making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, in November 2001,

“any learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”. The comprehensiveness of this definition was welcomed by adult educators in Ireland and throughout Europe (Keogh, 2004:21)

### **2.1.2 Definition and Characteristics of a Mature Student**

The formal definition of a ‘mature student’ is ‘a candidate who is at least 23 years of age on 1<sup>st</sup> January of the year of entry’ according to Department of Education and Science (2004:6). There is no upper age limit. However, for the purposes of this Literature Review, the defining characteristics identify what the term ‘mature student’ implies. This is someone over the age of 23 who does not come directly from the second level educational system. It will also infer that it

is one that comes with other responsibilities. These include financial (mortgage, employment) and 'emotional' (children, partners, parents) responsibilities. Consequently, they have to incorporate and combine study into their existing life. In addition the term 'mature student' will be referred to as 'student', in the body of Literature and 'ordinary students' will be used to refer to students belonging to the main student body, or the traditional student cohort. Third level education refers to attending a full-time accredited day or night course. This includes male and female students from all academic years including those completing foundation courses.

There are a number of other characteristics, which would appear to delineate mature students more commonly than others. Mature students may have different support needs from the traditional student body, as their life experiences may be more diverse, because they have been out of the educational system for a number of years, and during which period, have been through a range of varying life experiences. This in itself makes a mature student unique because their perspective is different from the traditional student role. It also means that a mature student encounters a different set of problems and has different support needs. Many have had to combine established family and financial responsibilities alongside the demands of their new student role. This may create confusion and pressure on the adult student making the transition more difficult. For these reasons, it is important to explore the barriers facing mature students. Therefore, the main emphasis of this literature review is to get a clearer understanding of the issues and concerns in relation to mature students in higher education.

## **2.2 Background and Changing Nature of Mature Learners**

Irish history shows that ‘until recent decades higher education in Ireland was almost synonymous with university education’ according to Quin et al, cited by Clancy (1999:78). Trinity College is Ireland’s oldest university established in 1592, however the ‘operation of religious tests in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries meant that only members of the Established Church could avail of University Education in Ireland’ states Clancy (1999:78). Maynooth was the first Catholic Higher Education College and it was established for educating priests. Religion is a strong point of the Irish tradition and has played a strong influential role in education in Ireland. ‘The National University of Ireland was established by the Irish Universities Act 1908’ according to Curry, (1998:93) which saw a growth in the number of Irish Universities. D Thornhill (2002) points out in his extract in the Higher Education Authority Action Plan 2005-2007 that at present the Irish third level education system consists of ‘seven Universities, fourteen Institutes of Technology and a number of other smaller institutions’ (HEA, 2004:37).

However the current shift in education began with the changes in the country’s economic growth which, according to Powell (1992:281) ‘coincided with a growing political awareness of the importance of education in Irish Society’. He suggests the education reform debate was initiated by Dr. Noel Browne in 1959 bringing these issues to the attention of the political parties which lead to the State publishing the ‘Investment in Education Report’ in 1966 (Powell, 1992:281). One of the main emphases of this report was to ensure Ireland’s educational system could adjust to the demands of the increasing economic growth in Ireland and beyond.

Also, 'economic recession, technological change and greatly increased levels of unemployment' are according to Drudy and Lynch (1993:147) also significant factors in the changing demands for education. 'Qualification inflation' means higher qualifications are a prerequisite for any job particularly in today's competitive world.

The reality is 'that the number of adult workers in education and training in Ireland is below the E.U. average', according to Cahill and that 'about one third of the existing workforce – 500,000 – does not have a Leaving Certificate' (2004:58). However, according to the National Development Plan 2000-2006, the lack of educational attainment is greater in the BMW Region at primary, secondary and tertiary levels NDP, (1999:4) in comparison to the South and East Region of Ireland.

This leaves large pockets of the Northwest without the opportunity to adapt in a volatile labour market where there is a very real need for qualified and up-to-date education and retraining.

The non-university sector, (formally known as Regional Technical Colleges, and now recognised, as the Institutes of Technology), has grown considerably in the last two decades because as Curry points out there was a very real 'need for high-level technicians to service a growing industrial sector' (1998:90). The R.T.Cs were established in the 1970s and 'were originally intended to reinforce the technical dimension of the second-level system' (1998:90) but 'quickly found themselves called upon to cater increasingly for third-level demand' (1998:90). 'During 1997, the status of the RTCs became an issue and each was eventually renamed an Institute of Technology' (1998:91). All courses in the Institutes are now third-level standard and include both full and part-time courses.



Historically the developing role of the mature student in adult education had a link with agriculture, through organisations such as the GAA and the Irish Countrywomen's Association, which, according to the Green Paper on Adult Education (1998:38) was 'outside the formal statutory sector'. The changes in adult education along with being influenced by the economic climate are also influenced by the concept of 'lifelong learning'. However, the process is somewhat slower in Ireland compared to other countries in a similar position, because the numbers of mature students participating in higher education is very low in this country.

Studies show that,

the participation rate of mature student entrants to higher education via the CAO/CAS system has remained relatively static...in 1980, just over 3.5% of CAO/CAS entrants were mature, while the comparable figure for 1993/1994 was 3.4% (Lynch, 1997:79)

According to an OECD report, 'mature students (over 23) represented only 5% of new entrants in 1998, and about 2% of the university based student body' (2004:29). Further more the profile of mature students, 'certainly indicates that it is younger 'mature students' who constitute the majority of entrants' according to Clarke and Malone, (2004). The coincides with Lynch's findings (1997:83-4) argue Clarke and Malone who found 'in 1993-4, 52 per cent of all higher education mature student entrants were under thirty years of age, while only 5 per cent were over fifty years of age' (Clarke & Malone, 2004:57).

Although the economic wealth of the country influences the educational system, Lynch recognises that education is a major form of capital in its own right, and the Irish economy has always been reliant on knowledge-based capital, therefore it needs to develop this capital. She argues that participation in higher education is, especially important because not only does the State benefit from a well-educated population but encouraging all groups in society to participate gives people control over their lives, thereby improving their quality of life and

enriching the social and cultural life of individuals but more importantly the wider society's, (1997:113).

The previously dominating ethos of adult education towards personal development and unrecognised course qualifications, is no longer acceptable according to Brady, because 'adult students now have much more sophisticated needs and are no longer prepared to spend time, energy and money pursuing courses which cannot be used for anything other than personal development' (1997:8). Another form of educational development is Community education.

Community education by its very nature serves a different purpose as the following definition provided by Aontas in its policy document, *Community Education (2000)* explains. It is more in the realm of self-development

Its structures, programmes ... were rooted in the day to day experiences, interests .... (of) those disadvantaged economically, socially and educationally as they struggled to direct their lives in the face of growing employment, poverty and marginalisation. It adopts a person-centred approach which is very different from the approach which centres all the power, knowledge and status in the teacher (AONTAS, 2000:3,9, cited in King, O'Driscoll & Holden, 2002:26)

This is a learner-centred approach which offers guidance and mentoring generally on an individual basis. These approaches to learning are aimed at those unemployed and

disadvantaged young people and in women's programmes which is primarily on confidence building and women's participation in decision and policy making in their communities, such education builds practical skills

specifically for the job market according to King, O'Driscoll and Holden, (2002:26).

Community Education presents individuals with the opportunity of readdressing their own personal development and practical skills, and is often the first step up socially, economically and educationally, in addressing their external environment. However, the cost of courses and returning to education in general always has an impact on students. Finance or more likely, lack of finance is a hurdle that students need to consider and address.

## 2.3 Financial Impact

According to Leonard, a number of recent studies have indicated that adult students bring into higher education a much larger and more complex baggage of commitments and constraints in comparison to the traditional higher level student. In addition, they 'are often at greater risk academically, psychologically, financially and socially' (Leonard, 1999:49).

Walters agrees stating that 'mature students face many barriers in their quest for third level education' (1997:21). Furthermore, he believes that the lack of sufficient finances make it not even possible for many to consider third-level, and this is especially in the case of those adults from a disadvantaged socio-economic background. Even the application process itself, may appear too daunting. In addition, many potential students may lack confidence in their own ability to reach and attain the level required for third level exams, and assignments. And the fact is barriers include other responsibilities that the student has. This means as Walters's points out, 'some mature students may also face difficulties in meeting assessment deadlines due to family and other commitments' (1997:24).

Lacking the relevant knowledge required of academic success in higher education is not uncommon, according to McMahon (1997:33) who describes his own experiences of higher education. He also discusses the experiences of

another mature student who lacked the relevant knowledge to succeed in college yet he

gave so much of himself, attending all lectures and tutorials, meeting all essay deadlines, and spending a phenomenal amount of time in the library, always in a panic trying to get this book and that book, to accumulate as much information as possible. This was probably his downfall. What he lacked was a knowledge of the specific information that the examiners were looking for. The person was so committed, yet the system failed him when he need not have failed (McMahon, 1997:33)

McMahon describes his own experience as being characterised by struggles to meet deadlines, with feelings of isolation in a competitive educational world. However, he argues that third-level education does need to be challenging, 'but if higher education institutions are to attract and retain students ... then a more supportive, less competitive, more pleasurable and more relevant environment must be developed' (1997:34).

Education has a powerful influence over our future roles in the social order through its certification and accreditation systems 'it not only allocates people to different positions within the economic system but also controls the level of social mobility in society' according to Drudy and Lynch (1993:26), making the prospects of higher education more of a distant illusion for those from a socially disadvantaged background.

However, taking on the challenge of returning to education means one may be faced with many other challenges that must be resolve. According to Moxley *et al.*,

many students will face serious obstacles to educational achievement. Some will be overwhelmed by personal stress triggered by changes in their family, financial position or health. Others will face academic challenges that reveal learning needs or issues, Even the best students may experience periods in which barriers emerge that seem impossible to overcome (2001:153)

The academic world of higher education involves extensive reading and note-taking which needs to be carried out in an effective systematic manner. It involves gathering the appropriate material for assignments and evaluating the assignments academically. Plus according to Moxley *et al.*, students need to be aware of ‘both deductive and inductive thinking and how they can incorporate these approaches within a problem-solving framework’ (2001:184). Students also need to be skilled in presenting ideas through writing and they need to be accustomed to all that academia entails in order to succeed.

## **2.4 Impact of Social Responsibilities**

The social responsibilities may be more evident for some students, particularly for female students as

these difficulties may be more pronounced among female mature students who may find that the private world of the household impinges more dramatically on their entry into the public world of higher education compared to their male counterparts (Leonard, 1999:49)

According to Inglis and Murphy, their male counterparts may not have the same weight of responsibilities, as female students with children often report that they frequently had to hurry home in order to receive children from school (Inglis and Murphy, 1999:32). Furthermore, study was often fitted in after the child’s bedtime. Whereas, men with families had not the same level of family commitments; and could stay on at college to study.

‘It is not surprising that women with families who are continuing their education occasionally complain of fatigue and cite conflicting demands on their time as their number one problem’ argue Lenzand and Hansen, (1977:207).

In addition, one’s responsibilities may cause internal conflict according to Bennett, ‘neglecting these so-called home duties can cause immense guilt and

emotional pain' (2002:60). Furthermore, fulfilling one's parental duties can negatively impact on one's study as research carried out by Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, has shown 'over one-third indicated that they missed classes at least occasionally due to problems with childcare arrangements, and over half said that they had difficulty in financing arrangements' (2002:90). In fact 'financial considerations arise even before students enter higher education, and can influence their decision' (2002:8) where students may have to consider the length or duration of the course. This is particularly the situation for students who have to pay course costs. Indeed financial difficulties are 'one of the reasons frequently cited for dropping out of college (Martin, 1985; Pantages and Creedon, 1978); particularly among mature and working class students (Yorke, 1999)', cited in Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, (2002:8).

However, students who have completed a number of course years are 'prepared to put up with the strain of living with limited resources, presumably because they had already invested a lot of time, money, and effort, and had the goal of graduation in their sights' (Eivers, Flanagan & Morgan 2002:9).

Time constraints can cause major problems, 'married women overwhelmingly cited 'finding time to study' as the most serious drawback they had to face' according to Leonard, (1999:54) Being a wife or mother involves allocating certain amounts of time to the tasks involved in fulfilling these roles along with study. However, this specific consumption of time cannot be measured by the time on a clock, 'the time and space both education and family could, potentially, take up mentally created the same sorts of dilemmas and pulls that the women felt with regard to the physical allocation of their time' (Edwards, 1993:68).

In addition, time studying is time not spent with family and vice versa, resulting in the fact that 'whichever way the women prioritized their time they often did not feel completely at ease with their decision. Most of the women wanted to fulfill all the commitments generated' (1993:66) by both the family and

education to the full according to Edwards. Furthermore, the need for study means 'education intruded on family life in ways that paid work did not' (1993:67), because part and parcel of being a student means one is never done thinking about 'study'. 'Education did not just come home with the women in a physical sense, in terms of books and essays to write, but it could also do so mentally .... the subjects they were studying were constantly in their thoughts' (1993:68).

Yet, 'women rarely questioned whether or not what they were doing was attempting the impossible. The balance they were seeking appeared to be the ability to do everything as if other things did not exist' argues Edwards (1993:76/77). A failure to meet the needs of home, family and study is regarded as their own fault for not being properly organized. However, 'it is easier to stop doing than to stop being: women may *do* housework but they *are* mothers or wives' (1993:63). It is part of their identity and who they see themselves to be. Nonetheless, 'the time limits on their attendance created by the responsibilities of family life meant that the women could never totally immerse themselves in being a student in the ways that they felt other students without such responsibilities could' (Edwards, 1993:79).

Research that explore the effects of study on domestic life according to Edwards, 'seem to be implicitly or explicitly, organized around the idea of roles, role strain and role conflict' (1993:10). The idea that juggling multiple roles is the direct source of conflict implies that all students have to do is to become more skillful at organizing the roles they have to fulfill.

Research on mature students' experiences of combining higher education with caring responsibilities found that returning to education calls for drastic changes in one's life and in one's family's life such as 'changing employment patterns', and childcare and domestic changes, 'and living apart from the family while studying', according to Cappleman-Morgan (2004:5) all of which can place strain on one's relationships. Also, 'looming deadlines often led to very late

night or very early morning additional studying to limit the impact on family life, but with negative consequences' (2004:7) leaving students burned out.

Some students are subjected to the 'demands of not two, but *three*, 'greedy institutions' (2004:7) from study, family and employment. The research reveals that students feel 'subsequent guilt at neglecting their families' (2004:8). In addition students find that combining all roles can leave them 'torn between competing educational and family obligations and distressed when overriding family needs were met with unsupportive attitudes institutionally' as Edwards (1993) suggests, argues Cappleman-Morgan, (2004:8). 'Real life impacts on their education', and students must 'rely on the goodwill rather than the duty' (2004:9) of the institutions to meet their study responsibilities.

Another hurdle that a student may face is the negative attitude from one's spouse or partner. Reynolds discovered during his work that 'one pattern emerged from women clients in their forties and fifties. They had stayed at home to rear the children' who are now grown and these

ladies wanted to develop some kind of career or, at least, part-time work. Their husbands were having major difficulties accepting this. Perhaps the husbands felt challenged as the breadwinner .... The men need to realize that everyone grows and changes. The wife wanted to grow to her potential. In nine cases out of ten, the husbands were refusing to even talk about it (Reynolds, 2000:33/34)

However, this is not the only source of negative attitudes that students may experience. The student may find that their friends attitudes change toward them. Friends may start to feel uncomfortable at the student's level of success.

If you start to achieve more than the group expects, you are rocking the boat. The others start to feel uncomfortable .... Intellectually and rationally, they will wish you well but subconsciously they will pull you back. Not only are you challenging their comfort zone but also your success is reflecting back to them their own lack of it. They do not want a constant reminder of their failure to do what they know they should be doing. They will systematically and subtly (sometimes not so subtly) pull you back to their level (Reynolds 2000:107/108)



Nevertheless, if the individual wants to return to education then they must ‘fit’ study into their life even if this causes unwanted pressure; as part and parcel of being a mature student means one has other roles and responsibilities to fulfill even if sometimes support is shortcoming.

## 2.5 Academic Impact of Student Life

‘You have multiple roles in life, each requiring a different perspective. Depending on which role you are playing, your actions and reactions will change, depending on who you are dealing with’ states Reynolds (2000:10). However, some roles are more difficult to fulfill and may create inner personal conflict. Individuals behave the way they do because of influences from past successes, failures, feelings of inadequacy etc. but argues Guskin and Guskin it is ‘not necessarily the result of certain basic personality types but often the results of the pressures and expectations to which they have been and are subjected’ as there are ‘certain requirements they are expected to follow’ (1970:17/18). There are specific norms and behaviours attached to the student role. Moxley, *et al.*, states ‘the basis of student development lies in a student’s mastery of the role of student’ (2001:92). For example at the beginning of one’s journey

adult students frequently experience a degree of discomfort as they begin to change their roles and attempt to adjust to new environments. Yet this aspect of returning to school is rarely anticipated; as a result, not only are many adult students unprepared to deal with these problems, but they often become overwhelmed by unfamiliar pressures and tensions (Lenzand and Hansen, 1977:154)

Moreover, ‘entry into higher education can involve taking on not just studying as work but also an identity as a student’ Edwards, (1993:63).

This transition in identifying oneself as a student may be harder than one expects according to Bean Ui Chasaide,

Interactional factors involve engagements both inside and outside the lecture hall. These can be difficult for adults who are moving from home (where adult status and family position create a body of expectations, respect and responsibility in a situation in which the adult is in control) into a lecture or tutorial situation (where student status implies subservience to external demands and expectations, and might appear to involve loss of respect and then back again to adult position, all within the course of a few hours. The fact that many of the lecturers may be younger than the adult student might exacerbate any difficulties in adjusting (Bean Ui Chasaide, 1997:41)

In addition, adults 'are used to having their adult status respected, and do not always easily adjust to being disempowered by the new system they enter' (1997:40). There may be a need for a certain period of adjustment required to incorporate this new student status into one's adult status. 'Adult learners resent being treated as empty vessels into which those who know, pour knowledge. Adult learners like to be treated as equals' according to Inglis and Murphy (1999:90), who explored Weil's research findings and found that

Weil (1986; 1988) found examples of a similar conflict among the students she interviewed. The following quote from one of her respondents typified the feelings generated when mature students are rudely made aware of their subordinated role.

The first year you learn that the boundaries are clearly defined by the institution. You're ignorant. You don't know what to expect. There was a useful comment one lecturer made. 'Undergraduates have no opinion'. You are made to feel that way, to say, 'I am the clay, you are the potter. Shape me, mould me.' (Quoted in Weil, 1986:226).

Weil's work on learner identity suggests it is the way in which the teacher and the institution relate to the student that causes this loss of confidence (Inglis and Murphy, 1999:33/34)

Research carried out in 2004 on older students in Waterford Institute of Technology found 'older learners fear failure, more so than younger students'. According to Bunyan, students report teaching staff using 'scare tactics'

whereby students have been warned this or that needs to be done in preparation for exams etc. As one states 'that's stuff that kids have been getting, we're not kids' (2004).

Nevertheless, there are practical preparations that new students can carry out that will help to transport them into the new student role in the initial period of adjustment. Lenzand and Hansen suggest,

they need to learn how to study efficiently and confidently; how to read with purpose, flexibility, and speed; and how to listen, take useful lecture and reading notes, write exams, and prepare research papers (1977:199)

However, having 'clear expectations about courses is an important factor in helping students to adjust to college' according to Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, (2002), cited in Flanagan and Morgan, (2004:34/35). As 'failure to complete a course can have negative personal costs for students, often leading to a sense of failure, wasted talent. And low self-esteem' (Flanagan & Morgan, 2004: 3).

Furthermore, 'the more you learn, the more acutely aware you become of your ignorance' argues Senge, (1994:11). But equally, Fleming states people have the 'right to learn all that is possible to learn' (2004:11). However, exploring new knowledge and expressing or forming new opinions may be difficult because of the body of existing knowledge.

Share states that the 'disciplinary power of preexisting and established bodies of knowledge can make it very difficult for students to achieve any level of expressive freedom' (2004:18),

as it stands Irish third-level student's have minimal power to shape their own learning. They have little influence over the content of their education nor how it is structured or delivered....A more positive approach might be on where, as an IT Sligo student remarked:

student input should be taken more into account as it would make “us” that we are part of the college, unlike just being told what to do. Also if we worked with our lecturers to get a mutual goal we would become more involved and interested in the work given.

This stance would represent a fundamental change in how most Irish tertiary-level education is experienced. It might lead to a change in how students experience their courses of study, and how they might approach the tasks of writing and self-expression (Share, 2004:19/20)

In addition, Bennett suggests one needs to consider that ‘we are often so consumed with learning the skills and competencies for a career or job that we are conditioned to think of learning as just that: qualification hunting’ (2002: 113) and very often we are reduced to feeling ‘we have only learnt something when we pass a test or exam in it’ (2002:120).

As a full time mature student who interacts with lecturers on a daily basis I noticed I had to adapt to different learning styles from exploratory to fact based learning, as each discipline requires a different form or process. At first this had negative consequences because I was losing the ability to critically analyse information until I understood the process and adapted the roles more easily to suit my learning. However this process takes time to understand, adapt and integrate. Furthermore, it can be influenced both positively and negatively by internal and external forces.

Why do we choose to educate or re-educate ourselves? Corey and Schneider Corey see this as part of the nature of our human make-up, ‘to be constantly developing, growing, and moving toward a balanced and complex level of development’ (1997:8). The process of ‘striving for self-actualisation means working toward fulfilling our potential toward becoming all that we are capable of becoming’ (1997:6), and education has an important role to play in this process. The process of self-examination is the start of an on-going process in self-actualisation, but accordingly ‘to continue to grow, we have to be willing to let go of some of our old ways of thinking and acting so new dimensions can develop’ (1997:6).

Corey and Schneider Corey state that Carl Jung points to the fact that ‘part of the nature of humans it to be constantly developing, growing and moving toward a balanced and complete level of development’ (1997:7). The process of self-actualisation implies that you are an active learner, and are responsible for your own learning. It is a humanistic approach to learning. However past experiences may prevent this process from occurring. Instead of questioning and thinking for yourself, your experiences may have taught you to become a passive learner in a number of ways. Corey found his school experience to mean he had to ‘please’ his teacher. He found he could not question the teacher, but had to accept the teacher’s opinions, (1997:15).

However, there are very different types of education. One is ‘skill-learning’ and the other ‘creative education’ and both can ‘be aided by institutional arrangement’ according to Illich. ‘Most skills can be acquired and improved’ through the educational system but ‘education in the exploratory and creative use of skills, however, cannot rely on drills’ Illich (1978:17).

Corey acknowledges that there is a need to learn basic skills however ‘academic learning of content is most fruitful when combined with the personal concerns of the learners’, (1997:15). This in itself makes learning more interesting and memorable with ‘real’ meaning attached to it. It also allows for the learner to want to learn more and allows for the creation of a healthy curiosity and thirst for knowledge.

The concept of “whole-person learning” endorsed by Rogers’s (1983) is a belief also shared by Corey ‘wherein what is learned becomes a basic part of the person and the attitudes and values are at least as important as the factual knowledge’ (1997:15,16). ‘Whole-person learning’, involves a number of characteristics, including the following: it is self-initiated in that there is a sense of discovery from within the learner. It influences the behaviour, attitudes and personality of the learner. The learner evaluates his or her own learning in

relation to his or her own needs and the written material is significant and combines logical knowledge with cognitive; and feelings with intuition. Learning from this perception is learning that flows; you develop and grow with your learning and you're learning develops and grows.

“Mental models” is how Senge, describes why our thinking affects our actions. Mental models ‘are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action’, more often than not, ‘we are not consciously aware of our mental models or the effects they have on our behaviour’ (1994:8) but this is how we make a judgement on what we perceive. The discipline of working with mental models ‘also includes the ability to carry on “learningful” conversions that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others’ (Senge, 1994:9).

The arguments are highly applicable on returning to education and are an important dimension to learning particularly if one has been out of the educational system for a while. This process of education allows your mind to actively analyse, evaluate and learn.

When Freire said ‘I see “education as the practice of freedom” above all as a truly gnosiological situation’ (1976:147) this is his understanding of the true power of education because not only does it provide the opportunity for radical social change by providing the tools to better one’s social and economic environment, education also equips the individual with knowledge that awakens their consciousness.

He further states

dialogue awakens an awareness. Within dialogue and problem-posing educator-educatee and educatee-educator go forward together to develop a critical attitude. The result of this is the perception of the interplay of knowledge and all its adjuncts. This knowledge reflects the world; reflects human beings in and

with the world explaining the world. Even more important it reflects having to justify their transformation of the world (Freire, 1976:125)

Freire sees education as a process that informs, develops, and evolves because 'people become aware of their manner of acquiring knowledge and realize the need to knowing even more. In this lies the whole force of education in the gnosiological condition' (1976:153) or as Torres describes it 'education is not the key to transformation, but transformation is in itself educational' (1999). It is a process of social change. Freire believes that through learning people learn that they can re-make themselves and are 'capable of knowing – of knowing that they know and of knowing that they don't. They are able to know what they know better and to come to know what they do not yet know', (2004:15). Through his experience of working with peasants, Freire noted that the more informed they were, the more they understood the oppressive nature of the society in which they lived. Knowledge gave them the power to understand and readdress this oppressiveness.

By predisposing men to reevaluate constantly, to analyze "findings," to adopt scientific methods and processes, and to perceive themselves in dialectical relationship with their social reality, that education could help men to assume an increasingly critical attitude toward the world and so to transform it (Freire, 1976:33/34)

It is through this thinking process that according to Freire, (1976:47) a person can come to 'discover the value of his person'. This is an important argument in respect of the role of education and the development of man's creativity. However, it is through the process of exploring knowledge and informing oneself that one increases knowledge. He states 'the more I inform myself on the substantiveness of what I read, the more and the better will I read and become able to re-write what is read in my way, becoming also able to write what I have not yet written' (2004:71/72). Using what you have come to know to further explore, understand and create more knowledge, this is the real power of knowing, putting knowledge into practice of ownership. However the learning

environment must develop an encouraging atmosphere to allow for critical reflection.

Encouraging and developing the creative mind is a process, which Rogers suggests ‘cannot be forced but must be permitted to emerge’ (1967:356).

Creativity will emerge when

external evaluation is absent, “when we cease to form judgements” of the other individual from our own locus of evaluation we are fostering creativity. For the individual to find himself in an atmosphere where he is not being evaluated, not being measured by some external standard, is enormously freeing. Evaluation is always a threat... (Rogers, 1967:357)

Critical evaluation of information which is a highly important educational process may be disrupted or strained particularly if a student is under stress, for example during exam times. This form of freedom encourages the thinking and evaluation process through incorporating new knowledge by contrasting and blending into old knowledge whereby formulating new ways of thinking. Critical evaluation also allows the individual to examine and appreciate other points of view. Or to use the simple words of a peasant who said ‘before this, words meant nothing to me; now they speak to me and I can make them speak’ cited by Shaull, (1990:13).

Mezirow defines learning as a process of making an interpretation of meaning of an experience, which guides understanding and action. What we perceive or fail to perceive and what we think or fail to think are powerfully influenced by our expected assumptions, and how we interpret our experiences, (1990:1/2). Expected assumptions, i.e. assumptions that we believe to be absolute, can limit our thinking processes. He argues that all human action is thoughtful action, which draws on what we know to guide our next action. Reflective action is a critical assessment in decision-making, or a re-assessment of what we normally presume to be the case, (1990:6).



‘Thought that involves critical reflection involves learning’ states Mezirow (1990:xvii). Reflective judgment is the key to transformative learning. A process where the individual critically evaluates the information they receive. It is a process that allows people to see themselves from another perspective.

There are two dimensions to transformative learning, the transformation of meaning schemes and the transformation of meaning perspectives. The transformation of meaning schemes is integral to the process of reflection. As we assess our assumptions about the content or process of problem solving and find them unjustified, we create new ones or transform our old assumptions and hence our interpretations of experience (Mezirow, 1991:192)

This is how we learn on a daily basis, argues Mezirow. Reflective learning involves examining or reassessing one’s assumptions and only becomes transformative when we find that the assumptions we once held to be true are no longer valid. Transformative learning requires the individual to analyse their own interpretation of their situation or experience objectively. However, the individual’s structure of assumptions influences the way they will act or decide on their experience. It is the

transformation of these uncritically assimilated habits of perceiving, thinking, remembering, problem solving, and feeling affords the most significant opportunities for learning, creativity, self-realization, and social action in adulthood. These habits determined what, where, how, and when we learn, as well as the nature of our perceptions and thoughts about the world, other people, and ourselves (Mezirow 1990: xiv)

Mezirow states that ‘learning may be understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action’ (1991:12) or learning may mean ‘using a meaning that we have already made to guide the way we think, act, or feel about what we are currently experiencing. Meaning is making sense of or giving coherence to our experiences’ (Mezirow, 1991:11).

As human beings we constantly create and re-create our knowledge. All new knowledge,

is generated from knowledge which has become old, which in its turn been generated from previous knowledge. Thus, knowledge is in constant succession, such that all new knowledge, when it is established as such, becomes the basis for the knowledge which will replace it (Freire, 1976:117)

Consequently, the more we learn, the more we want to know, and the greater our understanding of knowledge becomes.

Although adult learners do face financial and family barriers to further education Fleming states that it's 'the learning process itself that presented students with the most difficult barrier to achieving a degree' (2002:4). He argues that

what exists between the individual mature student, with their experiential knowledge, and the college, with its highly structured, abstract theoretical knowledge, is a latent conflict that manifests itself in various ways. In particular the conflict arises in the process of writing essays and examinations (Fleming, 2002:5)

which may result in the student developing thoughts of self-doubt and uncertainty, in one's abilities, the student may loose and the college wins.

This is in theory but the reality is 'common' or 'subjective knowledge' and 'college' or 'objective academic knowledge' according to Murphy and Fleming, (2000:86) are regarded as two different forms of knowledge opposing each other. 'Subjective knowledge' is knowledge gained from work experience and general 'know how' or common sense from day to day living, and it is a valuable form of knowledge as one can not only develop high levels of critical awareness skills but one can also inform and educate oneself. 'College knowledge' is highly structured theoretical knowledge with its own set of rules and requires thinking objectively; and depends heavily on theoretical arguments

and debates. It does not however recognise an experimental approach. Furthermore,

academic knowledge is problematised from various directions - for monopolising the truth, for lacking relevance, for losing touch with the “real” world, for excluding the voices of those not traditionally a part of the student population, and for reproducing an unequal social order (Murphy & Fleming, 2000:79)

Moreover, undermining practical knowledge is counterproductive to learning. As students arrive at university and “bring with them their knowledge at the level of common sense and they have the right to go beyond this level of knowledge’ (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 157)” cited by Murphy and Fleming, (1998: 5).

In returning to education the student has to come to terms with the fact that academic knowledge is acquired through a very specific set of rules. Accordingly, knowing the “tricks of the trade” is what students must come to grasp (Fleming & Murphy, 1997: 58).

## **2.6 Conflict between Common and College Knowledge**

Fleming believes that the conflict between individual subjective knowledge and the objective knowledge of the college is not the dominant issue, but the real debate ‘over what counts as useful and valid knowledge, constitutes the real boundary between adult and higher education’ (2002:7).

Two studies carried out in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and University College Dublin; respectfully, (Fleming & Murphy, 1997; and Inglis & Murphy, 1999) found,

it was the learning process itself that presented students with the most difficult barrier to achieving a degree. What we found intriguing was how mature students attempted to meet both their own learning needs and the requirements or need of the college (Fleming, 2002:4)

‘Students own subjective knowledge, accumulated over a lifetime of working and raising families is ignored by the university as having little to do with the demands of academia’ (2002:5) and according to Fleming this gives rise to conflict in various ways for a student.

In particular the conflict arises according to Murphy and Fleming ‘in the processes of essay writing and examinations. These are the two areas that caused major anxiety for students and created dissonance for their learner identity’ (1998:2). Academic essays for example have ‘a more de-personalised content and style’ (1998:3), where one student in their research described it has having to “twist my whole mind around” (1998:3). This Murphy and Fleming terms ‘intellectual game-playing’ (1998:3), a necessary component for academic writing and effective studying.

This is undoubtedly a hurdle; however there are other hurdles that further reinforce this internal conflict. Students generally have a certain level of intelligence or knowledge in order to be accepted into college initially but one of the main reason students go to college is to increase their intellectual knowledge. However, having to disregard previous common knowledge ineffectively makes the adult student an empty vessel. They know nothing of value, as in order to focus on college knowledge they must think the ‘intellectual game’. On the one hand, not only may this challenge the student’s previous intellectual capabilities as non existent and be an additional threat to increasing the ‘right kind’ of knowledge, it may be counterproductive to the student’s critical awareness skills, as students are encouraged to think actively but only using ‘college knowledge’. On the other hand, a student may feel ‘trapped’ into giving the

lecturer what they want whereby not using or building on their objective thinking skills.

As Inglis and Murphy report ‘adult learners resent being treated as empty vessels into which those who know, pour knowledge’ (1999:90). For instance, the authors cite Weil who suggests that this can have a negative impact on a student’s confidence. One of her students reports ‘undergraduates have no opinion’. You are made to feel that way, to say, ‘I am the clay, you are the potter. Shape me, mould me’. (Quoted in Weil, 1986:226, cited by Inglis & Murphy, 1999:33/34).

In addition, ‘developing *self-critically*, if it retains any meaning for us, is manifest within silence as much as within language’ argues Zembylas and Michaelides, (2004:195). Raising critically awareness and the act of critically appraisal requires time to reflect, which is often difficult to find in the hurried atmosphere of student life. Also, time constraints have an influence on how much time a student may or may not have to ‘think’ and tiredness can have a negative affect on thinking. As one student put it, ‘*dead brains can’t think*’.

Without a doubt, knowledge is infinite and immeasurable and there will always be something new and different to learn, it is a continuous cycle of didactic energy that informs us everyday. However, there may be another area of conflict that could negatively impact the learning experience. ‘Ultimately what is being asked for in academic work is almost invariably a response to a preexisting body of knowledge, embodied in texts’ states Share, (2004:18).

The disciplinary power of preexisting and established bodies of knowledge can make it very difficult for students to achieve any level of expressive freedom. Constrained by an overwhelming consensus over the ‘facts’ and established modes of knowing, students may almost be forced to plagiarise (Share, 2004:18)

If students feel they are almost forced to plagiarise, this may be counterproductive in developing critical awareness skills as the student may not be analysing the author's work in a critical sense. The student may repeat what the author is stating because college knowledge is presented in this way.

Academically you have to justify your arguments by what other authors have previously stated and this is justifiable, because this is how the work is evaluated. However, does a student think in a restricting manner because of restrictive rules? The bottom line is that you have to remember your own interpretations of how you see, experience and understand knowledge.

Another student spoke of students who failed academically because

“they weren't grasping, they were working very hard, but they weren't working at what they should have been .... the lecturer is saying something, and he says it in black and white, I want you to do the following, and he'd say it that slow and they don't pick it up” (Murphy & Fleming, 1998:3/4)

Yet another mature student spoke of an older student who wanted to know why the 'arrow' (1998:4) in the diagram was pointing in a certain direction to which the mature student responded 'just learn it so you can regurgitate it in the exams and get marks for it .... It wasn't necessary to know the nitty gritty in second year, and by asking why, she was actually dragging herself deeper into the mire' (1998:4). The older student clearly wanted to gain a deeper insight to inform her own understanding of this new knowledge whereas the younger mature student was playing the intellectual game as a means to an end.

The learning experience can also manifests itself in the following way as described by one student who explains how he worked through his experience.

If you are under a lot of pressure then you will just concentrate on passing the course. I know that from bitter experience. One subject I wasn't very good at, I tried to understand the subject and I failed the exam. When I re-took the exam I

just concentrated on passing the exam. I got 96% and the guy couldn't understand why I failed the first time. I told him this time I just concentrated on passing the exam rather than understanding the subject. I still don't understand the subject so it defeated the object, in a way (Gibbs, 1992:101, cited in Gibbs and Simpson, 2004/5)

If the student has chosen to return to education specifically to explore and gain knowledge for their own intellectual and personal development as many students do, intellectual game playing may possibly hinder this kind of learning as a student I came in contact with, once described this process as 'being institutionalised'. Murphy and Fleming describe this process as a constant compromise where the student gives way, (1998:5).

The intellectual game-playing is learning the skills of "college knowledge" (Fleming & Murphy, 1997), Murphy and Fleming, (1998:4) which include honing skills specifically for exams, essays, note-taking, reading, etc.

This process of skills learning, however, is really only a manifestation of the underlying latent conflict between these mature learners and the learned of the college. The process through which mature students go in attaining these skills is one of constant compromise with the demands of the college, of a giving in to an authority which will not accept their experimental knowledge .... the college never compromises. The students themselves are always on the losing end ... (Murphy & Fleming 1998:5)

Separating or moving from a position of regarding previous common knowledge as worthless to what is needed, expected and required academically means the student must disregard their own wealth of previously assimilated common knowledge. However, people are inherently inclined to draw on 'their own experience in order to make sense of new learning. This combined with the vast accumulation of life experiences that all adults have, makes it possible for adult learners to make meaning of their lives' argue Edeko, (2004:55). Furthermore, an adult's experience 'defines the individual and establishes his/her self-identity. A defining condition of being human is that we can understand and attribute meaning to our experience' (2004:56).

‘Each one of us is such a collection of experience and stories, (1997:1)’, according to Fleming, (2004:3), ‘the frame of reference in which we think, feel and act is the frame of reference within which we find our identity’ and this process builds ‘a stronger sense of identity’ (2004:3).

Since self-identity is how we come to see ourselves, a certain transformation will take place if our previous sense of self (based on practical knowledge) moves to the academic sense of self, through aiming to achieve what we hope to achieve. However, this depends on whether the ‘academic sense’ is inclusive of common knowledge or exclusive.

Learning is often a hurried affair as there are always deadlines to meet, assignments due and future exams compounded by time constraints. However, Zembylas and Michaelides raise the question of silence and its potential in the learning environment.

They query,

at what cost to the individual, of teaching and learning, and to society in general does education ignore the pedagogical value of silence? How can respect for silence in education become a call for respect of the self, otherness, humility, and a sense of wonder? (Zembylas & Michaelides 2004:193)

They claim that ideas and understandings can be lost in speaking, that silence can be viewed as opposite to talking, but can also be viewed as part of talk and ‘that the notion of developing *self-criticality*, if it retains any meaning for us, is manifest within silence as much as within language’ (2004:195). Raising critical awareness and the act of critical appraisal requires time to reflect.

Hearing new facts for the first time may need time for adjustment to assimilate the new information into our existing information. ‘Silence may be used in educational settings to allow time for reflection on teaching and learning (as when students work on a project)’ according to Zembylas and Michaelides and



'research has indicated that "wait-time", which is essentially a moment of silence within the realm of speech, benefits both learning and teaching, (2004:200/201).

After all

a philosophy of unknowing in education reminds us that education remains a game of knowing and unknowing, of learning and ignorance, and, above all, of wondering. Our argument is that in view of a philosophy of unknowing, the whole nature of education has to be rethought beyond "knowledge of facts and theories", with an awareness that educational theory has to take into account a pedagogy that allows for the silence that facilitates openness, receptivity, and hearing of the experiences of otherness (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004:210)

Jerome Bruner's concept of 'Discovery Learning' according to Conway involves active participation where students are more likely to remember learning as part of what they have discovered themselves. 'Discovery learning is "an approach to instruction through which students interact with their environment-by exploring and manipulating objects, wrestling with questions and controversies, or performing experiments" (Ormrod, 1995, p. 442)', (1997). This is an active approach to learning.

## 2.7 Impact of Stress

The fact that a mature student has matured<sup>3</sup> to some degree is due to the knowledge and experience gained through having lived their life up to now. Nonetheless, higher education can place extra pressure on adults in numerous ways. For example demands on time may be a major source of stress as students are under pressure to allocate time to other important areas of their life, and this can cause feelings of guilt and resentment, according to Bean Uí Chasaide (1997:45), as ‘time demands of relationships with family and friends are much more difficult to handle’.

In addition, ‘many of the stresses of daily life come from external sources’ according to Corey and Schneider Corey (1997:206), and the student role involves facing a range of different stresses for example,

consider some of the environmentally related stresses you face at the beginning of a semester...you may have difficulty arranging your work schedule to fit your school schedule, and this can be compounded by the external demands of friends and family and other social commitments. Financial problems and the pressure to work to support yourself (and perhaps your family too) make being a student a demanding task (1997:206)

When individuals are under stress, the stress can be easily compounded, ‘when stresses pile one on top of the other, they are more than additive-they seem to *multiply* the sense of stress, so that as we near a breaking point, each additional burden seems all the more unbearable, the last straw’ (1999:75), according to Goleman and can suddenly seem overwhelming.

‘To the body, there is no division between home and work; stress builds on stress, no matter the source. The reason a small hassle can drive us over the

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<sup>3</sup> The presumed assumption that you gain more coping and problem solving skills as you grow older.

brink if we are already overwrought is biochemical’ states Goleman. ‘When the amygdale hits the brain’s panic button, it induces a cascade that begins with the release of a hormone known as CRF and ends with a flood of stress hormones, mainly cortisol’ (1998: 75/76). The fact is ‘cortisol steals energy resources from working memory – from the intellect’ and when the levels are high, ‘people make more errors, are more distracted, and can’t remember as well – even something they’ve just recently read’, and processing information becomes more difficult, if stress is continuous, the probable conclusion is exhaustion, (1998: 76). There are certain periods that students are under tremendous pressure and stress, for example during times of exams, which students need to be able to deal with.

## **2.8 Concept of Intelligence**

The concept of intelligence, how it is understood and seen by society and how it is measured influences our perception of education. ‘Despite the advances made in the psychology of learning, where we know the importance of personal learning styles for how individuals learn and the rate at which they learn’ argues Bennett ‘we are still insisting on rigid systems of schooling that define ability in the old way’ (2002:85).

Irish education defines the individual in terms of fixed or innate ‘talents, abilities, or intelligence. Indeed, talent or intelligence are frequently defined in purely intellectual terms’ (1993:55) according to Drudy and Lynch and that ‘a highly essentialist understanding of individual ability has underpinned public thinking in the last twenty-five to thirty years’. It is assumed that each individual possesses a ‘quantifiable entity called intelligence’ or ability. This is generally ‘interpreted as a ‘given’ entity, something that remains fixed through time’ (1993:57). Education is seen as measurable, and the system acknowledges only those individuals who come up to these measurements. Due to the fact that

people are constantly labelled in this way and because according to Drudy and Lynch 'our understanding of intelligence is what determines our educational horizon: .... one's vision of what is educationally possible and desirable is strongly influenced by one's understanding of what constitutes human ability' (1993:229).

They argue that evidence suggests that many Irish educationalists have a narrow view of what constitutes individual ability. It means that our vision of what is both educationally possible and desirable has been, and continues to be, 'seriously circumscribed by the narrowness of our view of intelligence and human ability' (1993:239). In addition, there are multiple forms of intelligences.

Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences identifies eight forms of intelligences. The first three are linguistic, logical-mathematical and musical. The fourth and fifth are, bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence which involves physical movement, for example making intricate pieces of furniture; and spatial intelligence i.e. seeing images in your head or forming mental pictures, (1993). The sixth and seventh intelligences as described by Smith (2002) are interpersonal intelligence which 'is concerned with the capacity to understand the intentions, motivations and desires of other people. It allows people to work effectively with others'. And intrapersonal intelligence 'entails the capacity to understand oneself, to appreciate one's feelings, fears and motivations'. The eighth is naturalist intelligence which understands nature and its environment.

Interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences are highly influential and are strongly interconnected with the other forms of intelligences. Gardner states that these 'forms of knowledge are of tremendous importance in many, if not all, societies in the world – forms that have, however, tended to be ignored or minimized by nearly all students of cognition' (1993:242). Gardner's argument includes the significance of a 'sense of self' and the role it plays. He states that 'an emerging sense of self proves to be a key element in the realm of the

personal intelligences, one of overriding importance to individuals the world over' (1993:243) and every human being has the potential to develop this part of the self.

Bennett thinks somewhat similarly but calls this emotional development. He argues that 'the key to better understanding lies in having sound education in the emotions' (2002:102). The intellectual or cognitive side is recognised in the variety of academic qualifications in society, but there is no qualification that acknowledges emotional development. 'It is valued yet not openly recognized' argues Bennett, and if we are to progress 'we have to reach for a system that publicly recognizes the stages of emotional development and gives them the same level of esteem as intellectual advancement' (2002:102).

Associated with these concepts is 'Tacit Knowledge' which relates to solving every day task-related social or emotional problems 'contributes to our understanding of individual differences in performance' according to Hedlund and Sternberg (2000: 156) because 'the ability to acquire knowledge, whether it pertains to managing oneself, managing others, or managing tasks, can be characterized appropriately as an aspect of intelligence', as the process requires analyzing and incorporating new information with existing information. 'The decision to call this aspect of intelligence social, emotional, or practical intelligence will depend on one's perspective and one's purpose' (2000: 158). However, argue Hedlund and Sternberg, tacit knowledge 'is relevant to understanding problems of a task-related, social, or emotional nature' (2000:157), including how to plan, how to examine progress and to how evaluate your outcomes.

Emotional intelligence according to Goleman, 'describes abilities distinct from, but complementary to, academic intelligence' (1998: 317). According to Giddens, Goleman's (1996) argument that 'emotional intelligence' may 'be at least as important as IQ in determining how we fare in our lives. Emotional

intelligence refers to how people use their emotions – the ability to motivate oneself, to have self-control, enthusiasm and persistence’ (2001:522). Unlike IQ which sees little change after the teen years, we learn and develop our emotional intelligence through living and understanding our experiences of life. ‘Emotions are, literally, what move us to pursue our goals; they fuel our motivations’ (1998: 106). Senge’s concept of personal mastery is similar to Goleman’s emotional intelligence. ‘Personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies .... and of seeing reality objectively’ (1994:7). Learning is not only about the everyday taking in of information, ‘through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do’ according to Senge. ‘Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life’ (1994:14).

There are multiple forms of intelligence, nevertheless, the concept of intelligence and how we perceive knowledge influences our perception of the importance of the different forms of education. However, there are many other obstacles facing students both of an internal and external nature; and barriers that students need to transcend in order to succeed through education.

### **2.8.1 Conflicting Interests in Learning**

Finding alternative study paths in order to create other routes to higher education are viable options. However, it is evident that there are sections of the population who believe further education has nothing to offer. Research carried out in 2003 in Northumberland by Cohen and Pender exploring the barriers faced by older learners reveals among other concerns that the participants have ‘no interest in learning’ (2003:3) for the sake of it. The socio-economic background of the area is traditionally working-class where vocational education is more valuable than academic knowledge. They view education in a different light; an example of this is the fact that they believe that if ‘the employer sends

you to learn, its work, not learning' (2003:5). In addition, there is a belief in this community, that 'learning comes second .... as caring responsibilities came first' (2003:6). However, one of the major barriers to learning found in this study was the fact that the majority of the respondents expressed no desire or interest in learning regardless of any incentives.

There are a number of issues of concern here. First, these workers are more vulnerable to changing technology in that they are less likely to have the 'employability' factor or skills needed to adjust over their working life in the present unpredictable working environment. The second issue is the attitude that education has nothing to offer. This is quite common among the working class population because generations before them did not need an education to carry out the manual work they did (such as mining etc). However, the arrival of technology has changed working conditions leaving many areas of the population at a disadvantage. This situation is similar in the Northwest of Ireland in that the population is vulnerable to the present technological changes in working conditions as previously they have depended heavily on agricultural activities.

According to a report by the National Economic Social Forum, 'Donegal/Sligo experience infrastructural underdevelopment, rural isolation, loss of traditional industry and is lacking an economic driver. Overall, this region particularly Co Donegal, is economically under-developed, with relatively high unemployment' (2006:111). Furthermore, 'low education, low skills and low self-esteem as significant impediments to employment. Also frequently identified was limited access to childcare and limited access to transport' (2006:112).

According to the BMW Regional Assembly, the BMW 'region faces a serious challenge in improving its stock of human capital. General educational attainment is lower and graduates are less willing to work' or stay in the area leading to a 'brain drain' in the region. (2006:37).

Educational attainment is lower in this region. However, for some individuals it is non-existent and can have a serious impact on the quality of one's life. At a VEC Adult Literacy Conference titled 'Capturing Success in Literacy', Daly described not being able to read and write 'as a dreadful stigma' and 'it's like being in prison except that there are no bars'. Daly went on to state that 'you try to control things, put yourself in situations where you are never going to get caught out, like where you have to read something' (2005). There is a certain amount of shame attached to being illiterate as the individual can feel inadequate or less than a whole person. "I want to learn to read and write," said an illiterate from Recife, "so that I can stop being in the shadow of other people", cites Freire, (1976:50).

Low literacy levels in Ireland are high. According to the Nation Adult Literacy Agency Strategic Plan 2002-2006, 'despite increased funding for adult literacy work, only 4% of those with basic education difficulties are in tuition' yet 'one in four adults have low literacy skills' (2002:5).

The following definition provides a description of literacy according to the Nation Adult Literacy Agency,

Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and numeracy. It also encompasses aspects of personal development - social, economic, emotional - and is concerned with improving self-esteem and building confidence. It goes far beyond the mere technical skills of communication. The underlying aim of good literacy practice is to enable people to understand and reflect critically on their life circumstances with a view to exploring new possibilities and initiating constructive change (2002:8)

Literacy therefore is more than reading and writing and involves the development of the whole person whereby opening up the opportunity for further interest in education. It is not common but it is not unheard of either where an adult student had to learn to read and write before eventually going on to third-level education. 'The illiterate perceives critically that it is necessary to



learn to read and write, and prepares himself to become the agent of this learning' argues Freire, (1976:48).

'Until recently there was only one model of assumptions about learning and the characteristics of learners on which educators could base their curricula and teaching practices' according to Knowles, (1980:1/2), which is called the 'pedagogical model' meaning the 'art and science of teaching children' dating back to the seventh century. Pedagogy transmits fact-laden knowledge as oppose to the 'andragogical model', which refers to a self-directed model of learning. The 'andragogical model' recognises that 'adults have a deep psychological need to be generally self-directing, although they may be dependent in particular temporary situations'.

The andragogical model assumes that adults enter into an educational activity with a greater volume and a different quality of experience than youths. The greater volume is obvious – the longer we live, the more experience we accumulate (Knowles, 1995:8)

However, a new set of principles and practices have been established and according to Hase, (2001) is a natural progression from pedagogy and andragogy. 'Heutagogy' is described as 'self determined learning' (Heuta means today, current, or of the moment)' according to The JARMI Learning model, 'the learner internally initiates learning based on felt need or interest'.

There are two states of Heutagogy, Provoked and Incidental Heutagogy.

- Provoked Heutagogy – While the structure and initiation is internal, the triggering is external. A work assignment might be an example. The supervisor indicates that something needs to be done. That is the triggering event. Initiating and structuring the project or solving the problem is done by the person.
- Incidental Heutagogy – This is total internal triggering, structuring, and initiating based on a felt need of the person. It is a situation where the individual simply feels a need or desire to learn something (The JARMI Learning model, 2003)

The aim of heutagogy according to Hase and Kenyon (2001) ‘is to enable people to remember how to learn and facilitate the development of capability’.

‘Heutagogy takes account of intuition and concepts such as ‘double loop learning’ that are not linear and not necessarily planned’. An individual may not identify a learning need but recognizes a potential learning opportunity from reflecting on an experience because of how it challenges, or supports existing assumptions. ‘Heutagogy includes aspects of capability, action learning processes such as reflection, environmental scanning as understood in Systems Theory, and valuing experience and interaction with others’ according to Hase and Kenyon, it solves problems and creates proactively. It is not a departure from andragogy but an ‘extension that incorporates self-directed learning’ (2000). Since the world we live in is constantly changing, we need to develop capabilities to adapt and extend our knowledge therefore, there is a very urgent need for ‘immediacy of learning’, ‘Heutagogy approaches to learning may help people to remember how to learn and will better prepare them to manage in an increasingly complex world’ argues Hase. ‘The thrust that underscores these approaches is a desire to go beyond the simple acquisition of skills and knowledge of a learning experience’ (2002).

## **2.9 Ireland’s Position at Present**

‘It is now twelve years since the Government Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* formally articulated the need for Ireland’s education system to ensure equity of access to higher education’, progress has been made through a range of initiatives and extra resources. A National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education is the most recent development within the HEA and ‘has begun the task of developing a national strategy to widen access to higher education’ according to the HEA Report “Towards A National Strategy”, (2004:5).

The lack of a national policy has consequently resulted in a wide range of foundation courses and an uncertainty between institutions as to where these courses should be offered and for whom. However, 'financial support is not available from the state to students who complete foundation courses', and progression opportunities are uncertain for these students, 'in particular where there is no formal accreditation or recognition of achievement available to students' (HEA, 2004:25).

The above report also stated 'access personal and other advocates of under-represented student groups sometimes find it difficult to have their voice heard by those influential in policy development and resource allocation within their institution' (2004:28). Promoting access for under-represented students should not be the total responsibility of the institute's access personal, this should be 'embraced as an important goal by all staff' (2004:28).

The State has a number of proposals in place, to raise participation levels in education. The "Programme for Prosperity and Fairness 2000" has proposed a target for mature student representation in higher education - 15% by 2005' according to the White Paper on Adult Education (2000:18/19). This will be carried out through government funding for third-level institutions to make adult-friendly policies and, among other measures, establishing a 'Forum of Adult Education Practitioners' in order to network good practices.

The role of education is changing, and part of the reason for this is the concept of 'Lifelong Learning'. How people learn is changing and this may be due to other ways of learning (for example the internet). The structure of learning has changed according to Giddens. The traditional idea of learning of the structured transmission of knowledge within a formal setting is no longer the only way to learn. Learning can take place in a diversity of settings and. 'learners are active, curious social-actors who can derive insights from a multiplicity of sources, not just within an institutional setting' (2001:523).

Over the past number of decades the Irish state has adapted to the changing role of education through increasing investment and funding in education.

As Fitzgerald (1999) put it: *“in terms of domestic policy .... investment in education in the last 25 years is one of the country’s major successes. The changing educational attainment of the population is having a wide impact on Irish Society....”* (Ferreira & Vanhoudt, 2004:217)

Figures show that only 11% of the work force had a third level education in 1981 which rose to 18% in 1991, and it is ‘expected that over 40% of the working population will hold a third level education by 2010’ (2004:217). Although there has been clearly an improvement in the Irish education system in the last forty years, ‘the Irish achievements have not brought the country to an educational level significantly different from that of its more direct competitors’ state Ferreira and Vanhoudt, (2004:225).

Ireland can not afford to become complacent as the recent OECD report on education shows other countries are becoming increasingly competitive

Europe and the United States are increasingly outperformed by countries in East Asia. Two generations ago, Korea .... was among the lowest performers in education. Today, 97% of all Korean 25-to-34-year-olds have completed upper-secondary education, the highest rate among the OCED countries (OECD, 2006:1a)

Education has to adjust to the changing demands that a knowledge based society requires, therefore the conflicting concepts of vocational qualifications as against academic research, both of which are vital to the growing economy need acknowledgement and recognition for their importance. The development of these concepts of educational knowledge need to be reappraised to meet today’s knowledge-based economy.

‘As society becomes more ‘knowledgeable’, higher education has come under pressure to expand the kinds and types of knowledge it provides and to diversify

the criteria by which it is judged' according to Bleiklie, (2003:349). National culture and identity are no longer part of traditional education as globalisation and membership of the EU demand greater economic influences. Furthermore states Bleiklie 'Internationalisation means that most disciplines and most kinds of knowledge production are increasingly based on international networks', and the tendency to identify even more with 'international communities, networks and institutions' is increasing, (2003:350).

Business, industry, and public authorities will play an important role in the future development of knowledge. In 2003 the Department of Education and Science requested the OECD Secretariat to evaluate and review Ireland's Higher Education System. Two of the main objectives of higher education policy in Ireland are 'expansion of access to higher education for disadvantaged groups and mature students' and 'adoption of lifelong learning as a planning motif in higher education' (2004:7), according to the report. Although there has been a large uptake in third level education 90% of students has been generated from those coming from second level education, lifelong learning, and encouraging 'mature students to enter tertiary education have not been given much emphasis and must be reinforced in the future if Ireland is to capitalize on its success over the last decade'(2004:8).

The report also recommended that greater collaboration between institutions be encouraged and incentivised through funding, and recommends

that the Government makes an unequivocal statement that generating non-state resources whether through fees from overseas students, income from short courses for industry, income from spin out companies, or from other commercial activities should be retained by the institution concerned and should not [be] taken into account in any way in the calculation of recurrent grant. This will remove any disincentive to institutions to generate additional resources by their own efforts and will encourage institutional diversity (2004:24)

In relation to encouraging adult students to participate in lifelong learning, the report made two recommendations in regard to part-time education. These included that every effort be made to increase part-time student numbers and to end the distinctions between part-time and full-time students by removing the obligation to pay fees and receive maintenance support and that part-time students should also qualify for the grant, (2004:32). Furthermore, continuing education evening courses 'should be fully integrated into an HEI's academic programme' (2004:32/33)

### **2.9.1 European Union and the Bologna Process**

The Bologna development came about as a consequence of a conference of Ministers of Education held in June 1999 in Bologna, Italy, which resulted in 29 countries and regions (as of May 1<sup>st</sup> 2004, this number was 32, Rauhvargers, 2004:335) signing a 'declaration on the restructuring of higher education in Europe', (2004:299), according to Dittrich, Frederik; and Luwel, the Declaration was 'seen as a political response to the appeal made by the Ministers of Higher Education of France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy in 1998'. In order to ensure that the EU strengthens its globalised position in higher education and in the labour market, all educational systems in Europe are being brought under one umbrella to develop a united European Higher Education Area.

The Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities (CRE), (2000), examined the importance of the Bologna Declaration. Along with the development of a framework of comparable degrees and the creation of freer mobility for students; it has also established a system of credits that acknowledges life long learning. As lifelong learning tends to follow more varied routes than traditional educational paths, recognition of prior learning is of special importance.

‘The Declaration states that the process of establishing a European space for higher education requires constant support, supervision and adaptation to continuously changing needs’ (2000:5) and, higher education institutions have a unique opportunity to shape their own future’ (2000:6) to meet the changing needs and profiles of their students and to maximize employability. Education is universally recognized as paramount in developing the social economy according to the Confederation of EU Rectors,

A Europe of Knowledge is now widely recognized as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competencies to face the challenges of the new millennium (2000:7)

Since ‘lifelong learning emphasis that one is never done with absorbing new knowledge, skills and competence’ according to Bergan, (2003:4). This is one of the most important roles for higher educational institutes to adapt to the reality of the changing needs of a globalised society as lifelong learning is a certainty in today’s changing economic climate. However, to guarantee that widespread acceptance of the need for formal systems assessing the quality of higher education, the ‘subject matter or content’ should comply with the required profile of the qualification, otherwise, the qualification would become second rate. To ensure this does not occur, Bergan urges ‘that lifelong learning should primarily be seen as alternative learning paths toward qualifications described in the qualifications framework of a given education system’ (2003:7).

The underlying principle of a ‘Qualifications Framework’ is to provide guidelines, policies and procedures for the recognition of credit systems including the ‘validation of prior learning’ states Bergan, (2003:2). The framework provides coherence and transparency for all relevant stakeholders.

A ‘Qualifications Framework’ is a framework of an integrated system of qualifications, including policy, practice, guidelines and research, etc. ‘A

qualification framework is a system for describing all qualifications offered within a given education system and how they relate to each other' Bergan, (2003:6). This provides direction for individuals to reach their educational goals, at their own pace but it also enables educational institutions to measure and evaluate their own systems and the systems of 'foreign' countries. This makes evaluation more transparent and more defined.

The most important recent progress towards recognition of qualifications across the European Higher Education Area is development of the National Qualifications Framework.

A national qualifications framework is nothing more than a precise description of the structure of national qualifications system, indicating the work load, level and learning outcomes of each qualification and the sequence in which the qualifications follow each other (Adam, 2003, cited in Rauhvargers, 2004:344)

Although each country has some form of national qualifications system already in place, 'the first systematic attempts to describe qualifications in terms of level, workload, profile and learning outcomes are just emerging' Rauhvargers, (2004:344). According to Bergan, the following are the objectives of the national qualifications frameworks as outlined by Stephen Adam,

- making explicit the purpose of qualifications;
- delineate points of access and overlap;
- identify alternate routes;
- position qualifications in relation to one other;
- show routes for progression as well as barriers (Bergan, 2003:8)



## 2.9.2 Irish Qualifications Framework

The National Qualifications Authority (NQA) was established on 26 February 2001 under The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, according to a Submission Report from the National Qualifications Authority, (2004:1). The NQA developed a new more flexible and integrated system of qualifications called the National Framework of Qualifications. This is an essential progression in order to fulfill the national objective of moving towards a ‘lifelong learning society’ in which learners will be enabled to avail of learning opportunities when they need it at any given time of their lives. It also means that learners should be able to undertake aspects of learning at varying rates of progress, ‘and that it should be possible to receive recognition for learning achievements in units that are smaller than many existing awards’ (2004:1). This approach means that learners can ‘accumulate credit - including credit for prior and experiential learning - towards the achievement of awards’ (2004:1). The new qualifications system includes any programme ‘by which learners may acquire knowledge, skill or competence and includes courses of study or instruction, apprenticeships, training and employment’ (2004:2/3).

The qualifications framework guidelines have been drafted in line with the existing European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) as part of the progression of the Bologna process and the development of the European Higher Education Area. ‘Exploratory work is also ongoing on the possibility of linking credit to levels and to learning outcomes’ (2004:7).

In a Seminar hosted by the National Qualifications Authority, McGivern stated that the OECD and the Irish National Framework of Qualifications acknowledge that ‘training and education must be relevant to the needs of the learner’ (2003:25), which overlaps the needs of the enterprise. She states that ‘once people experience a quality programme they are keen to continue’ and that ‘the first programme has a vital role in ‘unlocking the door’ to progression’, which

‘in a way it is the most difficult but most important obstacle to overcome’ (2003:26).

Although the National Framework of Qualifications is a more flexible and integrated system, according to the NQA Report, and it should be possible to receive recognition for learning achievements in units smaller than many existing awards, which is the starting point for many, especially those unemployed and under-employed, this is not yet available. In addition, learners are not necessarily ‘free’ in any given point in their working lives to return to education and training, as there are other barriers that may prevent the return to education, such as finance. Furthermore, employers many not be amendable in providing employees with the opportunity of returning to education and training.

## **2.10 Lifelong Learning/ Knowledge-Based Economy**

The NESCC [National Economic and Social Council] defines Lifelong Learning as learning over the entire life-span. It includes all formal and informal learning that aims to improve knowledge, skills and the promotion of personal fulfilment. ‘This definition is consistent with the approach taken by other international bodies such as the OECD and the EU’ (Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, 2000:85).

There is a very real need for up-grading knowledge and improving one’s skills to ensure continual employment and career prospects. Education has been conforming during the last number of years to meet these changes. Some of these requirements according to Debande, have included ‘the widening of access to and participation in tertiary education, the shift from an elite to a mass system of tertiary education, and the development of lifelong learning’ (2004:161). In addition to, as Moxley *et al.* argues, since ‘one career, one employer’ is no longer the norm, that everyone in work based settings, and at all levels have to be prepared to make adjustments in their working life.

There is a very real need to acquire new competencies and ‘undertake new work roles, some of which did not even exist a few years ago. In this context, continuing, adult and professional education become more important for current workers than at any time in the past’ (Moxley *et al* , 2001:37).

A Knowledge-Based Economy according to Ottersten and Jennett, ‘is dependent on a society of people whose skills and flexibility are maintained throughout life (Lifelong Learning)’ (2004:141). The fact is that:

Over a lifetime, people engage in numerous learning activities, (attending schools, apprentices, universities, training on the job, evening classes, community seminars, etc) to enhance daily life. Today, there are strong ‘incentives’ for people to invest in their human capital in the perspective of potential higher private benefits as well as wider social objectives (social cohesion/equal opportunities). Modern society demands lifelong learning .... there is a need to provide adequate incentives to stimulate lifelong training .... proper financing opportunities should be developed to allow for the building up of a portfolio of skills over a lifetime. Creating, diffusing and transmitting knowledge will be a key process to ensure the adequate provision of this asset in all economic activities and in the development of social cohesion ... (2004:143/144)

Education is very important to future research and sustained progress, and is a key driver to modernisation. ‘Education and training will have both direct effects in the market and indirect effects in the build up of Research and Development and implementation of innovation’ (2004:144), Ottersten and Jennett. The ‘employability’ concept is the goal that current thinking is aiming to achieve. Learning is seen as an employability factor and is measured in skills and the upgrade of knowledge. Ireland is dependent on a workforce with employability skills, so skills need to be constantly upgraded throughout one’s working life. The following definition provided by Yorke and is used by The Enhancing Student Employability Co-operation Team (ESECT) in England, which describes employability as:

a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2004, p. 7, cited in Yorke, 2004:410)

Embedded in this definition is the ability to adjust, over a working life, to the present unpredictable employment market. It would appear that the standard of education is rising and improving all the time, however it is not benefiting people over their lifetime. Gorard states that even though each up and coming age cohort leaving education generally have a longer period of education and higher levels of qualifications, nevertheless, ‘each age cohort also tends to simply retain, rather than improve, their initial education over the remainder of their lives’ (Gorard, 2000:3)

He states that it is young people and their future that are continuously targeted, ‘this ‘progress’ consists almost entirely of passing young people with extended initial education into the category of ‘working-age’ and passing older people’ with lower levels of education and qualifications out of it (Gorard et al. 1999b). He calls this the ‘conveyor belt effect’. ‘Despite the calls for lifelong learning, adults may be now less likely to take part in learning *as adults* than they were 20 or even 50 years ago’ (Gorard, 2000:5). He continues on to state the policy initiatives and funding are in place to make future adults better educated and even on these ‘rare occasions then the focus is on the employed and the employable, rather than the lifecourse’ (2000:5).

The changing influxes in labour, technology and social cohesion in an energetic economy demand continual education and training. During a lifetime, individuals constantly engage in learning activities, because modern society demands lifelong learning.

Promoting learning is not enough state Ottersten, and Jennett,

proper financing opportunities should be developed to allow for the building up of a portfolio of skills over a lifetime. Creating, diffusing and transmitting knowledge will be a key process to ensure the adequate provision of this asset in all economic activities and in the development of social cohesion (Ottersten, & Jennett, 2004:143/144)

Accordingly, education is part of an energetic process to allow development and growth in the community.

Bergan, suggests this could be a 'lifelong learning portfolio' (2003:13) mapping previous learning but asks, 'if lifelong learning paths are integrated into accepted qualifications frameworks, how can authorities and higher education institutions encourage people to actually follow those paths' (2003:13).

Along with the need for research and development to sustain lifelong learning for the individual Ottersten's argument includes the fact that 'employment is a wide concept but key to its success is employability, subject of course in parallel to a well functioning labour market where new jobs are created'. However, there is a clear link between education and the labour market in that 'individual employability depend on the ability of a country to create jobs' (2004:155). Therefore, it is not enough that the country should adapt to the employability of individuals but that lifelong learning opportunities need to be in place to accommodate the course of the working lifetime.

However we must remember that there are many aspects and influences in relation to lifelong learning. Ottersten reminds us that, 'lifelong leaning is at the heart of economic and social processes, and cannot be separated from them'. The learning process is increasingly influenced by 'many factors including the home and community environment, the education system and the work environment' according to Ottersten, (2004:156).

Addressing the position of quality assurance in lifelong learning and how we measure quality is difficult as ‘a learner may feel satisfied with a learning programme because it meets their needs, whereas measured against set aims and objectives, the programme may not have measured up to ‘set’ performance indicators and maybe considered a failure according to Armstrong, (2000:3).

Equally, ‘a learning programme may be able to demonstrate it has achieved its aims, but leave learners feeling dissatisfied. In other words, official outcomes never tell the whole story’. Assumptions may be made according to Armstrong ‘around ‘performance’ or ‘quality’ indicators that may prove to be unwarranted’ (2000:3).

Lifelong learning has been addressed in all the Bologna policies however, according to Rauhvargers ‘a full integration of lifelong learning’ into higher education with a ‘view to defining alternative study paths for lifelong learners that would allow them to reach regular higher education qualifications is an issue yet to be solved’ (2004:342).

A Seminar held in Prague in June 2003, on recognition and qualification systems in lifelong learning, examined the issues on integration of higher education and lifelong learning. The resulting recommendations encouraged higher education institutes to develop policies

to promote the recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning for access and study exemption; reconsider skills content in courses and the nature of their study programmes, while the national authorities should ensure the right to fair recognition of qualifications acquired in different learning environments, states Rauhvargers (2004:342)

The Seminar concluded that on an international scale it would be good practice to promote the recognition of qualifications earned through lifelong learning.

Rauhvargers believes it is up to the individual countries to commit on a greater scale and implement the principles into the policies at both government and

higher education levels. With reference to lifelong learning, 'emphasis should be put on establishing learning paths that allow reaching higher education qualifications in an alternative way' (2004:345). He concludes that the development of an international framework of national qualifications is needed for all countries.

It appears that there are markedly different concepts or perceptions of Lifelong Learning that may affect how it is viewed and the role it has to play. Bergan states that because lifelong learning is seen as being an entirely different form of education that it 'is not sufficiently well integrated into higher education policies' (2003:8). Wachter, on the contrary, points out that lifelong learning is gaining prominence but is 'linked to the issue of access of 'all citizens' to higher education, i.e. to an inclusive rather than competitive ideal of higher education' (2004:267). This he argues creates conflicting demands because there are two markedly different concepts in regard to lifelong learning. On the one hand, there is the 'inclusive concept' that provides access to those who are entering higher education for the first time; whereas on the other hand, 'continuing education and professional development' is regarded as further education. Each concept requires specific policies and procedures to develop both separately. This has not been addressed by the Bologna Process, because of increasing emphasis on competition and excellence and solidarity, 'the Bologna Process at its present stage clouds rather than highlights this need for a clear decision' (Wachter, 2004: 272/273).

Neo-Liberal Lifelong Learning is another concept, and has been described as radical learning for liberation which means liberating the oppressed in society and transforming society's 'unjust social structures' according to Fleming (1996: 4).

Adult education is participatory, critically reflexive, open to new ideas and changing frames of references. It has a vision of learners engaged in dialogic participatory discourse, collectively seeking ways of changing themselves and

society; so that all systems, organisations and individuals respond to the needs of others (Fleming, 1996:52)

Irish democracy has a tendency to represent 'special interest groups'. 'In order to be a social partner and have a say in economic policy one must have a job. Women in the home are not social partners. Neither are the unemployed, older people, .... they get representation but not participation' argues Fleming, (1996:50) and it is participation in this part of the democratic process that allows for a say in the decision-making influence of community and society. Lifelong learning is not a 'catch-up on lost or missed opportunities and ...only justifiable as good for getting a job'. 'Adult education is of course for jobs, competence and training but this appallingly narrow vision of its possibilities leads one to wonder how can we get the point across that there is more' disputes Fleming, (1996:49).

Connolly argues that community development and adult education are interdependent.

Each has a vital role to play in the implementation of the other's principles. Community development not informed by adult education remains domesticating and hierarchical. Adult education without community development stays personal, isolated and socially less powerful. Together, they combine to create an emancipatory model of collective action. This model will ultimately underpin an equal and just society (Connolly, 1996:40)

However, there are other concepts and influences concerning lifelong learning and include what is happening globally and at EU levels. According to a Policy Brief by the OECD, as one of the 'OECD's more open economies, Ireland is particularly exposed to external risks' (OECD, 2006:2b). In addition to this, states the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 'it is important to remember that our main trading competitors will also have improved their educational profiles and that if Ireland is to compete effectively, it will need to build competitive advantage in the area of skills' (EGFSN 2007:90). But our main trading



competitors are not the only sources of competition. Other countries besides Korea in East Asia are scoring well in educational terms. 'Between 1995 and 2004 alone, the number of students attending university more than doubled in China and Malaysia, and expanded by 83% in Thailand and 51% in India' (OCED, 2006a). This means Ireland must respond to defend or make its position stronger and therefore, 'engagement in continuing learning will dictate the future productivity of those currently employed in the workforce; and continuing learning will dictate the ability of workers to transition to 'new' jobs in the future' argues EGFSN (2007:78).

Maintaining high rates of productivity growth entail continued efforts to upgrade skills. However, to 'maintain a dynamic economy, Ireland faces challenges that are common to many OECD countries' (OECD, 2006:3b).

If Ireland is to develop competitive advantage in world class skills, education and training, and transition to a knowledge economy in which skills drive innovation, productivity and entrepreneurial activity, it requires a skills profile which substantially changes the equilibrium -- that is, one that is skewed towards higher levels of skills attainment (EGFSN, 2007:90)

Addressing the future skills of the working population along with the continual upgrading of skills and knowledge of the contemporary labour market is essential as Ireland's economy depends on an adaptable and competent, employable workforce. However, work/life balance issues need attention as well as family friendly work places, along with top quality and affordable crèches, all of which could negatively impact on the family unit; the corner stone of society.

Even though there has been a large increase in the numbers obtaining third level education in recent years, there are still large portions of the working population underemployed and still at risk from unemployment as their current employability skills are poor. These are important concerns that need to be addressed, (for instance, employers could be provided with incentives to encourage upgrading the skills of their employees). Furthermore, Lifelong

Learning has different roles and purposes, for example, it is as essential today as it was in the nineteen eighties, for individual liberation and community regeneration, socially, economically and politically. In recent years, the smaller towns and villages in this region have rapidly increased in population size yet infrastructure, schools etc. are yet to be upgraded, all of which needs attention.

## **2.11 Lifelong Learning Recommendations/Proposals**

According to the Report of the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning, the reason Lifelong Learning is of major importance is because the 'development economies are moving into a post industrial phase where the emphasis is increasingly on the ability to continuously acquire knowledge, skills and competencies in an environment of constant change' (2002: 5). It also takes in consideration that there is a 'more sophisticated view of learning' (2002:5). In addition, there is the social imperative between employability and social inclusion 'whereby people are empowered to contribute proactively to the development of society, whether through politics, community development, business, the arts and sciences' (2002:5). This also includes individual personal development. However, the Report has identified two critical areas of difficulty in Lifelong Learning. These are 'Access/Barriers to Lifelong Learning, and Workplace Learning/Upskilling' (2002:6). Furthermore there are other issues that need to be readdressed if Lifelong Learning is to become a reality. These include the fact that there is no single point of contact for learners in accessing information. In addition, access needs to be available and able to reach a much wider population of learners, with a diverse 'span of aptitudes, abilities and ages will involve some fundamental changes in how education and training institutions operate and how learning is funded and incentivised by the State' (2002:9).

Furthermore, the 'need for co-operation between the Departments of Education and Science and Enterprise, Trade and Employment' is very important as is the

fact that 'primary, secondary, further and higher education policy must all be driven by the Lifelong Learning imperative' (2002:9). Specific learning opportunities need to be timely, and relevant. Accessible information is an important tool in updating education and retraining. While there are many different roots of information on courses, individual colleges, resources centres, libraries etc, there is no united single source of information on all the courses on offer. Providing information alone is not sufficient in generating a deeper commitment to Lifelong Learning, according to the Report. 'Guidance and assistance in making choices is also an important factor, particularly in the context of assisting individuals to choose a career path and in terms of meeting the skills needs of the economy' (2002:29). The current situation is fragmented. Simplistic and easily understood information is needed on specific education and training development opportunities and the subsequent costs and subsidies, (2002:29). There is 'the lack of independent guidance for adult learners' (2002:30).

Finally practical steps recommended by the Taskforce on Lifelong Learning that should be put in place include the following. 'The Taskforce recommends that a single national source of learning information (the National Learning Line) should be developed' addressing the information needs through a 'telephone service, the Internet and in disability friendly media' (2002:31).

Linked to this Line would be

- Sharing of computer based diagnostic and assessment tools
- Joint inservice training for guidance practitioners
- Joint actions and sharing of good practice in regard to qualifications for front line guidance and advanced level skills (2002:31)

The guidance strategy should include the Departments of Education and Science, and Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 'FÁS Employment Services the National Centre for Guidance in Education, third level and community

education interests' (2002:31). Further more, a move to more flexible opening hours is needed in both education institutions and FÁS to accommodate those in full-time employment and/or with caring responsibilities. The 'fee barriers which deter participation of adults in flexible part time courses should be removed, and that a grant in lieu of fees scheme should be introduced for part time participants in publicly funded further and higher education and training institutions' (2002:41).

Scotland is similar to Ireland in that it has a large rurally based population. However, Scotland's educational system has a 'tax credits system' in place particularly for students with families. In Scotland, students with children are entitled to claim the Child Tax Credit which is paid to those who are responsible for at least one child, whether or not they are in paid work. Furthermore, students working more than '16 hours a week could also be eligible for Working Tax Credit'. This is a system designed to 'make work pay for those on lower incomes. Extra help is also available for those who are disabled or who are caring for disabled children'. In addition, Scotland has a 'fee waiver' scheme. This scheme can give you 'support with your fees if you are a less well-off part-time degree student studying at a Higher Education Institute (HEI)'. This may apply 'if you are a part-time student who is either unemployed or on low income and who is studying for a first degree at a HEI' according to the 'Site Student Awards Agency for Scotland'. This is a proactive approach to alleviate the potential financial burden for students. However, there needs to be a diversity of other practical approaches put in place in this region under scrutiny.

Murphy and Fleming suggest the 'partnership approach' at national and institutional level, where 'an increasing emphasis has been placed on 'getting out' to potential students in order to widen participation'. Another approach is the work based initiative providing an entry route to 'sections of the population unable to take advantage of higher education and involving the linking of academic credit to student/employer-negotiated projects' (2003:25). This aspect

in widening participation means that those individuals who thought education had nothing to offer for them are now being encouraged to update skills and knowledge. 'In Ireland, there is also greater emphasis on access initiatives through partnerships between the HE sector on the one hand and schools and area-based-partnerships on the other' (Murphy & Fleming, 2003:27).

A community based programme called 'The Right Path' initiative in Scotland is associated with widening access to higher education. The programme offers three main transitions 'from personal development and self-confidence building to participation in higher education' (2003:30) leading to credits or qualifications. This programme has three unique characteristics. First of all it starts where each individual is at, meaning it starts at their level and develops with them. Secondly, the programme works successfully on access issues and provides a route for each person to follow. And lastly it links personal development, and academic work, practical knowledge with academic knowledge. It is a successful community education/higher education approach. This type of approach could be implemented in the BMW region.

According to the Employment Action Plan Report, more money has been invested for apprenticeship training and keeping unemployment levels down by 'reintegrating the more disadvantaged into the work force' (2002:30), however, retraining and education needs to be specifically tailored to this region county by county. Each county has its own particularly problematic areas that need tailored courses designed and implemented in each case. However, in addition, literacy and numeracy skills and the

ability to use computers and communication technology and software is also being seen as part of the basic skills portfolio. Taking a slightly more expansive view, problem solving, managing information and learning to learn can also be seen as essential to a lifelong learning portfolio of basic skills according to the Action Plan, (2002:24)

There has been general agreement on these issues by many other organisations. Aside from this, there is a very real need to understand what is happening at ground level county by county in the Northwest region.

A report by EQUAL (an EU initiative that puts the learner at the centre of Lifelong Learning), examines success stories about the tools, lessons and good practice that members of EQUAL are using to change policy and practice in Lifelong Learning. Members have been using innovative ideas to address some of the problems of Lifelong Learning. For example, the GB NTN (National Thematic Network) has provided their government's education department with 'a 'menu' of what does and does not work' (2005:5) in reaching out to disadvantaged learners. Understanding what is happening at ground level and by using different techniques, EQUAL with the support of NTN 'have been able to demonstrate the difference they can make to hard-to-reach individuals in a way that the Government has not always been able' (2005:5). This method can target people with basic literacy and numeracy skills and/or who are not interested in 'learning' per se.

One of the more dominant problems in rural areas is that education is inaccessible for many. Therefore education has to be able to come to the people in these communities. It is all about adaptability and using innovative approaches. For example, a revolution in education and training took place in Hull between 1995 and 2006 called 'IT in the Community' and it was a way of 'helping people whom otherwise would not have considered learning' (Smith, 2006:6). 'IT in the Community' was based on the idea that everyone should have access to computer technology communication and was achieved by

placing equipment within community locations and then supporting those local communities to run their own centres by giving them the financial resources and technical and administration skills. This would enable disenfranchised communities to bridge the digital divide and so support 'regeneration' in areas of greatest need (Smith, 2006:3)

In addition, the learning was delivered at very varied times in very varied locations ‘making it possible to reach a wide audience, flexibility around school hours was imperative, and the length of classes was designed to support the learner’ (2006:6). Furthermore, there were many successful projects in returning people to work. One such one was the office project based in Gipsyville, which placed returnees in a simulated office environment with all the workings of an office. ‘The end of the programme involved extensive job search with mock interview support. The consequence was a near 100% success rate in returning these people to work’ (Smith, 2006:7/8). The projects used all types of innovative approaches designed to individual needs.

‘The digital divide remains a very relevant area’ with particular reference to older workers and other vulnerable groups, which EQUAL has a particular focus on helping these ‘groups to keep up to date with new technologies and new forms of communication’ (p.25) according to the EQUAL Adaptability programme. ‘Upskilling workers in line with technological development’ (p.2) is one of the main aims of Lifelong Learning EQUAL initiatives. One of the main objectives of digital learning is that outreach and distance learning have an important role to play in ‘bringing educational facilities to areas, traditionally disadvantaged by their poor access to such facilities’ according to a submission from the Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly, (2004:4). According to another submission in 2006, ‘wireless technologies, for example, should be deployed in more remote areas, through initiatives such as the Group Broadband Scheme’, as the availability of ‘high-speed always-on Internet access is crucial for the economic development of the BMW Region, from innovation, competitiveness, knowledge/learning and quality of life perspectives’ (2006:57).

One of the key priorities in addressing local development and social inclusion by the Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly is to ‘increase the range and accessibility of course provision (e.g., through e-learning and outreach

centres)' (2006:67). There has been a number of pilot access initiative schemes carried out at outreach centres that provide proof that delivering education in this way meets an educational need that has not previously been met, according to a Lónra Report.

By supporting outreach and ODL [Open Distance Learning] at a variety of centres, relevant and useful benefits have accrued to significant numbers of people in the Region and the potential for further investment and development has been made abundantly clear (2003:19a)

for dispersed rural populations.

For example, the Lónra/Equal Ireland A3L (Access to Third Level) programme is

innovative in that it is delivered by open distance learning methods .... that participants complete the majority of their work when and wherever suits them but they are required to attend workshops and tutorials at centres in their locality approximately one weekend per month ... The Outreach centres also play a vital role in supporting participants and liaising with Equal Ireland Co-ordinators (p.1)

This approach 'allows individuals who are employed to access further education in their free time' (p.2). It is a part-time course and 'successful participants will receive a Foundation Certificate from NUI, Galway' (p.2). It is designed to lead on to further education at Third Level. Research shows that there is greater need for 'the provision of outreach centres in counties lacking a third level institution, with clear links and further courses, and progression to further courses, would facilitate provision of courses to disadvantaged cohorts and communities' according to Lónra, (2003:116b) as 'these counties tend to display lower participation rates in further education' (2003:116b). However, 'in selecting pilot programmes, consideration must be given to the availability of opportunities for further development and progression for the participants' (2003:117b) if any real progress is to be made.



The following recommendations are some proposed by Lónra. Outreach centres are needed in ‘unemployment black spots and remote and underdeveloped areas in all counties’ (2003:123b) in the region. Short vocational training programmes are needed to upgrade people’s skills and ‘learners should be able to accumulate credits to qualify for nationally recognised degree, diploma and certificate awards’ (2003:123b).

Furthermore, the potential that each county have to offer should be developed, for example ‘Leitrim is focusing on developing eco-farming; the food-related initiatives linked to Leitrim should likewise focus on this area. Institutes of Technology with expertise in hospitality industry areas should lead these initiatives’, (2003:125b). Again both Donegal and Cavan have low value-added industries. Donegal for example, could develop its fishery/marine potential, (2003b).

Donegal on the other hand has been running a successful educational scheme for women since 1996 called the ‘Second Chance Education Project for Women’ (SCEPW). In 2000, the project succeeded in obtaining core funding from the Department of Education and Science through a partnership with the Donegal Vocation Committee according to Management and Staff of the Project. ‘The project was also successful in securing funding in 2000 through the Education Equality Initiative to develop the Women’s Studies Programme’ (2003:21). ‘The SCEPW developed two very different methods of engaging women in mainstream education. The first approach was based in local community neighbourhoods .... the second approach offered a more structured opportunity to returning to education through a Women’s Studies Programme’ (2003:21). The Neighbourhood Project specifically targets those most marginalised and isolated and starts by meeting women in their own home. Part of the project ‘went on to develop a third level Certificate Programme in Women’s Studies’ through UCD, (2003:25). The programme is accessible in two formats, ‘a yearlong course offered in Donegal Town, or through stand-alone modules that

are rotated throughout the county' (2003:25). The project which uses unique approaches to reach out to the most disadvantaged, has 'participated in the development of the county strategy on Lifelong Learning'. 'The Neighbourhood Work approach is also referred to in the County Development Board Strategy Document as one of the models of good practice in tackling social inclusion' (2003:27). The project now also includes work with marginalised men.

There are other successful pilot programmes carried out around Ireland that lessons could be learnt from. One of these is the Early School Leaver Work/Education Pilot Project that was carried out in Dublin which tested models of quality second chance education and training which meets the needs of young people who left school early. There were three pilot projects carried out, one each in Tallaght, and Clondalkin and one on Dublin's Northside and all were 'considered to be relatively successful'(2004:53). The projects involved a partnership approach including the local schools, Youthreach, 'Chambers of Commerce, businesses and the relevant Area Partnerships. FÁS and the Department of Education and Science were involved under the guidance of the Dublin Employment Pact. However, what is innovative about this project is that it involved the private sector. Although, there was some difficulty attracting some contributors in this sector. Therefore one of the recommendations arising from this is creating an effective marketing campaign transferable across a number of regions, (2004:53) according to Joyce, Delaney and Duggan. There was also difficulty in attracting young participants because of their youth, future pilots should focus on '20 to 30 year olds who are at a different life stage and willing to respond to education in a positive way' (2004:54). Also the way the education was delivered could 'not mirror their school experience', as many had negative experiences, (2004:55).

One of the ways of enticing the private employment sector is by informing them of the benefits. These include 'better motivated and productive staff, a formal and concrete 'local' contribution [and] for the future, a part at local level in a

project linked to the National Agreement Sustaining Progress' (2004:56). The employers who took part provided very positive feedback. However, it has been suggested that employees who take part should be allowed to understand 'that they have enhanced their position in the company through completing the programme' (2004:57). There have been further recommendations in starting a second pilot scheme. Addressing low educational attainment and early school leaving is a key objective of the National Development Plan (1999) and 'people are the country's most important asset' (1999:2).

Research reveals that even those individuals who are not interested in learning, have been successfully targeted, whereby providing evidence that it is possible to target everyone of working age. The success lies in the mastery of innovative planning, procedure, course design, and implementation. However, on a large scale this may be both costly and timely.

## **2.12 Conclusion**

The face of education is changing for it has many roles to fulfil. Education has to accommodate a diversity of students, including mature students. It has to create employment and employability for a continually changing work environment. Education has to develop research and innovation to keep abreast in a competitive world. In addition, it must accommodate, develop and adapt to the ever-changing demands of Lifelong Learning for lifelong learning. Furthermore, it has to create social cohesion, promote equality of opportunity and ultimately entice and liberate minds. Education holds the key in providing opportunities for improving the quality of people's lives by increasing skills and knowledge whereby we become more adaptable, capable and employable.

In today's knowledge climate, there is a greater necessity to tap into and use all kinds of resources available. Not only will the community benefit but the individuals and their families will also reap the benefits. We live in a

‘Knowledge-Based’ economy where it is necessary to upgrade our education and skills in an equally competitive world market. People need to understand that training or re-training and learning anew develops the self and the world in which they live; and innovative ways are needed to encourage further learning.

However, there are other influences and include what is happening globally and at EU levels. According to the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, ‘it is important to remember that our main trading competitors will also have improved their educational profiles and that if Ireland is to compete effectively, it will need to build competitive advantage in the area of skills’ EGFSN (2007:90). But our main trading competitors are not the only sources of competition. Other countries in East Asia are scoring well in educational terms. This means Ireland must respond to defend or make its position stronger and therefore, ‘engagement in continuing learning will dictate the future productivity of those currently employed in the workforce; and continuing learning will dictate the ability of workers to transition to ‘new’ jobs in the future’ argues EGFSN (2007:78).

However, there are a number of barriers to education and within education. These barriers include internal and external barriers. Finance, one’s other roles and responsibilities and the learning environment are internal barriers. Finance is a main area of contention for students. Greater ‘Financial Incentives’ such as the Scottish ‘Tax Credits’ system would encourage and promote individuals to further upgrade their knowledge and skills.

The roles and responsibilities that are part of their lives as individual human beings constitute the emotional baggage that students carry around with them, and involve many conflicts of interest, particularly for female students. The internal barriers include learning itself and how a student confronts and adjusts to different ways of thinking; although this appears to be an institutional issue, it is also a very private one, again because of inner conflict. Time constraints have a further impact as the more responsibilities the individual has, the greater the

impact of time constraints. In addition developing a greater understanding of these barriers and exploring possibilities to reduce or minimise them will open up learning to others.

The external barriers include the ‘employability factor’ and geographical location. This region previously had a farming background but this has been increasingly changing with the arrival of new technology leaving many unskilled for the present job market; they lack that employability factor. Another barrier is transport or lack of transport. If you do not live near an Educational Institution, you are less likely to be given the opportunity to return to education to increase knowledge and skill.

The Educational Theories and Styles share similar beliefs in that critical thinking and evaluation is crucial to the educational and learning process and in how people learn. How individuals are allowed to develop and evaluate and interpret their own thinking is important to this process. Learning is also influence through positive affirmation in the learning environment.

Too many individuals living in rural areas are excluded from gaining access to education or retraining due to living in isolated places. Some of these places are unemployment blackspots and are in need of redevelopment. Finding other ways of targeting and addressing these concerns can be carried out by using multiple initiative approaches such as specific pilot programmes between all the educational players, (Institutes of Technology, Post Leaving Certificate Courses, Vocational Education Programmes, FÁS, etc). Courses need to be tailored, adapted and designed to target those most disadvantaged in society. There are many examples of successful course delivery which could be adapted, such as the ‘Right Path’ approach, (Murphy & Fleming, 2003:30), linking personal development with increasing one’s knowledge and skills.

In the interests of resolving the issues and concerns raised, it is crucial that all the relevant stakeholders and organisations are involved, as a combined effort has the most successful prospect of reaching the goals and objectives in changing education for the better. Learning opportunities need to be timely, appropriate, and take into consideration all diverse circumstances.

To conclude, it has been the purpose of this literature review to explore and examine the experiences and support needs of mature students within the framework of current debate and theory. The following chapter details and justifies the methodologies used in the process of carrying out the research study among mature students in higher education in the named region.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

'Mature students face many barriers in their quest for third level education' states Walters, (1997). There are a number of aims to the research which include an exploration of the supports and needs of mature students in Third Level Education. Mature students are a unique set of individuals because of their background experiences and the common characteristics that they share. The following generalisations would appear to delineate mature students.

They do not come directly from the second level educational stream as the traditional Third Level student does. They have various other roles and responsibilities to fulfill on a daily basis. Consequently, they have to incorporate and combine study into their existing life.

In addition to the above is the fact that the population in the area is largely rurally based making the delivery of education much more difficult. Furthermore, according to L onra, the national average of the population who have no formal education or only primary education is 25.1%. This percentage is much higher in the BMW Region with Donegal and Cavan the highest in the region, 37.8% and 36.4% respectfully, (2003). Consequently, mature students have a different set of needs and supports from the traditional student cohort and this is been researched. According to Leonard, a number of recent studies have indicated that mature students bring into higher education a much larger and more complex baggage of commitments and constraints than their eighteen-year-old colleagues (Lynch, 1997; Gallagher *et al*, 1993; Philips, 1986; Woodley *et al*, 1987; Percy, 1985 cited in Leonard, 1999:49).

Briefly, the primary methods of research use both a quantitative and qualitative approach and have included Focus Groups, Questionnaires with students; and Interviews with Educator/Mentors. The results have been analysed using a content method of analysis.

### **3.2 Research Process**

The initial research process began with a series of Focus Groups with student volunteers as part of the primary research to investigate the students experience in order to gather information to inform the data for the second strand of the research, the Questionnaires.

There were four Focus Groups, made up of full and part-time students. Two Focus Groups were held on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2005 while the remaining two were held the following Monday, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2005. The Institute of Technology Sligo was chosen as the initial location for the Focus Groups because of easy access to students and recording equipment.

An important part of the research process is to have a representative sample of students which according to Bryman, is 'a sample that reflects the population accurately so that it is a microcosm of the population' (2004:87). Initially, there was a lot of interest expressed in taking part in the Focus Group research after talking to students in lectures and tutorials about the research I was undertaking. Plus, it was important to include representatives from full and part-time students in all academic years and schools. However, the first hurdle of getting students to volunteer in the Focus Group research was more difficult than I initially anticipated as smaller numbers participated than expected, but this is quite the norm according to Bryman, 'there is growing tendency towards people refusing to participate in social survey research' (2004:98). Contrary to this, the advantage of a Focus Group allows the researcher to observe 'how people respond to each other's views and build up a view out of the interaction that



takes place within the group' Bryman, (2004:346). More importantly, 'the focus group approach offers the opportunity of allowing people to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view' (2004:348) but more to the point argues Bryman, 'participants are able to bring to the fore issues in relation to a topic that they deem to be important and significant' (2004:348).

A total of twenty-six students took part. The Focus Groups had four, six, seven, and nine participants respectfully. Eleven of the students were day students; the remaining fifteen were night students. Nineteen overall were female while the remaining seven were male. However, and more importantly, the students who participated in this part of the research did represent all four academic years and different schools.

The participants consented to signing volunteer forms before the process began, giving their consent to volunteer in the Focus Group research under the understanding that any information they did contribute may be used anonymously for research purposes. All four group sessions were recorded on video tape. The volunteers were given a preview of 'Topic Issues' on the areas selected for intended discussion in the Focus Group. These included issues such as college supports, and services, other responsibilities students have such as children or mortgages, and the academic role of the student. The same specific set of questions were given to each group.

Participants are selected 'who are knowledgeable about a specific subject because of their experiences' argues Baker, (1994:188), but 'focus groups also help when a researcher needs to get background information on a topic'. Furthermore, this 'research strategy is often used as a starting point for developing a survey' states Baker, (1994:188).

The information obtained from the Focus Group data provided the basis for developing the next strand of the research. By analysing the issues arising from

the findings of the Focus Groups and using the information, the Research Questionnaire was developed. It consisted of a total of twenty-two questions divided into five separate sections designed to explore specific areas. These were, to gain information on the background of the student; the student's financial situation; other social responsibilities; the student's academic experience and finally the student's college expectations and preparations. These topics are the main issues and concerns of the experiences of students revealed in the Focus Group findings which the researcher has re-arranged under the above sections.

Questions in a questionnaire can be either open-ended or closed-ended. In a closed-ended question, respondents are offered a pre-determined set of answers to choose one. The advantages of closed-ended questions are straight forward and quick to answer, and their analysis is straight forward. Their major drawback according to Nachmias and Nachmias, 'is that they may introduce bias, either by forcing the respondent to choose from given alternatives or by making the respondent select alternatives that might not have otherwise occurred' (1987:211).

The virtue of the open-ended question is that it does not force the respondent to adapt to preconceived answers: having understood the intent of the question, one can express one's thoughts freely, spontaneously, and in one's own language (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1987:211)

However, the disadvantages are, they are more difficult to answer and according to Nachmias and Nachmias, for the researcher 'still more difficult to analyze' (1987:211). But the authors agree that 'sometimes there may be good reasons for asking the same question in both open-ended and closed-ended form' (1987:212). This they reason is that, the researcher can not be sure the respondent has mentioned all important details. Sometimes 'factors such as the inability to articulate thoughts or a momentary lapse of memory may cause

omission of significant points' state Nachmias and Nachmias, (1987:212/213). This is an important factor to consider when designing the Questionnaire.

The first section of the Questionnaire aimed to find out practical information such as age group, college year, and course etc. The second section using open-ended questions examined how finance impacts on study. The third section explored the social responsibilities that the students have and consisted of open-ended questions. The fourth section was designed to explore the academic side. This section was a series of questions that consisted mainly of statements that the participants voiced through the Focus Groups; and was taken from this data. Most of the questions in this section required a straight forward agree or disagree predetermined answer. Another approach used in the academic section was circling or choosing predetermined word/words to describe one's college experience. In the final section, the questions were mainly designed to extract open-ended answers on preparations and expectations and final commentary.

'It is exceedingly difficult to plan a survey without a good deal of knowledge of its subject matter, the population it is to cover, the way people will react to questions and paradoxical though it sounds, even the answers they are likely to give' argue Moser and Kalton, (1979:47). However, the most valuable function of the pilot study is the adequacy of the questionnaire and nearly 'always results in important improvements in the questionnaire and a general increase in the efficiency of the enquiry' (1979:51), but it has another purpose according to Moser and Kalton. The pilot study is 'the researcher's last safeguard against the possibility that the main survey may be ineffective' (1979:51).

A pilot study was carried out to test and evaluate the design of the Questionnaire to see if it would exact useful information. St. Angela's College, Sligo was chosen as the most suitable place because this educational institute matches the criteria of the research. Firstly, it is a Third Level College and secondly, there are a sizeable number of mature students attending courses in the college. On

seeking permission from St. Angela's, I was advised as to the most efficient means of contacting mature students at the college. I was informed that the students go to the canteen for lunch at 1 p.m. and I was directed that this was deemed the most suitable time and place to get in contact with mature students at this college. As this was a directive, I had to conduct the pilot study during this period. Although, this meant the participants were all day students, it was still inclusive; as male and female students attending a range of courses completed questionnaires. I used the snowball method of questionnaire delivery. This is non-probability sampling where 'one person sends you on to another' according to Kane and O'Reilly-de-Brún, (2001:101). I informed each mature student I encountered as they entered the canteen about the research study. After gaining their consent, I gave them a Questionnaire.

The rationale of a pilot study is to test the Questionnaire to ensure the questions are easily answered based on participant's own experience. The questions need to be simply structured but sufficiently well defined that all participants will interpret them in the same way. Finally, the wording of questions should not be structured in such a way that participants can only answer one way which causes bias. As each individual completed the Questionnaire, I observed them as much as I could and proceeded to ask them if they found any questions or sections that they misunderstood. To this the overall answer was no. The respondents found the questions understandable and easy to complete, and all questions in the Questionnaires were answered. Therefore, the design of the Questionnaire extracted the most appropriate and useable data.

The delivery and completion of the Questionnaires took place during March and April 2005. The decision to use the four main Educational Institutes included the fact that,

1. The study is based in the Northwest of Ireland and these are the main Educational Institutions.
2. I live in this region and I am interested in the experience of mature students in the Northwest because of my own experience in returning to education.
3. There is a greater chance of reaching more mature students in the largest institutions.

The delivery and completion of the Questionnaires was carried out with the assistance of the Student Services/Access Office in each of the other three Educational Institutions. These were the National University of Ireland, Galway, Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology and Letterkenny Institute of Technology. The Questionnaire was presented in a variety of ways to different numbers of volunteering students. An Introductory Letter accompanied all Questionnaires to the three external institutions.

Access Officers had differing views on how the Questionnaire should be delivered; and I respected their advice and help. However, some of this advice was directive in nature. While other advice and suggestions of help were inappropriate and raised ethical concerns of which I will explain presently.

One educational institution emailed the Questionnaire to all their students as soon as I emailed it on, as completed Questionnaires were emailed back from students within hours and it looked very promising. However, it was badly timed as the students were preparing for their end of year finals a couple of weeks later, so the returning numbers were small. I had made the mistake (approximately four weeks) of assuming all educational institutions had the

same academic calendar. A total of thirty five students completed the questionnaire. Nonetheless, the gender response was almost 50-50, as eighteen questionnaires were completed by females, while seventeen were completed by male respondents. In addition to this, the responses included both genders in all academic years.

Another educational institution requested the Questionnaire by email to pass on to the students. The difficulty arose when no Questionnaires were returned. So I contacted the Access Office in this institution and was informed that the Student's Union did not email the Questionnaire to the students. Not only was the Questionnaire emailed in plenty of time, this was not the original offer of assistance. The Access Office made contact with the students immediately, but the results were poor. A total of ten responded; six female and four male students.

The third educational institution requested one hundred paper copies of the Questionnaire to be mailed to the Access Office. A total of forty-three were completed and returned. This consisted of thirty-one female responses and twelve male responses. Although the response rate was good, it was largely dominated by first year students.

In an attempt to reach students on night courses, I contacted two of the institutions for assistance. One institution had no suggestion to offer, while the other institution suggested leaving a box at the Front Lobby with questionnaires to be completed by night students. However, this was considered inappropriate by the researcher as there was no way of protecting a student's confidentiality and anonymity as completed Questionnaires would be on display and freely available for others to view.

As regards travelling to the other institutions to 'target' night students meant taking into consideration one's other roles and responsibilities and the fact that I

was not familiar with the layout of the other institutions; it was considered too time consuming. As this process would take several trips, one would end up driving hundreds of miles and I could not justify this, particularly since there was no guarantee of succeeding in locating night students.

In the Institute of Technology Sligo, the Questionnaires were delivered in a number of innovative ways. A number of lecturers who lectured full and part-time students offered to distribute Questionnaires to their students on my behalf. Also, lecturers teaching at 'Outreach' centres distributed questionnaires to their students.

A number of classes at the Institution tend to attract larger numbers of mature students than other classes, such as 'Fine Art' and 'Social Studies'; which were easier to identify and locate to distribute Questionnaires. However, this method is not ethical in classes where there are small numbers of mature students as this could be seen as forcing the student to take part, or the fact that the whole class is present may mean the mature student may feel obliged to complete a Questionnaire. In order to provide as many mature students as possible with the opportunity of volunteering and participating in the research, I spent one full week going around the canteens every lunch time and during morning and afternoon breaks. Between these times I constantly toured the library. By the end of the week two hundred and thirteen mature students had participated in the research. The breakdown of these numbers are as follows.

- Full-time female students - 69
- Part-time female students - 63
- Full-time male students - 54
- Part-time male students - 27

Students participated from all four academic years, and included all schools at the Institution.

The combined total number of participating students in the research Questionnaire stands at three hundred and three.

The third strand of the research process consisted of four interviews with specific 'Educator/Mentors of Lifelong Learners'. The overall reason for carrying out these particular interviews was to obtain information on the educational paths that students take on route to college. Secondly, the interviews provided data on different styles of learning and teaching of adult students where upon providing a greater understanding of the potential these learning styles have to offer educational systems.

The four interviewees were chosen specifically for a number of reasons. One of which includes the fact that, each interviewee has many years experience in their specific educational field and secondly, each individual is at the 'front line' of education. In addition all would have witnessed changes over time. Lastly, each was chosen because of the setting in which they mentor/teach, and finally the level at which they teach.

Two of the interviewee's (one male, one female), lecture in Third Level Education. The male was chosen because his background experience includes lecturing both full and part-time mature students, so has equal experience of the differences between day and night classes. The female lecturer has been chosen because she has been mainly lecturing female students over the years.

The remaining two candidates are also male and female. The male was selected because his background mentoring has been based in PLC (Post Leaving Certificate Courses), and also has a history in Distance Education and Open Learning. Many of his PLC students continue on to Third Level Education. And lastly, the female mentor comes from a Community setting with many years experience in the Voluntary sector. She was specifically selected because her work involves community development and has a strong belief in educating



people at the grassroots. Her work involves empowering individuals to develop themselves through individual and group work educational settings.

Each of the above individuals were asked three open ended exploratory questions designed to draw on their particular experiences. Each interviewee was labeled B, C, D, and E as an individual form of identification. The interviews were tape-recorded after gaining verbal permission from each of the Educator/Mentors.

Although the interviewees may appear to have been chosen because of 'convenience' or 'opportunity' sampling, as all were 'personal contacts' through someone knowing someone else; but the sampling method deemed most suitable was 'purposive sampling' (Bryman, 2004:333). 'In other words, the researcher samples on the basis of wanting to interview people who are relevant to the research questions' states Bryman, (2004:334), as each interviewee's background experience and setting was relevant to the research. This relevance related differences between full and part-time student's experiences in third level; gender perspective (lecturing mostly female students in third level); additional routes to Third Level (adult students on PLC courses); and finally, from a community based perspective. 'In qualitative interviewing, there is much greater interest in the interviewee's point of view' argues Bryman, (2004:319). Moreover, a respondent's replies can be further questioned providing rich detailed answers. Three of the interviewees represented National University of Ireland Galway, Letterkenny Institute of Technology and Sligo Institute of Technology while the final interviewee represented the Community Sector in County Donegal.

There are generally two approaches to research, quantitative and qualitative, although they have many differences, the 'two approaches also share many similarities' argues Punch, (2005:234). For example 'quantitative research is thought to be more concerned with the deductive testing of hypotheses and

theories, whereas qualitative research is more concern with exploring a topic, and with inductively generating hypotheses and theories' states Punch, (2005:235). Nevertheless,

while quantitative research may be mostly used for testing theory, it can also be used for exploring an area and for generating hypotheses and theory. Similarly, qualitative research can certainly be used for testing hypotheses and theories, even though it is the most favoured approach for theory generation (Punch, 2005:235)

According to Punch's understanding of the logic of triangulation means, the

findings from one type of study can be checked against the findings deriving from the other type. For example, the results of a qualitative investigation might be checked against a quantitative study. The aim is generally to enhance the validity of findings (2005:241)

'Using as many approaches as possible is part of a process that many researchers call triangulation' state Kane and O'Reilly-de Brún, (2001:108). However, triangulation can occur in a number of ways. 'Methodological triangulation is when you use more than one technique to get the same information. Interviewing, administering a questionnaire, observing, and examining documents on the same phenomenon provide 'stronger' information than using a single technique' argues Kane and O'Reilly-de Brún, (2001:108). The data from the Focus Groups developed the Questionnaires so that greater numbers of students could be reached in order to find out if the experience of mature students was similar to that of the Focus Group findings. Consequently, the findings from the Questionnaires reinforced the findings of the experiences of mature students in this region. The interviews were conducted to create an understanding of the student's experience from the educator's point of view, in four different settings whereby providing a different perspective and understanding from each.

‘There is a growing recognition of the potential of multi-strategy research’ states Bryman, (2004:464) because ‘it may provide a better understanding of a phenomenon than if just one method had been used. It may also frequently enhance our confidence in our own or others’ findings, for example, when a triangulation exercise has been conducted’ argues Bryman (2004:464).

Approaches to multi-strategy research include triangulation and can imply ‘that the results of an investigation employing a method associated with one research strategy are cross-checked against the results of using a method associated with the other research strategy’ (Bryman, 2004: 454).

Researchers may carry out multi-strategy research for other purposes, but in the course of doing so discover that they have generated quantitative and qualitative findings on related issues, so that they can treat such overlapping findings as a triangulation exercise. (Bryman, 2004:456)

Other methods of triangulation include ‘researcher triangulation’ where a number of researchers are used to gather the same information however, ‘different kinds of researchers offer different insights’ (Kane & O’Reilly-de Brún, 2001:110). ‘Theory triangulation is when you use different, or competing, theories to try to explain what is happening’ state Kane and O’Reilly-de Brún, (2001:110) and one description of ‘data triangulation’ occurs when you ‘examine the influence of different times, past and present, on whatever you are studying’ (Kane & O’Reilly-de Brún, 2001:110).

The research data was analyzed and evaluated through a content analysis method. ‘Content analysis is based on the assumption that analysis of language in use can reveal meanings, priorities, understanding and ways of organising and seeing the world’ according to Edwards and Talbot, (1999:121). Content analysis allows for the formation of the categorisation of the data into themes and similarities and subsequently a system of coding. There are many other definitions of content analysis. Bryman describes content analysis as an

‘approach to the analysis of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner’ (Bryman, 2004:183). He also cites Berelson’s (1952:18) definition of content analysis, which states ‘content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication’, (Bryman, 2004:182). There are two other approaches to content analysis, Semiotics which is ‘the study/science of signs’, states Bryman, (2004:183). The other approach, sometimes referred to as ‘qualitative content analysis’ or ‘ethnographic content analysis’, a term employed by (Altheide, 1996, cited in Bryman, 2004:183) which refers to ‘an approach to documents that emphasizes the role of the investigator in the construction of the meaning of and in texts’ argues Bryman, (2004:183).

Content analysis is a very transparent research method. The coding scheme and the sampling procedures can be clearly set out so that replications and follow-up studies are feasible. It is this transparency that often causes content analysis to be referred to as an objective method of analysis (Bryman, 2004:195)

‘Qualitative content analysis as a strategy of searching for themes in one’s data lies at the heart of the coding approaches that are often employed in the analysis of qualitative data ...’ reports Bryman, (2004:393). Moreover, ‘coding is the starting point for most forms of qualitative data analysis’ states Bryman, (2004:408). However, he points out that ‘one of the most commonly mentioned criticisms of the coding approach to qualitative data analysis is the possible problem of losing the context of what is said’ (2004:411). A second criticism of coding according to (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, cited in Bryman, 2004:411) ‘is that it results in a fragmentation of data, so that the narrative flow of what people say is lost’. As the researcher, I was particularly careful about this part of the process of content analysis, as it is important to retain the voice of the research participants, because it is their voice that tells of their experience of being a student.

Therefore, reports Bryman, ‘coding is a crucial stage in the process of doing a content analysis’ (2004:189), and this entails ‘deriving themes that can be employed to form the basis for codes’ (2004:146). ‘Essentially what is being sought is a categorisation of the phenomenon or phenomena of interest’ states Bryman, (2004:188), and this is the overall objective for the researcher.

All variables in the questionnaire were numbered (except the open-ended questions and sections of questions) in a coding schedule in Microsoft Excel. The data on all the questionnaires were fed into this system. All the replies to open-ended answers and sections of the questionnaires were typed separately onto Microsoft word. Categorisations of both a positive and negative nature applied in particular to open-ended questions and were routinely identified, as were unusual responses. This process of content analysis allows the formation of categorization of the data into themes and similarities, and subsequently forms an understanding of the overall profile of the student experience.

Initially, the completed questionnaires from each college were coded the same way but the information was stored separately. Furthermore, the data was initially coded separately under gender and separately under each academic year as far as was possible. This enabled the researcher to analyse the results separately to find if there were any startling differences between the genders, college year, or educational institutions. There were no apparent or unanticipated results. With this in mind, the data from each of the four institutions were joined and coded under respective gender and all four academic years allowing the data to become more unified.

I made the decision to use Focus Group research to development the Questionnaire because I believe this was the most appropriate way to source the main concerns and issues that individuals have as mature students. I deemed it important from the start that it was necessary to uncover the concerns of students and to be able to build on these in order to develop a Questionnaire that would

draw out the experiences of mature students in higher education. It was the most suitable way to uncover issues as I had direct contact with the participants and could clarify any areas of misunderstanding on my part from the beginning. Not only can one interpret what is being said, but one can probe in a more in-depth fashion. Finally, bringing a group of individuals together who have similar experiences creates an atmosphere where people can debate with each other exacting more information.

In addition to the above research process, an extensive review on existing literature and previous research in this field was conducted. The review specifically examined Education Theories on adult learning and the transformations that may occur during the student lifetime. In addition, other research including Irish research reveal similar results which substantiate the findings of this research. For example, time constraints cause major problems for students who have many other roles and responsibilities as ‘real life impacts on their education’ Cappleman-Morgan, (2004:5). Fulfilling one’s parental duties can have a negative impact on study. Research carried out by Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, has shown ‘over one-third indicated that they missed classes at least occasionally due to problems with childcare arrangements’ (2002:90).

Furthermore, ‘older learners fear failure, more so than younger students’ argues Bunyan, (2004). As failure to complete a course can have negative personal costs ‘often leading to a sense of failure, wasted talent. And low self-esteem’ (Flanagan & Morgan, 2004:3).

Barriers to higher and further education were explored, and include Corey and Schneider Corey’s (1997) stress related issues and concerns that negatively impact on the quality of student life. Educational barriers also include the learning process and the conflict between practical and theoretical knowledge.

One student describes her experience as having to “twist my whole mind around” (Murphy & Fleming, 1998).

In addition, the concept of ‘Lifelong Learning’ and a ‘Knowledge-Based Economy’ (Ottersten & Jemmett, 2004), is a reality now where skills and knowledge must be upgraded throughout one’s life. This is termed the ‘Employability’ factor, (Yorke, 2004), Ireland has an open economy which is very dependent on a working population that is adaptable to labour market changes.

The Literature review also explored models of best practice that specifically target problematic areas such as unemployment blackspots with the aim of successful re-generation. These included successful projects at both outreach and urban locations in Ireland, and in other countries, namely Scotland and England. Other proposals comprise developing the natural resources unique to each county. There are a number of possibilities and a diversity of additional routes to address the delivery of education in rural areas.

### **3.3 Ethical Issues**

Ethical considerations are very important areas in social research practice. ‘This is because the research involves collecting data from people, and about people’ states Punch, (2005:276). Ethical issues can arise in both qualitative and quantitative research but argues Punch, ‘they are more likely and more acute in some qualitative approaches’ (2005:276), depending on how sensitive and personal the research is. However, it is duty of the researcher to ensure anonymity and confidentiality in all matters relating to the research.

There are three types of research procedures which raise ethical concern according to Baker, and include

covert research, which usually entails some forms of deception; studies in which there is coercion of subjects to participate in certain ethically questionable practices as a part of the study; and research that is considered an invasion of privacy (Baker, 1994:71)

Nevertheless, there are ways of protecting study participants. These include granting anonymity states Baker which 'is an assurance that subjects' identities will not be disclosed in any way' (1994:79). The provision of confidentiality 'is to minimize in any available way the possible exposure of a subject's identity'. Baker also suggests confidentiality means protecting one's identity by storing 'the data on subjects under codes and fictitious names' (1994:79). Informed consent is another form of protection and according to Baker 'is achieved if the subject knows what the study is, understands his or her level of confidentiality in the study, comprehends the objectives of the study, and agrees to cooperate' (Baker, 1994:79). However, there is a second objective to informed consent. This is in relation to the participant's understanding of 'what he or she is consenting to and has been given a clear exploration of what that is' states Baker, (1994:79).

All the students who participated in the Focus Group research give their consent freely to participating in the study by signing the Volunteer Forms before the sessions began. Further to this, the first line on the Questionnaire stated 'the information on this questionnaire is confidential: for research purposes only', informing students on issues of confidentiality. In order to ensure the identities of participants are not identified or identifiable, all individual names of participants were edited out from the data including any descriptions that could infer a participant's identity in the transcript.

'One Cardinal rule is that merely by doing your research, you will often raise people's hopes and expectations – less advantaged people may hope for some improvement in their situation' urges Kane and O'Reilly-de-Brún, (2001:124). None of the students who participated in the Focus Group research and the



Questionnaire where led to believe that this research would in any way change their circumstances as the research was exploratory in nature, and designed to discover the experience of mature students in this region, and to create a greater understanding of this experience, as was stated in the 'Questionnaire Introductory Letter'. However, from the comments received in the Questionnaires, it was clear some students were interested in the end results of the research, while several others expressed appreciation that this research was on-going. Other students commented that they felt the research was timely and warranted.

### **3.4 Limitation of the Research**

It would have been ideal if equal numbers of students volunteered from all academic years including equal gender numbers. However, participation in the research was on a voluntary basis therefore, I had to accept those students who volunteered to take part. Even though students often have class during lunch time, lunch time was deemed the most suitable time for full-time students. The best time for part-time students to take part in the Focus Group research was at 6 p.m. before most night classes generally begin. Only students free at these times on the two dates in question were free to volunteer which meant that I was uncertain how many students would volunteer to participate in the Focus Groups.

Not all students participated in all questions discussed during the Focus Group settings as for example; the situation arose where one student answered a particular question that perhaps all nodded agreement with. Also there are times where all may have attempted to answer a question together thereby interrupting each other, with result some replies may appear short, or interrupted. Whereas at other times, the responses complimented each other where conversations flow and debate flourished between the individual students. Also material arose

which was unexpected but nonetheless important to students and even though it may not have been the initial focus of the topic issue under discussion, it was nevertheless included under the section it arose in.

During the process of looking for volunteers, I initially thought more students would be interested in sharing or exploring their experience so that this could be shared as a way of informing other prospective students. However, there is a valid reason for appearing somewhat reluctant. A night student explained why some students were reluctant to take part. She said *'you can't blame them'* for not wishing to take part in the research. On further investigation what she meant was students were so interested and eager to learn that they did not want to waste any time on any thing else. These were 1<sup>st</sup> year students. On the contrary, the reason given by day students who could not volunteer was because they had absolutely no spare time, (3<sup>rd</sup> years).

In addition, I had no direct contact with students in the other Educational Institutes. Completion of the Questionnaires by students required the assistance of the Access Office in each of the Institutes. Also taking into consideration that participation in the Questionnaire was entirely voluntary, there was no fool proof route to equal gender numbers or equal numbers in all years including part-time numbers, from any of the four Institutes.

With result the response was largely uneven with fewer numbers of students from third and fourth year in full and part-time education. However, there appears to be no apparent or startling revelations because of these limitations.

Finally, students in the Focus Groups tended to know where each person was coming from as many for example answered at the same time or finished each other's answer corroborating the fact that mature students are indeed a unique student group and a separate group from the traditional student body. Further collaboration is evident in chapters 4 and 5, and is represented by the word

'[yeah]' incorporated into the middle of a student's response, indicating either the majority or all the participants agreed with the student.

Many of the responses in chapters 4 and 5 are highlighted in bold lettering and indicate that the quote is a 'dominant' or 'governing' quote.

A number of alternative approaches to conducting research were initially examined to explore their potential. The additional methods under assessment include case study research, secondary analysis research and ethnographic research.

According to Hakim, 'case study research is concerned with obtaining a rounded picture of a person's life, a situation or event from the perspectives of all the persons involved, usually by using a variety of methods and sources of information' (2000:10). 'Case studies take as their subject one or more *selected* examples of a social entity', such as communities, organisations, families, life histories etc. which are studied using a variety of collection techniques argues Hakim, (2000:59). Whether the case study is descriptive or exploratory, the 'use of multiple sources of evidence and, very often, multiple investigators makes the case study one of the most powerful research designs' (2000:61). However, the main weakness of case studies is that the researcher's interests can 'strongly' shape the results. There are 'innumerable examples of case studies whose conclusions are flatly contradicted by a subsequent re-study by another researcher with a different perspective on the subject' argues Hakim, (2000:63). In addition, having the research staff with appropriate experience and skills is often a difficulty, for example, 'case studies often involve specialised interviewing of informants' which is unlike standard research interviewing. Therefore the researcher often requires additional specialised training states, Hakim, (2000:73), whereby rendering case study research unsuitable as a research tool method for this research project.

Secondary analysis research is,

any re-analysis of data collected by another researcher or organisation, including the analysis of datasets collated from a variety of sources to create time series or area-based datasets. Most commonly, secondary analysis is applied to quantitative data from previous studies (Hakim 2000:24)

The advantage of using secondary analysis of existing data is that it is fast, with 'relatively low costs compared to other types of study and the ground to be covered can be specified fairly precisely' states Hakim, (2000:31) before the study begins. The disadvantage is that the 'scope and depth of the study will be constrained by the material already available' (2000:31). Furthermore, certain sections of the study may have to be 'dropped if unanticipated data limitations emerge during the course of a project' (2000:31). In addition, 'these studies are usually carried out by researchers who are specialists in the particular topic' rather than researchers in 'a particular type of study' (2000:31). As no previous research on mature students in higher education has been conducted in this region, secondary analysis research is therefore incompatible with this study.

Finally, ethnographic research monitors or observes the participant and enables the researcher 'to share the same experience as the subjects and so to understand better why they acted in the way they did' according to Bell, (1993:10). However, the approach is time consuming and the researcher's interpretation is open to criticism, as 'it is difficult to stand back and adapt the role of objective observer when all the members of the group or organisation are known to you' argues Bell, (1993:110). This method can be 'criticized as being subjective and bias' (1993:111), and therefore renders the observation research approach as an inappropriate research method for this study.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the design of this chapter was to provide details of the research methods and justify the triangulation methodology which was conducted using qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. In addition, an extensive Literature Review provided information detailing internal and external barriers for mature students in and through Third Level Education. It also provided models of best practice specifically designed not only to deal with rural isolation but also to deal with unemployment blackspots. In the following chapter the presentation of the findings are provided in precise detail and form.

## **Chapter 4 Presentation of the Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The primary research consists of three strands of exploration which include:

1. The completion of questionnaires by students.
2. A series of focus groups with student volunteers.
3. Interviews with individual Educator/Mentors.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse and evaluate the primary research by assessing the findings through categorizing responses into recurrent themes and positing conclusions. It also categorizes differences in responses in relation to cause and effect e.g. day student unlikely to have full-time job.

Students from National University of Galway (NUIG); Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT); Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT); and the Institute of Technology Sligo (ITS) participated in this strand of the research by completing questionnaires. The participants included students on full-time, part-time, and foundation courses, and also students on outreach programmes. Limitations regarding student access and contact are examined in the Methodology Chapter.

## 4.2 Presentation of the Questionnaire Findings

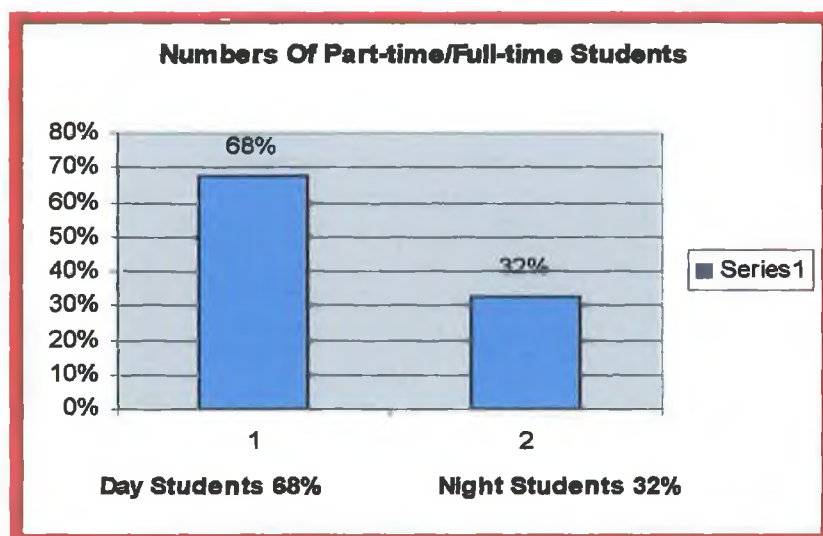
### 4.2.1 Section 1: Student Background

This section examines initial background information of participating students.

#### 4.2.1.1 Gender Profile

In all 303 students participated in this part of the research. 115 were male and the remaining 188 female. Just under one third or 32% (98) are night students.

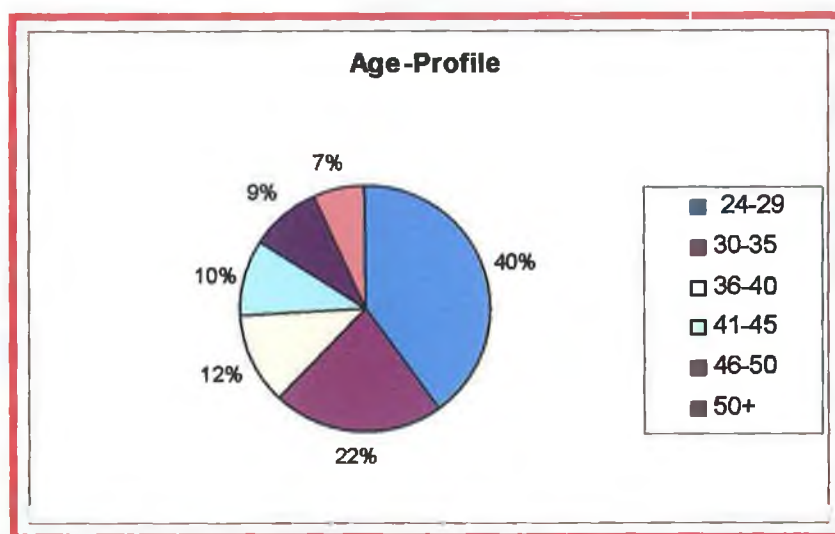
Figure 1: Numbers of Full/Part-Time Students



### 4.2.1.2 Age-Profile

The age cohort shows the following. Of the total student population 40% (121), are in the 24-29 age group, 22% (67) are 30-35, 12% (36) are aged between 36-40, 10% (31) of the students are aged between 41-45, 9% (28) of students are aged 46-50 and the remaining 7% (20) are in the 50+ bracket.

Figure 2: Age Profile of Students



- The findings show the 24 -29 age group make up the largest single group of the student population, with a continual drop in percentage as one goes higher up the age groups.

### 4.2.1.3 Academic Year

Out of 303 participants, 151 were 1<sup>st</sup> year students; 68 were 2<sup>nd</sup> year students; 50 3<sup>rd</sup> year students leaving 34 4<sup>th</sup> year students.



#### 4.2.1.4 Academic Courses

The response to Question 5 exploring what course students were taking resulted in a wide diversity of comments. Responses ranged from an apprenticeship course to Ph.D level study. There were quite a few students who stated a degree, diploma or foundation course. Similarly, there were a number of unspecified replies such as Arts or Business. While some other students stated single subject courses, others responded by using initials and/or shortened versions of the title of a course. However, a substantial number of students did state precisely what course they were completing which went right across the board including everything from Medicine, to Drama, from Business to Engineering. As a result of the diversity of this information, I believe it would be quite impractical to list all the answers, because this information is too diverse to be categorized into any theme or form and may create unnecessary confusion.

The following list provides a sample of the academic courses that students state they are completing:

1. Foundation
2. Apprenticeship
3. Diploma
4. Degree
5. Ph.D
6. Outreach

## **4.2.2 Section 2: Finance**

This section explores financial background and experience of mature students.

Questions 7 and 8 explore the financial aspect of student life. Question 7 explores how students finance their studies. Question 8 considers if finance has any negative or positive impact on the life of the student. In relation to both questions, students responded with anything from a one word response to a diversity of comments.

### **4.2.2.1 How Students Finance Study**

The findings show six common responses from students to Question 7.

These are;

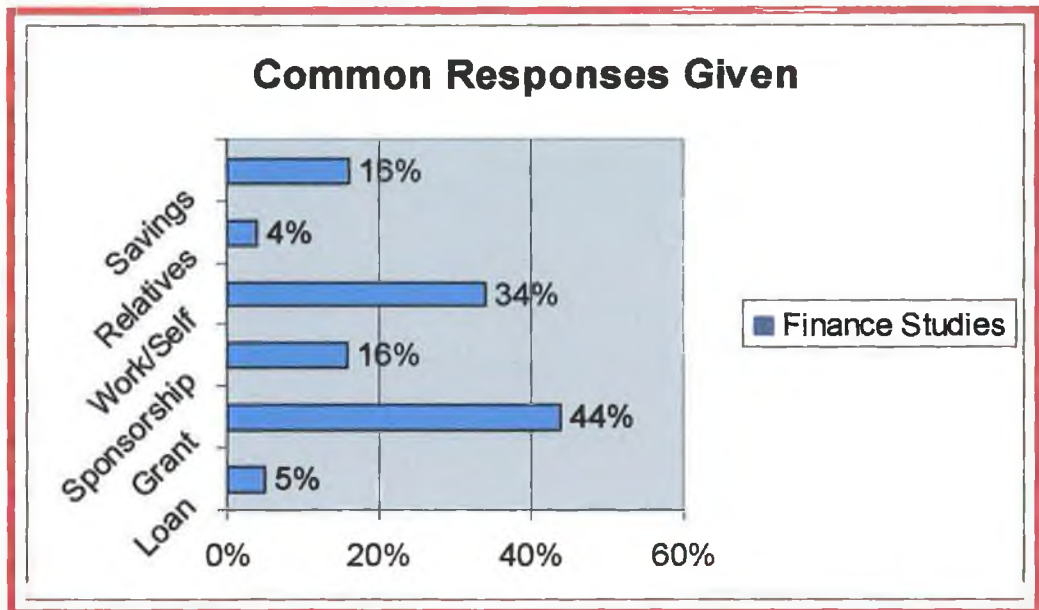
1. Loan
2. Grant
3. Sponsorship
4. Work/Self
5. Relatives
6. Savings

However, students did add other personal comments on the impact of finance in relation to Question 7, along with completing Question 8.

This research will examine the first part of Question 7 and then evaluate the second response to the question. Figures indicate that 5% (15) of the total student respondents finance their studies through a loan, 44% (133) indicate a

grant, 16% (48) are sponsored, 34% (103) specify work/self, 4% (12) received finance from relatives and 16% (49) were using savings.

Figure 3: Six Common Responses Given by Participants



Closer evaluation shows very little difference in the percentages between male and female students in relation to loans and savings from the overall total.

- The findings illustrate nearly half of all students are in receipt of Government assistance.

As I stated earlier, students also commented on the financial aspect of student life in Question 7 which reveals some interesting aspects of the financial implications of being a student. It is clear some students who are not in receipt of any grants depend on parent, partner and/or spouse's income to help with the cost of going to college. One student said *'my husband works two jobs'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year student). Another *'my partner works and gives me money to keep me going in college'*. One 1<sup>st</sup> year male in full-time study stated he is *'working a work sharing basis ¾ time'* showing the diversity of how students finance their studies. Part-time students on night courses frequently state that they will get

sponsorship only if they pass their exams. As one 1<sup>st</sup> year put it *'if I pass I get refunded from work'*. Another said they will be reimbursed when they have completed the whole course. Other students do get sponsorship as a number of students in full and part-time study have commented on this fact, *'my work finances my studies'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year).

From other responses to Question 7, grant dependency may also coincide with the need for a student to work part-time as quite a few students have acknowledged this. Evidence of this is more apparent in Question 8. Another issue of concern is the fact that students who do not qualify for any kind of grant may have to resort to returning to live with their parents as one full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female student reports *'I didn't qualify for any grant this year so I had to live at home and get a part-time job, which is my only income'*.

Some students state that they are partially funded by their own Institute with the Institutes Student Assistance Fund. These students include a number of lone parents' particularly single mothers who have been assisted with childcare funding through their own Institutes of Learning.

However, not every student is struggling financially as one student wrote *'I am also a pharmacist so I can work locums at weekends and during academic holidays'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male), but this seems to be exception rather than the rule.

- The findings illustrate that students not in receipt of government assistance either use their earnings or depend on the financial assistance from family members.

#### 4.2.2.2 Financial Impact

The findings show a number of similar trends in response to the financial impact of student life. And overall are largely of a negative nature in that students have reported having less money to live on than previous to commencing study,

*'it makes a difference when you are used to a normal pay from work plus have to budget then when it's only the grant. There is little time for part-time jobs with the workload of college',* (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

Students handle their financial burdens in many different ways as the following replies reveal.

*'Yes it's a constant worry, added to the worry of study, success and life events .... wonder why I'm doing this at all ....'* (2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

One is *'.... constantly in debt'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male). Another finds the uncertainty of the situation unnerving, *'extra jobs are needed to fulfill the year and every year everything starts over again, (...insecurity)'*. (4<sup>th</sup> year male).

The costs of the course is another drain on finance. Drama for example costs €300 per year (two modules only) whereas Social Studies can cost as much as €2,000 per year, which one student states is *'very expensive and like stealth taxes rising all the time'*, (part-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male).

But even if the cost of a course is relatively low, having children can make a difference financially,

*'this year it cost over €900 and that was a lot gone from savings account especially when you have 4 kids as well, when they need school uniforms, and other activities outside school',* (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female).

The fact that students have to work part-time to supplement their finances during study have negative impacts on academic study as *'time devoted to part-time work eats into both lecture time and study time, also time spent worrying about financial situation doesn't help studies either!'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male).

Very often students cease employment to attend college *'I had to give up my job'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female) to do the course which means she is now dependent on her husband financially.

The social aspect is another area of difficulty financially for students as one states, one's social life,

*'is seriously curtailed. Sudden events like weddings, funerals, christenings all cost money. These events are hard to attend when you are living financially from week to week'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male).

For many, returning to education basically means, putting one's life on hold for the duration of the course. One female student said, *'I enjoyed the freedom that a monthly wage allowed me. Now I feel restricted....'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year).

Students with other financial responsibilities, feel more pressure, it's *'very hard to keep bills paid on time and support myself. Have other financial commitments apart from college'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male).

Being in receipt of Government assistance in the form of a grant or an allowance does not necessarily lessen the financial pressure as one full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male argues because there's a *'long wait for the allowance, house/car (not realistic go to college on this allowance ....)'*.

However, a number of students received no government support and the following statements clarify how this is effecting their situations. *'I received no grant because I worked last year. I am finding it very difficult to make ends meet...'* (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Another female student, wrote,

***'because the course is only one years duration I am not entitled to a third level grant or college access fund, so this has left me struggling to pay bills and stressed out over financial worries'***, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

The financial situation can have a major affect on the quality of one's life as the following statement states.

***'I do not qualify for a grant as I was in college before. I live 2½ miles from college so when weather's bad I have to get taxis to the crèche. I have not yet paid my fees as I cannot afford to. I have to save up to go out. Everything I do depends upon how much money I do or more often don't have'***, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year).

Being a parent can add to the financial pressure especially for female students, as one 1<sup>st</sup> year states it ***'takes a lot of money for childcare and transport; could not attend seminars due to lack of money; books were hard to get the money for'***.

The negative consequences can be extreme for students particularly for single mothers. One explains her situation, ***'I am currently looking for a job during the day and going to continue the course at part-time as I am finding it a financial struggle'***, (1<sup>st</sup> year).

Students who resort to loans find themselves under another financial burden, ***'had to get loans so a lot of financial pressure'***, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female). This can mean having ***'to work full-time to pay for loans plus bills, may have to leave some classes early plus stay up all night getting work done'***, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

It is clear that numerous students would be unable to return to education without government funds, ***'without financial aid it would not be possible'***, to go to college (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female)

Students completing night courses that are not sponsored can find the fees a problem. The fee has ***'increased almost 90% on year one and as I am in third I***

*cannot afford to go on and do diploma course. Work will not fund same and I cannot afford costs', (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female).*

However, finance is not a problem if one is in full-time employment as one full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female is *'I work full-time approximately thirty-nine hours per week'*. Nonetheless, working long hours can leave one feeling very tired or exhausted,

*'my course fees are €6000 per year plus living costs – I am trying to finance it myself without being dependent on my parents – this means working during the week as well as weekends which can be tiring when you have already put in a fairly full day at college', (1<sup>st</sup> year female).*

Part-time students who are not sponsored also report working long hours to meet the cost of living, *'I work 6 eight hour days and then go to college. I have to in order to pay rent and afford food etc', (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male)*. Other night students find they end up using their annual leave for extra study and, *'miss out doing overtime at work', (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year night)*.

Commuting costs are another drain on finances as quite a number of students must. One states *'.... travel three days a week, two hundred miles', (part-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male)*.

However, students have acknowledged that finance may not affect them at present, because they are able to work and study at the same time but recognize that circumstances may change. As one said

*'at the moment I have been able to juggle the two to the extent that I feel my study doesn't really suffer but in the next two years, study will take precedence so I may have a different answer for you then', (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male).*

Though, some students have become very disillusioned by the negative experience of the financial aspects of student life. One expressed his views on the impact of finance which he believes affect all members of his family.



The following is his response;

*'Yes, I'm struggling to survive; I support my wife, two daughters in university and two sons in secondary school as well as pay €415/month mortgage and €70/week car loan; the worst part is that I had to cancel my life insurance because I can't afford the premiums. Our annual income exceeds the cut-off limit for the top-up grant by €500, so neither I or my two daughters in college qualify for €1,900 each. For the sake of €500/annual, our family is being deprived of €5,700. The Minister has told me that she has no intention of correcting this disgraceful injustice. Eligibility for the top-up is not on a sliding scale, as opposed to the standard grant which is: re – the standard grant, if more than one person in a household attends college the income eligibility limits increase accordingly; not so with the top-up grant, which remains fixed at an income limit of approximately €14,500/annum/family. A household with one member attending college is deemed worthy of a top-up if the family income is €14,500 or less but a family with many members attending college is not deemed worthy of a top-up if the family income is even 1 euro above the €14,500 limit. The purpose of the top-up grant is to help those most in need....', ( full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).*

A student who took part in one of the focus groups in the primary research made the comment that *'any person who wants to better their situation should be given the opportunity'* this comment is part of Question 14 in the questionnaire to which 95% of the total number of students agreed with the statement, (2% disagreed). By choosing to return to education the above student is trying to create a better future for himself and his family and is definitely finding this an uphill struggle financially.

- The findings illustrate although students associate lack of finance as part of student life, the majority of full-time students find it a difficult part of being a student in that it causes unwanted pressure *'it can cause stress sometimes as finance is always an issue'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).
- Finance is a dominant concern for students although not all students are affected to the same degree. However, significant numbers are struggling financially and evidence demonstrates that it can have a major impact on

one's study. A number of participants have questioned their decision and whether it is unrealistic to continue on with study.

### **4.2.3 Section 3: Social Responsibilities**

This section examines the relationship between other social roles and the student role. It explores any positive or negative impact and the reason for this.

Section 3 of the questionnaire explores the social roles that students fulfill alongside the student role and determines any associated connection between these variables. Question 9 considers any positive and/or negative consequence of the parental responsibilities of students. Question 10 ascertains any positive and/or negative effect of students currently in a relationship. Question 11 studies any positive and /or negative outcome in relation to students who have responsibilities toward other dependent relatives.

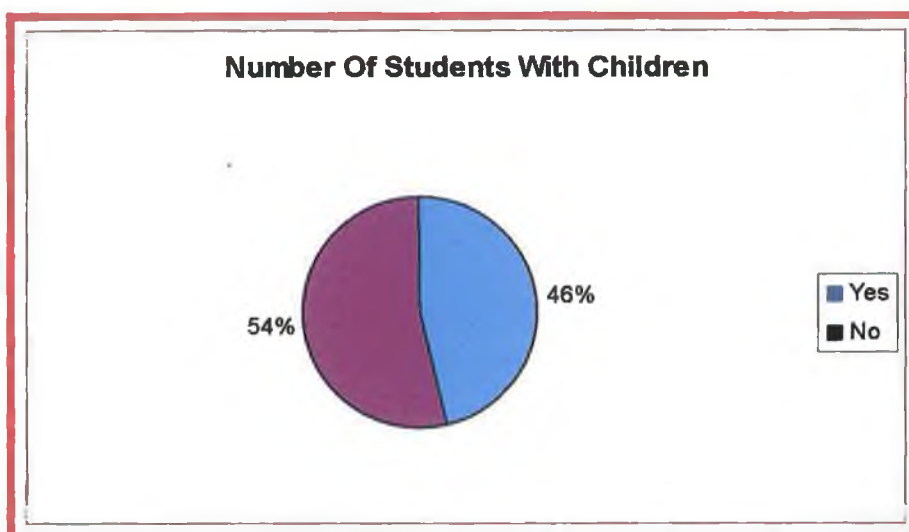
#### **4.2.3.1 Parental Responsibilities**

Question 9 explores parental responsibilities of students in three ways.

- A. The first looks at how many students have children.
- B. The second part predetermines if the effect is positive, or negative or both.
- C. Part three establishes the cause or reason given by students.

**Section A** Figures show that 46% (139) of the total number of students have parental responsibilities.

**Figure 4:** Numbers of Students with Children



**Section B** In answer to the effect student life has on their children 26% (59) said positive, 17% (38) said negative and 50% (83) report both positive and negative effects.

**Section C** The findings show interconnecting similarities in relation to the third part of Question 9. It is also clear that a large number of responses have both a positive and negative nature. Central to the positive opinion is the importance of education, the end result will justify the means, I *'can't spend the same amount of time I ought due to night classes, studies etc. but it will be worthwhile in the end'*, (3<sup>rd</sup> year female part-time). The negative consequences vary but include the fact that time spent on education results in less time for family commitments, *'too much time away and time devoted to study while at home'*, (1<sup>st</sup> year male full-time).

Students tend to believe the benefits of education outweigh the fact there is less time to spend with their children because it *'shows the advantages of 3<sup>rd</sup> level education'*, (2<sup>nd</sup> year male full-time), and *'shows her the value of education'*,

(full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Also *'it shows them that goals are achievable, that education is important etc'*, (1<sup>st</sup> year female part-time). There is also a tendency to believe that one's children become more interested in education, *'my children are more positive about education'*, (1<sup>st</sup> year male full-time). However, students do acknowledge that there are two sides to every argument and negative consequences are also being passed on to their children. *'I think it's good for them to see me go to college, but with all the study and project work might be transferring some of the stress'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male).

Education provides the opportunity to better one's future prospects to the benefit of one's children. However, combining college with parenting responsibilities can change this belief, as one student has discovered,

*'I felt the reason I was coming to college was to provide a better life for her but now I feel like I am neglecting my responsibilities because of all the work from college, I have no time for her'*, (1<sup>st</sup> year female full-time).

Students compare the compensations of returning to education as having a greater impact overall compared to the disadvantages. An example of one such reply includes

*'my time at college can sometimes be long so I have to be away from the children for longer than I like, that's the negative thing about it. The positive aspect of it is that I am now better able to help with their homework and think that coming to college has become a huge advantage as it has improved my self-confidence and it also has made me more aware and academic. It is good for my children as well as I am now more educated and can answer questions more academically than before I started college'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

Students speak about developing self-worth because they are enjoying the course while children have expressed pride in the fact that their parent has returned to education. Another aspect is setting the example of a good role model for children.

However, stress during exam periods is universal among students and is frequently reported as having a negative impact on one's children, *'around exam time especially I feel as though I am neglecting my parental duties'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). In addition, if a child is unwell, it can cause unwanted stress and anxiety particularly around exam times and this tends to predominantly affect female students,

Time constraints are another issue and affects many aspects of student life, *'juggling between course and housework, and responsibility for family'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Lack of time can have more of an impact on some students, *'I am very limited in the amount of time which I can spend on college work. Also I am limited in the amount of days in which I can attend college'*, [2 part-time jobs] (3<sup>rd</sup> year female full-time). Furthermore, time spent travelling is an issue for many students, *'commute so less time with them'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male). It is also not uncommon for some students to be away from home during the full academic week, *'away from home from Monday to Friday night'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). Or a student may have to travel to another part of the country as part of their coursework. *'I had to go away to Sligo as part of my course (nine weeks); positive, they see me studying'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Children may also spend time in transit with the parent student, and this is not always ideal. It can mean *'early hours for child to be getting out of bed. As I have to travel, it can be late when I get home....'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). The academic day can be very long for some students and they miss out on parental duties and appointments. *'I'm away from home from 7 am, not back till 7 pm, miss out on school parents teacher meetings etc.'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female).

Also, it has been known that children can become angry that a parent is spending time in study. *'They miss me not collecting them from school and playschool now (was a stay at home mom before).... They can also get annoyed when I am studying'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

In addition, parent students can also find other responsibilities interfering with the need to study and may also find themselves impatient with their children. *'When I have to study or do homework it is difficult to find the time with 3 children. I can become cross with them for no reason....'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Having many responsibilities and roles to fulfil make it more difficult, *'as I am in full-time employment and studying I find it difficult to make time for my family and degree course research'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). This can also be the experience for those on part-time courses as it *'.... can be very stressful to get dinner – do homework, keep household in order – do full-time job and keep sane'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Children can also be students, whereby creating a special type of bond between parent and child in that *'we understand each other'*, (1<sup>st</sup> year female part-time). Or they may have just qualified as one male explained *'two are just finished college. Delighted to see me have a go as I dropped out of education at fourteen,* (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). It also *'highlights the fact that learning is for life'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Associated guilt and feeling one is missing out in watching one's children grow and develop is another negative impact on returning to education, *'I am hardly around to watch them grow up, I feel like they only have a part-time father figure'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

Lone parents relate their experience in terms of the stress of individual situations.

*'Positively, my child sees the importance of education. Negatively, sees the stress it puts me under, also the financial constraints. Overall, he copes with it very well and knows its something I need and want to do for myself but its hard, especially as I am a lone parent and the only breadwinner'*, (1st year female full-time).

Nonetheless some students report positive impacts on their children, because as one wrote, *'enjoy my night course, therefore enjoy time for myself and thus am a happier mummy!'* (part-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year) and *'my older children have now the incentive to go back to education....'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

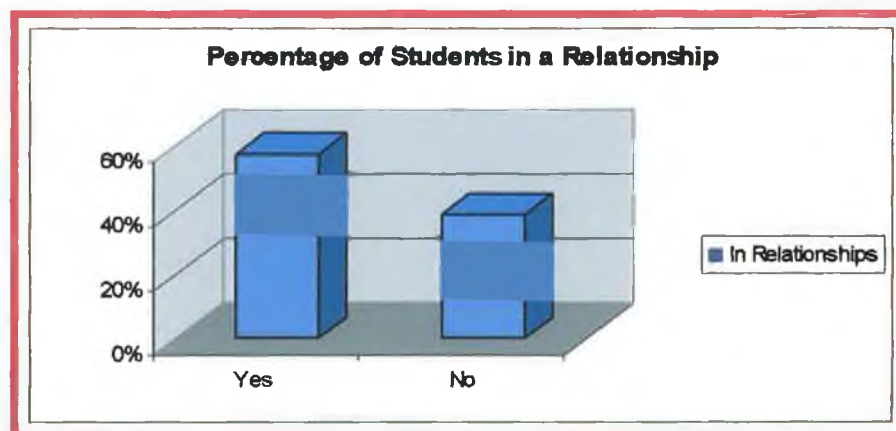
- The findings reveal that a student's children can be affected both negatively and positively. However, comparing both impacts students believe the positive benefits of education outweigh any negative results as overall, students believe education has many future opportunities to offer.
- Students, particularly female students tend to experience high levels of stress associated with combining all roles and responsibilities together and guilt associated with neglecting one's parental duties.

#### 4.2.3.2 Responsibilities Toward Spouse/Partner

Question 10 determines the impact of student life on any relationship a student may have in two ways. The first establishes how many students are in relationships and the second explores any positive or negative impact.

58% (175) of all students are in a relationship. Further analysis show 60% (122) of all females are in a relationship, while this is 55% (63) for their male counterparts.

**Figure 5:** Numbers of Students in Relationships



Students vary in their replies about the level of support from partners. This can range from *'he's very supportive'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female) to *'my husband is very supportive, but does get a little frustrated when I'm spending weekends and evenings working on projects'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female) to *'I don't get to spend as much time with my husband. He wasn't fully supportive of my decision to return to college'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Although spouses can become more accustomed to the idea.

Students who state they are married find their experience vary from *'my marriage is stable'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male), to its hard *'keeping a marriage going'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male). Replies also include, *'I am married and in college three nights a week and all day Saturday and is affecting this. I am gone from 7 am – 11 pm most days'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Obviously for some, relationship break-ups will occur.

*'I was in one when I started but it ended before Christmas exams because we never saw each other. I've been single throughout the degree, I don't have the time to devote to a relationship and .... [it] would distract me from study and add more stress to an already stressful me!'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female).

Other responsibilities and constraints create more pressure on a relationship. *'As I need to work in the evenings I only get to see my boyfriend at weekends. If there are assignments/exams due I do not see him at all. Can lead to stress'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). While some students report being a student puts prospective partners off. *'Women my own age tend not to be interested when they learn I am a student'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

Nonetheless, combining a relationship with study does have a negatively impact for some students. *'The study takes up a lot of time and so it is very difficult to give the time you used to, to the other half'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female).



This places extra pressure on the relationship and stress on the student.

*'Many times when he wants us to go out I can't because I have too much to do, we don't get to go away too often, I can be quite moody around exams and sometimes it puts a strain on our relationship',* (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female).

Travelling and time spent away from home is a major concern and negatively impacts on the quality of life for many students. Common replies include *'too much time away and time devoted to study while at home'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male), or *'away from home attending night course and studying at weekends'*, (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male).

Issues of finance can impact on a relationship and study, *'my partner is working two jobs so I can go to college and we never see each other because I am in college during the day and he works day and night'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Lack of finance can undermine one's position in a relationship according to some

*'... if one is a mature student and is in a relationship, if student isn't working it can also weaken a relationship as work and money comes number one in relationships which are serious, especially when one is older'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Finance can also cause an imbalance between the couple, *'my girlfriend has a teaching job. And I end up not being able to afford to go out, do things that she can afford to do'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

Some find they either do not share their concerns about any 'college' problems they may be experiencing with their partner *'find it very difficult to speak with my partner about college issues'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female) or act the complete opposite, *'I am .... spending more time outside the home and less and less time with my husband. All I ever talk about are exams, the results and assignments'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Understanding the pressures one is under as a student can also cause difficulties between a couple. *‘Those on the periphery do not understand the pressure that students put themselves under in order to do well. Can cause negative consequences’*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male).

However, the impact on a relationship is not always negative, or it may be of little consequence, just *‘sometimes’*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). Finally, some students in relationships are happy with the fact that they do not spend time together, *‘never see her, good thing’*, (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male).

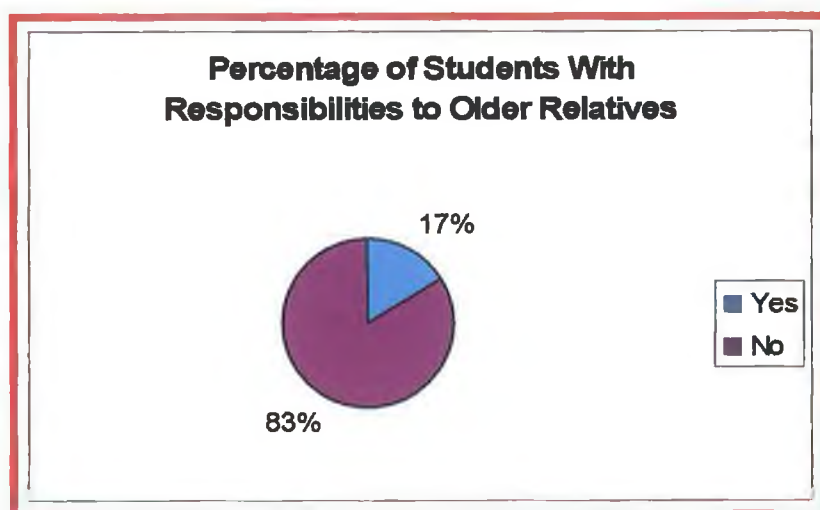
- The findings show many students are under pressure from numerous internal and external sources and it may have a negative impact on their relationship, but may depend on the quality of the relationship.
- A number of students receive little support from partners. However, for many, even though the support is good, students still tend to feel guilt about neglecting partners.
- Some relationships fail due to the lack of time/commitment, while others have no time or money to develop new relationships.

#### **4.2.3.3 Responsibilities Toward Older Relatives**

Question 11 ascertains the impact of student life on prior responsibilities to other relatives that students have. It is in two parts. The first establishes how many students have responsibilities to other relatives; the second explores any positive or negative impact.

17% (50) of all participants report responsibilities to others.

**Figure 6: Students with Responsibilities to Older Relatives**



Some students find only minimal difficulties arising, *'sometimes, with appointments'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female), while others report numerous dilemmas and clashes *'very much so'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female). Again time is an issue for many students, *'time is reduced'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male), and in addition it is *'more pressure'*, (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female). Students carry out specific jobs for their relatives, *'driver for my mother'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male), while others are conscious of the fact that they can be needed at any time and must be available just in case *'my 97 year old father is still reasonably independent. But obviously this is decreasing'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female), all adds up and *'puts extra pressure, as you have to be more prepared'*, (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female).

Students who are directly responsibility for a parent find they can not fulfil their role as carer because there is not enough time, *'I am carer to my mother and due to full-time college (35 hours) and part-time work (20 hours) I do not get to help her as much as I should'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

A number of parents are totally dependent on their adult children, which can leave the student with the feeling of guilt, *'.... at present I do feel I am abandoning her to study for my exams'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

Managing and organising all the responsibilities can be difficult, and students find they are *'always tired out'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). Furthermore, relatives can resent the student returning to education., *'my mother is quite resentful and feels I am too old to be "playing" at school'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). Finally, some students have tremendous problems to shoulder alongside study, *'both my mother and sister have cancer'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

- The findings show responsibilities towards others can be another source of anxiety and guilt for adult students impacting on the quality of life.
- A number of students are under tremendous pressure because of family commitments.

#### **4.2.4 Section 4: Academic Life**

This section explores various aspects of academic roles, including the learning experience, the college experience, and the concerns and issues of student life. The final section examines interaction between lecturing staff and students.

This section of the Questionnaire examines the academic experience of students. Questions 12 and 13 monitors how much time one would like to spent on study per week, and what one actually spends on study per week.

Questions 14, 16, 17, and 18 are made up of a series of statements arising out of the findings of the Focus Groups, the first part of the primary research.

Students either agreed or disagreed with the statements.

- Question 14 studies student learning experience.
- Question 15 ascertains the college experience. Students completed this by underlining the words that best describe their experience.
- Question 16 details the role of the mature student.
- Question 17 determines the pressures of being a student.
- Question 18 explores interaction with lecturing staff.

#### 4.2.4.1 Time Spent on Study

Findings to the Questions vary widely partly due to the fact that courses are not of the same duration. Furthermore some courses demand more time in the classroom and less time on exploratory study while other courses are the opposite where one hour of lecture demands two hours further exploration.

The main point to Questions 12 and 13 is to find out what the general position for students on studying is at present.

Two hundred and eighty seven students completed these Questions. A number of other students did not answer both. Furthermore, a number of students indicated that the Questions were not applicable as their work is mainly studio based '*constant, studio work 9 -5, research evenings and weekends*', (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female), or '*some days can be 10 to 12 hours per day*', (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male)

Others report spending long hours on college work. For some it can be '*60-65 hours approximately, never under 40*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). While another reports, '*.... up to 80 hours per week*', (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female).

Nonetheless, a total of one hundred and eighty four students, (64% overall) acknowledge that they do not spend as much time on study as they think they should.

There are various reasons given for this, for example lack of time can be a major concern. One student acknowledged they *'don't have much time for it'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female). Whereas, another student responded *'practically none, I cram'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male).

However, it may depend on the academic year as one male reason's don't *really study, 1<sup>st</sup> year'*, (full-time) while those in their final year profess *'all the time I can get .... about 8 hours a day at moment'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male).

For others, given a choice they would like more time to study, *'enough to ensure I have a comprehensive grasp of my subjects [but] not as much as I would like'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male). Some students find work interferes with study, *'with job commitments, at present no time is spent studying'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). In addition, study and time spent on study can depend on the amount of academic work one has to cover, *'not much on study. A lot of time on assignments though'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male). However, lack of time for study can affect overall enthusiasm for study as one participant finds this to be the situation,

*'I rarely get to study until near the exams, (a few weeks before them), I find that I'm so busy writing up lab reports and doing assignments that I don't have the energy or motivation to study'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female).

The whole learning environment should be similar to full-time employment, but in reality the demands of the learning environment continually change.

*'I think that it should be like a job, I should only need to do a 40 hour week. This is never sufficient to do well enough ..... in the beginning of the semester I only spend 30 hours per week. Then from after the first quarter onwards, I go from a 45 hour week to sometimes a 60 hour week (upward sometimes)'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

Or it could be the fact that too much time is spent in transit. *'Not enough, I squeeze study in between lectures, family, plus 3 hours driving per day to and from college'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male). Finally, making time for study can have a negative impact on sleep, as one student states they study for *'3- 4 hours per day, (sleep 4 hours)'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male).

- The findings reveal overall, study is a major issue of concern for mature students; many feel inundated with study while others are anxious about the lack of personal study time due to time constraints.
- It is also evident that the amount of academic work involved can impact on study time.

#### **4.2.4.2 Student Learning Experience**

The following findings illustrate what students believe to be their learning experience.

When I came in first, it would have been like a honeymoon kind of period - 41% (125) agree, 53% disagree.

You're very conscientious; you've made a decision to go back and learn, and people expect you to do well - 84% (256) agree, 14% disagree.

By going back to college you put yourself under pressure - 82% (247) agree, 17% disagree.

I don't think I'd be reading anything unless it contributed towards my marks - 30% (90) agree, 68% disagree.

It gets to a point where I don't know if I'm learning anymore - 29% (87) agree, 71% disagree.

I push myself hard to succeed – 77% (233) agree, 22% disagree.

It's all about trying to get a good mark – 55% (166) agree, 45% disagree.

I don't have time to explore or read around things – 48% (146) agree. 51% disagree.

Any person who wants to better their situation should be given the opportunity - 95% (289) agree, 2% disagree.

I love learning – 85% (257) agree, 14% disagree.

Pressure has spoiled learning for me – 36% (109) agree. 64% disagree.

- The findings illustrate, students agree that because one has made the decision to go to college, not only do other people expect a high standard of performance but the decision to return to education doubles the pressure on oneself. Also students mainly agree that ‘they push themselves hard to succeed’.
- 85% profess to love learning, however over one third report pressure has spoiled learning for them, while just under one third find they have reached a point where they do not know if their learning is continuing. Time constraints mean almost half the students do not have time to explore or read around material.

#### 4.2.4.3 College Experience

The following information is in relation to how all students best describe their college experience.

Enjoyable	68% (206)	Interesting	77% (233)
Knowledgeable	60% (183)	Refreshing	28% (86)
Awakening	36% (108)	Exciting	34% (104)
Inspiring	36% (109)	Stimulating	53% (161)
Eagerness	22% (66)	Learning	64% (194)
Curiosity	35% (105)		
Pressurised	48% (145)	Hurried	26% (80)
Stressful	54% (164)	Tiring	53% (161)
Heavy	18% (56)	Apprehension	17% (53)
Apathy	5% (15)	Exhausting	36% (109)
Dread	11% (32)	Intense	28% (86)
Failure	8% (24)	Disillusioned	10% (30)
Lonely	12% (37)		



- The findings show on the positive side, students use the following words to describe their experience enjoyable, knowledgeable, interesting, stimulating and learning.
- On the negative side, students mainly report high levels of stress, pressure and tiredness.

There are limitations to the above Question that may distort possible interpretation. It should be kept in mind that a word may have one meaning to one student yet suggest or imply another meaning to another student. Also bearing in mind that several students may have calculated a number of words to have the same meaning whereby choosing one word to describe their college experience whereupon other students may have chosen a number of words to describe their college experience as the findings demonstrate.

Another important factor to consider is the overall experience of individual students. Students who found their experience very negative may mark all the negative words, whereas students whose experience is very positive may have chosen all the positive choices.

There may also be gender issues in relation to the Question. One should understand that male students may not be inclined to describe their experience as exciting, or awakening whereas female students may. For example, 12% of male students underlined 'eagerness' to describe their experience whereas this was 28% for female students.

#### **4.2.4.4 Role of Mature Student**

The following facts are the results of Question 16 on the experience of the mature student role.

I don't have any free time - 47% (141) agree, 52% disagree.

I had a perception that it was slightly easier but its tough going, there's nothing easy about it – 62% (188) agree, 36% disagree.

The amount of work was more than I actually thought – 60% (183) agree, 39% disagree.

It's a fine balancing act, I find myself balancing all the time - 79% (238) agree, 19% disagree.

Some days you wake up and don't want to go in – 48% (146) agree, 50% disagree.

It's up to yourself to fit in as there's no support there – 47% (141) agree, 51% disagree.

Health wise I'm developing all kinds of ailments – 20% (60) agree, 77% disagree

I'm just absolutely bogged down in college work – 36% (110) agree, 60% disagree.

You cannot abandon your role as a parent, kids come first at the end of the day – 63% (192) agree, 11% disagree.

You have to put everything else first the college comes second – 29% (88) agree, 68% disagree.

If you're in a weak group, you have to do all the work – 39% (117) agree, 54% disagree.

At times I can't think I'm so tired, I can't concentrate – 63% (192) agree, 35% disagree.

Its very much self-directed learning - 58% (175) agree, 38% disagree.

A lot of learning is like reciting or repeating; and giving back the information we get – 56% (170) agree, 41% disagree.

I feel the more I learn, the thicker I get – 18% (54) agree, 78% disagree.

I don't know what future opportunities are open to me – 45% (136) agree, 52% disagree.

- The findings show that six out of every ten students underestimated not only the volume of work involved at Third Level but also that it is much more challenging than they first imagined.

- Students tend to find themselves constantly balancing everything while nearly two thirds can become so tired at times that they find it difficult to concentrate or think. Just over one third of all students feel swamped by college work. Furthermore two in every ten students believe it is having a negative impact on their health while almost two in every ten are becoming intellectually confused about what they are gaining in the process of learning.
- Over half the students believe that learning is self-directed, the process also involves repeating or giving back the information you receive.
- Nearly two thirds of all students agree that the needs of children come before college work.
- Over one third of students' state they are 'bogged down' in college work and find groups that are weakly structured can mean one ended up doing all the work.
- A small but significant number of students believe the experience is affecting their health. Similarly, a small but significant number believe they more they learn the less they know.

#### **4.2.4.5 Pressures of Being a Student**

The following details are the results from Question 17, on the pressures of being a mature student.

I would drop out if I thought I was going to fail – 23% (70) agree, 74% disagree.

I was thinking of dropping out because I'd fallen behind – 14% (42) agree, 84% disagree.

It's all about getting that piece of paper (qualification) – 50% (152) agree, 48% disagree.

You're going nowhere without that piece of paper – 49% (149) agree, 48% disagree.

We all want to pass – 96% (291) agree, 3% disagree.

You need to succeed, that's why you're doing the course – 80% (241) agree, 18% disagree.

I don't think failure is an option – 70% (212) agree, 28% disagree.

I worry about failing because I've given up so much – 47% (143) agree, 50% disagree.

You put so much effort into something that you really want to pass it – 93% (282) agree, 5% disagree.

Near exams I stay away from the college because it makes me more stressed seeing everyone else stress – 27% (83) agree, 69% disagree.

People saying fair play to you, you'll fly through it, puts even more pressure on you – 54% (164) agree, 45% disagree.

I had/have to give up my job to concentrate solely on college work – 35% (106) agree, 60 disagree.

Financial assistance from your work creates extra pressure on an individual to succeed – 40% (120) agree, 43% disagree.

- The findings illustrate that for half of all students returning to education to gain a qualification is all important. While almost all the students agree that one invests so much in study that succeeding is of major importance and the fact is almost half have anxieties about failure.
- Over one third had to resort to give up paid employment in order to concentrate solely on study, while four in every ten find financial sponsorship puts extra pressure on an individual to succeed.
- Over half of all students agree that the fact that other people assume because one has returned to college one will automatically 'do well' places 'added pressure' on the student. Stress also adds pressure at exams for 27% of students who deliberately stay away from college as stress from other students can be picked up.

#### **4.2.4.6 Interaction with Lecturing Staff**

The following details the results from Question 18, on mature student's interaction with lecturing staff.

Positive affirmation from lecturers made me feel; maybe they're right, maybe I can do this – 92% (280) agree, 7% disagree.

The lecturer knows where you're coming from – 70% (212) agree, 24% disagree.

Lecturers are very encouraging – 82% (247) agree, 16% disagree.

It's much easier interacting with lecturers as adults - 84% (255) agree, 13% disagree.

Sometimes lecturers speak to you like you were ten - 32% (96) agree, 66% disagree.

Lecturers still go on and do their lecture; it's up to you to catch up – 74% (223) agree, 23% disagree.

- The findings illustrate students tend to find interaction with lecturing staff positive and encouraging. Also, positive affirmation is very important for students and enhances a student's own belief in their abilities.
- However, nearly one third of students experience condescension from staff.

## 4.2.5 Section 5: Expectations and Preparations

This section examines the preparation experience and what students aim to achieve by returning to education. Additional comments finalise the questionnaire.

### 4.2.5.1 Time Spent in Transit

Question 19 explores time spent in transit per day.

	Numbers
• Up to ½ hour in transit	- 101
• Up to 1 hour	- 82
• Up to 1½ hours	- 19
• Up to 2 hours	- 51
• Up to 2 ½ hours	- 9
• Up to 3 hours	- 17
• Up to 3½ hours	- 1
• Up to 4 hours	- 5
• Up to 5 hours	- 1

The findings show a significant number of students spend a major part of their day in transit. The data reveal 29% (84) of students spend up to two hours and over daily in travelling.

### 4.2.5.2 What Students Expect To Get from the Course

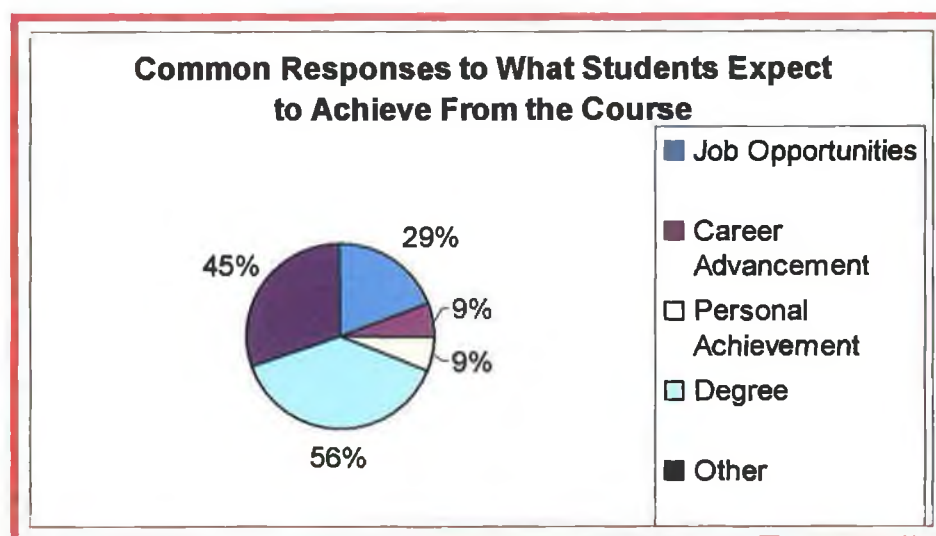
The following are the responses from Question 20, which asks what students expect to get from the course?

Students on the whole responded by providing five common answers.

The percentages are as follows:

- Job Opportunities. 29% (87)
- Career Advancement - 9% (26)
- Personal Achievement - 9% (26)
- Qualification - 56% (170)
- Other - 45% (136)

**Figure 7: Five Common Answers to What Students Expect to Achieve**



Other responses include a number of significant statements. Gaining *'knowledge'* is one of the more common answers, as one female states *'higher degree; more importantly, to be educated'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year). However, students express different reasons for this. For some the reason's include *'gain knowledge and education that I always wanted; and come out with a qualification that I hope I can use'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). For another returning to education provides *'more awareness, more knowledge of the work I am doing'* (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female), or it may provide *'... recognition in the workplace'*, (part-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). One states *'to advance the knowledge that I have and use the new knowledge at work'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female) or hopefully *'of what to expect in the workplace...'* (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female), or

*'on the job front, doors should open which were previously closed'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male). Another looks forward to the academic challenges of a decent job, she states, *'a qualification to get myself an interesting job and a job that I really enjoy doing; which would constantly challenge me intellectually'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year).

Many students believe there are numerous opportunities returning to education, these include, from earning more money, to learning something different and fulfilling. Others prefer *'...interaction with like-minded people'* (1<sup>st</sup> year female) or to develop *'real world skills and academic credentials'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year).

A number of participants were more specific in what they wish to achieve. They expect education to provide the opportunity of independence, *'hopefully to get a job that I like and be able to manage without social welfare. I'd like to be independent'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). Another wrote *'... I want to get a good job.... so I don't spend the rest of my life and my child's life living hand to mouth'*, (full-time).

However, a number of students made it clear that they have become uncertain about what they want from college with responses such as, *'don't know anymore'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male) or *'not a lot anymore'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female) and *'at this stage I no longer know what to expect'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). One student explains further why she is disillusioned:

*'I feel after three years I am not qualified for anything. We cover bits of things, in reality if I went for an interview, having the cert would be of benefit but in reality, in a job situation I am not qualified for anything. I know I would not take someone on as a result of this course'*, (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female parent).

Self-confidence is an important concern for many students. This can include *'confidence in area studied'* (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male), or *'confidence to get the*



*job I want*', (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female) or *'confidence and knowledge to work as a professional'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). For others this means *'confidence to continue to further education'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> female). Also, self-esteem and *'self respect'* are valued highly. One 3<sup>rd</sup> year wrote, *'self-worth/esteem, confidence and supporting my initial thoughts "yes I can do this, I want to do this"'*, (full-time female). For other students learning is personal or *'a doorway to more personal learning'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male) and *'a memorable learning experience'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). It is a move towards further gaining *'a qualification to continue my work'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year).

Finally, besides the opportunity of gaining a qualification, a number of students expect to contribute more to society as one states, *'I expect to gain the knowledge and skills to be the best nurse that I can when I qualify'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female), while another says *'... hope I can make a difference when I start working'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female).

- The findings illustrate students aim to succeed in getting worthwhile jobs both in terms of earning power and job satisfaction and for many it is a lifeline to an independent and improved lifestyle.
- The advantages of returning to education outweigh the disadvantages of not returning to education. However, there are a number of students that have become disillusioned.
- Gaining knowledge is very important for any progression in the workplace for many students but it is also important in self-development and assists and facilitates self-confidence, particularly for women.

### 4.2.5.3 Initial Preparations

The following are the replies to Question 21, which explores the initial preparations students engage with in returning to education.

Motivating oneself is important to a number of students, just *'motivated myself as best I could'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male) or *'just prepared myself psychologically that I want to do this and to do well'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Also having *'...the commitment to study for 4 years and the backing from work'*, (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female) is important. Many students prepared by reading up on the subjects they were undertaking or *'intensive reading'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

While a significant number, completed other courses in preparation for Third Level Education. Some attended foundation courses *'VTOS, FETAC Level 2'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male), or *'one year PLC, six months computer course, gave up work'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male), it is also common for students to attend a few *'night courses'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male), before committing to full-time education. Others completed introductory courses *'mature students' introduction course before starting actual course, lasting 2 weeks'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Whereas taking part in *'voluntary work in area to see if I like it'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female) was a deciding factor. Also paid work influenced the decision to return to education as I *'started working in a youth club'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Distance learning is another route to Third Level Education, *'I have completed various modules in other courses and took part in a distance learning diploma in social care'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). While others undertook extensive preparations as one student reports he *'did the junior and leaving cert'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year). Some underwent unbelievable preparations to return successfully to education, one wrote *learnt to read and write, spellings still not great and did level two business studies'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

Some preparations can involve changing one's whole life around. One 2<sup>nd</sup> year wrote

*'gave up my job in New York. Moved from there to Ireland, (after 9 years). Found somewhere to work part-time until the course started in sept. Found somewhere to live. Basically I changed my entire life to do this course....'*

Some found, getting the initial information difficult, and this can give rise to uncertainty. One full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female wrote, *'it was very hard to get details about it, very hard to find out what I would need (qualification) to get a job – not sure if I really made the right choice'*.

Completing a Foundation course provides more opportunities for students who are unsure where their interests lie.

*'I took part in a "Training for Transformation" course which made me realise I had let myself get in a rut. I know I wanted to do something but didn't know what, so that's why I choose the Foundation year as a starter',* (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Several students found out by attending the college *'Information Evening; talking to previous students; reading all the literature'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female) while others *'attended the college open day'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male) as a means to find out more about courses. One student reported that he *'researched a number of college and courses, spent a day in this college with the head of dept'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male), before he made the decision. A few looked for specific help, one stated she *'got help from Adult Education Centre, Letterkenny, who provided me with lots of information and support and encouragement which I needed'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

However, students should be made aware that some Educational Institutes have specific guidelines for entry. *'I did a part-time access course at ..., the subjects were physics, chemistry, biology, and maths. I needed to pass this course to gain entry into the degree'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female). Others found the access

course particularly valuable. *'I had done an access course, which was invaluable as far as preparation was concerned'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female) and *'... Would not be able for college if I did not do that course'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

There were many practical preparations such as saving to improve finances or *'learned how to drive...'*, (part-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female) to generally organising one's other roles and responsibilities.

- The findings demonstrate that students generally prepare and organise their personal life prior to beginning a college course and put a lot of energy into finding out as much course information as possible, and reading up on course material is very important to many.
- It is clear a significant number have completed numerous other courses, before embarking on one at Third Level including starting at the very basics. Also completing courses introduces one to academic material, creating a less challenging atmosphere.

#### **4.2.5.4 Negative Experiences During Preparations**

The following are the replies to Question 22, aimed at discovering any negative experiences during preparations.

Uncertainties about one's capabilities also cause major issues for some students.

The following is an example of what students thought.

*'Initially, I thought I was going to be the oldest student in the course and that because of that I would not be able to compete with or relate to the younger students. I also feared that I would not be academic enough as I had been out of the education system for 20 years'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

And *'just thinking I would not be able for it'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Also, *'apprehension of coming to college at my age'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). Some *'found it hard to adjust to classroom environment at first'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male). Others *'thought some of the subjects were out of my depth'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Other students can experience a lack of self-confidence, one full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male wrote *'lack of confidence. Finance. Low self-esteem'*. Also motivating oneself can cause anxieties. *'Found it hard to get motivated because I was so tired after work'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). This affects full time students also, *'lack of motivation, discipline and money'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male). Again, the problem of finance arises *'the financial pressure can be a lot'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Also there is uncertainty about the grant system, *'finding out that because I'd done a cert in computing (with no grant) that I wasn't entitled to a grant until third year of this course ....'*, full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). In addition, making financial decisions can cause major stress.

*'Handing in my notice at work was very stressful, giving up a job where I had a wage to go to a situation where I was getting even less money! People giving me "advice" and saying I was in a "good job" even though it wasn't going nowhere'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

For many students, financial stress is compounded by the fact many have to explore avenues of financial assistance and it can be very intrusive,

*'Co. Council asking for my divorce papers when I applied for a grant. Was divorced 10 years at this stage, on one-parent family payment, yet they wanted to see – the first time I was asked to produce them. Yea that and all the other paper work, CAO, BTEA etc, form filling, waiting'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

Even, a student's age can be an issue. *'People wondered was I not a bit old to be back studying – only thirty-three!'*, (part-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female),

Some students found *'not enough information- unsure where to get information'*, (part-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female) or *'received little notice'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). Another found the *'Head of School not very encouraging'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Another said

*'I was told by one facilitator on the two week course in college, that I would fail the course I was undertaking as she could observe I was very involved in family matters. (I will prove her wrong)'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

Another *'was told I was wasting my time and would probably drop out or fail'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male parent). This is the second attempt at returning to education.

While another felt *'mature students get little support; expected to support the younger students, not to support others'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

- The findings reveal students come across many negative experiences during their preparations for Third Level Education including uncertainties about finance, intellectual capacities, and alienation.
- Lack of motivation and tiredness both have negative impacts on students.
- Exploring financial avenues, searching for the appropriate information and experiencing negative responses from institutional staff can leave students feeling vulnerable.

#### 4.2.5.5 Assessment of Initial Information

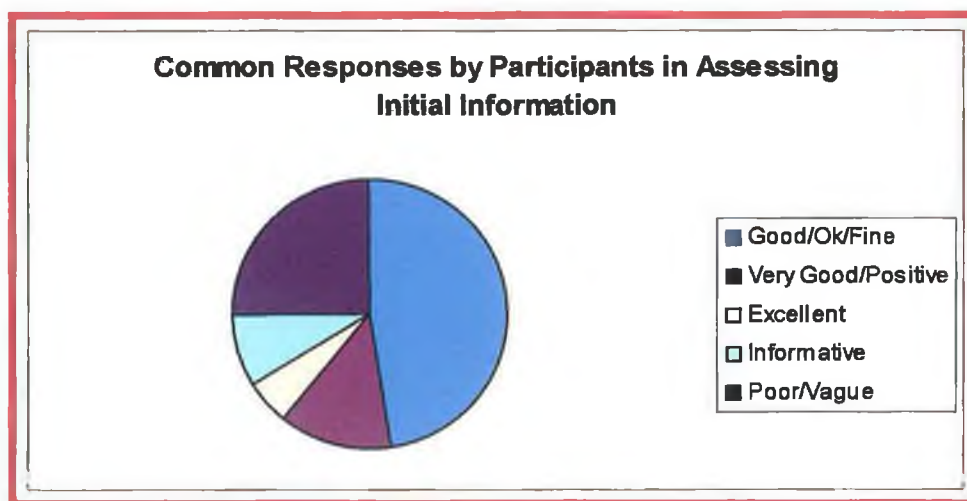
The following are the replies to Question 23, aimed at assessing initial information received about the course.

There were a wide range of diverse replies including a number of similar answers and further comments; or short replies. The following numbers can not be completely accurate as many participants included different types of answers. Therefore it is a general overview only.

Participants assessed the initial information as:

Good/OK/Fine	100
Very Good/Positive	28
Excellent	11
Informative	18
Poor/Vague	53

**Figure 8:** Common Responses in Assessing Initial Information



A number of students '*did not receive any information*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female) or found that '*no specific initial information was given*', (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female).

Quite a number found it '*not true to what it actually is*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female) and that it is '*not realistic*', (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female). '*It was not very detailed and could be more informative over exact content and requirements*', (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male). Students also tended to find that the '*workload wasn't highlighted as much as it should*', (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female), or that '*some of the subjects seem irrelevant or out of touch*', (part-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female) and again '*getting the actual information from a single source is impossible*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). It may also be misleading because '*exams and percentages [were] not fully explained*', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

The right information can have very positive effects, '*the initial information was very encouraging and interesting and that is one of the main reasons I decided to return to college*', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female) and can guide people in the right direction.

- The findings show, course subject and content is not as detailed as it could be.
- There is uncertainty about the volume of academic work involved at Third Level. Also, students need to be better informed about exams, marking schemes, etc.
- There are also difficulties obtaining all the relevant information.



#### 4.2.5.6 Final Comments

Question 24, examines any further or final remarks students wish to comment on.

Going back to college is a new lease of life for numerous students:

*'Coming back to college has been a great experience. I'm so glad I done it. The lecturers are brilliant and so helpful. I've made so many friends and the younger students don't treat me any different because I'm a mature student. They look up to us a bit and ask me for advice on different things. I would advise anyone to come back',* (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

And age is no barrier, *'.... I'm glad that I've decided to do this at my time in life. You're never too old to learn ....'* (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

Also students are more appreciative for the second opportunity.

*'For someone like me who, showed no interest in school when they were young if they [get]the second chance that they should take it and do their very best no matter what because it is well worth it',* (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

*'It is a wonderful opportunity to get',* (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

However, students offer advice about returning to education. There is a need to *'think before you try to do any type of course, [it] takes up a lot of your time, be prepared to spend time away from other parts of your life',* (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). It can be *'very hard to work, have a family, go to college and have a social life',* (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). Also *'as a mature student, one takes things much more serious – there is no boss to blame',* (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female).

Support from other students is highly important, *'would like to see more support for mature students and perhaps a mature student's society [as it] can feel weird*

*with all twenty year olds at times*', (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female). In fact some can feel at a complete loss among the traditional student cohort;

***'I found that if you were the only mature student as I was, you were a little alienated, there was no mature student group that you could become part of, in order to mix with other mature students. This was a shame as it meant that you had no interaction with others much and was quite lonely'***, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female).

Another wants to know about *'mature student representation. Is there someone who looks after us?'* (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

Nonetheless, becoming a student one does put ones life on hold because time is needed for exploration and study.

***'It's also very lonely trying to cope with the knowledge that you have to put your personal life on hold. But still at this point I don't regret going back to college and I wouldn't give it up'***, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Nevertheless, there are numerous other barriers that students face. Many students find they must combine all responsibilities and roles together by allocating and constantly prioritising. *'I would love to be able to afford to be a student full-time and not have to combine my studies with work'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). This can be compounded further by the academic requirements set on the course.

***'... We are expected to do a thirty hour placement week for six weeks, I think this is not very encouraging for mature students who have restructured their working life around the twenty hour college course having to change it, work extra hours for free while still having to do a thirty hour job (real job) to finance returning to full-time education'***, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Without a doubt, as an adult, student life can have its ups and downs.

*'I find the course very fulfilling and informative. Sometimes it's difficult to try and balance everything – being a parent and student and travelling a fair distance is stressful. But completing assignments and projects gives a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).*

Clearly other responsibilities that need particular attention can negatively impact learning as life can not be guaranteed to run smoothly.

*'...I feel due to exam stress and family problems I was lacking in confidence to continue what seemed an up-hill struggle. I .... am going to re-charge for the summer I have a feeling I will need it', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).*

However, the lack of a college crèche is negatively impacting on some female students with children.

*'There should be a college crèche. I have to drop out of college after 1<sup>st</sup> yr as even though my marks are in the 70's and 80's my child has a hole in her heart and the travelling 2 hours a day is too much on her health', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).*

Education can also interfere with other major commitments in one's life. *'Having summer exams on the day of the First Holy Communion is very stressful. This happened last summer and this summer', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).*

Finance is another important concern for students. Some students are not in receipt of any assistance. *'Financially is it hard as I am not receiving grant. Did not qualify because the grant is based on last year's income but I'm not working this year', (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male).* This is also an important issue for part-time students, *'no help from anyone barr my partner and a few friends. No help from the government i.e. tax relief or grant', (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).* Another

part-time student questions 'why *the price of a course goes up a lot every year: 1<sup>st</sup> – five hundred and fifty; 2<sup>nd</sup> – eight hundred and sixty; 3<sup>rd</sup> – nine hundred and sixty*', (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female).

Many students argue financial concerns need to be addressed.

*'Financial assistance should be looked at in greater detail in relation to mature students as their circumstances greatly differ from the majority of the student population within the college'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

The benefit of having adult students in the learning environment is constructive to all, as *'mature students positively affect the learning environment – in class debate they are worth 15 ordinary students'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male).

Another stated that they *'feel there is more pressure on me because I'm older, don't really have time to spend another four years in college'*, (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female). Occasionally, *'lecturers are sometimes very arrogant and uncommunicative. Communications skills not up to standard'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

The course may be *'pressured and challenging. The methodology used to teach seems to be outdated; surely there is a less traumatic way to educate people full-time'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female). This can cause problems, *'the course was good to begin with but after a while things got on top of you and you just find the pressure and I feel like giving up'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Failure can be more daunting for some more than others. One said *'I can't allow myself to fail or else I'll give bad example to my children'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male), while another wrote

*'going to college is the best thing I have done by far. A lot of pressure is felt because I so want to do well, not because of others, but because of myself, and the plans I have made for my future. Without a proper*

*education I fear I won't do all that well in life, at least not as well as I hope to do....., (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male).*

The bottom line is that *'it's up to you. You decide to go back to college. You set the demand to achieve; it's up to you to deliver on it .....*', (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year male) and *'its about getting your qualification if you have put the work in, it's a sense of achievement and being proud of your own efforts', (part-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female).*

Finally, students believe this research is warranted, *'thank you for doing this questionnaire....., (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).*

And it is timely *'thanks for taking an interest in mature students; it can get lonely out there.....', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).* Students have also expressed an interest in the results of the research *'will love to get any feedback to this questionnaire. I would like to see where it's going and .... take on all of this. Please return with your information', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).*

- The findings illustrate education is a wonderful opportunity to get but can be challenging, and pressurised, and students may feel alienated and lonely.
- Education takes time and commitment and has too fit into the rest of your life so it can be additional stress and can at times seem like an uphill struggle.
- The lack of a college crèche is having a negative impact on some female students with children while college placements can impact on employment.

To conclude, many barriers including lack of finance, employment, childcare, travelling, studying, stress, time constraints, and finding a balance are just some of the major obstacles students must overcome.

## **4.3 Presentation of the Focus Group Findings**

### **4.3.1 Introduction**

A series of focus groups with student volunteers was initially carried out as part of the primary research to investigate student experience in order to gather information to form the data for the second strand of the research, the questionnaires. Taking into account that the sole purpose of the Focus Group research was to develop the questionnaire, the information gathered is very similar to the Questionnaire findings. Therefore, the Focus Group data is briefly summarised in this section of the Presentation of the Findings. However, any Focus Group data that is not present in the Questionnaire findings will be covered in greater detail.

During the Focus Group research, students tended to agree with each other on specific issues, and is represented by the word '[yeah]' incorporated into the middle of a student's response, indicating either the majority or all the participants agreed with the student. The following findings are the outcomes from the Focus Groups.

### **4.3.2 Section A: Initial Information and Support**

This section explores the sources of initial information available to students. It also ascertains if students were offered other choices or guided toward other courses more suited to their needs.

In relation to finding specific information on courses of interest to students, the replies are similar to the Questionnaire findings and include the internet, media, open day, or the hand book.

However, some were given specific information,

*'I was on a community employment scheme with FAS and someone from the college came and spoke to us about this course. I felt it was a better opportunity in that it was a course with more to offer in the long run', (full-time).*

However, students still like to be more informed about course content as a form of preparation. *'.... We'd like to have a bit more information in the beginning to organise ourselves a bit better', (part-time).*

Some of the part-time students suggests *'it may have been helpful to talk to someone to tell you what the course was about',* to which all other participants in the focus group nodded in agreement.

The transition to Third Level can be a major step and often students find the changeover difficult.

*'Going back to school I found .... it's tough work going, there's nothing easy about it. I had a perception about it, that is was slightly easier.... mature student drop out, it's all right if you're a 1<sup>st</sup> year, or seventeen, or giving it a shot', (part-time).*

Again the workload is *'certainly far more work going into it than I actually thought or hoped initially', (part-time)*

Support at the beginning of one's course was non existent for some, particularly part-time participants, *'someone just came in, I felt very unsure the first night of what was ahead of me', (part-time).* However, students who received support and guidance through the 'Induction Programme' at the beginning of their college life were more *'.... acclimatised by the place ....'* and *'.... you don't feel as out of place if you can spot a familiar face', (full-time).*

- The findings reveal students would have found information on subject content and the actual workload more informative as the uncertainty of what lays ahead gives rise to anxieties etc. It is clear from feedback, it is very important for adult students to know and understand what lies ahead of them because it may hold people back from feeling they are fully immersed into the new role.
- There is general agreement that the college handbook could be more informative on actual course content, and having contact with others on the actual course would provide an insider view.

### 4.3.3 Section B: Aspects of College Life

This section determines how much adjustment if any is required for one to ‘fit in’ at college; and if each academic year has different requirements. It also explores interaction with the main student cohort and any impact on one’s participation and learning. The final part of this section establishes how much pressure students feel from learning.

With regard to ‘fitting in’ at college, some students believe it depends on what course you are completing as some are more geared towards mature students particular the ‘*caring profession*’, (full-time), whereas others found it much more complicated. *‘We were kind of thrown in at the start and this is it, go to class and that was it like .... you could be alienated.... you’d be the only one’*, (full-time).

Loneliness is also a main concern for some, particularly day students. This is quite the opposite for night students, *‘personally I feel I would fit in a lot easier into this situation as opposed to a day student’*, and one of the benefits are students can depend academically on each other for support, this is particularly so for night students, *‘I found that if you exchange numbers and if you were doing an essay and you’d call somebody up and I’m stuck on this, (part-time).*



There are other differences between full and part-time classes.

*'.... I find the classes more structured at evening time, everyone's there for one reason, that's to learn, it's a more supportive environment. Because I've been in college .... you've got seventeen or eighteen year olds and its happy hour, it takes half an hour to calm them down, to get them together, like a lot of the time is taken up with silly kind of crap, you know, lecturers lecturing people about notes, have you got that assignment done, and maybe half the class not showing up', (part-time).*

However, the down side at night class is *'that there are other options for students; we tend to miss out on a lot of things', (part-time).* The sort of 'things' mentioned includes library facilities. And *'.... if you're not aware of it before hand, you can run into obstacles and it would be helpful just to have that information', (part-time).*

There is the need to become accustomed to the library as again time constraints impact on every aspect of student life. The part-time students felt they would benefit greatly from an access officer.

*'Very often you know as a mature student you would hit a situation, I know I did. And I missed a few classes. It just threw me and I know I got to the stage where I was seriously thinking about dropping the course .... it crossed my mind but that's me but somebody else would have gone ahead and dropped out', (part-time).*

However, there is general agreement that lecturers are very encouraging for part-time students. *'There was always positive affirmation from them when you go in, like don't be worrying that you'll fail it', (part-time).* *'But even the fact of them actually saying it; yes it made you feel maybe they're right, maybe I could do this', (part-time).*

However, there is a difference between night and day students with regard to interaction with lecturing staff. One day student points out *'sometimes they speak to you like you're ten or something; if an adult did that to you, you*

wouldn't let that happen', (full-time). Sometimes if *'you query something that you're not sure of, that are you completely stupid you know especially if your peers have no problem with it. There's that side of it as well'*, (full-time), the situation can make the student feel stupid.

However, students are very conscientious and diligent about the standard of their academic work *'we're not willing to throw up any auld trash. You're back here for a purpose and you're willing to give it your best....'*, (full-time). They are also aware of what they have had to do to get the course, *'you know what you were leaving behind; giving up a tremendous amount to come back .... so it's a fairly big sacrifice to come back here so you're fairly conscientious....'*, (full-time).

Students find they need to make adjustments in each academic year. For example, more time is required for study and again it can affect one's employment and finances. *'.... finance, I'm worse off obviously like, but sanity wise, I had to do it ....'*, (full-time).

However, some students just cannot find the extra time for study because they are in full time employment, *'we have three weeks to study for the final exams and if you're combining it with work, we only have a few days off'*, (part-time).

For others the most stressful times are during exams, *'now I don't meet people before an exam .... because other wise that panic can [set in], it does yeah .... I learned the hard way. I used to have panic attacks believe me....'* (full-time).

Stress can be infectious, *'.... seeing everybody else stressed; it has a rub off effect I think'*, (full-time).

There is a major emphasis on working together as a group on a project or a specific assignment but students believe because of their background experience they have a different *'mentality'*. This is particularly the case for full-time students.

*'I have my own son at home so I'm geared in a different way. But if you're working in a group where other people don't have that. I mean they mightn't even bother coming in if they were out the night before....'* (full-time).

There are a number of reasons for feeling like this.

*'When you don't live here. Its very difficult for me to say right I'm coming in at nine and we really don't start till twelve and we meet at nine o'clock and somebody texts you at ten and says listen I'm not going to make it .... meanwhile you've two or three hours put into it .... and before you know it you're taking it home and typing it up .... it's very hard to make it fair so that everybody does equal work ....'*, (full-time).

Another reason is it is extra pressure on the student because *'you're trying to meet deadlines or something and they say, oh, we haven't got this done, or it's very hard to get people together, to get them motivated....'*, (full-time).

The discussion became more intense when one asked, *'but what are your learning outcomes suppose to be, because you're learning outcomes are total frustration, anger'*, (full-time). However, one student argued there was a solution to group work problems stating,

*'as with maturity, a higher level of assertiveness should come in. We would work in groups and I would find that I would be dictatorial almost in saying you've got to do this by Wednesday; and I expect it to be done'*, (full-time).

Ordering students to complete material by certain deadlines does not necessarily work as there are always ways around this according to other students,

*'what the problem is for example, in the last group we had, two of the girls headed off to the pub and never even showed up for the very last meeting before our presentation that was worth 25%. So it doesn't matter. Unless we had physically gone to the pub, fuck that .... But in a work environment, there would be repercussions if you don't pull your weight; it's not the same here'*, (full-time).

This is also not possible every time as the lecturer may choose the actual group members as another said, *'if they go down the list, it doesn't work if they mark off three or mark off four'*, (full-time). But there are other barriers, particularly if you do not live here. *'.... I can't pop over to someone's house at ten o'clock at night and work right through the night to get a thing done, which is done a lot, I just can't'*, (full-time).

Night students have little or no contact with the main student body but find contact between each other reassuring. *'We support each other more because we are a more mature group.... help each other out, we all want each other to succeed'*, (part-time). For example if one was *'.... thinking of dropping out, no don't, don't'*, (part-time) is the reaction from the others.

The night students agreed that the pressure to succeed comes from one's self. As one points out *'we chose to do it ourselves'*, while another said *'and the pride in it too if we're honest'*, (part-time). However, all are in agreement with *'we all want to pass'* even if it means additional pressure and stress but *'.... that's why you're doing the course'*, (part-time). Again sponsorship adds further pressure to succeed. However, students are investing *'.... a lot of effort, so it's personal as well'*, (part-time).

A number of students felt because they were mature it would be worst *'well I'd be gutted if I failed; the pressure's on like we don't want to fail especially coming back as a mature student ....'*, (full-time).

- The findings show night classes are more structured and focused and positive affirmation and encouragement is more likely a characteristic of night class.
- Groupwork has many hidden obstacles that place greater pressure on students.

- College services are not available or accessible to all students and night students need an introductory course of all library services.

#### 4.3.4 Section C: Other Responsibilities

This section examines the interaction between a student's responsibilities and standard student requirements. It also determines any impact on a student's other responsibilities, for example, children, partner, and /or employment.

Having other responsibilities such as children means,

*'.... they have to come first .... I can't tell the children that I can't cook the dinner .... I can't start any study or any college work until ten at night, it's a big commitment. I work the weekend and I may be up some of the nights till one o'clock trying to write up the notes and I still have to work next morning at eight', (part-time).*

Also, students with children often have to come to terms with feeling swamped with guilt as one part-time participant said *'I haven't seen my son at all today yet since this morning. I came straight up from work to here and that kills me'*, resulting in two conflicting emotions between anxiety in wanting to learn and worrying about her son at the same time. This is also extended to partners,

*'You couldn't possibly think of going out for a night .... it's really under pressure that I feel I should go out. I feel I should be at home studying, but it's very unfair to the children or partners to say I have to do my homework', (part-time).*

In addition to parental duties children often fall ill and student life is ill prepared for this eventuality *'.... I was up all weekend because he was sick all weekend. And there wasn't a thing touched so there's more pressure on top of the pressure that was there already....'*, (full-time).

Those in full-time employment can find a conflict of interest occurring between work and study when they find work interfering with their anticipation for study,

*'... like my work for me was getting in my way, that was taking over my study time and I was getting annoyed about it .... Like I want to do assignments, and I felt under pressure to get assignments done....',* (part-time).

There are continuous deadlines to meet in college with assignments and exams; this can lead to combining learning with a 'hurried atmosphere' as one said *'you meet yourself coming'*, (full-time). *'Your head is full of so many different things'*, is how another put it. This can lead to one feeling very tired, *'I could not think I was so tired ....'*, (full-time).

This also affects ones ability to concentrate, *'I found my concentration .... the week before last, it was really bad'*, (full-time). Another said that one can become, *'exhausted, absolutely exhausted ....'*, (full-time).

However, one can lose one's motivation if the course becomes too finicky,

*'I think our course at the moment has just been fastidious .... and any bit of love or grá I had for it last year has just gone out the window .... it takes the fun out of it .... the curiosity .... the interest'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year).

Students can find it consumes their whole being.

*'It takes over your mind .... it does take over you're thinking and that probably has an effect on your interaction with other people because you're kind of thinking of judicial review than having a conversation with someone ....'*, (part-time).

Students acknowledge they are under tremendous pressure from both internal and external sources. The following example illustrates some of the sources of pressure.

*'I think there's a huge pressure especially on mature students to succeed on the course. Everywhere you go it's like I hear you're back at college, fair play to you. Your back because you want to come back ,*

*that's true, but if you do have a bad subject or are not brilliant, and you do fail it .... your own kids would think, Da's a bit of a loser, you know what I mean. [It's embarrassing]. If you go back to college; (your family and friends), you have to pass it. Most people say you're great for doing it, ah you'll fly it, and it's left like that. It may be five or six hours of study and you're scrapping through a subject .... It's my biggest pressure', (full-time).*

Sometimes one has to rethink their actions if others are also feeling the pressure,

*'I know I push myself hard to succeed .... and I've had to reassess that and play it down because I have a daughter .... And I seen at Christmas, the pressure in her, mum my exams are coming up .... I want to do well. .... what I was doing, was it rubbing off on her .... that I was putting pressure on her', (full-time).*

Responsibilities to others can mean prioritizing because *'you do change your life completely as a mature student'*, (full-time). This varies differently for each person and depends obviously on other responsibilities. The following is a description of a typical female student routine,

*'my son is four and when I go home, like I don't see him for twelve hours. I leave C\_\_\_\_\_ at seven and don't get back until seven .... if I want to get any work done I've to get up at five, do a little work before I actually get him up, so I can spend time with him before I go in the morning. It's just - I literally crawl on my hands and knees to bed, I'm so wrecked .... you don't want them to suffer either but I'm sure it's definitely, health wise, I'm developing all kinds of strange, you know what ever....', (full-time).*

- The findings illustrate students who have other responsibilities find they continually prioritise. Priorities include children, partners, parents, employment and a combination of these. The more responsibilities a student has the greater likelihood of tiredness.
- Female students feel guilt because of conflicting interests and concerns in relation to children, partners, work and the 'love of study'.

- Time constraints on a student promote a ‘hurried and pressurized atmosphere’, affecting motivation and interest and students are constantly mentally preoccupied with academic material.

#### 4.3.5 Section D: Finance

The findings on the effects of finance are similar to the Questionnaire findings. Some students find they cannot combine employment and study sufficiently, whereby ‘.... *college work would suffer I don’t have the time to do reading round things ....*’, (full-time).

- The findings illustrate part-time students, (of which the majority are in the income tax bracket), express anger at the Government’s failure to have incentives in place particularly since the Government is promoting Lifelong Learning through its policies and strategies.
- Many students with children are financially supporting their children through education.
- The evidence reveals that many students have no financial choice but must combine their study with paid work which adds pressure as both require certain time commitments.
- Night students have few study days to prepare for examinations, and may have to take unpaid leave etc.



### **4.3.6 Section E: College Services**

This section determines how accommodating students find college services and is similar to the Questionnaire findings in this respect. However, many college services are not as available at night time.

- The findings reveal part-time students have no access to many of the college services.

### **4.3.7 Section F: Expectations and Outcomes**

This section explores what students expect to achieve by returning to education. Again the findings are similar to the Questionnaire findings in that students cited personal achievement, job prospects, and gaining a qualification as their outcomes.

Although numerous students report that returning to education has given them greater insight to their external environment. *'... God knows, I'd no interest in politics and now I feel I should read the paper much more; you want to know what's going on in the world don't you'*.

- The findings reveal career opportunities and advancement are important alongside gaining an education. Furthermore, personal achievement is another popular goal.

### 4.3.8 Section G: Concluding Comments

This section provides students with the opportunity to comment on any other aspect of college life that I may not have addressed and which would benefit from further attention and exploration. The replies again were similar to the replies made in the Questionnaires.

Students agree that some kind of meeting place would benefit all, perhaps a number of tables in the canteen was one suggestion. However, one stated they did set up a mature students society but the biggest problem was time constraints, *'it's a vicious circle, in that respect. If you want to meet other people but its just getting the time to do; [to commit] yeah, even on a regular basis'*, (full-time).

The following barriers were what individual students found initially. These included the level of noise in the canteen *'.... and people were so busy they seemed to be running everywhere, I'm too old for this, the noise level was just unreal....'*, (full-time). For others emailing and searching the internet was daunting while a sense of humour may be needed on occasions in dealing with negative comments,

*'.... you get a lot from people like, that's great now, you're going to be what, so you'll only be fifty-three when you qualify. You'll only be in a job two weeks and you'll have to retire .... it's when I leave this college; that's when my problems start'*, (full-time).

Also evidence reveals that motivation and interest can be lost if one feels too much pressure; student life loses its shine.

*'At the moment, I'm loving working at the weekend, because it means at least if I'm at work, I can't be thinking about my college work. [Yeah] I'm just absolutely bogged down in it at the moment. I would rather do anything now than what I have to do'*, (full-time).

Not only do students feel pressure from every direction, it builds up as time goes by whereby the student increasingly feels less and less in control.

Another point to consider is the fact that not knowing how to put an assignment together could put people off proposing to return to education as '*...you would panic about it and what was the best way round it and yet nobody was giving you the information; it wasn't easy to access how to do it ....*', (part-time). This is a relatively major barrier to many prospective students with the potential to put people off returning to education.

Students in receipt of financial assistance from the government may find they need to look for employment over the summer recess as '*.... the grant stops for the summer*', (full-time). When Back To Education Allowance (BTEA) was first introduced by the Government a couple of years ago, payment was originally supposed to carry on through the summer to the beginning of the following academic year. However, the Government decided to stop this and a Dublin student took the Government to court in a land mark case in February 2006 and won it.

Finally, encouragement is extremely important not only for those beginning a course, but also for those thinking about returning to education as it is a daunting step for many to consider '*I think a lot of the time it's pure encouragement*' (part-time). The reason encouragement is all important is the fact that their previous school experience may have been negative and '*some of our generation were not so much at school*', (part-time). In addition, while at school '*you were knocked; you were always put down, [that's right yeah], if you didn't know something, you were nearly afraid to ask and now at this stage we surely should be encouraged*', (part-time). To which one student unambiguously said '*no question's foolish, [no] and there's always an answer and there's always a way around things*', (part-time). This student continued on explain that countless other people would benefit greatly if they could understand what returning to education could do for them. She said

*'I was just saying to K.... when they were talking on Ocean F.M. I was just thinking about the people sitting at home (say maybe in backward places) that would hear somebody talking .... saying it on an ordinary level, you'd feel that maybe I can try this, maybe I can do this. Because a lot of people may be sitting at home with young children or whatever, they don't have maybe access to a car and there are a lot of people out there in that situation [that's right] .... if they felt they could have somebody that they could go to, .... chat to them. And somebody who may encourage them and say to them this is doable and this is how you go about it, and don't see things like money as obstacles; there's always a way around something', (part-time).*

- The findings illustrate full-time mature students believe there is a need for some kind of meeting place where mature students could mingle with each other, as a number of students feel very alone.
- Again statements disclose if one feels 'bogged down' academically, one becomes disinterested and loses motivation.
- The lack of knowledge about the requirements of an assignment discourage people from returning to education.
- Finally, numerous students believe encouragement not only help those in making the decision to return but is very valuable to those already on the educational journey particularly for those whose previous educational experience was negative.

## 4.4 Absent Voices

To conclude this section of the research, I would like to recall the absent voices, those students too harassed and overburdened to take part in this research. ‘Time’ is critical. I found it extremely difficult to encourage people to volunteer because lack of time was a major issue. For example one student explained to me that she couldn’t give me an hour of her time because she just didn’t have it to give. Another first year student verbally informed me that she was leaving the course and she said she *‘didn’t care who knows it’*, in other words she was disillusioned to the point that she was past caring. She said *‘it isn’t worth the hassle or the stress’*. She was repeating first year because she had to drop out due to illness the year before. She cited finance, the intensity of the workload and stress as mitigating factors.

Edwards found in her research that female students felt it was their job to ‘balance’ all their responsibilities, then everything would ‘fit’ together or work in sync with each other. ‘Women rarely questioned whether or not what they were doing was attempting the impossible. The balance they were seeking appeared to be the ability to do everything as if other things did not exist’ argues Edwards (1993:76/77). A failure to meet the needs of home, family and study is regarded as their own fault for not being properly organized.

One of the research interviewee’s stated that night courses are run on the basis that one third of the participants will drop out. The reason they drop out is *‘because they get worn out by the process of trying to fit it in.... they say things like ....work is so demanding I can’t do this as well’, or the kids or so and so; so I can’t fit this in as well’, C.*

But this can occur with full-time students as well because real life gets in the way. When a student realises that they can not incorporate the demands of the student role and all it entails into their existing life as the student role is too

demanding. It is a combination of trying to give the college what it wants, 'college knowledge' and coping or juggling with a lack of finance, worrying if you succeed to the point of completion and all the additional stress surrounded in a tense and hurried atmosphere. No wonder some students drop out. Students are prepared to invest in education and sacrifice or put their life on hold to return to education. However, if their idea of returning to education includes becoming more informed intellectually which many students consent is a welcome bonus, then having to drop out is an intellectual double blow. As Lynch so aptly points out, 'knowledge is power, lack of knowledge is lack of power'. She continues on to state 'we are denying people who receive relatively little gain from education from having their voices heard' (Lynch, 2004:14).

## **4.5 Presentation of the Interview Findings**

### **4.5.1 Introduction**

The third strand of the research process consists of four interviews with specific ‘Educator/Mentors of Lifelong Learners’. The overall reason for carrying out these particular interviews is to obtain information on the educational paths that students take on route to college.

Secondly, the interviews will provide data on different styles of learning and teaching of adult students whereby providing a greater understanding of the potential these learning styles have to offer educational systems.

The four interviewees were chosen specifically for a number of reasons. One of which includes the fact that, each interviewee has many years experience in their specific educational field and secondly each is at the ‘front line’. Furthermore each was chosen because of the setting in which they mentor/teach, and finally the level at which they teach.

Each of the above individuals were asked three open ended exploratory questions designed to draw on their particular experiences.

The findings do not necessarily come under the appropriate headings as individuals explored their own experiences. In order to present a readable argument, I have labeled each interviewee B, C, D, and E.

B represents the experience of working with full-time female students in Third Level Education, C represents the experience of working with part and full-time students, at Third Level Education meanwhile D’s expertise explores students on route to Higher education and E’s expertise explores grassroots education in the Community.

## 4.5.2 Part 1: Difference Between Mature Students and Traditional Students

Motivation is one of the major noticeable differences between the mature students and traditional students that B has found over the years. She said mature students

*'are much more motivated. They are much more interested and actually I think the difference is that they've actually tried for a long time to get in to nursing and it's the first opportunity they've been afforded to get into nursing so they're much more motivated'.*

And they normally keep that motivation however, *'sometimes they go through a period where things are difficult, especially in first year.... they find it very hard going....'* However the difficulty is specifically *'the academic side....we would find the people who would do the foundation studies course don't have the same problems or issues...'* The specific terminology is what presents difficulties in the beginning and students tend to find this easier as they go on.

D's experience shows putting assignments together can be difficult for students. He finds *'all they can remember is school when they did compositions'*. How one prepares a Third Level assignment is very different from one's schooldays. You read and

*'build your arguments on what the learned Joe Bloggs said, and what the learned Mary Bloggs said, and whatever, and then you form your opinion after that', D.*

The process can be fraught with difficulties for some who need more time than others to understand the process and initially this can affect one's confidence as so many students *'don't know what it's about'*, D. Referencing is another problematic area for new students which D argues students need to get this right



from the start *'because it's going to impact on the next three or four years and on the marks you get'*.

There is a tendency for students compared to the traditional student cohort, to *'over achieve'* because *'they get so absorbed by the whole thing'* which D describes as *'almost like a thirst for knowledge'*, because *'I've missed out up to that point'*. However, education is *'about educating you'*, D

D believes the pressure is felt because

*'we don't know the system, we actually think it must be harder every year but it's not harder. You're just moving on to a different level, and the previous level has prepared you or should have prepared you for this level. And you are going up and becoming more knowledgeable but it doesn't get harder in that sense'*.

He continues on to explain.

*'I think we have grown up with the idea that it does get harder, everything is harder and you have to be bright and all that. The most important thing that anybody with any reasonable intelligence is, if they show up in class consistently .... obviously the most important thing is somebody's commitment and.... some adult students can do it better than others .... trying to balance .... your family life with your work life with your study with your social life.... and some mature students have more supports than others whether its family or friends', D*

D states students study what they want to do and do not just drift onto a course. He said, *'I much prefer to engage with mature students'* because education for mature students is *'about forming opinions based on you being informed yourself, based on you reading (yourself), then applying your reading to what you're writing and then coming in with your.... own view along the way'*.

Returning to education requires a certain amount of confidence especially for potential students whose previous educational background may be non-existent.

Therefore, there are major differences between how D delivers a workshop or a module compared to how it would be presented academically at Third Level.

This is

*'because a lot of the time you have to show people that this is actually very doable and you have to say you can do this and there might be literacy problems .... where you have women and or men who may have left school earlier.... I can hardly write my name. Don't worry about that .... the Distance Education system that G..... have in place are quite good in a sense that people, I think I have in there feedback is very important [the Interviewee put together a number of bullet point notes prior to the interview], for mature students and that's particularly for weaker students. If you can bring the weaker students through to give them the confidence to go to the next round, it's a very personal interactive thing, and sort of saying we'll do whatever we need to do to support you if you're interested and you have a certain amount of ability', D.*

New students in particular need to adjust to the academic side and this can expose feelings of vulnerability for some, who are not that confident, and a certain amount of direction needs to be provided by explaining *'this is the way that I would do it, without actually doing it for them'* states D. *'You need to be able to engage with people at that level....'*

D recognizes that mature students are *'more focused'*, they *'make sacrifices to study'* and they have *'more hurdles to overcome [finding a] balance between family-work-social-study'*. Students *'opt to study by choice [and] are more likely to have a specific reason for study: personal-professional development with a specific outcome in mind....'* D.

In his experience he has come across students who *'wouldn't have got a lot of support from their children'* and *'quite a number of times.... older women wouldn't have got a lot of support from their male partners'* because they were afraid the women would become smarter than them.

E acknowledges there are numerous differences between adult students and the traditional student population.

The younger student does not

*'have the understanding of the importance of education as the adult student would .... the adult student is there because they want to better themselves. They want to get a better job; they want to get themselves educated. They recognised even in their personal life, education is important, learning just for their own benefit, for their own self-esteem, for their self-development is important .... [the younger student needs] to recognise you evolve and develop through what you learn. I had to be an adult before I recognised this, before I could, for the want of a better word, be at 'peace' with myself', E.*

She further explains what she means in using the word 'peace',

*'to respect myself, to be happy to be the person that I was. I always felt that because I hadn't got the education originally when I was young, that there was something missing in my life that made me inferior to others who had'*

and *'as you learn, you learn different methods and different ways of thinking'*.

In C's experience, one of the major differences between mature and traditional students is the academic difference,

*'because mature students tend to come in to study armed with all kinds of practical wisdom from their lives, so they actually know.... family life, education, work, failure, stress, achievement, class structure, economics just from being alive so for them information that's given in the class is not just simply abstract, it's not just a story, it's something that can be very easily fitted to their experience, so they tend to understand and learn quicker; not all of them but it is a tendency and in the last place where I worked.... we did see statistically I know that among the students who got 1<sup>st</sup> Class Honours, a really high percentage of them were mature students so they do tend to achieve better academically but they do also tend to find the whole process more nerve racking and stressey and take it I think, more seriously than the younger students do. Because for some of them, they coming back to education, they may have dropped out earlier on or have negative experiences earlier*

*or quite a lot of mature students see it as a kind of definitive statement about whether they can make it in some sense in the world whereas the kids are just doing what comes next after school so they don't take it as seriously and probably don't have really much sense about what happens in the whole thing even when they have gotten the degree, so that's the biggest difference'.*

- The findings illustrate mature students are more motivated, focused and interested as many have waited a long time to get on their courses but students can find it hard to adjust at certain stages academically. However, students who complete foundation courses do not have the same concerns.
- Students tend to overachieve because they believe they have missed out educationally up to that point.
- There are more hurdles to overcome and they make more sacrifices.
- Mature students have a background in 'practical wisdom' and tend to achieve higher marks than the traditional student body. However, they do get more stressed about the whole process.
- Students with a minimal educational background need more direction on how to prepare assignments etc and feedback is important. Students in this position need a more encouraging atmosphere where student and tutor work as a team whereby building confidence to move further up the education path.
- There is a stronger possibility that female students will lack support from partners and/or immediately family.
- Learning styles depend on a student's previous education background.
- Mature students understand the importance of education, and want to 'better' themselves. Learning is important in one's personal life in particular for one's self-development and self-esteem.
- Many may see education as the final chance to make it in the world and this in itself places tremendous pressure on the student to succeed.

### 4.5.3 Part 2: Common Difficulties in Third Level Settings for Students

Two types of common difficulties in C's experience are 'practical' and 'emotional'.

*'The practical ones are all due to the fact that they are in the middle of their lives, so they're working while they do their studies, which is really common especially people coming in, in evenings after work and are all knackered, they've got all the problems of work and, most of them have got family life, so you've got kids, partners, other well developed activities which they are engaged in which are valuable to them and they have to decide how much they value the study .... And then they have to juggle and fit it in to the rest of their lives. And that is completely different to your average school-leaver going into your 3<sup>rd</sup> level because .... it isn't for them something they have to fit into life.... And the emotional difficulty is quite ironic really given that mature students tend to do better, tend to work harder, tend to achieve all; they tend to read better, they have a more sophisticated understanding of things for all the reasons I said in answer to question one. Given all those things, it ironic that I think mature students tend to find it all much more stressy and threatening and there's a lot more emotional baggage. Why are they here? Why do mature students turn up at college in the middle of their life .... and I think a lot of mature students are asking themselves that and because they have that question in their heads .... They're coming back into education and encountering practical problems they tend to read all kinds of things into the practical difficulties, some of which are there and some of which aren't there or are only there for them as it where. So everything down to getting your essay in on time, what grades you get, can you get the books, how you get on with the other students who are all children as well; that's all very stressy for mature students and makes it more difficult for them'.*

On the topic of 'student drop out', C felt if a student makes the decision to drop out there is very little point in trying to persuade the student to stay because they are dropping out for a specific reason and generally it is a practical reason.

*'I will go through the possibilities and if they are a really good student and doing really well, I will tell them that if I think they can really benefit from their education, that there's something really worthy in it*

*for them, I will tell them that but I would never try and persuade them; because in my experience their judgement is invariable right'.*

However, there is a high 'drop out' rate in night classes.

*'I mean you run it on the basis that you're going to lose a third and the reason they drop out is because; I'm, teaching tonight, its eight o'clock to ten o'clock; OK and there's twenty-five in the class and they've already been taught from six o'clock to eight o'clock and they've already just worked all day .... they're already knackered and they have to come into this building and it's pretty empty and the facilities aren't fabulous in the evening and they have to go though four solid hours of which is a full day, an absolute full day condensed in four hours, and that is just tough for anybody. So what you find is that when they drop out, it's not because they're intellectually struggling, it's because they get worn out by the process of trying to fit it in and usually that is expressed in different ways. Its usually; they say things like but their work, 'work is so demanding I can't do this as well', or the kids or so and so, 'so I can't fit this in as well'. Its usually expressed in terms of not being able to fit it in, in which case they may well be making the right decision; if they can't fit it in', C.*

Students who make the decision to drop out are disappointed but as C reports *'you can deal with that by making it clear to them that they are not stopping, that they are just stopping for now because its lifelong learning, because people can'*. Evening classes in particular have adapted to suit the needs of a number of students who otherwise would not have survived the course.

B finds the common difficulties are both practical and academic. The academic level involves presenting academic writing and general material. The practical level is on the home front with young children and placements *'especially our people who would be psychiatric students who would have to go to the R.... for psychiatry, like they go to Sligo and Leitrim and maybe they live in Donegal, those are the main issues'*

Discussing differences between genders B finds in her experience that males *'don't seem to take on the same responsible role a female would. And I*

*suppose males in general don't seem to be as concerned or as anxious as females' academically as*

*'they don't seem to get up tight as readily as females'.... 'I think what's happening for females you find it's a combination of things it's not just one thing that makes them uptight, it's probably the other roles and responsibilities that they have'.*

The common difficulties experienced by those in the community are time, finance and travel complications according to E, however

*'if adult students are working they can't get the time off during the day to do it and not every company is amenable to having their staff go to different courses especially if it's not relevant to their work. The other thing is living in a rural area, the transport, how do we get to these courses if they are run in Killybegs or Sligo or Galway. Often it's not feasible for us to travel those distances'.*

Outreach Courses are more suited to rural areas according to E, and *'you can be subsidised in any course you do depending on who you're working for .... or it may be grant aided'.*

One of the more common difficulties according to D is that *'the student needs to strike the balance'* between all other roles and responsibilities and if the student has a partner, the *'partner needs a bit of attention from time to time'* otherwise the relationship could run into trouble.

- The findings illustrate striking the correct balance between other responsibilities and study is very important.
- Even though students have a much more sophisticated understanding of knowledge still they find the experience more threatening and stressful.
- Females have more family related responsibilities particularly female students who are also parents and are more likely to become academically anxious.

- There is traditionally a high drop-out rate at night class as students become worn out by trying to 'fit' every thing in, (work, children, and study).
- Travelling long distances to attend courses is realistically not possible for many in the rural community; Outreach programmes would be more amenable in these areas.

#### 4.5.4 Part 3: Influence of Personal Factors and Interaction on Study

How influential are personal factors, home and family life in the success and failure of mature students compared to the traditional student cohort? For a start 'younger students are really incredible unreflective people', states C as they do not really have a sense of who they are. C has experience of working with a group of students with disabilities and the difficulty is, it is hard to get the group to talk but the problem is,

*'it's not exactly shyness, its more than that, they're just incredibly uncertain about things. But what they don't articulate is a real sense of the fact that the uncertainties are related to all the life issues and family issues, learning problems, and cognition problems that obviously circulate around the fact that they have got e..... I can see it as clear as a bell. They do know it but they haven't got an image of themselves to themselves yet because they're young. You see what I mean, they haven't reflected. So they haven't yet co-ordinated in their minds what are the factors that disenable them and what are the factors that enable them. Well they obviously must be doing it because they come here so they're doing it. But in a way, they are in exactly the same position as the other young students. It's just that as a group, because they're put in a group because they are aware they're in a group they have e..... and there's issues; they're actually further down the path of thinking about the conditions of their life so far, and how it's put them where they are, than the other students are'.*



This is a similar concept to 'respecting' and being at 'peace' with oneself as E states in the interview. However, according to C,

*'mature students think about it all the time. Its part of the image of being a student, the package, that's why they're here. That's why they're back. Because they feel the need to develop their academic life and they obviously feel it isn't developed enough and because they feel it isn't developed enough, they will be aware of this fact; that they hate it. I think it's almost a common sense if you have a room of mature students as you have in the evening, there is a kind of common sense or a comradely built around the fact that they all recognise that they have come back and they are really aware of things that hindered, stopped, stunted, and intruded on their ability to develop their careers and their intellectual and the rest of it, so they're really aware of the oversight'.*

The comradeship atmosphere present at night class is not present during day classes as

*'the class doesn't develop the dynamic and the lecturer doesn't develop the teaching strategy because you actually develop the tone and technique that you use when you're teaching the most to do with the class.... when you're dealing with the younger kids, there is a necessity generally to actually do more spoon feeding; to work from the concrete to the abstract more; and you need to explain things .... because the kids haven't see it', argues C.*

You can reach deeper levels of knowledge at night classes because of the life experiences of the students.

*'The difficulty with teaching is when you have mature students who are pocketed in large groups of younger people .... sort of imbalance between maturity and practical. I've never done it but you could actually be teaching a parent and a child in some of these classes because the age groups could be that different. As a pedagogy issue that's quite complex, it's quite a challenge actually', C.*

He continues on to discuss success and failure and states ***'I think success and failure is qualitatively different for a mature student because there's all different ways of succeeding and failing'***. He reasons that for mature students,

*'everything is much more complicated and I know a lot of mature students are just happy to pass just to get it just to say I've got it; I've got a diploma, I got a degree and that is the challenge they set themselves. I am aware that mature students also tend to beat themselves up about it a lot more. That they worry about what grade they can get and also, sometimes with mature students because the rest of their life gets in the way and they're not therefore going to complete the whole degree because it becomes an unreasonable expectation. (Because their ill or their mum is dying or their kid or a combination of all those things)'*.

He continues on to explain that students

*'of course still succeed, they succeed quite often in managing that situation, completing what ever they can complete, doing all that, but they will not see it as a success. They usually see that as failing to get the diploma or the degree'*.

Many night students find combining all responsibilities hard and unfortunately some situations make completion impossible whereby students do have to leave. There argues C is a very important point in relation to this occurrence and the current climate on the situation. At present there are no systems in place that allow ***'people to actually complete what is completeable and get something for it'***. The last place he worked at in London had a very good system in place. Students need something for what they have achieved whether it is one module or two ***'to show themselves that they'd achieved, so that they could come back if they want to; and feel like they'd done it'***. At present, there is no such structure in place which means when the student drops out

*'it's just a drop out, its just a non progression to use the jargon and if they're not given any means to think otherwise about it, they'll see themselves as having gone back yet again to education and quite possibly see themselves as having failed again',* states C.

C states every module should have its own recognition as part of lifelong learning, and suggests *'you can certificate every year'*. He has

*'mentioned it to people but .... nobody's thought about it but with mature students dropping in and dropping out, it is a consequence of life and if it really is lifelong learning, that shouldn't be any hindrance, you should be able to drop in and out. But when you come back everybody needs to know where you are; what you done .... course accreditation is definitely the answer'.*

Failure can be overwhelming for mature student's because as C points out

*'the meaning of failure I think is so intense when you're older. I mean its true when you're older when you fail, existentially you really feel it, you really know it, it's really damaging'*. Its impact can be so powerful it can destroy one's very core or being. When you're young, you can try again; when you are older there is seldom a second chance. You failed to achieve what you have set out to achieve.

Fear of failure is such a powerful emotion and because one has placed oneself deliberately in a position where failure is a possibility, it does dominate one's thoughts at specific times because C argues,

*'that you want to be something or be in a place intellectually or professionally for real that you're not, so you're dissatisfied with the present, you want to change it in some way. So you're not just talking about doing a course, you're actually talking about changing your life, developing it in some direction, and you know that when you do this you're taking a risk and you're being very brave, and you know it's a very brave thing to do. It's like taking your own evaluation in your hands and testing it and if you've failed, that's just catastrophic. I mean for a mature student it's a catastrophic event and it ought to be .... in my view there's just absolutely no good at all in failing mature students. I cannot see the point in failing mature students. I just cannot see what that does for anybody or anything and I think there's plenty of ways of making sure that never happens'.*

Having little control *'which you don't have when you do all the exams'*, states C, which is why exams are so stressful because failure means the end of shaping one's life as the students sees it. However, students do fail sometimes and it happens because according to C,

*'they've got the whole world on their shoulders and they can under perform. Mature students can fail because they can stress themselves out, classically mature students hate exams, they're really scared of them, they stress themselves out; life events can pile up around assessment time out of the blue and catch them unawares, so they can fail and it does happen'*.

C thinks life is more meaningful and deeper when you are mature, the

*'really significant difference about the quality of success and the quality of failure is much more intense, much more meaningful .... you don't want to be going round failing things at that stage in your life .... you haven't got the energy, or the time or the lifespan left to reverse it'*.

From D's experience home support is very important to the success of a student because without that *'support you're barely going nowhere'*. He said he sees some *'women hanging in and coming through probably against all the odds'*. However women with no family support often loose out academically for example if a child becomes ill, the female student may miss the class or miss a variety of presentations etc that are not repeatable. Even though there is good support from teaching staff

*'some situations are just impossible .... it's just you don't have enough support to do what you're doing. And that whole thing impacts negatively, you don't perform so well and you feel a failure and it can do, and you feel this whole thing is too big', D.*

D agrees that it can affect an individual's confidence and self-esteem. The fact that the student has no control or choice over their situation means they have to

walk away. This is similar to what C states, and can be devastating for the individual as they realize they are not going to achieve what they have been working towards.

Academically it is easy to build up an individual's confidence according to D, by providing the newcomers with a template showing how to do an assignment showing that it is very doable. *'People appreciate that'* and its *'confidence building as well as reassuring them'*. because *'sometimes you need to show people there is light at the end of the tunnel and you will be able to do this and we are going to break it down so that you can do this'*. However, D acknowledges there are human costs in returning to education *'different costs to different people'*.

He agrees that it's

*'during the process that's when they're at their most stressed and therefore even though they're being honest as to how they feel at this present point in time .... that doesn't necessarily truly reflect how they feel about the process and re-entering education and training and coming out the other end. It only tells you how they felt at some of the most stressful points. Or maybe it matters in the context of designing courses to take the stress out of them to help people to get through'*.

B finds students who have good home supports *'actually seem to get into things much better'*. In her experience single parent or one parent families *'seem to have more difficulty than other people'*. She states support

*'is really crucial .... when they go home from college, if they have actually someone to take the children from them .... or that they've time to go to the library rather than having all their other responsibilities and seeing to all the various things they have to'*.

The result of course is that the students with extra responsibilities can become very tired and *'get really stressed out'* when it comes to assessment time.

Living in a rural community can mean having very different problems according to E, for example one of the problems is transport as there may be no way of attending the actual course, and again there is a financial issue, money may be in short supply, for example *'if you're on the dole'*.

There is a very real need for community education because it targets people who otherwise believe education is beyond their reach, whereby creating a confidence in people that *'has changed their whole attitude'*. E has seen

*'various women who would have left school at twelve, thirteen years of age, who believed that they had no, they hadn't got the education. One of them kept saying, 'sure I couldn't do that, sure I'm not educated, sure I'm thick'. She was not a thick woman, she was an intelligent woman; the only thing that was missing was that she hadn't been educated. She's gone on and done various courses over the last two or three years and I've seen her change beyond all recognition. She's now running a group of women, she organises different projects for them .... this is a woman who said she could do nothing'.*

People living in rural areas can experience *'a complete sense of isolation'* as there is no communal meeting area and individuals can feel very isolated. Becoming a member of a 'creative' group where individuals can choose whether to take part and complete an Arts course or computer class, changes people's lives. However, it is highly unlikely that they will consider returning to college as the route is fraught with difficulties. *'The husband would be going out to work and the wife would be at home to look after whatever's left on the farm. He would be using the car and she would have no transport'*. She believes women need these creative groups more so than their male counterparts as they are not as isolated due to the fact that the male is normally out working in the community. Another point according to E is the fact that *'women develop and women change and they go out and discover life'* as previously they have been staying at home rearing children whereas *'men have been out there'*.

However, there is high levels of unemployment in the area which can be threatening for males and according to E, *'it's an awful blow to a man'* to find himself unemployed, *'it really affects them mentally and physically too'*, work and self-esteem go hand in hand for many men.

E believes people who are planning to work in the community, at the grassroots need to develop a greater understanding of what exactly goes on, on the ground in order that progression is made.

- The findings illustrate the meaning of failure is so intense and can be much more damaging when one is older. The reason fear of failure is so strong is the fact that in returning to education, the student is attempting to change their life and this is a very threatening position to find oneself in. This is why exams are so stressful.
- Students need to be accredited for completing a qualification in stages for the benefit of the student who will have an achievement marked and for the college who will have it on record. At present the educational system is failing the student in another way.
- The comradeship atmosphere of night class is more suited to mature students
- Evidence reveals single parents find student life more difficult and students with extra responsibilities suffer more stress and tire easier. Those with children are more at risk of missing out academically.
- One of the greatest benefits of community education is developing confidence in individuals through groupwork whereby instilling a sense of community spirit and belonging. This is all the more important considering the lack of transport means many are unlikely to attend any Third Level Courses.

Finally, the fact is mature students are indeed a unique student group and need specific supports designed for mature students, to make the transition in and through education successful and encouraging.

## **4.6 Limitations of the Research**

It would have been ideal if equal numbers of male and female students had participated from each academic year, including part-time students. However, this was not possible to achieve as participation was on a voluntary basis.

With result the response was largely uneven with fewer numbers of students from third and fourth year in full and part-time education. However, there appears to be no apparent or startling revelations because of the limitation.

## **4.7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the purpose of this chapter in analysing and evaluating the primary research by assessing the overall findings has been completed. The following chapter is the discussion and interpretation of the findings. In addition, the secondary findings will be incorporated and integrated into the primary research.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of mature students in higher education and investigate and evaluate the barriers that confront students on their educational journey as ‘many students will face serious obstacles to educational achievement .... Even the best students may experience periods in which barriers emerge that seem impossible to overcome’, state Moxley, *et al.*, (2001). The previous chapter has examined and analysed the primary findings in detail. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the research findings by summarising and interpreting the primary research in relation to the secondary findings.

Findings are grouped and interlinked under each respective section as similarly followed in the previous chapter, whereby, evaluating the Questionnaire findings, then continuing on to the Focus Groups findings and finally appraising the findings from the Interviews. Where there are similarities between the findings of the Questionnaire and Focus Group data, the Focus Group data will not be regurgitated but otherwise briefly summarised.

## **5.2 Discussion of Questionnaire Findings**

### **5.2.1 Section One: Main Findings on Student Background**

In relation to student background, the most noticeable finding that coincides with previous literature research is the fact that the '24 -29' age group make up the largest single group of students, with a continual drop in percentage as one goes higher up the age groups. The research reveals that 40% of the total number of participants are up to 29 years old, while this figure is 7% for those over 50 years of age. Clarke and Malone found in 1993-4, 52 % of all higher education mature student entrants were under thirty years of age, while only 5% were over fifty years of age (Lynch 1997:83-4 cited in Clarke & Malone, 2004:57).

Also in a report requested by the Department of Education and Science, the OECD Secretariat, found little emphasis placed on encouraging mature students to enter Third Level. According to the report mature students represented only 5% of new entrants in 1998, and approximately 2% of University based students, (2004:29).

In addition lifelong learning is a constant demand of modern society as 'one career, one employer' is no longer the norm (Moxley *et al*, 2001:37). However, although there is an rise in educational qualifications, secondary research show it is not a continual rise, because although people achieve higher qualifications, they do not continue to improve their education further but retain the level they have (Gorard, 2000:3).

This has many negative implications that include the development and promotion of Lifelong Learning. Adaptability in skills and knowledge which is

essential in today's modern society is also failing in fulfilling its present potential.

### **5.2.2 Section Two: Main Findings of the Affects of Finance**

The financial experience is a constant source of major concern for students and previous research shows mature students 'are often at greater risk' financially argues Leonard, (1999:49). The findings show six common responses to how students finance studies including loan, grant, sponsorship work/self, relatives, and savings. However, nearly half (44%) of all students are in receipt of government assistance, and over one third (34%) indicate work/self. However, if you include the percentage for those who use their savings to finance studies, this figure would be 50% overall. There is no existing statistics on mature students in receipt of Government assistance at present in Ireland.

Finance affects students in many different ways depending on their circumstances and responsibilities and it reaches into all areas of their lives. Students report being constantly in debt and taking into consideration the intensity of the academic workload there is little time for part-time jobs. However, many full-time students report having no choice but to work to supplement their income, even at the expense of learning. This is the reality of student life. And according to Moxley *et al*, (2001:153), 'some will be overwhelmed by personal stress triggered' by changes in their financial position.

Other students found they had to give up their job completely to concentrate solely on study whereby becoming financially dependent on partners or relatives. Students have reported that this can cause an imbalance in power particularly between a couple where one is now dependent on a spouse's income. Whereas prior to commencing study one was independent and had a

certain level of financial freedom. For example a student may not have the money to socialise with their partner.

Students in receipt of Government allowances report that financial expenses such as the upkeep of a car or a house mean it is not realistic to go to college on this allowance. One of the common reasons quoted for 'dropping out' of college is financial difficulty as much of previous research indicates, (Martin, 1985; Pantages & Creedon, 1978; cited in Eivers, Flanagan & Morgan, 2002:8).

Several students reported that because the academic course they are completing is of one year's duration, they are not entitled to a third level grant. Foundation courses are a stepping stone toward further study. However, beset with financial worries at foundation level may not encourage further study. Research carried out by Bunyan (2004) in Waterford Institute of Technology report individuals who have a limited income find it difficult to participate in education. Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, has shown that 'financial considerations arise even before students enter higher education, and can influence their decision' (2002:8).

Financial difficulties can be quite serious for some student's particularly lone parents, as individual circumstances dictate one's experiences. For example one student who lives 2 ½ miles from the college said '*when the weather's bad I have to get taxis to the crèche. I have not yet paid my fees as I cannot afford to*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). While others may find they cannot attend seminars due to lack of money. This is a direct affect of the high cost of childcare and transport. Furthermore, Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, found that 'over one-third indicated that they missed classes at least occasionally due to problems with childcare arrangements, and over half said that they had difficulty in financing arrangements' (2002:90). Recent research carried out on Third Level students in Britain provides evidence that corroborates with the fact that lone parents (more likely to be female) are particularly vulnerable financially. In addition, the

research also confirms lone parents find childcare costs a financial struggle (Cappleman-Morgan, 2004).

Students who take out loans to finance their education find this an additional burden where some report the need to combine full-time study with full-time work. This can result in the fact that they *'may have to leave some classes early plus stay up all night getting work done'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). This is contrary to the atmosphere of learning because not only are students combining and fulfilling two demanding roles, it is at the repeated expense of learning. Having to leave lectures early means missing out on essential information and staying up all night to complete assignments can leave the student drained whereby negatively affecting the following day's 'work'. It also leads to a hurried learning environment for the student. Students who combine work with study report high levels of tiredness resulting in an unenthusiastic impact on study.

*'I'm tired all the time and I know that my results would be better if I could only concentrate on studying. I can't afford to leave my job at the moment .... The current grant won't even cover my current rent never mind the food, books and other living expenses'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Students who are not in receipt of any kind of financial assistance have no other choice but to work which means students are in danger of underperforming.

In addition, the cost of the course is another financial strain on students as the fee has *'increased almost 90% on year one and as I am in third I cannot afford to go on and do the diploma ....'* (part-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female). Part-time courses can be very expensive and the fact that there are no Government incentives such as tax relief is an area that needs to be addressed.

Returning to education can not only mean one's whole life is financially affected, in addition it can affect the lives of all members of the family and students may resort to drastic measures to solve financial crises. For example, one student surviving on a limited income whose four offspring are still in the

educational system had to cancel his life insurance because he can no longer afford the payments. His total income exceeds the cut off limit for the higher grant by €500 which affectedly means his family are €5,700 worse off because of present Government policy. As *'the top-up grant is not on a sliding scale as opposed to the standard grant which is'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). A study carried out by Edwards (1993), uncovered evidence that students see government assistance as 'providing an income of sorts' but more 'importantly though the grant provided some legitimation for what they were doing' as putting extra financial burden on already stretched family finances would be too much to justify to partners. This is a major issue for students with families on limited incomes, and one which would put many prospective students off from choosing to return to education.

To conclude, finance is undoubtedly a major concern for students and can cause a serious impact on the quality of one's life and is a main area of contention for students. In addition many students find the lack of finance a constant source of worry and stress, as previous research from the literature review indicates repeatedly, 'most notably, those on low income are clearly far more directly affected by inequalities of wealth and income' Lynch, 2004:20).

### **5.2.3 Section Three: Main Findings of the Impact of Social Responsibilities**

It is not unusual for mature students to have various social responsibilities towards others. These can include parental duties towards children, responsibilities to older relatives, and obligations to spouses or partners.

#### **5.2.3.1 Student/Parent**

For the purposes of this research, a student's parental responsibilities explored both the positive and negative affects returning to education has on one's children. There are a diversity of reasons that the impact is of both a positive and negative nature on children and on the student themselves. One simple reason for example is, it is difficult to find time to study and spend time with the children. Many of these reasons have interlinking and intertwining similarities.

Central to the positive position on the impacts of returning to education for students and their children is the fact that the positive affects tend to outweigh any negative consequences. Education is regarded by the students as an important possession which is highly valued and sought. The rationale provided by the students for this high regard of education is justified through a number of reasons that basically state education is important because of the future opportunities it can create in gaining employment while at the same time acquiring further knowledge.

'A great many people have a strong interest in higher education since they understand that educational attainment and achievement may be one of the most important assets a person can acquire in a lifetime' (Moxley *et al*, 2001:73).

Taking into consideration that many students return to education solely to enhance career opportunities, the fact that their decision to do so stimulates an educational interest in their child/children is a double reward. Furthermore, as the student is more informed, the student feels in a better position to educate the child.

However, students can be conscious that although their children are not getting their full attention and although education provides the opportunity to better one's future prospects which will benefit one's child, some students find the negative consequences too great an impact and therefore counterproductive.

*'I felt the reason I was coming to college was to provide a better life for her but now I feel like I am neglecting my responsibilities because of all the work from college, I have no time for her', (1<sup>st</sup> year female full-time).*

According to Bennett, 'neglecting these so-called home duties can cause immense guilt and emotional pain' (2002:60) and is one of the sources of internal conflict for female students. A student can face conflicting and stressful circumstances that pull them in opposite directions, for example *'exam time is very stressful especially when children are sick'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female) and at times a student can feel very torn between the two 'greedy institutions' (Edwards, 1993). However, according to Cappleman-Morgan some students are subjected to the 'demands of not two, but *three*, greedy institutions' (2004:7) from study, family and employment.

Time spent travelling also eats into family time. Furthermore some students live away from the family home during the week, therefore only see their children on their days off from college. In addition, children may also spend time in transit which can be difficult for both child and parent because it can mean an early start to a long day. Edwards found in her study that 'both education and family are greedy institutions which demand that women fulfil their different



requirements to the full. The women wanted to, and attempted to, meet these requirements' (1993:136). Furthermore,

women are under pressure to achieve success in each of the two greedy spheres by showing that neither suffers because of their participation in the other. They must show that their educational work is not affected by their family commitments, and that their family lives are not suffering because of their studies. Women cannot meet public world obligations without being accused of neglecting their duties in the private domain. Moreover, it is often argued that the qualities associated with the competent performance of roles in one sphere are deemed inappropriate for success in the other (Edwards, 1993: 63)

In addition, women can feel guilty over their inadequacy to meet the needs of both commitments. 'They rarely believe that they did enough studying because of their family commitments, and they did not feel they were giving their families enough attention because of their study commitments' (Edwards, 1993: 70).

It is not uncommon for female students to report that they can be 'grumpy' because of the pressures from time constraints. Equally, children can become impatient with the parent because study is interfering with their time together. Edwards found the female students in her research 'would lose their tempers, or feel cross with children and partners because they were under stress from their family and educational commitments' (1993:72). Furthermore, there are students with parental responsibilities who are not only full-time students but are also in full-time employment who find '*as I am in full-time employment and studying I find it difficult to make time for my family and degree course research*', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). In Edwards study,

the women rarely questioned whether or not what they were doing was attempting the impossible. The balance they were seeking appeared to be the ability to do everything as if other things did not exist. This coupled with their belief in organization, meant that if they were not 'on top' of all that needed doing in and for home, family and their studies they felt this to be their own fault for not being properly organized (Edwards, 1993: 76/77)

Female students can find they cannot immerse themselves fully into the student role as their parenting role is the more dominant role because of the emotional bond, *'it is hard to get into student life style as you have to organize yourself around your child. If I am gone all day I feel guilty....'*, (full-time 1st year female) and this according to Edwards is because women unlike men carry 'their attachments and responsibilities for caring about the happiness and well-being of others, particularly with regard to their children, around them all the time' (1993: 52).

However, male students also report they feel they are missing out with their children, *'I am hardly around to watch them grow up, I feel like they only have a part-time father figure'*, (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

In conclusion, students who have parental responsibilities do not have the same time available to them as students who do not have children. Student life and study negatively impacts on family time and for many, particularly female students, gives rise to feelings of emotional guilt. Completing the needs of both can leave the student constantly juggling between the two, where the whole experience becomes very stressful and tiring. It can also mean that the student is left feeling more vulnerable to life events where things go pear shaped (e.g. if a child falls ill, as they are prone to do), because everything is so finely balanced. For many female students, the emotional bond is in continual conflict with the need for education although for many, parenthood comes first and foremost. Overall, students justify their decision in returning to education, as worth it in the end because it provides a wealth of opportunities for a more secure future.

### 5.2.3.2 Student/Partner

According to Leonard, ‘the importance of husbands/partners’ support was identified as crucial’ (1999:59) on the level of success of a student’s educational journey. The research reveals 58% of students are in a relationship, and students report various levels of support from partners. This ranged from a lot of support to ‘... *He wasn’t fully supportive of my decision to return to college*’, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female) to, he ‘... *was a little jealous, neglected and felt left out ...*’, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

It is obvious that time spent on study means less time with one’s partner and students can feel guilty about this. However, the time needed for study and employment means that some students find it a struggle to keep the relationship going as they are spending too much time apart. Or they may be living apart and this puts an additional strain on the relationship. Study can inevitably lead to a break-up because one just doesn’t have the time to give to one’s partner.

Again, there could be additional financial hardship, ‘*my partner is working two jobs so I can go to college and we never see each other because I am in college during the day and he works day and night*’, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). Study takes up so much time; students find that any spare time is spent on study which can leave the student with feelings of guilt about neglecting their partner. Furthermore, children, study, travel and employment commitments all come before the needs of the partner.

Students can find they have become obsessed by college work to the point that it is all that they ever think and talk about. Returning to education means one is given another chance and students want to do as well as they possibly can. This could possibly be because ‘for many adults this is not their second chance. It is in fact their last chance’ according to Fleming. Countless numbers feel it is their only chance. However, this means students put themselves under tremendous

pressure which impacts on those closest to the student. *'Those on the periphery do not understand the pressure that students put themselves under in order to do well. Can cause negative consequences'*, (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year male). This is because according to Merrifield (2005), 'learning is one of the few things we do that is just for us, that isn't about something that we do for someone else'. The fact that we choose to learn means immersing one's whole self completely in study. A respondent in Inglis and Murphy's research describes it in the following way, '.... you put in so much work and if you haven't studied for such a long time, and you put your heart and soul into it. God knows what personal problems you have ...' (1999:41). Learning can tend to take over one's whole life.

To conclude, being in a relationship can be difficult for both the student and their partner because time needed for study takes over and eats into any leisure time that one previously had. Students have very little spare time as there are always exam and assignment deadlines and constant research and reading. Time constraints mean a student must prioritise their time particularly if they are employed and/or have children. This can mean that effectively meeting the demands of one's partner comes behind all other priorities even if it gives rise to feelings of guilt.

### **5.2.3.3 Student/Duties**

Students who have obligations to older relatives again find time constraints a major obstacle and this gives rise to feelings of guilt where students can feel *'.... I am abandoning her to study for my exams'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female) because they are failing to fulfil their roles as they see them. For others, time constraints make the situation impossible, *'I am carer to my mother and due to full-time college (35 hours) and part-time work (20 hours) I do not get to help her as*

*much as I should*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). The end result being that students find they are always tired.

Furthermore, for some students, the educational journey is fraught with family problems that may be greater than the time needed for study, *'both my mother and sister have cancer'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). Problems on this magnitude would undoubtedly be disruptive to study to a certain degree, or maybe even totally.

Combining study with the role of carer is a demanding position for any student. This is further compounded if one is employed. And even more so if one has numerous other responsibilities such as children. In the long run, it means extra pressure, as you have to be more prepared as other responsibilities can not be ignored. Women have to prioritise between home and study commitments 'although this did not seem to directly affect the women's academic performance, some felt that their overall experience had been impaired', state Fleming and Murphy, (1997:15).

#### **5.2.4 Section Four: Main Findings of Academic Aspects of Student Life**

The aim of this part of the research is to explore the experience of the academic side of student life. This section analyses how much time is spent on study, and the student's college and learning experience. The role and pressure of mature students is also included in this section as is interaction with lecturing staff.

### 5.2.4.1 Time Spent on Study

Taking into account that course hours can vary immensely, for example, art and interior design are primarily studio work, the rationale of the section is to recreate an understanding of the amount of time that individuals generally spend on study. However, this may have been a difficult section for students to complete as time could vary considerably from student to student, dependent on course requirements and dependent on different times of the year, (e.g. exams). Nevertheless, I wanted to obtain an overall insight into how much time is spent on study.

However, it must be stated that whether it's studio-based work or not, some students spend excessive hours on academic work, '*(never enough time), up to 80 hours per week*', (full-time 3<sup>rd</sup> year female). Nonetheless, almost two-thirds of all who took part believe they do not spend as much time on study as they should or not as much as they would like. Again students frequently refer to time constraints and other commitments such as employment negatively impacting on study. Time for study also depends very much on the amount of time needed for other academic work such as assignments and research. In actual fact the level of academic work can be so demanding that it can challenge one's enthusiasm, '*.... I find that I'm so busy writing up lab reports and doing assignments that I don't have the energy or motivation to study*', (full-time 4<sup>th</sup> year female). Again time spend travelling has been mentioned as eating into study time and for some consuming sleep time as well; study for '*3-4 hours per day, (sleep 4 hours)*', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male).

Taking into consideration that mature students strive to do their best, hours spent in study are taken seriously. How much time is taken up by study, and ideally how much extra time is needed for study? Indeed, what constitutes 'study' and how much of the academic work substitutes for study. These remain areas of uncertainty for students who are unclear about how much study is enough.

#### **5.2.4.2 Learning Experience**

In making the decision to return to education not only places pressure on oneself to do well but the fact is other people expect you to do well. This may double the pressure on a student. Nevertheless, students like learning and are not only very conscientious about producing good work but strive to do their personal best. However, lack of time is a major concern as nearly half the students report they do not have time to explore or read around material. This is a serious obstacle in furthering one's learning. Furthermore, just over one third of the total number find pressure (deadlines, time constraints, 'college knowledge', heavy workload etc.) is spoiling learning. However, 'how are people expected to learn when they have little time to think and reflect' asks Senge (1994:302) as this is an important part of the learning process. On top of this, nearly one third of all participants have reached the point where they do not believe their learning is continuing, (contributing factors may include, time constraints, information overload, pressure of stress/worry, tiredness, etc).

#### **5.2.4.3 College Experience**

The more dominant word that students choose overall to best describe their college experience in a positive way is 'interesting'. 'Stressful' is the most common word chosen by students to describe the negative experience. The 'college experience' is of both a positive and negative nature. The danger here is, if a student's experiences are overly negative, as has been the experience for some, they are in danger of underperforming; and possible failure or dropout.

#### 5.2.4.4 Experience of Student Role

More than half of all students state that learning is ‘very much self-directed’, and also a lot of learning involves reciting back the ‘information we get’. If one examines ‘subject content’, it is clear some academic material is quite precise, e.g. ‘accountancy’, or for example subjects that are scientifically detailed. In other words there is precise information that needs to be understood and learnt. On the other hand, courses such as ‘advocacy’ may involve exploratory subjects such as ‘equality studies’ where one can read around the material as there is a certain level of exploration. However, although knowledgeable, students come to understand that the lecturer is looking for specific information in assignments and exams etc. because that is the system. According to Tenenbaum, ‘once authoritative opinions are expressed, [students] tend not to think, but to try to guess what is in the instructor’s head and provide him with what he might like’ (1967:312). Also, there is a danger that a certain level of critical awareness may be lost or the danger of undermining the ability to think critically for oneself and lose out on learning, ‘thought that involves critical reflection involves learning’ (Mezirow, 1990: xvii). Being directed and instructed in the main as to what is required academically, the student ‘feels less and less secure in doing his own thing’ (Illich, 1985: 59). In other words the student may end up losing confidence in their own abilities.

While nearly half of all have no ‘free time’, the majority of students find it a constant ‘balancing act’ however ‘overwork is potentially stressful’ argues Bennett, (2002:80). In addition, time constraints can cause major problems particularly for female students with children, ‘married women overwhelmingly cited ‘finding time to study’ as the most serious drawback they had to face’, according to Leonard, (1999:54). The findings also show that in the main students underestimated how challenging college actually is, and this includes an underestimation of the volume of academic work involved. Bearing in mind over one third confess to be ‘absolutely bogged down in college work’, it comes



as no revelation that just under two thirds can get so tired that concentration becomes difficult. In addition, taking into consideration, nearly half of the students think the onus is on the student to 'fit in'; its not surprising then there are days when almost half the students admit they don't want to attend college.

Group work can be problematic for four out of every ten students, as they can often end up doing most of the work which students find unfair. Also nearly half are uncertain about what future opportunities are available to them. Being a mature student in a predominantly younger group can be problematic. Sometimes according to Merrill, 'when you are the only mature student you can feel out of step with the rest of the group' (1999: 50). And often argues Merrill, mature students find 'that pressure was on them to provoke discussions and debate', (1999:36). As one part-time student who has preciously been a full-time student also, states that classes are '*more structured at evening time, everyone's there for one reason, that's to learn, it's a more supportive environment...*'.

While students with parental responsibilities have no choice but to put their children first before college, the reality is that for nearly one third of all mature students, college takes second place. This makes education seem more like a luxury or a leisurely pursuit which it is not, but in actual fact what it means is education although important has to take second place. However, 'higher education is increasingly a necessity, not a privilege in a knowledge-driven society' (Lynch, 2004:19).

The fact that one in five students believe it is affecting their health is disturbing, but considering students can experience high levels of stress and tiredness, poor concentration, time constraints, constant pressure, and feelings of being swamped, etc. it may not be so surprising. According to Bennett, 'stress comes in a wide variety of forms. Because it is so personal in the way it affects people it is hard to get anyone to admit they are suffering from it' (2002:9). However, it can also be misleading as the feeling of being stressed 'is something that can

build up over time' (2002:78). Nonetheless, stress can have a negative impact on one's health if cortisol levels are too high, according to Goleman (1999), 'at low levels, cortisol can help the body fight a virus or heal damaged tissues, but when too much cortisol flows, it diminishes the effectiveness of the immune system' (1999:85).

Furthermore, practically one in five students report the more they learn, the less they feel they know. I interpret this to mean, they can feel stupid because they can not understand and relate to the information they are receiving. There may be a variety of reasons for this, tiredness/poor concentration, and perhaps trying to fulfill all other daily responsibilities to name a few. Everything is completed in a hurry to meet one deadline or another including 'family' deadlines. So it is not surprising that students sometimes admit the more they learn, the less they know for according to Goleman (1999) the greater pressure and stress one is experiencing, the more forgetful one can become because 'cortisol steals energy resources from working memory-from the intellect .... When cortisol levels are high, people .... can't remember as well-even something they've just recently read' states Goleman, (1999:75/76).

In conclusion, students have constant barriers to overcome on a regular basis in different forms and disguises; and from different directions but students adapt continuously.

#### **5.2.4.5 Pressure of Being a Mature Student**

Without a doubt all of the participants want to pass, that's why they are doing the course because they need to succeed, and many see failure as just not an option. Students invest so much personal effort in college work that they really want to pass it, 282 out of 303 agreed with the statement, while 16 disagreed. The remaining 5 did not answer. This means a great deal to them, and is of major importance. Almost half admit that they worry about failing in the light of

what they have sacrificed to get to Third Level Education. Moreover, half of the students acknowledge that obtaining a qualification is the only way forward to a securer future.

Nearly one in four students would rather drop out if they thought they were going to fail, while 14% of students had considered dropping out because they had fallen behind in their academic work. Over one third have had to give up their paid work in order to concentrate on college work because they can not do both. Furthermore, students who are sponsored by their employer can feel under greater pressure to succeed academically because their employer is investing in them and would not have sponsored them if they thought they could not succeed in obtaining a qualification. Secondly the qualification offers further opportunities at work. However, numerous students have to qualify first before their employer reimburses them. On top of this, more than half of all participants agree with the fact that ‘outsiders’ automatically assume you find the whole process easy as you made the decision to return and this adds extra pressure. In addition, nearly three out of every ten students experience other students’ stress whereby multiplying their own levels of stress particularly around times of exam.

‘To the body, there is no division between home and work; stress builds on stress, no matter the source. The reason a small hassle can drive us over the brink if we are already overwrought is biochemical’ states Goleman, (1998:75). The fact is ‘cortisol steals energy resources from working memory – from the intellect’ and when the levels are high, ‘people make more errors, are more distracted, and can’t remember as well – even something they’ve just recently read’ and processing information becomes more difficult, if stress is continuous, the probable conclusion is exhaustion (Goleman, 1998:76).

There are certain periods that students are under tremendous pressure and stress, for example during times of exams, which students need to be able to deal with.

As students have sacrificed a great deal in returning to education, so much emphasis is placed on succeeding and any thoughts of failure place extraordinary pressure and anxiety on the students. Furthermore, there are many external avenues of stress on individual students.

#### **5.2.4.6 Interaction with Lecturers**

Students overwhelmingly agree that positive affirmation from academic staff has a constructive impact, and students clearly find this reassuring as at times they can feel unsure about their own capabilities. 280 out of the 303 students who took part agreed with the statement which means that positive affirmation can restore confidence in the students own belief in themselves. Encouraging and developing the creative mind is a process, which Rogers suggests ‘cannot be forced but must be permitted to emerge’ (1967:356). Creativity will emerge when

external evaluation is absent, “when we cease to form judgements” of the other individual from our own locus of evaluation we are fostering creativity. For the individual to find himself in an atmosphere where he is not being evaluated, not being measured by some external standard, is enormously freeing. Evaluation is always a threat... (Rogers, 1967:357)

This form of freedom encourages the thinking and evaluation process in a positive atmosphere. Lecturers are found to be very encouraging on the whole making interaction between student and lecturer easier as the transition can be difficult at times. According to Lenzand and Hansen,

adult students frequently experience a degree of discomfort as they begin to change their roles and attempt to adjust to new environments. Yet this aspect of returning to school is rarely anticipated; as a result, not only are many adult students unprepared to deal with these problems, but they often become overwhelmed by unfamiliar pressures and tensions (Lenzand & Hansen, 1977:154)

Moreover, 'entry into higher education can involve taking on not just studying as work but also an identity as a student', Edwards, (1993:63). This transition in identifying oneself as a student may be harder than one expects according to Bean Ui Chasaide,

interactional factors involve engagements both inside and outside the lecture hall. These can be difficult for adults who are moving from home (where adult status and family position create a body of expectations, respect and responsibility in a situation in which the adult is in control) into a lecture or tutorial situation (where student status implies subservience to external demands and expectations, and might appear to involve loss of respect and then back again to adult position, all within the course of a few hours. The fact that many of the lecturers may be younger than the adult student might exacerbate any difficulties in adjusting (1997:41)

In addition, according to Bean Ui Chasaide adults 'are used to having their adult status respected, and do not always easily adjust to being disempowered by the new system they enter' (1997:40). There may be a need for a certain period of adjustment required to incorporate this new student status into one's adult status.

Other potential sources of conflict include the learning atmosphere according to Inglis and Murphy (1999:90), who explored Weil's research findings and found that other potential sources of conflict facing mature students include being 'made aware of their subordinated role'.

The first year you learn that the boundaries are clearly defined by the institution. You're ignorant. You don't know what to expect. There was a useful comment one lecture made. 'Undergraduates have no opinion'. You are made to feel that way .... (Quoted in Weil, 1986:226, cited in Inglis & Murphy 1999:33/34)

However, almost one third of the students in this research report that at times students are spoken to like children. Research by Bunyan in Waterford I.T. reveal similar findings as one student reported.

.... As adults we have a lifetime behind us, we have lived lives and sometimes we are treated like children .... We are here because we want to be .... We don't need to come in and be treated as if .... you didn't get this done and you didn't get that done. There are reasons why we don't get them done (Bunyan, 2004)

It can undermine one's confidence because there is not a lot one can do about this as the lecturer is the one imparting knowledge. 'Adult learners resent being treated as empty vessels into which those who know, pour knowledge. Adult learners like to be treated as equals' argue Inglis and Murphy (1999:90).

However, 'good' lecturers compensate for 'bad' ones, which levitates the situation. Practically three-quarters of the students agree with the fact that, lecturers continue on with class which although considered the norm means the onus is on the student to 'catch up'. Students usually have good reason for missing class, perhaps a child may have fallen ill, a natural occurrence but one where the student has no choice but to miss class. Instances such as this there is no flexibility, and this may add additional pressure on the student to stay on top of things. However, there is a difference in attitudes between men and women toward responsibilities to one's children, argues one female student in Fleming and Murphy's research in Maynooth. She stated

.... there is no comparison, they never, ever, ever, think about the children, they never ever have to think about the home .... they can protect themselves much more, but we can't .... We are continually faced with the responsibility .... (1997:50/51).

This is the 'mental' pull that is more difficult to measure and more difficult to articulate and understand because it cannot be seen.

This is also one of the reason students tend to complete assignments as soon as they are able, because there is always an uncertainty about what's around the corner particularly when children or the elderly are involved. Also students can be left feeling that they are missing vital chunks of information, or finding they

have gaps in information. Or as one student in Fleming and Murphy's research found time constraints mean

...one of the frustrating things I find about college is the lack of time to go and do anything in any depth. There's the feeling that we're just kind of scraping the surface .... There's an awful lot of keeping up with things rather than getting into them. I kind of feel that when I've left, I'll have a superficial knowledge of some things, rather than something more.... so far it feels like school, you're getting through a system rather than going into something.... (Fleming & Murphy, 1997:57/58).

To conclude, positive affirmation enhances a student's own belief in their own abilities. However, condescending experiences can cause resentment. There is common agreement that lecturers understand a student's situation but the obligation is with the student to keep abreast of the academic workload, which can sometimes prove difficult.

### **5.2.5 Section Five: Main Findings of Expectations and Preparations**

This section examines how time spent travelling impacts on the life of a student, and what students hope to achieve by returning to education. It ascertains initial preparations generally made by students including negative experiences during preparations. This section accesses initial information received about the course and concludes with finalizing comments by students.

### **5.2.5.1 Time in Transit**

Nearly one-third of the participants spend up to two hours and over travelling to college on a daily basis. Obviously the more one has to spend in transit means the less time one has for study and other responsibilities and interests. The reality is time spent travelling can have a negative impact on the quality of student life. Furthermore some students live away from the family home during the week, therefore only see their children on their days off from college. In addition, children may also spend time in transit which can be difficult and tiring for both child and parent because it can mean an early start to a long day.

However, as this region is largely rurally populated, a certain percentage of students are bound to have to travel. According to a report by the National Economic Social Forum, Donegal/Sligo experience infrastructural underdevelopment and rural isolation, (2006:111). The fact that the region's infrastructure is underdeveloped, and there is 'limited access to childcare and limited access to transport' (NCSF, 2006:112) means this has a negative impact in more ways than one. For example, it can mean that people spend more hours in transit because of underdeveloped roads and the region's poor transport system. It can also have a negative impact on children as the research shows some children have an early start travelling to a crèche, while others do not see their parent for long periods of time, and sometimes only at weekends.

Although this can have a negative impact and is another potential source of stress, the positive side is that it can provide the student time to mentally transfer from one's other roles to the student role. However, it does depend on how much free time a student has as the 'physical allocation of their time' may have a greater mental pull or conflict according to Edwards, (1993:68).



### 5.2.5.2 Students Expectations of the Course

There were five common answers along with further explanations on what students expect to achieve from their course. However, a number of students provided a variety of answers. More than half state they want a qualification while nearly half had other reasons for returning to education. These are included in the written comments. Under one-third have returned to education for job opportunities while only one in ten say it is for career advancement and personal achievement respectively. There were a variety of explanations provided in relation to 'other' reasons why students returned to education. These include gaining knowledge as one of the more common reasons. Gaining new knowledge for many students means that by using this knowledge not only will they be more capable in the workplace but that they will receive more credit or recognition at work. Education is a way forward both academically and in widening one's career opportunities.

Personal or self development is important to many students. Some are using education to build or increase their levels of confidence so that they will feel confident to work in a professional capacity. This according to Bennett is part of human development 'as part of personal growth you will be attempting to define your potential' (2002: 111). Others want to increase their self-esteem and self respect where individuals are more in touch with who they are. This is similar to Edwards research where one participant describes this experience as "... its kind of brought me together much more" (1993:157). For some education is a personal journey of discovery, or '*a doorway to more personal learning*', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male), as they are 'becoming conscious of themselves as unfinished beings' (Freire, 2004: 100).

While for others, the reasons are practical '*... I want to get a good job, possibly teaching so I don't spend the rest of my life and my child's life living hand to*

*mouth*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female). People want to make something of themselves for themselves.

A certain percentage of students know exactly what they are aiming to achieve, for example an interesting and challenging job. However, some students have no choice but need to obtain '*a qualification to continue my work*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year), a common strand in today's progressively economic society.

Sadly, the reality is that a number of students have become very disillusioned on their educational journey, that they have lost sight of what they had hoped to achieve in the beginning, or they have reached the point where they do not expect to achieve very much.

In conclusion, students return to education because of what it has to offer each person individually and in the main try to achieve what they set out to achieve.

### **5.2.5.3 Initial Preparations**

A lot of thought is invested in making the decision to return to education. There is a certain level of psyching oneself up and ensuring it's the right choice and that they can commit to study for the next number of years. Preparations for many include completing starter courses such as foundation or introduction courses, while others have previously attended night courses.

The duration and length of courses can vary where students find it quite the norm to complete one or two years previous to Third Level entry. '*Leaving cert in 2003 and a FETAC PLC course in 2004*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female), and '*did the Junior and Leaving Cert*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). This effectively means students can be in full-time education for continuous periods of up to seven years and it also means obtaining a honours degree can take as long as seven

years which has proved to be the situation for some. Getting an education can mean surmounting very high barriers, *'learnt to read and write, spellings still not great ....'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). This shows the lengths individuals will go to, to get an education. At a VEC Adult Literacy Conference in 2005, a mature student described not being able to read and write "as a dreadful stigma". The fact is "it's like being in prison except that there are no bars". He continued on to state that "you try to control things, put yourself in situations where you are never going to get caught out, like where you have to read something" (Daly, 2005).

The decision to return to education may have been made after they started working and developed an interest in the academic side. Or it may be the case that they did voluntary work in the area of interest before fully committing themselves to higher education. In addition, students try to give themselves every chance by preparing as well as they possibly can before they commence. For many this means *'intensive reading'*. However, this is often a continual process from one year to the next as students read up on material for the next academic year.

Many found access and foundation courses priceless in preparing the way. Encouragement at this stage is also crucial, *'got help from Adult Education Centre, Letterkenny, who provided me with lots of information and support and encouragement which I needed'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Thinking of returning to education can be one of the more vulnerable times for an individual particularly if they meet too many barriers, and difficulty in getting initial information was a barrier that some experienced. However, others found this a lot easier through Open days, or Information Evenings and by talking to other students.

In conclusion, education is highly valued and important and students will go to great lengths to get back into education. However, the first hurdle is getting the initial information and any difficulty at this stage could certainly put many individuals off, as people can be quite vulnerable in the beginning. They may for example lack self-confidence in their abilities to produce academic material at Third Level. Furthermore, many people may not even know where to begin to look for information especially if they know no one who has travelled this route before them. Potential students need some encouragement at this delicate stage in their enquiries because the first hurdle could put many off.

#### **5.2.5.4 Negative Experience during Initial Preparations**

Financial insecurity is one of the main areas of discontentment for prospective students and this affects both full and part-time students. Also the grant system is hard to decipher whereby students do not understand the intricacies of the system. Some find the grant application system humiliating, stressful and intrusive. *'Co. Council asking for my divorce papers .... on one-parent family payment, yet they wanted to see – the first time I was asked to produce them ....'*, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). Nevertheless, any financial decision-making can cause major stress, and further more so, if advice from family and friends is negative.

*'Handing in my notice at work was very stressful, giving up a job where I had a wage to go to a situation where I was getting even less money! People giving me "advice" and saying I was in a "good job" even though it wasn't going nowhere',* (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).

Compromising one's finances is never an easy choice to make. Having confidence in one's abilities is another area of uncertainty, in particular the academic side. While others thought some of the material was out of their depth. These are also the 'fears' that would put prospective students off from returning to college.

Education can appear unappealing if the student is worn down by other commitments. Furthermore, a student's motivation and enthusiasm can be seriously threatened for example, if '*... told by one facilitator on the two week course in college, that I would fail the course I was undertaking as she could observe I was very involved in family matters. (I will prove her wrong)*', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female). Nor is the fact that being informed that you are more likely to be unsuccessful in education as was the experience of another student, '*was told I was wasting my time and would probably drop out or fail*', (part-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). Considering this is his second stab at further education (in trying to achieve a more secure future for himself and his family); advice such as this is harsh and destructive.

Another disconcerting issue that can have a negative impact on a student's motivation and enthusiasm and one which has been raised by Inglis and Murphy in their research is the fact that because one is mature, they feel obligated to keep classroom discussions and debates going, '*mature students get little support; expected to support the younger students, not to support others*', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female), because otherwise there could be an embarrassment of deafening silence. However, it can become a drain on one's enthusiasm according to Inglis and Murphy as 'these situations have the unfortunate consequence of decreasing or even preventing the input of some mature students in discussion' (1999: 38). Experience has taught me that there are a number of reasons for losing one's enthusiasm. A mature student can tire of having to constantly provide or even know an answer but can feel obligated to reply as the unresponsive classroom atmosphere becomes uncomfortable otherwise. Nevertheless you can end up feeling used or doing all the work. Furthermore, you may become unsure whether you are giving the most appropriate or objective reply especially at those times when you find it harder to think (because some days you can be distracted by other responsibilities where it's harder to get your head around things). This can make you feel stupid and you find yourself becoming reluctant to answer anything at all in case it is 'wrong'

or inappropriate. In addition, when younger students do respond in class, the answers may be often ones with greater insight.

To conclude, students are generally a very resilient group of people and are willing and determined to make their educational goal a successful one, no matter how many obstacles there are enroute. As one said he met many, but '*it didn't deter me though*', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male).

### **5.2.5.5 Assessing Initial Course Information**

There were five common responses provided on assessing initial information received about the course. These included excellent, very good, good, informative and poor. 157 participants felt it was excellent, very good, good or informative while 53 felt it was poor, which is approximately 25% of those who responded to the question. In addition, many students added verbal comments. These include comments ranging from for example there was no specific information or it could be more informative over exact content and requirements to the fact that the workload was not sufficiently highlighted. Others found that the information provided was unreliable or inaccurate, or difficult to get from a single source. According to Lynch, 'there is no clear system of guidance and support for non-traditional entrants to higher education, yet encouragement and guidance is vital if we are to successfully address the access problem' (2004:16). Uncertainty about what is ahead and what is expected is a barrier that adults need to work through as it can cause havoc in relation to domestic plans and employment hours in the process of incorporating study into the daily routine as one needs to do.

To conclude, students benefit greatly by knowing what is ahead of them because it gives them time to adjust to what is needed or expected from them. Therefore, students need to be more informed about course content, and the type of academic work required. It may even be helpful at this stage to view samples of

the type of academic assignments required, and perhaps be provided with some idea of how long an assignment takes to produce, (researching, reading and writing the material up etc). In addition, students would gain from understanding the volume of work involved at third level. Adults tend to want to know what is in front of them so that they can psyche themselves up or mentally prepare, as well as carryout physical preparations such as reading up on material; in other words 'get their head around it'. This takes some of the uncertainty out of what is ahead and provides room for the formation of plans, as returning to college creates a certain level of '*apprehension*' of whether one is capable or not. Finally, students would greatly benefit from easily sourced information. As Lynch points out; there is a very real 'need for a fully developed higher education guidance service. This is especially urgent for mature students who have left school and want to return to higher education' (2004:16).

#### **5.2.5.6 Further Observations and Comments**

All questionnaire participants were provided with the opportunity to make any final comment they felt was important and needed to be addressed or aired.

It is clear that for countless numbers of students, education has provided a new lease of life. Firstly, age is no barrier and secondly it is also a second chance. The fact that almost all regard education as a golden opportunity fuels the student's ambition and drive. In addition, the student is in control over their own academic destiny and there is a certain sense of pride. However, they are aware that it may be the only opportunity they have so students must make the most of their time.

Without a doubt, it is the opportunity of a lifetime however students find there are certain negative aspects that affect them in a number of ways. More supports specifically for mature students would benefit as students can feel alienated and quite lonely among the traditional student cohort.

However, students are under no illusion, they are aware it is challenging work, academically (putting assignments together) and physically (completing all other responsibilities) and it can lead to inner conflict and turmoil. Occasions can arise when a student can find themselves pulled in completely opposing directions for example, when study interferes with other major life commitments. Other occasions arise that force a student to drop out.

*'There should be a college crèche. I have to drop out of college after 1<sup>st</sup> year as even though my marks are in the 70's and 80's my child has a hole in her heart and the travelling two hours a day is too much on her health', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).*

Up to now we have seen students with disabilities, older students, lone parent students, working class students as some kind of exception in college. They come, we see them, but we do not expect them so we do not accommodate them. When we do not expect them, we do not provide them with the necessary services such as .... crèches, flexible timetables, transport services, language supports, information and financial support (Lynch, 2004:17)

As one's employment pays the bills, but it can also interfere with the academic requirements of a course and vice versa. For example some students

*'...are expected to do a 30 hours placement week for 6 weeks, I think this not very encouraging for mature students who have restructured their working life around the 20 hour college course having to change it, work extra hours for free while still having to do a 30 hour job (real job) to finance returning to full-time education', (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female).*

As college placement is deemed a vital part of the course that the student must pass in order to continue on, from this student's point of view this is not a realistic condition for mature students considering their unique circumstances. The student has a valid point; one must simply earn money in order to survive. However, the fact that placements may be required in first, second and third year for longer durations as part of the course may make it impossible for students such as the one mentioned to fulfil these requirements. If a student is not able to



complete the set requirements, they will fail. How unrealistic is this barrier for those mature students whose sole income is from employment, and who would not be able to pay for college in the first place only for the fact that they are in employment?

A mature student's financial situation differs widely from the traditional student. This needs to be re-examined or reassessed, as it is based on the previous year's annual income and does not encourage the cycle of Lifelong Learning. The reality is, full-time students can not be in full-time employment so generally need financial assistance (although as the research reveals many actually are through flexi-time etc.). Whereas, part-time students feel the lack of government incentives is a major downside in returning to education and realistically, part-time courses can be very expensive.

Students want to do well, they also realise that without a proper education their chances of a better future are very slim.

*'... A lot of pressure is felt because I so want to do well, not because of others, but because of myself, and the plans I have made for my future. Without a proper education I fear I won't do all that well in life, at least not as well as I hope to do....', (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year male).*

The thought of failure is daunting for some *'I can't allow myself to fail or else I'll give bad example to my children'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year male). For others the whole experience can become daunting *'the course was good to begin with but after a while things got on top of you and you just find the pressure and I feel like giving up'*, (full-time 1<sup>st</sup> year female), as there are many potential sources of pressure, there may be numerous reasons for reaching this point.

To conclude, it is clear that increased financial and emotional supports are needed. Informing students and raising awareness of these issues will allow students to understand their own experiences. Many students find help along the way from starter courses to advice and information; and gain entry into Third

Level Education but the systems of support at Third Level are inadequate and insufficient, and form barriers for mature students. Also raising awareness of the barriers that confront mature students in higher education is a form of lobbying for stakeholders and other parties who are interested in developing other routes to education such as specific measures designed to target certain pockets of the population who are most in need of re-education and re-training. This is particularly the case for example for those in unemployment blackspots. Research already shows for example, projects designed to readdress these issues can be quite successful in targeting those most in need.

The following is a brief discussion of the findings of the Focus Group Research.

## **5.3 Discussion of the Focus Group Findings**

### **5.3.1 Section A: Initial Information and Support**

The findings included sources similar to the Questionnaire Findings, although ‘Open Days’ has been cited as one of the more informative options where specific information was forthcoming. However, the general consensus is that students would have found information on subject content and the actual workload more informative as the uncertainty of what lays ahead gives rise to doubts of whether they are capable.

### **5.3.2 Section B: Aspects of College Life**

This section determines aspects of college life were students find they have to make adjustments that are not as detailed in the Questionnaire findings.

Many full-time students can find it quite difficult to ‘fit in’ particularly in the beginning because they are very much in the minority in the class. As a result students can find themselves very lonely particularly if they have no other mature student for companionship.

The situation is quite the opposite for night students, *‘personally I feel I would fit in a lot easier into this situation as opposed to a day student’*, (part-time). One of the reasons for this is the fact that night classes generally consist of mature students and are normally made up of much smaller numbers (perhaps one fifth or even less of daytime numbers). This in itself creates a more inclusive atmosphere where students can develop greater comradeship (although this may depend on the type of course). An example of this is where students can depend academically on each other for support. This has the potential to develop more

so at night time class and creates more of an air of ambiance and support for each other, and from staff.

Another difference between day and night classes according to the students is the fact that night classes are

*'more structured at evening time, everyone's there for one reason, that's to learn, it's a more supportive environment. Because I've been in college .... you've got 17 or 18 year olds and its happy hour, it takes half an hour to calm them down, to get them together, like a lot of the time is taken up with silly kind of crap, you know, lecturers lecturing people about notes, have you got that assignment done, and maybe half the class not showing up', (part-time).*

According to Inglis and Murphy, 'unlike full-time students, age difference was not a concern. If anything, they enjoyed the companionship of people their own age and the atmosphere in the college at night' (1999:46/47). In my experience, often full-time classes are interrupted by a constant stream of late-comers leaving it harder to develop a learning atmosphere and lecturers frequently delay the beginning of class in order to catch those last minute stragglers. Also the classroom atmosphere may be geared towards directing the traditional students to completing assignments by given dates because a certain level of reminding is required but these constant reminders can pressurize mature students into believing they are not doing enough.

The class size may also influence the attitudes of some of the lecturing staff. While night students report positive affirmation and the *'attitude of you can do this'*, (part-time) from staff, some day students have reported staff with a condescending attitude. For example *'you query something that you're not sure of, that are you completely stupid you know especially if your peers have no problem with it. There's that side of it as well'*, (full-time). This can create doubts and make a student feel stupid. Furthermore, this may have a knock-on effect and one of the reasons students withdraw from taking part in class

discussion or debate because they have been made aware of the fact that younger class mates understand while they do not. Or,

sometimes when you are the only mature student you can feel out of step with the rest of the group – even if you know what you’re saying is valid but if others don’t agree it can create all sorts of self-doubt, (Merrill, 1999: 50).

This is one of the disadvantages of being in full-time education as being in a class with one’s own peers one may question more freely areas of misunderstandings. In addition, it may be more likely one’s own peers understand where you are coming from. According to Merrill,

the differences in age was also a problem in classroom situations, particularly in tutorials. Participants in the focus group interview felt uncomfortable in these situations. They felt that pressure was on them to provoke discussions and debate (1999:36)

Participants who took part in the Focus Group Research found group work projects very problematic. This was particularly so for students on full-time courses who believe their experienced background means they have a different mentality than the traditional student cohort. Mature students are at a disadvantage because not only do they end up doing extra work, they also end up under undue pressure and stress. Another point is the fact that one’s time is strictly allocated to include personal responsibilities and academic deadlines, and students are not freely available to re-arrange these tightly structured schedules.

Nonetheless, students try and solve or work around group work problems using different techniques such as using a higher level of assertiveness, *‘I would be dictorial almost in saying you’re got to do this by Wednesday; and I expect it to be done’*, (full-time). However, in many student’s experiences, there are circumstances that arise that students are helpless to prevent. *‘For example, in the last group we had; two of the girls headed off to the pub and never even*

*showed up for the very last meeting before our presentation that was worth 25%. So it doesn't matter....*, (full-time). Students find these situations counterproductive and a hindrance to the learning atmosphere whereby leaving students feeling resentful, *'you're learning outcomes are total frustration; anger'*, (full-time).

There is another side to this argument, *'you're trying to meet deadlines .... it's very hard to get people together, to get them motivated, sometimes you find that you're doing all the work ....'*, (full-time), why should it be up to the mature student to get them motivated, as this means not only shouldering further responsibilities but also obstructs one's learning experience.

In conclusion, there may be more of an inclusive atmosphere at night class (depending on the type of course) as students on day courses report they have to make certain adjustments to 'fit in' or they could be left on their own.

### **5.3.3 Section C: Other Responsibilities**

This section considers the impact of the interaction between a student's responsibilities and standard student requirements; and the impact on a student's other responsibilities.

The findings are similar to the Questionnaire findings. These include the guilt of parental neglect; and parent and partner neglect. This is a hidden cost of learning and it can spoil the learning atmosphere because of these conflicting restraints. Also in the best interests of children, parents try to minimize the impact that student life may have on the relationship with their children, *'if I want to get any work done I've to get up at five'*, however this can mean *'I literally crawl on my hands and knees to bed, I'm so wretched .... because you don't want them to suffer'*, (full-time) but this may have a adverse affect on

one's health and wellbeing. 'I found myself working into the night and weekends, running around trying to still be a mother and a wife as I had been before and wondering how I could manage everything', is how Eve Philips (2003:89) describes her student experience because 'this meant that I seemed to be on a constant time-management exercise, weighing up the pros and cons of everything I did', (2003:90). Philips did think 'there were many times I was not sure if it was worth it....' (2003:90).

While many students feel they need to study in order to do well, others would love the luxury of full-time education, *'like my work for me was getting in my way, that was taking over my study time and I was getting annoyed about it'*, (part-time). Students tend to become totally immersed academically, as *'it takes over your mind, like it takes over you're whole thinking ....'*, (part-time), where students may find they are completely absorbed by academic material. It is obvious students do get certain pleasure out of completing assignments, but limited time frames can lead to a hurried learning atmosphere where *'you meet yourself coming'* (full-time).

I had never intended that neither being involved with education, firstly on a part-time basis, then as a full-time student .... would interfere with the roles I have .... This has been a grave misunderstanding on my part, that has caused me much turmoil, guilt and energy over the past number of years, to the extent that I have tried not to acknowledge that part of my life .... being a mother and wife I have certain commitments and responsibilities that do not match well with the role of full-time student.... (Philips, 2003:89).

In conclusion, a student's academic responsibilities often have to take second place in conjunction with parental responsibilities; and readjustments on the student's part is needed continually. Also students with other responsibilities have to bear in mind that they have to be prepared for every eventuality as one never knows what's about to go pear-shaped. However, constant limited time frames can leave students overburdened and exhausted resulting in poor levels of thinking.

### **5.3.4 Section D: Finance**

This section analyses the effect of finance on returning to education and is similar in nature to the Questionnaire findings.

The opportunity cost of higher education is very real, and poorer people cannot afford to take risks. They need reassurances, and the assurances need to have a real financial foundation. There is a need to have a good grant system in place, to have grants paid on time, and to have provisions for supplementary support in the event of delays or difficulties (Lynch, 2004:15)

Therefore in conclusion, the fact that college can have a major impact on finances will strongly influence many people's choice in returning to college.

### **5.3.5 Section E: College Services**

In relation to college services, night students find it more difficult to access many services as they are not available during the evenings. Furthermore, some services are not available at all to night students. 'Higher education is increasingly a necessity....' argues Lynch (2004:19), yet students are not provided with 'necessary services such as .... crèches, flexible timetables, transport services, language supports, information and financial supports' (2004:17).



### 5.3.6 Section F: Expectations and Outcomes

There are a variety of objectives that students hope to achieve by returning to education which have been stated elsewhere. An added bonus which students may not be initially aware of in the beginning is the fact that students become more enlightened in many ways as one student in Fleming and Murphy's research found to his experience. He said,

I think people who come to college are here to learn, not just academically, but also here to learn as individuals .... When I go to the café, we will not just talk about history, we will also talk about ourselves ... it's about me as a person, me growing as a person. It's about me looking at my world, and me growing in that .... I believe it gives me a better insight into people. But it also gives me a better insight into society .... If you're talking about class, my father worked in factories. I never thought that when I left school at 14, that I would ever achieve a place in college, it would have be utopia ... I want to obtain learning ... And I want to actually give it back (Fleming and Murphy, 1997:59)

### 5.3.7 Section G: Concluding Comments

This section provides students with final commentary on any aspect of college life. This included the suggestion that a communal meeting place would be beneficial to all mature students such as a few tables designated in the students' common room where mature students would feel free to congregate and interact.

Finally, encouragement according to the focus group research is extremely important because returning to education is a daunting step for many to consider particularly if their previous educational experience was intimidating, '*...you were always put down, [that's right yeah], if you didn't know something, you were nearly afraid to....*', (part-time). There is more than likely, many people who would love to learn but the fear and uncertainty of not knowing what to do may prevent many from doing anything about it but '*... if they felt they could*

*have somebody that they could go to .... and somebody who may encourage them and say to them this is doable and this is how you go about it....', (part-time).*

The final comments made by participants include better systems of support for all students including prospective ones, as students can feel vulnerable over numerous periods and stages during the student lifetime. Also realistic information on college provided in a simple manner could greatly entice those on the outside who are interested but afraid, or are unsure about venturing further. A student at Warwick University commented,

I really had to make myself come to the mature students' induction day. I can remember sitting in the car park wondering and feeling scared, why the hell have I done this? It would have been so easy to have driven off. By the end of that day, I was so relieved that I had done it. I knew a few faces. It was chaos at the start of term and if I had walked into that I would not have survived (Merrill, 1999:49/50)

Encouragement and positive affirmation are very important tools for students into and through education.

## 5.4 Absent Voices

Many students come to realize that combining the student role with other roles can become very pressurized due to time constraints. This can be one of the more serious obstacles of student life and is dependent on many internal or external, real or imagined boundaries. This can be a major threat as to whether the student will continue on.

However, the opportunity of thinking of returning to education will never arise for many others, as O'Reilly-de Brún states, 'there are so many people who, because of the inaccessibility of university courses, will never reach their full potential' (2003:87). She further questions 'when will we begin to say: the university is too far away from these [men and] women, instead of saying these [men and] women are too far away from the university' (O'Reilly-de Brún, 2003:88).

## **5.5 Discussion of the Interview Findings**

### **5.5.1 Introduction**

The third section of this research consists of a set of four interviews with Educator/Mentors specifically to obtain knowledge on the educational route that prospective students may take on route to tertiary education. In addition, the interviews provide the research with insight to different learning and teaching styles provided for adult students.

Each interviewee was asked three open-ended exploratory questions. Each interviewee is identified and quoted as B, C, D, or E.

### **5.5.2 Part 1: Difference between Mature Students and Traditional Students**

The first major noticeable difference between the two student bodies are levels of motivation. Mature students are more motivated because they are interested and want to do the course. It may also be '*... the first opportunity they been afforded to get in*', (B) and according to Merrill 'on entry participants had high expectations of what a university degree could potentially do for their lives in terms of personal and career developments' (1999:50). However, there are some difficulties related to the academic side of becoming a student. Putting assignments together is a major difficulty for students (D) and they may have to become accustomed to the terminology used, (E). This uncertainty can affect confidence in one's own abilities because they do not understand what academia demands. For example, the importance of referencing (and the marks it carries), can be problematic for new students, (D).

However, students tend to over achieve because *'they get so absorbed by the whole thing'*, it's *'almost like a thirst for knowledge'*, and it may be because they have *'missed out up to that point'*, (D).

Another hurdle that students may have to come to grips with, is the fact that people tend to assume each academic year is automatically harder which D believes is a misconception. *'.... You're just moving on to a different level, and the previous level has prepared you or should have prepared you for this level'*, (D). Students may be under the illusion that it gets academically harder however in my experience the reality may be more likely that fulfilling the student role may become more difficult as other commitments tend to distract the student over time, and energy levels become strained which may affect academic performance. However, it is still a learning process and some students can find some material more difficult to understand as the findings show.

There is a major difference in the delivery and presentation on workshops and courses between a Third Level Institute and an Open Learning Centre because *'there might be literacy problems'*, and *'a lot of the time you have to show people this is very doable'*. It can be all about bringing the *'weaker students through to give them the confidence to go to the next round, it's a very personal interactive thing'*, (D). It is also about building the student's confidence in their own abilities. This method of teaching and learning is a more hands-on practical approach to education where examples of how to complete assignments are provided with a wealth of direction and feedback.

Previous research indicates support from family members is crucial to being successful in education but in D's experience, there are numbers of students that find their children and/or partners do not support their decision to return to education making it much more difficult. This is harder on women with children as they can be in danger of missing classes or missing out on vital sections of coursework such as practical work that can not be repeated. Lack of sufficient support can mean it becomes impossible to continue. It is also B's experience

that single parents '*seem to have more difficulty than other people*'. The result of course is that these students can become easily worn out and '*get really stressed out*'. In addition, female students have more family responsibilities and are more anxious than male students, '*it's not just one thing that makes them uptight, it's probably the other roles and responsibilities that they have*', (B). According to previous research by Merrill, women in particular

found it a struggle from time to time to cope with their roles of student, parent, carer, employee etc but thought it was worth it:

Being a student has become a major commitment in my life. Sometimes the task of studying and domestic life, that is, children, is exhausting but it is necessary in order for me to achieve my future goals (1999:50/51)

Practical problems according to B have the greatest disruptive effect on family responsibilities because students often have to complete college placements in different counties.

The general understanding according to E is, the '*adult student is there because they want to better themselves. They want to get a better job.... self-development is important.... you evolve and develop through what you learn....*', and through this process of learning '*.... you learn different methods and different ways of thinking*', (E). Mature students generally know what direction they want to develop and grow in because they have '*got an image of themselves to themselves*', (C) through the continuous process of reflection that adults tend to carry out.

Returning to education is stressful and panic inducing because '*quite a lot of mature students see it as a kind of definitive statement about whether they can make it in some sense in the world*', (C). This is what C terms as 'emotional baggage' that mature students tend to carry with them. The fact that a mature student reaches a certain point in life were '*they turn up in college in the middle of their life*', asking themselves the same question, and reflecting on '*the conditions of their life*', (C). It is because of the emotional baggage that students

*'tend to read all kinds of things into the practical difficulties, some of which are there and some of which aren't there or are only there for them as it were', (C).* It is not unusual that mature students find the whole process more nerve wrecking because students are investing a lot of themselves in returning to education. Having little or no education can leave a person feeling deprived, *'I always felt that because I hadn't got the education originally when I was young, that there was something missing in my life that made me inferior to others who had', (E).* This coincides with a comment made at a Literacy Conference where a participant describes not being able to read and write *'as a dreadful stigma',* and *'you try to control things'* Daly, (2005), because you do not want others to find out you are illiterate. This is the chance to develop academically but there are so many risks involved that can lead to failure. They can *'.... underperform. Mature students can fail .... they stress themselves out, life events can pile up around assessment time out of the blue and catch them unawares, so they can fail and it does happen', (C).*

Choosing to return to education means *'....you're actually talking about changing your life.... you're taking a risk and you're being very brave.... It's like taking your own evaluation in your hands and testing it and if you've failed, that's just catastrophic', (C).* According to Inglis and Murphy,

for many, third-level education functions as a gateway to a good job, an adequate income, and a position of authority and respect. We live in a 'credential' society; the more qualifications you achieve the more powerful you become (1999:11)

*'The meaning of failure I think is so intense when you're older.... when you're older when you fail you existentially you really feel it.... its really damaging'* and the reality is, *'you don't want to be going round failing things at that stage in your life. It's like you haven't got the energy, or the time or the lifespan left to reverse it', (C).* It is a process of self-evaluation, and it is because of this that failure is so threatening to individual students because of what they have set out

to achieve. E describes the process in a similar fashion. The reality is human beings *'recognise you evolve and develop through what you learn'*, where one comes *'... to be happy to be the person that I [am]'*. It can be a very private, individual journey.

### **5.5.3 Part 2: Common Difficulties in Third level Settings for Students**

This section further examines the common difficulties that Educator/Mentors recognize students face in Third Level settings.

There is a high drop-out rate at night classes because students come to realise they cannot combine or fulfil all their duties. Night students are coming in straight from a full day's work and further sit through

*'... an absolute full day condensed in four hours, and that is just tough for anybody. So what you find is that when they drop out, it's not because they're intellectually struggling, it's because they get worn out by the process of trying to fit it in', (C).*

Nevertheless, C does attempt to find solutions that could resolve some of the pressure. One of which is re-negotiating and spreading the subjects over an extended period. However, those that cannot continue are disappointed but *'by making it clear to them that they are not stopping, that they are just stopping for now because it's lifelong learning; because people can'* is important.



## 5.5.4 Part 3: Influence of Personal Factors and Interaction on Study

This section examines how influential personal factors, home and family life is, in the success or failure of mature students compared to the traditional student cohort.

Mature students are more aware of where they are in life because,

*'they think about it all the time. Its part of the image of being a student .... Because they feel the need to develop their academic life.... there is a kind of common sense or a comradely built around the fact that they all recognise that they have come back', (C).*

The meaning of success or failure for mature students is far removed from the traditional student body. *'I think success and failure is qualitatively different for a mature student because there's all different ways of succeeding and failing', (C).* Mature students who can not achieve what they have set out to achieve *'because the rest of their life gets in the way'* or where they quite often complete what they can, *'but they will not see it as a success'*. The reason they return to education is to succeed in achieving a set goal that they have previously set out. Students need to be supplied with some sort of recognition for completing each academic year or module *'.... so that they could come back if they want to; and feel like they'd done it', (C).* *'If they're not given any means to think otherwise about it, they'll see themselves as having gone back yet again to education and quite possibly having failed again'*. If lifelong learning is part of today's modern progressive society *'.... you should be able to drop in and out', 'course accreditation is definitely the answer', (C).*

*'Classically mature students hate exams, they're really scared of them, they stress themselves out....', (C), but, '.... designing courses to take the stress out*

*of them to help people to get through*', (D) would be one way in lessening pressure for students.

However, it is easy to build up a new student's confidence academically by providing newcomers with a template of an assignment. Students with little educational experience or those returning after a long period out of the system are bound to have academic uncertainties.

According to a report by the National Economic Social Forum, the fact that the region's infrastructure is underdeveloped, and there is 'limited access to transport' (NCSF, 2006:112), means people living in rural areas are more restricted and are certainly more isolated, and according to E unlikely to participate in Third Level Education because transport is a major problem.

Therefore, there is a vital need for community education in rural and isolated communities because through community education, individuals develop confidence in themselves. Education in the community means starting where the community is at and this is twofold. This means tackling isolation by developing groups which in turn develops people individually. This process occurs through taking part in all kinds of creative activities such as drama, art and public speaking. Courses such as I.T. are another way towards inclusive education by developing skills and instilling confidence, (E). Community education addresses the specific needs of those in their own community and some individuals continue on to complete accredited Third Level courses but this is not as common as one would hope.

However, there are other important aspects to education in rural and isolated communities which not only includes addressing social inclusion, but also includes researching and developing the unique potential each community has to offer. Therefore, there is a vital need for education to be brought directly into these communities in a variety of innovate ways. Research shows 'IT in the

Community’; (the project in Hull) provides a prime example of how to regenerate a community, (Smith, 2006). The whole purpose of education is to improve peoples lives, develop themselves, develop their community and allow them to create and be part of their own world. As Freire, states ‘education for today, then, is that which can best serve to *adapt* men and women to the world as it exists today’ (2004:78).

## 5.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to evaluate the barriers that confront students through discussing the research findings and interpreting the primary research in relation to the secondary findings. In addition, by integrating the primary findings into the original purpose of the research and the perimeters of the literature review, this chapter has provided a detailed understanding of the mature student experience in tertiary education. The following chapter is the conclusion and recommendations of the research and includes a brief summary of the main issues raised by the research findings. It also includes a number of specific recommendations designed to eliminate and integrate new ways of returning to education and training.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **6.1 Introduction: Original Purpose of the Research**

The original purpose of the research is to explore and examine the supports and needs of mature students in higher and further education in the northwest of Ireland. In addition to examining the supports of mature students, the research explores the educational needs of a largely rural population.

It has been articulated that mature students have different needs from the traditional overall third level student body, because they are a distinct group with distinguishing characteristics. Firstly, they do not come directly from the second level educational stream. Secondly, they have experienced an array of varying life experiences. Thirdly, many have established family and financial responsibilities alongside the demands of their new student role. Therefore, their role and status is different from the traditional student role. This also means that a mature student encounters a different set of problems and has different needs and support imperatives, all of which the student must process and prioritise in order to make the transition through education a successful, less pressurised one.

There are many routes to tertiary education by way of night courses, foundation courses, PLC's and the Leaving Certificate. All of these may be seen as hurdles that students overcome or build on to get to higher education. However, once students enter the Third Level system, they are confronted with many barriers and these need to be addressed.

One of the most serious barriers to education for those individuals living in rural isolation is that education is totally inaccessible leaving countless numbers vulnerable. This is an external barrier because education is failing to meet their needs. These external and internal barriers are summarised under the heading

'Main Issues Raised by the Research Findings' in this chapter. However, a brief description of the sources of internal and external barriers that confront mature students are as follows. Barriers or hurdles are what students need to get around, solve or come to terms with as they proceed through education. The internal barriers generally come from the private domain of the individual. These include the roles and responsibilities that are part of their lives as individual human beings. This also constitutes part of the emotional baggage that students carry around with them, and involves many conflicts of interest (particularly for female students), i.e. the emotional guilt of being worn in two different directions, for example, the need or love of learning verses the feeling that one is neglecting one's parental duties. According to Bennett, 'neglecting these so-called home duties can cause immense guilt and emotional pain' (2002:60). In addition, the barriers include learning itself and how a student conforms and adjusts to different ways of thinking and styles of learning. Although this appears to be an institutional issue, it is also very personal in how the student adjusts to learning contexts and modalities.

However, one of the major areas of contention for mature students is the financial aspect of returning to education. This is one of the greatest impacts on one's source of income and if a student can continue in employment or not. This is also a major area of contention for students on night courses because of course costs. According to Lynch, the 'opportunity cost of higher education is very real, and poorer people cannot afford to take risks. They need reassurance, and the assurances need to have a real financial foundation' (2004:15). Also time constraints dominate the student's life as they constantly balance all other responsibilities while carrying out the student role.

In addition to dealing with internal sources of conflict, adult students have external barriers to ascend. These barriers are institutionalised into our western world and are part of the norm of society. Money, goods and trade are valuable and marketable products and knowledge is used to advance and build on these

resources. The fact is, learning is seen as an employability factor, and is measured in skills and the upgrade of knowledge. Ireland is a 'Knowledge Based' economy dependent on a workforce with employability skills, so therefore skills need to be constantly upgraded throughout one's lifetime. The 'Employability' concept 'is a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment ....' according to Yorke, (2004:410).

However, there are external barriers that negatively impact on the population in this region. As the population is a mainly rural one, many people live in very isolated communities and can not access any type of education or retraining. Furthermore, there are many pockets of unemployment in this area, who are in direct need of retraining and further education. The region traditionally had a strong agricultural background which is now being replaced with technological developments. This means there are many individuals that lack other employability skills. To compound matters, transport is traditionally a problem in rural areas and can be another barrier to accessing further education. However, if people can not avail of education because they have no means or ways to, education needs to be able to reach these individuals by other routes which previous research shows has been successfully achieved elsewhere.

The reality is mature students have many barriers to overcome or adapt to. However, generally students have to overcome the obstacles on their own as the formal supports are insufficient. They need to be more specific to suit the needs of adult students. Furthermore, education delivery needs to be tailored to meet the needs of those living in isolation and tailored for those most at risk.

## 6.2 Research Methodologies

Three methods of research have been used to complete the study. These include a Literature Review, and both a quantitative and qualitative method of research. The Literature Review consists of a review of existing literature on the needs of mature students in tertiary education. Among other aspects, the review focuses on the negative impacts and barriers confronting mature students and on the different ways of learning and styles of teaching. In addition, a comprehensive examination of the barriers that face mature students on a daily basis from internal sources is explored to create an understanding of the experiences of mature students. Furthermore, external barriers are studied in relation to the educational needs of a largely rural population which is the case in the north and west of Ireland.

The information obtained through holding a series of Focus Groups provides the basis for developing the next strand of the research. 'Focus groups also help when a researcher needs to get background information on a topic' according to Baker, (1994:188). The advantage of using Focus Groups argue Bryman, is that 'participants are able to bring to the fore issues in relation to a topic that they deem to be important and significant' (2004:348). The process involves examining the issues and concerns that students contributed during the Focus Group sessions. By analysing the issues arising from the findings of the Focus Groups and using the information, the Research Questionnaire was developed. With the help of the Student Services Office in each of the other three colleges, the National University of Ireland, Galway, Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology and Letterkenny Institute of Technology, the Questionnaire was presented in various ways to different numbers of volunteering students; completed and returned. In the Institute of Technology Sligo, this process was carried out by volunteering lecturing staff and the researcher.

In addition to the above quantitative research, qualitative research was also carried out by way of a series of interviews with Educator/Mentors for the purpose of evaluation and analysing the differences in the processes and experiences of different educational settings for adult students. Although the interviewees were all ‘personal contacts’ through someone knowing someone else, the sampling method used was not ‘convenience sampling’ but ‘purposive sampling’. ‘In other words, the researcher samples on the basis of wanting to interview people who are relevant to the research questions’ states Bryman, (2004:334). The advantage of using qualitative and quantitative approaches mean the ‘results of a qualitative investigation might be checked against a quantitative study. The aim is generally to enhance the validity of findings, according to Punch, (2005:241). ‘Using as many approaches as possible is part of a process that many researchers call triangulation’ suggests Kane and O’Reilly-de Brún, (2001:108), which provides ‘stronger’ information than using a single technique.



## **6.3 Main Issues Raised by the Research Findings**

The findings of the research come under three sections. These are Questionnaire Findings, Focus Group Findings and Educator/Mentors Interview Findings. The following is a brief summary of the main issues raised by the research findings and any relationship to previous research. They are grouped together under internal and external themes.

### **6.3.1 Internal Barriers Confronting Mature Students**

There are many sources of internal barriers that confront mature students in Third Level Education. Mature students generally have other roles and responsibilities to fulfil alongside their student role and one of the first considerations they are faced with, are time constraints. Time or lack of time impacts all areas of their lives and the more responsibilities the individual has, the greater the impact of time constraints. The constraints on study for example, can mean less time is spent researching material, attending seminars and overall, generally less time for study. Students on day courses can find constraints on the number of hours they have available or left for employment. Night students on the other hand can find it difficult to find time for study, especially those in full time employment.

Finance is another major source of concern and one of the more central issues expressed by mature students as it effects every aspect of their lives. Even though nearly half of all participants who took part are in receipt of government assistance it is common to find many full-time students working to supplement their income at the expense of study. Mature students tend to have extensive financial responsibilities (such as loans and mortgages) and can find the level of financial assistance from the government inadequate and unrealistic in meeting these demands. Previous research shows financial difficulties are 'one of the

reasons frequently cited for dropping out of college (Martin, 1985; Pantages & Creedon, 1978); particularly among mature and working class students (Yorke, 1999, cited in Eivers, Flanagan & Morgan, 2002:8). Furthermore, part-time courses can be very expensive and some students find that they cannot afford to complete the programme. Furthermore, according to Inglis and Murphy, this can also be the 'experience of part-time students. Finance, for example, is a problem shared by both groups' (1999:43). In addition, the high costs of childcare and transport are concerns for lone parents as previous research also reveals.

Again time constraints impact on the time a student can spend with their children, partner and/or parents. These impacts in particular can create feelings of guilt for the student due to the fact that they believe they are neglecting their adult responsibilities. However, Lynch argues that

we also need to recognise that dependence and inter-dependence are integral to the human condition and that the emotional work, planning and responsibilities involved in caring are integral to both the personal and educational life of students .... we are not simply Cartesian women and men. *Cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am, is only part of what humanity is. *I feel therefore I am* is as important in defining who we are. We are carers and creators in the affective or emotional domain of life as well as in the intellectual and material domains (Lynch, 2004:13)

The emotional ties or bonds are a conflict of interest especially for female students with children as they are torn between the need to develop one or neglect the other. Also, a student's other responsibilities such as employment and responsibilities to elderly parents may all come before the needs of a partner or spouse. All of these barriers have been well documented in previous research.

In relation to the learning experience of mature students, there are various barriers and obstacles to overcome. For instance, almost two thirds of participants can not spend as much time as they would like on study, again due to time constraints and other responsibilities. However, Lynch argues that it is not solely the student's responsibility as 'it can be about a failure to appreciate

the fact they are carers and that both care work and education work have to be integrated into the working day', (2004:20). Also time constraints encourage a pressurised and stressful atmosphere around the whole learning experience. Another two areas of college life that can present practical difficulties are college placements and groupwork. Placements can interfere with a student's hours of employment while groupwork can cause resentment and frustration.

Putting assignments together causes uncertainty which may present problems to new students alongside putting prospective students from returning to education. Students can also find underlying conflict arising between common and college knowledge but the onus is on the student to adjust accordingly, in other words, knowing the 'tricks of the trade' according to Fleming and Murphy, (1997:58). This is one of the reasons why positive affirmation is highly valued by students as it can instil confidence in one's own abilities.

Finally, emotional baggage whether real or imagined, including fear of failure are constant sources of pressure and anxiety. There are many reasons why the return to education is stressful and include the fact that it is an evaluation of whether a student can make it intellectually and turn their life in another direction. The reality is the in-house supports in higher education are inadequate to meet the specific needs that are a necessity for mature students in and through education.

### **6.3.2 External Barriers Confronting Mature Students**

Mature students return to education to become more knowledgeable; gain a qualification; create job opportunities and overall generally secure a safer future for oneself on the employment market. The countries in our western civilisation are in competition with each other and a country's economic growth is how a country's wealth is measured. Economically this is how education is measured. Previous research also indicates that the economies of the western world dictate the direction of growth and knowledge. Education is marketed in terms of employability and capability skills, and students are bombarded with the core concept of Lifelong Learning where skills and knowledge need to be upgraded constantly throughout one's lifetime. As Cahill reminds us that 'one key item that we struggle to come to terms with is the fact that there is 'no job for life' outside of the civil service ....' (2004:57).

However, there are external barriers for large pockets of the population living in this region. This region previously had a traditional background steeped in farming but this has been increasingly changing with the arrival of technology which means many are unskilled for the contemporary job market. This is one of the external barriers leaving countless numbers unable to find other types of employment, because they lack that employability factor.

Another barrier specific to this region is the fact that if one does not live relatively close to an Educational Institution, one is less likely to be given the opportunity to return to education to upgrade skills and knowledge. This is also the scenario if one does not live near an Outreach Centre. Or an individual may live relatively close to an educational setting but has no form of transport as is often the case in rural communities, (regular forms of commuting are often quite disjointed in rural settings). The reality is, where one lives indicates if one will be able to access further education and training. Research shows that there are many pockets of unemployment blackspots in this region. In fact, the

geographical nature of the region implies there are many individuals living in isolation who can not avail of any type of education or training because they do not have any means by which to gain further education and training. Furthermore, the actuality is there are probably many individuals living in isolated areas that believe education has nothing to offer them. This indicates that there are many people in the community left vulnerable because they lack employability skills and therefore indicates a very real need for education and training in this region.

However, if people can not get to education, education must find a way of getting to the people and previous research shows there are routes and avenues around these problems. A prime example in County Donegal is the Second Chance Education Scheme, an innovative move which began by going directly into people's (women's) homes and imparting basic knowledge at the kitchen table about courses, etc. It is widely acknowledged that lack of educational training and skills and low esteem are impediments to employment. Some of the participants continued on and gained a qualification at Third Level. Education needs to start where people are at. It needs to conform and address specific issues and concerns in relation to each pocket or region.

Another successful community example is a programme carried out in Scotland called 'The Right Path'. This programme is designed specifically in order to widen access to higher education. It begins at personal development and confidence building, and eventually leads to participation in higher level education.

Other urban projects have been carried out, successfully integrating individuals back into the working environment. Two of these were carried out in Dublin; with males at risk through low educational attainment because of early school leaving. This innovative programme used a partnership approach with employers in the locality who offered on-the-job training. It was considered a

successful programme as both the employer and the newly trained employee reaped the benefits. Not only can small projects make a difference. Whole communities can be regenerated and transformed as the example in Hull demonstrates in its successful transformation by the programme 'IT in the Community'. Again all kinds of skills were created using innovative ideas that developed individual ability and instilled confidence in those who needed it.

Each county in this region could be explored in depth to uncover its untapped resources. This is one of the ways forward that would enable each county to develop individually, creating employment and social inclusion. Retraining and upgrading education therefore could be specifically tailored to support these needs.

Each county has its own problematic areas that need customised courses, designed and implemented in each case. However, there is a substantial lack of basic IT skills and communication technology in the northwest and this is another problem that needs specific addressing because IT communication is so widely used today. That without these skills, individuals are seriously hampered not only in up-skilling and further education but also in one's day to day work environment. It also presents another way of learning on-line or E-learning. Individuals need to be able to keep up to date with technological developments.

Finally, the best approach is a combined approach using the resources and know-how of all educational players (Institutes of Technology, Post Leaving Certificate Courses, Vocational Education Programmes, FAS, Outreach, Community Education programmes, etc). All the relevant stakeholders interested in educational progression in this region have something unique to offer as each has expertise in their own field and through networking, expertise can be shared and used to provide the utmost value and potential. Combined consultation is the best way forward.

In today's knowledge climate, there is a greater necessity to tap into and use all kinds of resources available. Not only will the community benefit but the individuals and their families will also reap the benefits. We live in a 'Knowledge-Based' economy where it is necessary to upgrade our education to keep abreast in a competitive society. People need to understand that training or re-training and learning anew develops the self and the world in which they live; and innovative ways are needed to encourage further learning.

In the end, other influences concerning lifelong learning include what is happening globally according to a Policy Brief by the OECD, as one of the 'OECD's more open economies, Ireland is particularly exposed to external risks' (OECD, 2006:2b). In addition states the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 'it is important to remember that our main trading competitors will also have improved their educational profiles and that if Ireland is to compete effectively, it will need to build competitive advantage in the area of skills' (EGFSN, 2007:90). But our main trading competitors are not the only sources of competition. Other countries are scoring well in educational terms. This means Ireland must respond to defend or make its position stronger and therefore, 'engagement in continuing learning will dictate the future productivity of those currently employed in the workforce; and continuing learning will dictate the ability of workers to transition to 'new' jobs in the future', argues EGFSN (2007:78). Lastly, maintaining high rates of productivity growth entail continued efforts to upgrade skills.

To conclude this chapter, a number of recommendations have been made in relation to the barriers that confront adults in education.

## 6.4 Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been made with respect to the internal and external barriers that confront adults in education. The following are the recommendations specifically made to re-address some of the internal barriers confronting mature students in and through education. Non-standard applicants need specific supports to ensure the experience of returning to education is less pressurised and more user friendly; and specifically designed for mature students.

- Time constraints impact all areas of a student's life making learning more pressurised but particularly impact all aspects of studying. Therefore students should be provided with a template on how to complete an academic project from initial researching to the finalised assignment. Students need to be shown this from the very beginning.
- Again because of time constraints students would benefit from being informed about what constitutes good written material. They need to be shown examples of what constitutes good or poor work as they generally have no concept of this prior to entry.
- The language or terminology used in setting assignments or in lectures etc can be problematic initially, which can easily be resolved by providing a variety of other descriptions or scenarios.
- Time constraints lead to a hurried learning atmosphere, however, an improvement in course design and implementation could alleviate some of this pressure, for example some courses may have too many subjects, as often students report the work load heavy.

Finance is a major area of contention for both full and part-time students. Many full-time students have to work to supplement their income even though nearly half of all participants are in receipt of government assistance. Students have



reported that the level of government assistance is inadequate and unrealistic in meeting the financial needs of mature students particular since so many have many other responsibilities. Part-time students on the other hand find course fees expensive. In the light of Lifelong Learning, there are three recommendations that the government could act on to encourage Lifelong Learning.

- These are introducing ‘Individual Learning Accounts’, establishing ‘a Means Test’ for students completing night courses, and the introduction of a system of ‘Tax Credits’.

An Individual Learning Account programme was launched in September 2000, in Britain. Just over one year later there were ‘2.5 million members registered with the Learning Account Centre as eligible to undertake subsidised learning’. However ‘due to evidence of abuse by a small minority of providers, the Secretary of State’ closed down the programme on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2001, ([www.dfes.gov.uk/ila/programme.shtml](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/ila/programme.shtml)).

Nevertheless, a study into the benefits of Individual Learning Accounts carried out in Britain revealed that one of the overall principles found that

**almost all of those consulted that a new ILA-style programme should be put in place**, recognising that much had been achieved through the previous programme. Almost four-fifths of the account holders interviewed thought that a similar programme would encourage them to invest more in their learning in the future Individual Learning Accounts’ Report, (2002: i/ii).

In Scotland, ‘if you earn 15,000 or less, you could get up to £200 per year towards the cost of learning’ ([www.ilascotland.org.uk/ILA+Homepage.htm](http://www.ilascotland.org.uk/ILA+Homepage.htm)).

This could be used for example to improve your computer skills or perhaps upgrade your communication skills.

- Students on government assistance allowances are means-tested. This should equally apply to part-time students who work full-time but pay the full cost of education. They are entitled to financial assistance with course costs and should be means tested in line with their earnings.
- The provision of ‘Tax Credits’ is another financial incentive to those working full-time and would encourage a return to further education and training.
- Employers should be encouraged to promote education and re-training by not only providing opportunities to return to education but by also paying the educational costs of their employees as they directly benefit from a highly skilled workforce.

A highly skilled workforce not only benefits the state and the economy but benefits individuals as well. However, countless numbers are losing out because education is inaccessible. The following are the recommendations specifically made to re-address some of the external barriers confronting adults in education from a rural prospective.

The promotion of social inclusion especially for the educationally disadvantaged through ‘equality of access to education, training and employment’ (1999:34) is regarded as of significant importance in the National Development Plan. Even though there are initiatives such as the ‘Back To Education Allowance’ and ‘Back to Work Initiatives’, they are worthless when one has no form of transport as is the case in many rural communities.

The National Development Plan stated that it would facilitate the ‘development of a system of Lifelong Learning, which includes the provision of accessible and flexible routes of progression’ (1999:6). This it has been failing to do. Furthermore the NDP stated it would ‘seek to ensure that human resources needs

of less developed regions are met through regionally targeted actions' (1999:7). These targeted actions are not being fully met as the research reveals. If the government is seriously trying to promote Lifelong Learning, then the following recommendation should be carried out.

- The Government should finance a National Lifelong Learning Campaigning Agency to promote and protect the rights of Lifelong Learners. This agency would give legitimacy to Lifelong Learning, along with advocacy rights and powers. It would not only modernised Lifelong Learning but through the further development of provincial networks and organisations means that tailor made course design can be successfully implemented at local levels, were targeted actions are needed the most.

All the relevant stakeholders in education should be active members of the National Lifelong Learning Campaigning Agency and each should have an equal voice. This is crucial if successful targeted actions in education are to be made.

The relevant stakeholders who should be members of the Agency include, the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), the 'support agency to the Department of Education and Science whose aim is to develop guidance in all educational settings'

([www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/links/National%20Organisations.html](http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/links/National%20Organisations.html)).

Léargas which is 'Ireland's National Agency for the management of National, European and International co-operation programmes involving: Education and Lifelong Learning; Vocational Education and Training; Youth and Community Work; [and] Guidance in Education'

([www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/links/National%20Organisations.html](http://www.aontas.com/pubsandlinks/links/National%20Organisations.html)).

Also Aontas, the Irish National Organisation of Adult Education because of its role in promoting the 'development of a learning society through the provision

of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education which is accessible to and inclusive to all' ([www.aontas.com](http://www.aontas.com)), should be a member of the Agency.

Along with FAS and the local VECs, the community sector needs to be included. Therefore, PLANET – the Partnerships Network, which is the ‘representative voice of the 38 area-based Partnerships in Ireland, who work to promote social inclusion through the development of disadvantaged areas and communities’ ([www.planet.ie/about.html](http://www.planet.ie/about.html)), should be a stakeholder. Finally, at regional level, educational organisations such as Lónra which represents the interests of higher education in the BMW Region should be on board.

- The final recommendation is to seek the advice of those individuals and groups at the ‘grass roots’ of society and on the edge of the community, to find out what they want out of education and from Lifelong Learning.

In conclusion, it has been articulated that mature students have different needs from the traditional overall third level student body because they are a distinct group with distinguishing characteristics – e.g. many have established family and financial responsibilities in addition to the demands of the student role. Consequently, they encounter a different set of problems and obstacles including economic, social and educational barriers and,

many students will face serious obstacles to educational achievement. Some will be overwhelmed by personal stress triggered by changes in their family, financial position or health. Others will face academic challenges .... Even the best students may experience periods in which barriers emerge that seem impossible to overcome (Moxley *et al.*, 2001:153)

However, one of the most serious barriers is that education is totally inaccessible for many in this region, and one finds it easy to agree with O’Reilly-de Brún

when she asks ‘when will we begin to say: the university is too far away from these [men and] women’? (2003:88).

One final thought, when asked ‘what preparations did you engage in before starting the course’, one student wrote, ‘... *learnt to read and write* ...’, (full-time 2<sup>nd</sup> year female).

May the individual never give up on education and may education never give up on the individual.

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## Appendices

## **Appendix 1**

### **Questionnaire Introductory Letter**

Marie Mc Gloin,  
Research,  
Business & Humanities,  
Sligo Institute of Technology,  
Sligo.

Hi Fellow Mature Student,

I am very aware that you are coming to the end of the present academic year and I know how busy you are but please give me a few minutes of your time.

My name is Marie Mc Gloin and I have been a mature student here in I. T. Sligo for the last four years. At present, I am doing a two year Research Masters on Mature Students in Higher Education in the Northwest of Ireland. In my research, I am exploring the experience of being a mature student alongside any transformations that may occur during your student life cycle.

By carrying out this research, I am hoping to create a greater understanding of the mature student experience for those wishing to return to education, those in education, and those who hold positions as educators.

Your Access Officer is assisting and has kindly offered to distribute questionnaires on my behalf.

Your contribution is very important to me. Please take part, complete and return the questionnaire. Thank you for your time and your help. Best of luck in your forthcoming exams.

Marie Mc Gloin.

## Appendix 2

### Mature Student Research Questionnaire

The information on this questionnaire is confidential: for research purposes only.

#### Section 1: Student Background

1. Gender -            Male [    ]                                  Female [    ]
2. Age-                24-29[    ]                30-35[    ]                36-40[    ]  
                              41-45[    ]                46-50[    ]                50+ [    ]
3. Name of Educational Institute \_\_\_\_\_
4. College Year:      1<sup>st</sup> [    ]            2<sup>nd</sup> [    ]            3<sup>rd</sup> [    ]            4<sup>th</sup> [    ]
5. What course are you doing? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Are you a:            Day Student [    ]                                  Night Student [    ]

#### Section 2: Finance

7. How do you finance your studies?

8. Does finance impact on your life as a student?

If yes, please explain –

If no, please explain –

### **Section 3: Social Responsibilities**

9. Do you have children?                      Yes [    ]                      No [    ]

9b. If yes, does your student life affect your children

                    Positively [    ]                      Negatively [    ]                      Both [    ]

9c. Please explain?

10. Are you in a relationship,                      Yes [    ]                      No [    ]

10b. Does student life have an impact on this?

11. Have you responsibilities to other relatives, (Carer etc.)

Yes [ ]

No [ ]

11b. If yes, does student life affect this?

#### **Section 4: Academic Life**

12. How much time do you think you should spend on study per week?

13. How much time do you spend on study per week?

#### **14. Student Life and Your Learning Experience**

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Please tick

Agree Disagree

When I came in first, it would have been like a honeymoon kind of period-

[ ] [ ]

You're very conscientious; you've made a decision to go back and learn, and people expect you to do well -

[ ] [ ]

By going back to college you put yourself under pressure [ ] [ ]

I don't think I'd be reading anything unless it contributed towards my marks-

[ ] [ ]

It gets to a point where I don't know if I'm learning Anymore-

[ ] [ ]

I push myself hard to succeed-

[ ] [ ]

It's all about trying to get a good mark - [ ] [ ]

I don't have time to explore or read around things- [ ] [ ]

Any person who wants to better their situation should be given the opportunity - [ ] [ ]

I love learning - [ ] [ ]

Pressure has spoiled learning for me - [ ] [ ]

### 15. Your College Experience as a Mature Student

Underline the words that best describe your college experience -

enjoyable interesting knowledgeable refreshing awakening

exciting inspiring stimulating eagerness learning curiosity

pressurised hurried stressful tiring heavy apprehension

apathy exhausting dread intense failure burden lonely

### 16. The Mature Student Role

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Please tick

Agree Disagree

I don't have any free time - [ ] [ ]

I had a perception that it was slightly easier but its tough going, there's nothing easy about it - [ ] [ ]

The amount of work was more than I actually thought - [ ] [ ]

It's a fine balancing act, I find myself balancing all the time - [ ] [ ]

Some days you wake up and don't want to go in - [ ] [ ]

It's up to yourself to fit in as there's no support there - [ ] [ ]

- Health wise I'm developing all kinds of ailments - [ ] [ ]
- I'm just absolutely bogged down in college work- [ ] [ ]
- You cannot abandon your role as a parent, kids come first at the end of the day - [ ] [ ]
- You have to put everything else first the college comes second - [ ] [ ]
- If you're in a weak group, you have to do all the work - [ ] [ ]
- At times I can't think I'm so tired, I can't concentrate - [ ] [ ]
- Its very much self-directed learning - [ ] [ ]
- A lot of learning is like reciting or repeating; and giving back the information we get - [ ] [ ]
- I feel the more I learn, the thicker I get- [ ] [ ]
- I don't know what future opportunities are open to me - [ ] [ ]

### 17. The Pressures of Being a Mature Student

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Please tick

Agree Disagree

- I would drop out if I thought I was going to fail - [ ] [ ]
- I was thinking of dropping out because I'd fallen behind- [ ] [ ]
- It's all about getting that piece of paper (qualification) - [ ] [ ]
- You're going nowhere without that piece of paper - [ ] [ ]
- We all want to pass - [ ] [ ]
- You need to succeed, that's why you're doing the course [ ] [ ]



- I don't think failure is an option -
- I worry about failing because I've given up so much -
- You put so much effort into something that you really want to pass it -
- Near exams I stay away from the college because it makes me more stressed seeing everyone else stress -
- People saying fair play to you, you'll fly through it, puts even more pressure on you -
- I had/have to give up my job to concentrate solely on college work -
- Financial assistance from your work creates extra pressure on an individual to succeed -

### 18. The Mature Student's Interaction with the Lecturer

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Please tick

Agree Disagree

- Positive affirmation from lecturers made me feel; maybe they're right, maybe I can do this-
- The lecturer knows where you're coming from -
- Lecturers are very encouraging -
- It's much easier interacting with lecturers as adults -
- Sometimes lecturers speak to you like you were ten -
- Lecturers still go on and do their lecture; it's up to you to catch up -

## **Section 5: Expectations and Preparations**

19. How many hours per day do you spend travelling to college?
20. What do you expect to get from the course?
21. What preparations did you engage in before starting the course?
22. Did you have any negative experiences during preparations?
23. How would you assess the initial information you received about the course?
24. Any final comments?

Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire.

## **Appendix 3**

### **Questions for Interview with Educators/Mentors**

1. Do you notice a difference between 'Mature Students' and other students?

2. In your experience what common difficulties present for 'Mature Students' in third level settings?

3. Are personal factors home and family life etc. a bigger factor in the success or failure of the Mature Student than for other students?

## **Appendix 4**

### **Focus-Group Questions**

#### **Seeking the Relevant Information**

Where did you look for the relevant information on what was available?

Where you informed or offered other options or routes that may have provided you with more or extended choices?

Where you provided with any guidance or support in your decision about which course most suited your needs?

#### **Initial College Supports**

What sort of guidance and support did you have at the beginning of your college life and how efficient was this?

#### **Aspects of College Life**

To what extent do you feel you 'fit or blend in' in college in relation to the required student role and status?

College life has a 'hurried atmosphere': how does the pace impact on your participation and learning?

Does each academic year require adjustment and alterations?

How do the responses of 'ordinary students' affect your participation and learning?

How does the need to succeed impact on your college experience, i.e. knowledge, understanding, skills etc?

Where does this pressure to succeed come from?

### **Other Responsibilities**

How do responsibilities to children/partners/employment etc. affect your performance and interaction in college?

To what extent do you believe your children/partners are affected by your attendance in college and in what way?

### **Financial Aspects**

Does the additional cost of the course, materials and travelling expenses etc, create or add financial pressure?

To what extent does 'finance' impact on your route through college?

### **College Services**

How accommodating are college services such as canteen, library, administration etc.

### **What you expect to achieve through Third Level**

What are your expectations and outcomes by attending college?

### **To Conclude**

Are there any other aspects of your college life that I have not addressed which would benefit from further attention and exploration?

## **Appendix 5**

### **Focus Group Volunteer Form**

I volunteer to take part in this research and I am aware that any information/material I contribute may be used anonymously for research purposes.

Sign \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 6**

### **Topic Issues - for Focus Group Study Discussion**

- **Seeking the Relevant Information on Courses**
- **College Supports**
- **Student Status and the Academic Role - (E.g. time for study, learning, interaction with lecturers etc.)**
- **Other Responsibilities - (E.g. childcare, mortgages, etc.)**
- **Financial Aspects - (E.g. course/material costs etc.)**
- **College services**
- **Concluding points**