# *Here's my story: Mature students' narratives of Further Education.*

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## Abstract

Public policy in Ireland continues to encourage increasing participation by non-traditional learners in Further and Higher Education.  Mature students account for 50% of the Further Education (FE) population and while their experiences are well studied in Higher Education (HE) there is surprising little work on FE. This study sets out to hear and understand the narratives of mature students' experiences in FE and how they make sense of them.

For this study, five mature students at an FE college in the North East of Ireland participated in a small-scale narrative inquiry.  The interviews focused on the participants' telling and understanding of their experiences of returning to study in FE.  The findings suggest that the participants found their time in FE to be a very positive experience which provided them with a valuable qualification and a possibility of progressing to HE.  They also recounted the many challenges encountered in returning to education including: low academic confidence, poor self-esteem, time management and finances.   The participants understood that support from FE staff, family members and peers was crucial in helping to overcome the obstacles encountered.  The findings also illustrate the students' pride in their academic achievements and a resulting new-found confidence.

It is concluded that, despite many challenges encountered and overcome, the participants viewed their experiences in FE to be very positive and having 'dipped their toes in the water', their experiences have led them to embrace lifelong learning and contemplate progressing to HE.

**Keywords:** Further education, mature students, narratives.

# 1.  Introduction.

This research explored, in an open-ended way, the lived experiences of mature students who have returned to education in a college of Further Education (FE) in Ireland.  These second-chance learners returned '*…to have a second bite of the apple'* (Fenge, 2011, pg. 381) despite prevailing obstacles.  This cohort of students are major stakeholders in FE and is it

imperative that we hear their narratives to understand how they process their experiences. While the experiences of mature students in HE are well examined, there is very little research on mature students in FE and this research will add to the existing knowledge available in this territory.

Irish public policy continues to encourage increasing participation by non-traditional learners in further and higher education.  These national policies (DES, 2008; DETE, 2002), aimed at life-long learning, set out to include students of all ages, promote inclusion, upskilling and a reduction in levels of poverty.  Mature students are considered 'non-traditional' as distinct from those who have just finished their Leaving Certificate in secondary school.  Mature students may have been early school leavers who have not attained recognised qualifications, and with a significant time gap before their return to education (FE and Training Strategy 2014-2019; Watson et al., 2006).  In FE, a student aged 21 or older is considered a mature student whereas in higher education (HE) a mature student is 23 or older.  Equity of access to HE has been identified as a core national objective in Higher Education by the Department of Education and Skills' Higher System Performance Framework (SPF) 2014-2016. The participation of mature students in Irish HE accounted for 15% of new entrants to undergraduate programmes in 2010/11. For some students, FE is a valued alternative to HE and is an end in itself, providing qualifications, for example, healthcare assistants, dental nurses or beauty therapists.  FE colleges also deliver re-skilling and up-skilling programmes for both the employed and the unemployed or inactive. However, FE colleges are also an increasingly important access route to HE in Ireland.  The HEA therefore proposed setting a new target for students progressing from FE to HE with targets of 6.6% of the entrant cohort in 2014 and 10% by 2016 – overall this would be an increase of 2,000 students over the life of the FE and Training Strategy 2014-2019.   Research from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) 2013 indicated that almost 20% of FE QQI major award holders progressed to HE and that an additional 21% took other QQI qualifications at levels 5 or 6 in a different discipline. Data is being accumulated but has not yet been reported as to what percentage of FE *mature students* progress to HE.

The student body in FE colleges is diverse, generally coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds and individuals are often the first-in-family to engage with education beyond the mandatory years (Hardiman, 2012 p. 19).  It is significant that mature students account for 50% of entrants to FE (Hardiman, 2012 p. 19).  The impact of their reengagement is profound and goes well beyond the qualifications achieved.

There is an abundance of research on the experiences of mature students in HE in Ireland, including studies carried out by Kenny et al., (2010), Kearns (2014), Moran (2015).  My research has identified similar studies from other countries including Osborne et al. (2004), Walters (2000), O'Shea (2015).  There are many recurring themes in this literature which include: motivation to return to education, adversities experienced, prior experience with education and self-transformation. In the HE sector, the different needs and experiences of mature students and those of traditional students are well documented. However, apart from two Irish two studies by Graham (2015) and Hardiman (2012), very little attention has been paid to the experiences of mature students in FE. Some of the issues mature students face in HE are likely to also apply to mature students in FE, for example caring responsibilities, time poverty or fear of academic failure.   However, there are some differences in FE. For example, financial expenditure is generally less in FE programmes. The differences remain largely unknown due to the limited available research in this arena.  For this reason, my literature findings are mainly in the HE setting.

## 1.1.  Irish FE research.

Of the limited research available, two studies have been identified which set out to explore the experiences of mature students in FE in Ireland.  Graham's (2015) master's thesis and Hardiman's (2012) doctorate dissertation set out to improve the understanding of their experiences and give a voice to their stories.

Hardiman (2012) describes research conducted with a group of older mature students in a FE college in Co. Dublin who returned to full-time education after an absence of several years. His study summarises the background to the development of FE and explored the students' reasons for returning to education, their experience in FE and what they considered to be the benefits of participation.  There were three elements to his research: a survey, a focus group and interviews.  He concludes by reflecting on the implications of his findings for the FET sector in Ireland.  He interviewed 9 students using constructive grounded theory approach to generate data. His analysis of the data found three main concepts: 1) the latent self – the range of factors that influenced the participants' decisions to return to education 2) the emerging self – how they negotiated the challenges faced in college 3) the revised self – how they have changed because of participation in FE. His findings identified '*a feeling of unfinished business*' (pg. 113), '*something for the CV*' (pg. 113) and gaining '*a qualification which would make them more marketable*' (pg. 116) as motivational factors voiced by mature students in

FE. The challenges highlighted by participants were fear of failure, lack of technical competence, the first assignment, and juggling multiple responsibilities. The positives experienced were the support received from course coordinators and teachers. Students acknowledged a new confidence which '*extended beyond college work*' (pg. 131).  Hardiman sets out that their participation in FE facilitated change in their self-concept, self-respect and sense of identity.

Graham's (2015) study set out to improve the understanding of mature students' experience in FE in Ireland, highlight the needs of this cohort and to make recommendations to support them to achieve their goals. The study used mixed methods of questionnaire and interviews to gather data. There were 23 participants and 7 interviews.  Findings identified the students' challenges as finances, academic work, IT skills and time management. 50% of the participants had not attained their Leaving Certificate and the findings were mixed on the past experiences of the participants in compulsory school. The study highlighted the significant difference in needs between the participants and the younger students. Also highlighted was evidence of significant personal growth by the students.  The findings identified the reasons for returning to education, highlighting the importance of the effective support given by tutors and by their peers. Finally, Graham made certain recommendations which may benefit this cohort to maximise their academic potential. She recommended that, prior to enrolment, students are informed of the level of academic and IT skills required.  Graham also recommended that policies and practices are put in place to support mature students, that they are made aware of available supports and that tutors are made aware of the unique needs of these students.

These two studies reported similar findings. Both are conducted in one FE college only. Hardiman's is the larger study as it is his Doctoral dissertation. Both describe and explain student experiences but neither explore how the students themselves made sense of their experiences. If students reflect on their experiences, their portrayal of these stories reveals the importance of them to the narrator.  Access to research on mature students' understanding of their experiences would benefit educators in FE with recruitment, retention and improved academic experience for this valued cohort of students.

# 2.  Methodology.

A narrative approach was used to facilitate an in-depth exploration and was considered the most appropriate to answer the research question. Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research which is increasingly utilised in many disciplines, including educational research (e.g. Carless et al., 2008; Schwind et al., 2014). It is a method which focuses on the storied nature of experience in all its complexities and richness (Bell, 2002). It facilitates the gathering, analysing and understanding of research participants' stories. Narrative inquiry is, however, much more than people telling their stories.  It is about their understanding and the meaning this person has ascribed to their lived experiences and to construct a sense of self (Kehily, 1995; Sutton, 2015). Narrative inquiry covers and utilises narrative as both the method and phenomenon of study (Trahar, 2009).

Human beings are natural storytellers (McAdams et al.  2013). As humans, we rely heavily on the use of stories to make sense of our experiences.  As described by Huber et al.  (2013) *'we draw on stories as a way to share, and to understand, who we are, who we have been, and who we are becoming'*. (p. 227). Narrative inquiry has been defined by Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) as '*discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience, and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it.*'" (p. xvi). Narrative inquiry allows participants to tell their life experiences through stories and to share how they understand and make sense of these experiences. This research paper draws on methodologies that embrace subjectivity, with the voices of the participants being central to the research. The participants' voices are of pivotal importance to this research and this study proposes that by listening and analysing their narratives we can understand how these mature students make sense of their experiences in this new learning community.  As storytelling is part of our everyday lives and we tell stories about ourselves as a means of giving organisation and meaning to our lives, narrative inquiry was a method that seemed a natural fit for my research question as this method is very effective way to divulge nuance and detail about experience.  Narrative analysis of the data will explore how that participants have interpreted their lived experiences and their perspective of their personal experiences.

## 2.1 Participants.

The participants were recruited via email in a FE college. Students in 5 classes were emailed in the Art, Healthcare and Sports departments requesting the participation of mature students. 5 volunteers were recruited.  They were studying at Irish QQI levels 5 and 6.  Pseudonyms have been used throughout this research to preserve anonymity.  The participants ranged in age from 32-57.

## 2.2 Ethical considerations.

Ethical approval was sought and received from the Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) Research Ethics Committee.  The research was conducted following the DkIT ethical guidelines. The initial email included the participant information leaflet highlighting their right to withdraw from the research at any stage.  Students were fully informed of the rationale for the research before they signed a consent form. Data was stored anonymously on a password-protected PC, to be retained for 5 years, after which the data is to be deleted.  Data collected was analysed and reported honestly (BERA, 2011).

As identified by Robson (2002) this was insider research as it was conducted in the researcher's teaching institute. The researcher was also an 'insider' of a different sort, being a mature student who has returned to education and could relate to some of the key turning points narrated by the participants.

## 2.3 Procedure.

Adapting the life story interview protocol (McAdams, 1993) where people describe phases of their lives,

 each participant was asked to describe their experiences as a mature learner who has returned to education in an FE college; and to describe in detail crucial scenes that stand out in their story: an opening scene (why they made the decision to return to education), a particular high point, a particular low point, an early memory (prior experience in education) and turning points.

## 2.4 Data collection.

A pilot interview was conducted to allow a review of the interview schedule, ensuring questions were clear and to get feedback from the pilot interviewee. Following this, 5 semi-structured individual interviews, each lasting approximately 40 minutes, were carried out towards the end of the academic year (March and April). Open questions and prompts were employed to allow the students to share their stories.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Audio recordings from the interviews were deleted once transcribed. Transcripts were checked and any identifying information removed. The analysis involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts which identified 5 key themes: motivation, challenges/support, past life and educational experiences and identity.

# 3.  Findings.

The analysis of the narratives involved careful reading and rereading of the interview transcripts to identify key themes from McAdam's (1993) life story method protocol which helped shape the participants' stories. While each participant had a unique story to tell, some common content themes emerged from the analysis of the data. These themes were: personal motivation for returning to education, challenges and support, past life/educational experiences, identity. The participants all shared a progressive narrative of advancement, achievement and success. All the participants saw their re-engagement with education as being very positive and transformative. They saw the decision to begin this journey as rooted in a big turning point in their lives. While the stories told of success and achievement, they also experienced significant challenges along the way. Participants told of overcoming these challenges and they explained this in terms of personal resilience, perseverance to succeed, and support received. The participants told how they came to FE and, after 'dipping their toe' in the water, they felt prepared for the rigours of progression to HE; though this was not a motivation for all. All the stories were framed in terms of personal growth and recognition of the enormous impact FE has had on their lives.

## 3.1   Motivation.

Various reasons for returning to education were expressed by the participants. This decision followed a significant turning point in the students' lives which acted as a catalyst for change. For Barbara, it was her son leaving primary school:

> *'My son is going to secondary school, he'll be out all day, I'll be at home cleaning the house.  And I thought, if I don't do it now, I won't do it.' (Interviewee 2).*

> *'I was unemployed for about 2 years and I was sitting at home doing nothing' (Interviewee 4).*

For Eileen, her decision was viewed as part of her recovery from depression following a nervous breakdown and her desire to move forward in her life.  Whilst, Angela had been working in retail for 10 years and '*wanted a change of career and a change of direction.*'

Four of the participants had long nurtured a desire to return to education and understood this as their opportunity to rewrite the story of their lives.  They believed they had '*missed out'* by not progressing past compulsory education and that this experience in FE would help to fill that void. For example, David shared that he regretted past choices and felt that he had wasted '*a lot of time and opportun*ities'. Barbara had always wanted to be a nurse but '*certain things'* stopped her.

Some participants felt inadequate due to their lack of education and were keenly aware of the social capital that went with education. They understood their participation in FE would rectify this situation.

Barbara and Carol spoke of interruptions in their education. Their deep love of learning was evident in their narratives.  Their long-held aspiration to return to education was a primary motivator for their return to FE, but they had a frustrating wait until '*the time was right'.*

Improved employment opportunities and financial security were revealed as motivations by some participants' return to education. They understood that the academic qualifications awarded would enhance their employment opportunities and provide long-term financial security for themselves and their dependents. For example, Barbara said *'I need to be able to make money and I can't do it without a qualification.*' Carol shared that financially she wanted to be '*fully independent'.*

The desire to be a positive role model for their children was highlighted as a motivation also. For example, David said that his teenage son *'was partly why I came'* to FE and believes '*the best way is to lead by example'*. His son respected his Dad's reengagement with education and has been so influenced by this that he is enrolled in the same college next year.

The findings revealed that a combination of factors prompted the decision for mature students to reengage with education in FE and they all believed that the timing was right. However, vocational reasons and a long-held desire to return to learning were the most significant motivating factors reported.

## 3.2    Past educational/life experience.

It is important to understand how the participants have engaged with education in the past, prior to their reengagement in FE. This information helps us understand how these past experiences have influenced their perception of education and any concerns they had to overcome to reengage with education as an adult learner. The findings show a mixed response to this question. Two participants had very positive experiences in prior education. Barbara said secondary school was a '*really positive experience'* and that her teachers there were '*absolutely fantastic'*. Carol enjoyed school and loved learning, but family circumstances dictated she had to leave at 15 years of age. Angela said she initially struggled in secondary school but after a year or two that changed and she '*made really good friends*' and '*it got a bit easier'*.

Two participants, Eileen and David, had very different prior engagement with education. Eileen experienced physical and emotional abuse from teachers and was told she '*was useless*' and to '*go sit at the back of the class'*. Because of her past experiences Eileen articulated that she put up '*invisible barriers'* to enrolling in FE as she didn't think she was '*good enough'*. Even after the semester began she felt she '*didn't deserve to be here'* and that she had taken up somebody else's place. David was expelled from secondary school and felt that this incident changed his outlook on education and authority. His fear of academic failure is evident in his story. However, he overcame these sentiments and returned to education last year and achieved distinctions in all modules. This academic success gave him the confidence to progress to QQI Level 6 and to strongly consider progressing to HE.

The participants appear to make sense of their return to education in FE as a means to resolve unfinished business and to prove themselves worthy in society. For the participants with prior positive educational experiences (Angela, Barbara and Carol) this was less challenging

as they had a strong foundation to build upon. David and Eileen had to overcome negative experiences in school to reengage with education in FE. Despite initial teething problems in the early weeks of the semester all participants narrated very positive experiences in FE.

The participants shared the unanimous opinion that their life and work experiences have been a benefit to them on their starting FE.  Their time management skills and interpersonal skills helped, as did their ability to juggle multiple roles in their lives. Barbara believes she had more '*determination*' than when she was younger. Angela explains:

> *I was probably more organised than some of the younger students because I'm kinda used to having to be organised with my day and budget and time management. (Interviewee 1)*

They felt that the younger students didn't share some of their challenges and wished they shared in the simpler concerns of 'what their Mam cooked for dinner'.  Barbara felt that the younger students who weren't parents didn't share her guilt about not being with her son … *'they go home, and they have stuff, like a lot of them have part-time jobs, they do work.  But they've no emotional kind of pull that I would feel that I have.'*  However, despite the guilt felt by these parents about how their academic work took time away from family life they strongly believe they are viewed as good role models for their children and have passed on their enthusiasm for learning.

## 3.3    Challenges and support.

### 3.3.1    Challenges.

The participants spoke of challenges encountered as they made the transition to FE. It was an anxious time for all.  Angela describes how '*in the beginning, I sort of like I felt like an outsider'* and worried she wouldn't *'fit in'.*  Barbara explains how '*initially I was completely overwhelmed'* and feeling so isolated she ate lunch alone in her car. David said it's been '*tough*' coming back into a '*young world'* as a 37-year-old. Their narratives capture a profound sense of isolation.

They shared how their new role as a student affected their lives, having to balance competing responsibilities. For the single mothers (Barbara, Carol) especially, the time constraints of balancing college and child-care were immense. Their stories revealed financial struggles, fear of academic failure, feelings of guilt, frustrations and the constant balancing of their academic needs with the needs of others. For Angela, leaving a fulltime salary in retail management for

a back-to-education grant has been a big *'step down'* and a significant adjustment. The participants' desire to pursue education in FE meant significant personal sacrifice with limited time for social activities. These narratives illustrate that, despite juggling multiple roles, the participants' determination to succeed and achieve their academic goals propelled them to push through these barriers. They appeared rich in what Yosso (2005) terms as 'aspirational capital' and firmly believed that the short-term hardship was worth the long-term gain.

### 3.3.2   Support.

What arose from the findings was the united opinion that the teachers in FE were very supportive.  The participants appreciated extensions to assignment deadlines afforded to them by tutors if their family responsibilities affected them. They all expressed that recognition for their academic achievements was a significant source of support.

For example, interviewee 1 shared:

> *'It's really good to see like your year of hard work actually getting some recognition so that's been really good.'*

And interviewee 2:

> *'I got my anatomy and physiology assignment back and I got 95%.  I never got that in my whole life.  I couldn't believe it, 95% like'.*

It was clear that the feedback received was an important enabler for all the students. For example, Barbara said that the feedback received was '*really important to know you are doing it right*'.  The participants understood that the level of support and encouragement received from FE teachers had a very positive and significant impact on their experiences. Receiving recognition for their academic abilities was very important to the participants in this study as they believed it validified their decision to enrol in FE and made them feel they had a place there.

Support and friendship from peers was viewed as valuable in coping with the shared stresses experienced.  They reported having developed close-knit support networks with their peers and that they '*look after each other'*. The mature students gravitated towards each other during breaks as a source of encouragement. Support offered by family was viewed as very important.  This support was offered in both practical and emotional levels and the participants understood that it contributed to their persistence and progression in FE. The support received

from all sources allowed them to progress in their studies and it endowed them with confidence in their new social identity of adult learner.

### 3.3.3   Identity.

Despite the challenges endured by this study's participants to enrol and complete their courses in FE, the progression of their narratives is uplifting, inspiring and filled with optimism. As they approached the end of the academic year, they spoke of having '*new confidence'*, pride in their anticipated qualifications, having a sense of achievement and empowerment, and feeling 'worthy of society'.

The findings revealed significant personal growth and transformations in confidence levels. This has been demonstrated in different ways for each student, but it is a core theme in the findings.  This turning point in their stories begins before they enter the college doors at the beginning of the academic year to have enrolled and interviewed for their college place required a degree of confidence and determination.   Despite obstacles encountered along the way, this confidence has gained momentum as the academic year progressed and is reflected in their stories. Barbara's feeling of inadequacy for not having qualifications has vanished and she is proud of her achievements and new identity beyond that of a '*stay-at-home Mom'*. For Eileen, FE has given her '*a sense of where I am and what I am worth.*'

This new-found confidence has clearly influenced these students' aspirations for future education. The participants did not expressly come to FE as an access route to HE but as their confidence grew during the year this outlook changed. All of the participants are planning to progress to HE and were investigating practical arrangements in terms of finance and childcare to help them achieve this. Interviewee 4 said;

> '*If I go on to HE I have such a strong foundation from here, to be able to deal with it. Knowing I can deal with the workload now….and what's expected of you'.*

The participants of this study viewed FE as a location of significant learning for adults which offered them resources to flourish academically and as individuals. It has provided them with a sense of social validation.

# 4.  Discussion.

The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of mature students who returned to education in a college of FE and the sense they make of those experiences. It explores the narratives of the participants story about their decision to return to education, the obstacles they faced and the supports they drew on in FE. The findings from the narratives highlight that the participants' journey in FE has been a very positive experience which has led to increased confidence, significant personal growth, improvement in self-esteem, a sense of pride in their achievements and feelings of optimism for the future. The transformative power of engagement with education has been shown in their narratives. There is a sense that *'unfinished business'* has been dealt with.  Their motivations for reengagement with education are varied. The research uncovered that, despite challenges experienced on this journey, determination, resilience and support from numerous sources helped them prevail and consider their next learning opportunity.

## 4.1 Motivation.

The results of this study found that the motivations of mature students to reengage with education are varied and complex but generally followed a turning point in their lives such as unemployment or a change in caring responsibilities. These findings correlate with research by O'Shea (2007) which identified '*some sort of recent catalyst*' that triggers the decision to return to education. Hardiman's (2012) study also identified a sense of the participants' return to education happening at an '*opportune moment'*. Another motivation identified by my research was the fulfilment of a long-held ambition to return to learning and to complete *'unfinished business'*. Research by Fenge (2011) supports this finding and suggest that some mature students believe they have not been given the opportunity to realise their potential and view their return as a way of getting '*a second bite at the apple'*.

## 4.2 Past Experience Education/Life.

The findings of this study reported mixed past experiences in education.  For two participants (David and Eileen) their negative educational experiences in compulsory schooling impacted their direction in life and impeded them considering further study.  They felt unwelcome and insignificant and understood these experiences contributed to their low self-esteem and fear of

academic failure. These findings corroborate with Fenge's (2011) study in which all her participants depicted themselves as having difficult educational experiences which they believed led to limited opportunity. Reay's (2003) study of female-only participants, also conveys feelings of 'irrelevance', being 'unwelcome' and 'slipping through' when discussing prior educational experiences. It is of little surprise that adults who have negative prior experiences in school have 'fragile learner identities' as the results of this study suggest.

While the literature suggests that mature students often have negative experiences at school, this was not the case for the remaining three participants in this study who viewed their experiences as positive. The findings of this study suggest that the prior accumulation of life and work experiences by the mature students were beneficial to them in FE.

## 4.3 Challenges.

Numerous barriers to learning in FE were identified by the participants in this study. All of the participants have multiple roles and responsibilities outside college which had to be considered to accommodate their new role as student. Financial concerns were highlighted by all students. One unanticipated finding was that none of the participants were currently working part-time which resulted in severely restricted financial resources. Three participants specifically mentioned that finances may prevent them progressing to HE. Financial challenges are highlighted by Graham's (2015) study where almost half of the participants stated finances as one of the least enjoyable aspects of FE. Loss of potential earnings for mature students in FE, compared to school leavers, is more pronounced because a significant percentage of this cohort are likely to have dependents.

Time management was identified as a challenge in the results of this study. Students shared that they were juggling many roles in their lives. Three of the participants of this study have dependent children and this responsibility was highlighted as a barrier to study. Their new role as student had to compete with the long-established role of parent/caregiver. This finding agrees with Heenan's (2002) study which suggests that access to suitable, affordable childcare is a key problem. Furthermore, O'Shea et al. (2014) point out that this gendered role of carer results in '*internal conflict'* and '*constant juggling'*. Graham's (2015) study confirmed the same time management challenge experienced by her participants.

A feeling of isolation and not belonging in the first few months was reported in the study. The students understood this arose as their academic confidence was low and believed they didn't

fit into this learning community where the traditional students appeared more comfortable. It is vital that mature students transition quickly to being comfortable in FE as Thomas (2002) points out that '*If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate… they may be more inclined to withdraw early'*.  These feelings of isolation were resolved when they made peer friendships which provided much-needed support.

## 4.4 Support.

An important finding of the study was the value placed by the participants on the support received in FE, coming as it did from many sources.   The participants frequently brought up the role of teaching staff in making their educational experiences positive.  They believed the assistance and encouragement offered by the academic staff was significant to them in progressing in their studies.  Other researchers had similar findings. Graham's (2015) study of mature students in FE reported high levels of satisfaction from contact with teachers.  This also correlates with Hardiman (2012) whose participants described the relationship between themselves and teaching staff as '*very positive'* and based on '*mutual respect'*.

The results of this study also highlighted the importance of support provided by peer friendships. These friendships were a strong presence in the participants' lives, and they appreciated having peers who could relate to the stresses they faced.  This concurs with Steel et al. (2005), whose participants found that support from fellow mature students played a 'pivotal role*'* in their survival in the programme.  Stone's (2008) participants talked about the *'support', 'friendship'* and *'assistance'* received from peers and how it helped to *'keep them going'*.

### 4.4.1 Identity.

From these results, it appears all the participants have changed significantly during their journeys in FE. They have successfully negotiated the transition into FE and report a *'newfound confidence'*, feeling a huge sense of pride in their achievements and feeling *'worthy of society'*. This echoes O'Shea's (2016) study, who reported her participants felt stronger, wiser and more self-confident than when they began this journey.  Graham's (2015) study of FE mature students also reported evidence of 'significant' personal growth and a learning experience that 'extended beyond the course content'.  This confidence has been earned by positive experiences in FE, support from staff and peers and by resolving the fear of academic failure which came with the acknowledgement by teaching staff of their achievements throughout the year.

Research by Hardiman (2012) supports these findings too. His findings state that his participants frequently used the word 'confidence' when discussing academic work but it was clear to him that this confidence extended into other areas of their lives too.

It must be acknowledged that this study may be overly represented by positive stories as the volunteers recruited for this research are likely to be coping well with their studies in FE. There may be very different stories out there. Further research on students with less positive experiences would be of interest. What intervention by FET policies and procedures would increase mature student retention rates? This is an important issue for future research and it would interest educational policy-makers to know the answer to these questions, particularly if they are to fulfil the participation quota of a diverse student body which includes mature students. However, this data may be difficult to capture and innovative methods are needed to try to do this.

## 4.5 Limitations of the study.

This relatively small- scale research examined the experiences of mature students in only one FE college in Ireland may have limited generalisability. However, generalisability was not the aim of this study and its value is as a snapshot in time in one FE college. The narrative analysis proved a rich source of information and the findings are in line with other limited studies undertaken in Ireland in FE colleges. There was only one male participant compared to four female participants. This gender imbalance was unavoidable as the participants were recruited on a volunteer basis and from mainly female-dominated courses.

### 4.5.1 Future research.

Stemming from my study a number of possible areas for further research have been highlighted. This study was conducted during the final few weeks of the academic year. It would be interesting to conduct longitudinal research over the full academic year, capture initial experiences early in the first semester and then compare to those experiences at the end of the academic year. Also, further research could be undertaken with a larger sample covering FE colleges in other parts of the country and see if the findings mirror my study.

# 5.  Conclusion.

The research reported in this paper adopted a narrative approach to explore the experiences of mature students in a FE college in Ireland and to understand the sense they make of these experiences. The participants' stories describe the transformative nature of their experience as students. Their increase in confidence, possibilities for progression, a sense of pride in their success and 'unfulfilled business' (Reay et al., 2002) being resolved were narrated by all these students. They all reported their return to education in a FE college as being very positive and recognised it as a hugely life changing event. This study has shown that the reasons mature students return to education are as varied and complex as the cohort of students themselves. This study indicates that mature students used their prior engagement with education as their frame of reference.  For some participants, this was positive and for others it was the opposite. The findings report many challenges encountered in re-engaging with education and they narrated how they overcame these obstacles to achieve their academic aspirations. To date, very little is known about these 'second chance' learners (Cantwell et al. 2001) and their experiences in FE and my narrative inquiry-based research has added uniquely to this.  There is evidence of similarities between the findings in this study and the literature, mainly in HE, reviewed earlier.

# 6.  References.

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