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# A Life Course Perspective: Life Course Learning for Adult Learners in Higher Education

An examination of the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies and the BA in Applied Social Studies

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A thesis submitted September, 2018, to the School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Declaration**

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as otherwise acknowledged in the text. The material has not been submitted, either in whole or part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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Deirdre Hardiman

September, 2018

## **Abstract**

This research study examines the concept of the life course and why it may be considered an issue of critical importance in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners in higher education. By choosing to adopt a life course perspective this research seeks to understand the learning experiences of part-time adult learners in higher education within the context of wider society and changing social structures. It is imperative that the needs, expectations, voices and life realities of adult learners feature in the decision making, design and implementation of programmes of higher education. Higher education as an institution of society has a fundamental role to play in promoting the ideals of democracy, justice, and human rights in addition to contributing to the economic and social development of society as a whole. As the author is a practitioner within the field of adult education focusing on the ‘real world’ problem of the ‘lived life’ realities of adult learners in higher education, this study adopts a pragmatic research perspective utilising mixed methods research. The purpose of the research is to examine life course influences on adult learning in order to contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education through an examination of two part-time community education programmes: the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies and the BA in Applied Social Studies. Research findings are discussed in terms of messages to the adult learner, recommendations for higher education institutes, and suggestions for national and international educational policy makers influencing the development of wider civic society.

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“You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.” —*C. S. Lewis*

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction to the research**

Over the years the humanistic definition of lifelong learning as espoused by Fauré (1972) and Delors (UNESCO 1996) has been distilled to a more narrow understanding of learning for employment. In the context of globalisation, major socio-economic considerations and the rapid successive changes of late modernity, much of the debate in relation to lifelong learning centres on the need to prepare individuals in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century adequately for the challenges of the life course and highlights the need to re-conceptualize lifelong learning in order to do so (Slowey and Watson 2003). As noted by Slowey (2008) the predominance of economics as a core component of European Union (EU) lifelong learning perspectives and policies reflects a narrow understanding of learning and fails to take serious account of the changing demographics and life patterns in the developed world. Learning and educational opportunities must therefore be reflective of the life course of individuals and ultimately ‘lifelong learning policies must embrace a life course approach’ (Slowey 2008, p.2).

This research study examines the concept of the life course and why it may be considered an issue of critical importance in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners in higher education. By choosing to adopt a life course perspective this research seeks to understand the learning experiences of adult learners in higher education within the context of wider society and changing social structures. It is imperative that the needs, expectations, voices and life realities of adult learners feature in the decision making, design and implementation of programmes of higher education. Higher education as an institution of society has a fundamental role to play in promoting the ideals of democracy, justice, and human rights in addition to contributing to the economic and social development of society as a whole. Since the late 1990s both EU and National educational policies have largely supported a concept of lifelong learning which focuses on upskilling and re-training for the labour market to keep pace with the demands of the knowledge economy (Fleming *et al.* 2017). This has led to

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the increased recognition within higher education of the need to expand the range of part-time, blended, on-line, flexible and outreach programmes for adult learners. But what do adult learners actually require from higher education and what challenges does higher education face in order to encourage, promote and enhance learning opportunities and experiences for adult learners now and into the future? This research study will examine these questions in the context of exploring a life course approach to learning and education with a particular focus on part-time adult learners in higher education. In doing so, this study seeks to determine whether life course learning may in effect address the recognised need to reconceptualise lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The remainder of this chapter is organised into three sections. Section 1.2 outlines the background to the study and considers the need for research specific to part-time adult learners in higher education. Section 1.3 presents the aim and the four key objectives of the research study. The final section, section 1.4, provides a description of the structure of the thesis with a brief account of each of the seven chapters.

### **1.2 Background to the study**

According to Raymond Williams (1990, as cited by Schuller and Watson 2009), education has three core functions: ‘understanding change, adapting to change and shaping change’ (p.13). Learning to understand, adapt to and influence change ultimately empowers people to take control of their lives across ‘....different spheres: civil society, the workplace, the home’ and throughout the life course (Schuller and Watson 2009, p.13). Learning therefore, is more than simply about employability; it is about learning from life for life so as to acquire the knowledge and resilience to cope with life challenges, capture life chances and inform the progress of a changing society. For that reason, we must look, not only to the ‘University of life’ as a ‘school’ by which to acquire significant life learning (Field 2000, p.vii) but also to the role of formal education and, more particularly for the purposes of this research study, higher education, in contributing to

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maximising the learning potential of adult learners, beyond simply intellectual and professional development, but equally for the changing nature of the life course. Pollard concurs with this viewpoint stating; ‘To achieve higher quality learning, the implication in circumstances of widening student participation is that higher education courses have to become more meaningful in terms of students’ lives-as-lived and in relation to development through the life course’ (2003 p.178).

Much of the policy and practice of higher education has been informed by International, European and commercial bodies. The voices, needs, expectations and life realities of adult learners of all ages rarely feature in the decision making, design and implementation of programmes of higher education. In particular, very little is known about the learning needs, requirements, experiences and life circumstances of part-time adult learners (Hunt 2017, as cited in Fleming *et al.* 2017). As noted by Darmody and Fleming (2009) ‘...the absence of clear data or empirical research on part-time provision in Irish higher education institutions makes planning and policy difficult to formulate or interpret’ (p.67). This lack of evidence in addition to a corresponding lack of support for part-time learners returning to higher education is a recurring theme in Irish and European higher education and lifelong learning research studies (OECD 2003, 2004; Field 2006, 2009; Slowey 2008; Biesta *et al.* 2011). Of particular concern is the predominant emphasis within educational and lifelong learning policy of a discourse aligning economic growth with social cohesion (Appleby and Bathmaker 2006). Such discourse, according to Brine (2006), has the potential of creating two categories of learners; ‘...high knowledge-skilled learners (graduates/postgraduates) for the knowledge *economy* and low knowledge-skilled learners located in (or beyond) the knowledge *society*’ (p.649). This perspective limits the more humanistic and socially inclusive vision of lifelong learning to a much narrower view prioritising the acquisition of knowledge solely for the purposes of employability; by seeking to further enhance the skills of the ‘high knowledge-skilled learners’ and by extending the principle of widening participation in higher education for the ‘low knowledge-skilled learners’ for the purposes of the

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labour market. Essentially, those already highly qualified have greater available resources and are more likely to access further education and learning opportunities than those with more limited educational credentials (Darmody and Fleming 2009). This raises concerns about the distribution of educational opportunities within society and highlights the need for a more comprehensive provision of supports and programmes for all adult learners in higher education including enhanced opportunities through community education programmes for individuals and communities, traditionally excluded from accessing higher education.

In seeking to promote access to higher education, community education as a strategy: ‘builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy formulation within the community (Aontas 2000, pp.18-19). The ethos underpinning community education highlights the central importance of education in enabling communities, and the individuals within them, to acquire the critical skills and knowledge necessary to collectively bring about change and challenge structural inequalities (Aronowitz 2008; Finn 2015). Such responses by higher education institutions demonstrate the willingness of the sector to actively promote not just access routes to formal education but also alter the nature of relationship between higher education and wider society by challenging the ‘elitist’ dimension of tertiary education. However, the current economic crisis with severe and restrictive cutbacks within higher education and the prevailing market-orientated focus of government raises serious concern regarding the ‘democratisation’ of access to higher education for adult learners (Aronowitz 2008; Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Slowey and Scheutze 2012).

Having spent over 20 years as an educationalist with part-time adult learners as participants on community education programmes in higher education, the author had become increasingly aware of the need for research reflective of the voices and ‘lived life’ realities of adult learners. As the majority of professionals working with adult learners within higher education settings are employed in administrative categories they rarely engage in research, or

publish academic material (Finn 2015). As a result there is a recognised requirement for further research in this field and therefore the author seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge in relation to the learning needs and requirements of adult learners in higher education, from a life course perspective. Adopting a life course approach to the research (Elder 1985) ensures a more complete investigation of the individual learning experiences of adult learners; going beyond a focus on one particular life stage to consider the wider life course framed within changing socio-economic structures and historical events (Withnall 2006). Using biographical approaches in drawing on the experiences and lives of graduates from two part-time, adult learning community education programmes, namely: the *NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies* and the *BA in Applied Social Studies*, this study seeks to inform higher education policy and practice of the life course learning requirements of adult learners reflecting the personal, social and economic considerations of their lived realities.

### **1.3 Research study aim and objectives<sup>1</sup>**

The aim of this research study is to examine life course influences on adult learning in order to contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education, through an examination of two community education programmes: the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies and the BA in Applied Social Studies, thereby establishing the challenges and considerations which may emerge to inform future learning policy and practice.

The core objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the concept of the life course in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners with a particular focus on higher education

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<sup>1</sup> In the interests of protecting the identity of the research participants, it was considered ethically appropriate to anonymize the titles of the programmes and the University.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

2. To determine the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education
3. To contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by adult learning experiences in an Irish Context
4. To review life course learning in the context of higher education policy and practice to identify potential considerations for the adult learner, higher education institutions and wider civic society.

By choosing to adopt a life course perspective incorporating biographical approaches this research seeks to ensure that the voices, perspectives and lived lives of adult learners directly inform national and international educational policy. The target population for the purposes of this study are part-time adult learners (usually categorised within higher education as non-traditional students) who have graduated from one or both of the aforementioned part time community education programmes in higher education (applicants for these programmes must be over 21 years in order to meet University criteria for adult education part-time programmes). This study seeks to redress the dearth of empirical research on part-time adult learners in higher education in order to ensure that higher educational policy and practice becomes reflective of the specific needs of this diverse student cohort and effectively responds to the challenge of the unequal distribution of educational opportunity in Irish society.

### **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis involves seven chapters, including this introductory chapter one which outlines the context, purpose, aim, and objectives of the research study. Chapter two provides a review of the body of literature setting the contextual framework for this research study. It is divided into four sections. Section 2.2 examines the first theme, the concept of lifelong learning. It reviews literature on the evolution of this complex concept in order to attain a more in-depth understanding of lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Section 2.3 considers the theme of higher education and adult learners,

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particularly in the context of national and international lifelong learning policy. It examines the challenges facing adult learners entering higher education and the corresponding factors for consideration for higher education institutions in terms of responding to the needs and requirements of this diverse student body within a rapidly changing society. Section 2.4 considers the university institutional context framing lifelong learning provision in University X as the host site of this study. Lastly, section 2.5 provides further detail regarding both programmes pertinent to this study and the diverse grouping of adult learners partaking of same

Chapter three provides a review of the body of literature pertinent to the theoretical framework for this research study. It is divided into four sections. Section 3.2 explores the concept of learning and investigates different theories of learning including adult development and learning theories in order to achieve a greater comprehension of the learning process. Section 3.3 concentrates on life course learning as a potential reconceptualization of lifelong learning. It provides an overview of literature in relation to the life course concept and outlines different theories and contradictory perspectives in relation to the nature of the life course. It then considers the inter-disciplinary, multi-level focus of life course research and describes key principles that frame such research in advance of discussing the potential of life course learning. Lastly, section 3.4 reviews the social research theoretical considerations informing this research study. This chapter concludes with a description of a tentative conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by the critical learning from this theoretical literature review. This conceptual model will also serve as an analytical framework to guide both the research design and subsequent analysis.

Chapter four outlines the research methodology and research methods selected for the purposes of attaining the aims and objectives of this research study. It is divided into four sections. Section 4.2 revisits the rationale, aims and objectives of the study. Section 4.3 discusses the design of the research study. It begins by exploring the concept of the life course in the context of this research with a particular focus on biographical processes

## Chapter 1: Introduction

in examining the learning experiences of adult learners. It then reviews the three capitals of learning concept identified by Schuller and Watson (2009) as a classification of different dimensions of learning pertinent to the nature of this research study. This is followed by an outline of the author's research position and the corresponding opportunities and challenges of this position with regard to the final choice and design of data gathering tools particular to this study. Section 4.4 focuses on the implementation of the research study, reviewing the research recruitment process, issues of ethical concern and processes of data collection and data analysis. The final section, section 4.5, identifies the limitations of the study within a wider context of potential mitigations for same.

Chapter five presents the findings in relation to the research study. The core findings of the research are provided in the context of the four key research objectives; section 5.2 focuses on objective one, and the corresponding secondary data findings in relation to the concept of the life course in the context of higher education teaching and learning policy from an adult learner perspective. Section 5.3 presents data collected specific to objective two focusing on two quantitative surveys identifying key themes relevant to adult life course learning experiences. Section 5.4 outlines the data collated through qualitative interviews reflecting the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education. Lastly, section 5.5 provides a summary of key findings and an initial review of objective four in relation to policy and practice considerations of an emergent model of life course learning for the adult learner, higher education and wider civic society.

Chapter six elaborates on the research findings presented in chapter five and examines these findings by returning to the tentative model of life course learning identified in chapter three (theoretical literature review). As previously noted, the greater part of the findings detailed in chapter five related to objectives one to three as objective four, which seeks to examine the policy and practice considerations of an emergent model of life course learning, was deemed to be more suited for consideration within chapter six. This discussion chapter therefore, expands on the findings from objectives one to three framed both within the tentative model of life course learning

and the three categories of consideration specific to objective 4: (i) the adult learner (*micro*), (ii) higher education (*meso*), and (iii) wider civic society (*macro*), corresponding to the multi-level nature of the life course concept.

### **1.5 Summary**

This chapter has outlined the context and purpose of this research study. As noted the overarching aim of this study is to examine life course influences on adult learning in order to contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education through an examination of two community education programmes. The four research objectives as outlined expand on the aim of the research and it is intended that the outcome of this research will ensure that the voices, perspectives and lived lives of adult learners directly inform national and international educational policy. In accordance with the thesis structure outlined, the next chapter presents the body of literature setting the contextual framework for this research study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review: Contextual Framework**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a review of the body of literature setting the contextual framework for this research study. It is divided into four sections. Section 2.2 examines the first theme, the concept of lifelong learning. It reviews literature on the evolution of this complex concept in order to attain a more in-depth understanding of lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Section 2.3 considers the theme of higher education and adult learners, particularly in the context of national and international lifelong learning policy. It examines the challenges facing adult learners entering higher education and the corresponding factors for consideration for higher education institutions in terms of responding to the needs and requirements of this diverse student body within a rapidly changing society. Section 2.4 considers the university institutional context framing lifelong learning provision in University X as the host site of this study. Lastly, section 2.5 provides further detail regarding both community education programmes pertinent to this study and the diverse grouping of adult learners partaking of same.

### **2.2 Lifelong learning**

‘We should no longer assiduously acquire knowledge once and for all, but learn how to build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through life – ‘learn to be’ (Fauré *et al.*1972, p.vi).

A simple understanding of lifelong learning reveals a literal translation: learning throughout life. The focus is not on ‘schooling’ or ‘formal education’, but ‘learning’ as an essential component of life and living across the whole of the life-span.

Lifelong learning is built around two axes: a vertical one which relates to the truism that people learn not just while they are young, but over the whole of their lives; and a horizontal axis which relates to the fact that active and purposeful learning takes place not only in formal educational

## Chapter 2: Literature Review: Contextual Framework

institutions such as schools or universities, but also in the workplace, in the community, in different social environments as well as through individual non-formal study

(Schuetze and Slowey 2012, p.3)

From birth to death individuals learn, intentionally or unintentionally, across a spectrum of different contexts; family, community, work, civic and social. The simplicity of the idea of lifelong learning may be ideal: a life of learning, but similar to many ideals, it becomes increasingly complex in the transition to practice.

In truth, the scope, range, breadth and depth of documentation, policies, programmes, and definitions specific to lifelong learning highlight the complexities of this concept, reflecting varying historical, political, economic, cultural and even global considerations. Despite the diversity of discourse with regard to lifelong learning, growing evidence would suggest a common agreement that ‘...a one off dose of school and college will not serve to get you through life’s many challenges and opportunities’ (Field 2006, p.1). The central tenet therefore of lifelong learning, within the simplest and most complex definitions, is learning: formal, non-formal and informal, for life.

Learning provides opportunities to individuals to develop the capacity to integrate new experiences and adapt to new situations. We seek to learn because learning enables us to change, sustain and improve our skills, knowledge and attitudes across the lifespan.

(Medel-Anonuevo *et al.* 2001, p.12)

The ability to learn continually, to acquire new information, knowledge, ideas, skills and dispositions as learners, is considered to be a precondition to cope with the demands of change and flexibility now regarded as commonplace within modern society (Field 2006; Schuetze 2012). In this context lifelong learning has the potential to shape the lives of every member of society; the degree to which this may be positive or negative will be largely determined by the dominant conceptualisation of lifelong learning. A restrictive or narrow conceptualisation will carry major implications for learning policies and learners. Much of the literature in relation to lifelong learning centres on the ‘struggle for definition’,

specifically with regard to ‘what counts as lifelong learning and, more importantly, about what counts as *worthwhile* lifelong learning’ (Field 2012, cited in Jarvis and Watts 2012, p.177; emphasis in original). What follows therefore provides a critical examination of the genealogy of lifelong learning in an effort to trace its evolution so as to attain a more comprehensive understanding of lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### ***2.2.1 Lifelong learning: An international and European policy context***

The concept of lifelong learning has been contested and challenged since its apparent origin. Attaining common agreement as to the exact source of origin is itself a matter of vigorous debate. Nevertheless, discourse predominantly identifies a landmark report, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), entitled *Learning to be* (Fauré *et al.* 1972) as being of seminal importance to the birth of lifelong education and learning (Jarvis and Watts 2012; Schuetze 2012; Field and Leicester 2000). This report was based on four assumptions: first, that the international community, despite its obvious diversity, has ‘common aspirations, problems and trends’; second, it centres on a belief in democracy, with education as the keystone to enabling each individual to develop to his/her ‘own potential’; third, that the aim of development necessitates the complete fulfilment of each individual; and fourth, that only lifelong education can produce a complete individual, ‘the need for whom is increasing with the continually more stringent constraints tearing the individual asunder’ (Fauré *et al.* 1972, p.vi). These interwoven assumptions advocated for the right of the individual to learn for his /her development throughout life, from a holistic perspective, not solely for employment purposes. But it also emphasised the core significance of lifelong education within educational policy as the foundation to promote the participation of the individual in civic and social life, thereby directly contributing to a just, equitable and vibrant democracy.

Every individual must be in a position to keep learning throughout his life. The ideal of lifelong education is the keystone of the learning society. The lifelong concept covers all aspects of education, embracing everything in it, with the whole being the sum of its parts. There is no such thing as a

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separate “permanent” part of education which is not lifelong. In other words, lifelong education is not an educational system but the principle in which the over-all organization of a system is founded, and which according underlies the development of each of its component parts.

(Fauré *et al.* 1972, pp.181-182)

*Learning to Be* championed a comprehensive and visionary perspective on learning throughout life. This perspective was further developed by UNESCO in 1996, with the publication of *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors 1996), which identified four key objectives of learning:

...learning to know, that is acquiring the instruments of understanding; learning to do, as to be able to act creatively on one’s environment; learning to live together, so as to participate and co-operate with other people in all human activities; and learning to be, an essential progression which proceeds from the previous three. ... (F)ormal education has traditionally focused mainly, if not exclusively, on learning to know and to a lesser extent on learning to do. The two others are to a large extent left to exchange, or assumed the natural product of the two former.

(p.86)

All four learning objectives were deemed essential to the concept of lifelong learning, ultimately leading to the visualisation of a ‘learning society’: a society actively supporting and enabling all individuals to attain personal fulfilment through a life of learning. In doing so this concept of lifelong learning countered the perceived need to ‘front load’ learning in the early years of life through formal educational institutions, however, it highlighted the significance of all learning, including but not exclusive to traditional education structures, across the lifespan (Slowey and Watson 2003; Field 2006).

In 1996, however, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) produced a report on lifelong learning, *Lifelong Learning for All*. This report, while giving consideration to the social dimension of learning, particularly with reference to promoting social cohesion, primarily espoused the economic rationale of lifelong learning as essential in order to ‘respond directly to the need to improve the capacity of individuals, families, workplaces and communities to continuously adapt and renew’ (OECD 1996, p.3). Learning, accordingly, should become an essential component for the building of a ‘knowledge economy’; promoting

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the economic management of knowledge in the development of a highly trained, flexible, workforce, capable of adapting to the many challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing society. ‘Lifelong learning was thus highlighted as a potential tool in the drive for ‘modernisation’ and ‘development’ with the economic imperative of education and training being to the fore’ (Schuetze 2012, p.7).

The theme of learning as a core instrument for economic development and employability was equally lauded in a succession of European Union (EU) policy documents throughout the 1970s and into the 1990s (e.g. ‘Recurrent Education’ in 1973 by the OECD and ‘L’education permanente’ in 1981 by the Council of Europe. The publication of the European Commission’s (EC) White Paper on *Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society* in 1995, subsequently followed by the declaration of 1996 as the ‘European Year of Lifelong Learning’, consolidated a vision of lifelong learning as a primary force in seeking to attain European economic competitiveness (Slowey 2008; Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007; Field 2006). The concepts of lifelong learning and the ‘learning society’ became implicit within EC public policy discourse, but a particular emphasis with regard to the development of a knowledge economy took precedence with the formulation of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 (EC). This strategy outlined a framework of action until 2010, detailing key priority objectives so as ‘to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (European Council 2000). The pursuit of a knowledge-based economy continued with the publication of the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (EC 2000). While conceding to the social justice objectives of learning, the ‘Memorandum’ essentially reinforced the dominant economic reasoning of investing in human capital through the promotion of lifelong learning. This perspective, largely based on human capital theory, assumes that the promotion of access to, and opportunities for, lifelong learning, will bring economic benefits for wider society. The main idea of the theory of human capital is that educational provision at an individual level is an investment in human capital which

allows the individual to contribute to society in a productive way. As Becker (1992, p.88) notes:

Human capital analysis assumes that schooling raises earnings and productivity mainly by providing knowledge, skills, and a way of analysing problems. An alternative view, however, denies that schooling does much to improve productivity, and instead it stresses "credentialism"-that degrees and education convey information about the underlying abilities, persistence, and other valuable traits of people.

The theory of human capital featured strongly within European educational policy and continues to do so over a decade later (Slowey 2008). Further policy documents were subsequently issued in 2001, notably *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (EC), which primarily detailed a set of guidelines for member states regarding the development of educational policy-making. Additionally in 2002, the Commission issued a *Resolution on Lifelong Learning* inviting member states to develop national lifelong learning strategies. The six priority actions of the Resolution, considered crucial to the development of lifelong learning systems in member states, echoed the key messages of the Memorandum and form the basis of current EU policy making on lifelong learning (Slowey 2008). The six priority actions are:

1. the provision of access to lifelong learning for all, regardless of age, with specific actions for disadvantaged and under-represented groups in education and training;
2. the provision of opportunities to acquire/ update basic skills, such as IT, languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills;
3. the provision of training, recruitment and updating of teachers and trainers for lifelong learning
4. the promotion of a method of effective validation and recognition of formal qualifications, as well as non-formal and informal learning;
5. the provision of access to high quality target group specific information, guidance and counselling concerning lifelong learning benefits and opportunities;

6. the need to encourage the representation of relevant sectors, including the youth sector, in established and future networks (Adapted from EC 2001).

These six actions underpin a European framework of lifelong learning primarily seeking to attain a knowledge-based society (Slowey 2008; Morgan-Klein and Osborne 2007). The degree to which Europe has been successful in doing so, as initially envisaged by the Lisbon strategy and then reinforced more recently with the publication of the Europe 2020, Education and Training strategy (EU 2010) in the midst of the worst economic crisis in decades, remains to be seen. But this predominant economic perspective continues to inform and influence the development and implementation of European lifelong learning policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***2.2.2 Lifelong learning in Ireland***

Any consideration of lifelong learning in Ireland must take cognisance of the dramatic economic upheaval the country has experienced over the past decade. Ireland, traditionally, had been a country of net emigration, largely due to poor employment opportunities and high unemployment rates. The onset of the ‘boom’, primarily driven by construction and an unsustainable property market, reversed such trends leading to a country of net immigration, economic growth and high employment. It was a short lived experience, followed by a deep recession, compounded by the disintegration of the banking sector, a crisis within public finances and high unemployment rates of 14.8% (CSO Oct 2012), which would have been higher had it not been for the new generation of people emigrating in search of work (Schuetze and Slowey 2012). It is against this background that the theme of lifelong learning in Ireland is explored, tracing past history to present reality.

Historically, Ireland has had a strong community- based adult education sector underpinned by high levels of volunteerism. As a consequence, social forces have always been viewed as key drivers, alongside the economic forces at play, in the promotion of the lifelong learning agenda.

(Maunsell *et al.* 2008, p. 1)

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This strong voluntary, community-based tradition is deemed significant within two important documents: The Green Paper on Adult Education, *Adult education in an era of Lifelong learning* (Department of Education and Science 1998) and the subsequent White Paper, *Learning for life* (Department of Education and Science 2000), with both papers contributing to Ireland's most comprehensive policy development on lifelong learning. The national commitment to lifelong learning became a 'governing principle' of education policy in Ireland as the rationale for investment in lifelong learning was based not;

...entirely on economic considerations and issues of disadvantage, but also on the role of learning in creating a more democratic and civilised society by promoting culture, identity and well-being and by strengthening individuals, families and communities.

(DES 1998, p.16, cited in Maunsell *et al.* 2008)

Therefore, while recognising the economic rationale for lifelong learning, as per the EU lifelong learning agenda, the key policy objectives of the White Paper prioritised the issue of social cohesion, involving the promotion of active citizenship and social capital through personal and community development (Maunsell *et al.* 2008; Nussbaum 2010). Access to learning was considered essential to enable individuals to participate fully within both society and the economy so as to counter social exclusion and promote social stability. Three core principles underpinned the development of lifelong learning in an Irish context: *equality*, of access, participation and outcome in education for adult learners; a *lifecycle* approach to educational policies; and *inter-culturalism*, the need to promote diversity in educational policy in order to respond to a changing population (DES 2000).

Although the policy context of lifelong learning in Ireland espoused the need to promote social inclusion through the provision of lifelong learning, statistics during and post the economic 'prosperity' of the so-called Celtic Tiger would appear to suggest otherwise. While tremendous wealth was created during this time, from 1996 to 2007, 'relative poverty at the height of Ireland's boom persisted at 20 per cent of the population' (O'Connor 2010). Figures presented by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for 2006,

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indicated that 38% of the population over the age of 15 had not completed second level education. A report published by the OECD in 2006 recommended that Ireland ‘improve skills and training among all workers, but especially so for older workers’ (p.108). The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 2009 equally noted that;

The consequences of our relatively late investment in secondary and higher education are still evident in the educational profile of our older adult population, which remains poor by international standards. This weakness is compounded by our similarly poor performance in lifelong learning.

(HEA 2009, p. 4)

The need to improve Ireland’s lifelong learning performance was echoed in the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013* (HEA 2008) in which the Irish government set a target of attaining EU average levels for lifelong learning at 12.5% by 2010. A mid-term review of this plan, however, indicated that ‘...no improvement has been recorded on participation in lifelong learning among 25 to 64 year olds as defined by Eurostat. In fact the rate has declined over the period 2006-2010’ (Mallon and Healy 2012, p.27). The rates officially fell during this period from 7.3% in 2006 to 6.7% in 2010 (Eurostat 2010). Concern regarding Ireland’s poor performance in lifelong learning in comparison to other EU countries was also reiterated within the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES 2011), which questioned the flexibility of the Irish higher education system and emphasised the need for urgency and a much greater focus on lifelong learning and up-skilling in view of the scale of unemployment and the changing patterns of work. This perspective, essentially promoting ‘vocational’ lifelong learning, directly linked to labour market activation, reflects a much narrower conceptualization of lifelong learning than that espoused within the White Paper. Certainly, the ideology of lifelong learning within Irish policy development corresponds to a holistic humanist perspective, and there is clear evidence that the Irish government are seeking to pursue a lifelong learning agenda (Maunsell *et al.* 2008). However, the focus of this agenda would appear to be predominantly weighted towards supporting an economic rationale for learning, a viewpoint reinforced by Judge (2005), who stated that; ‘An over emphasis

on the human capital approach, employability and economic progress is evident, reflected in how resources are allocated and programmes are designed' (p.31). In view of the patterns to date and the wider context of the current economic crisis with corresponding pressure on public finances, the concept of lifelong learning as depicted within Irish educational policy may become more aspirational than real.

### ***2.2.3 Lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

Lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reveals a marked departure from the democratic, social justice and equitable model of lifelong learning proposed in the 1970s and early 1980s. According to Schuetze and Casey (2006), despite some similarities, the concept of lifelong learning proposed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century clearly demonstrates 'a shift from the emancipatory-utopian or social justice concept to a market-oriented model, from an understanding of opening up access to and participation in education as a means of achieving a more egalitarian society to a strategy of adjusting workers' skills to the requirements of changing production processes and global market conditions' (p.282). Yet this divergence does not infer one clear distinctive categorisation or definition of lifelong learning, but essentially an all-encompassing banner or label housing a variety of models of education and learning which reflects competing interests and perspectives in relation to the organisation of work, political culture and visions of society (Schuetze and Casey 2006). A note of caution, however, is necessary with regard to the potential complexities hidden behind the requisite simplification of a label: 'As with all labels there is a variable correspondence with the true content of the packet. It is therefore of crucial importance to look closely at the content rather than the label' (Schuetze and Casey 2006, p.287).

Gewirtz (2008) seeks to unpack some of the content of contemporary discourse on lifelong learning and in doing so identifies four discourses about learning reflecting different ideological perspectives. These discourses, namely: personal fulfilment (liberal), citizenship (political), social inclusion/social justice (social) and work related learning (vocational); may be combined in various ways to contribute to a concept of

lifelong learning within a learning society. Variations therefore of all four discourses may be found in documentation and public policy relevant to the learning society and may be directly linked to ‘three contrasting sociological approaches: theories of reflexive modernity, neo-Marxist critiques of contemporary economic change, and post structuralist theories of governmentality’ (Gewirtz 2008, p.416). While each of these approaches illustrates different perspectives of the learning society and the individual, they may be considered as both competing and complementary, forming the basis of much critique of the learning society and thereby worthy of further consideration.

Reference to theories of reflexive modernity emphasise persistent change, risk and uncertainty as core features of contemporary life, often referred to as ‘late modernity’ (Giddens, 1991). Within this ‘Risk Society’ (Beck 1992), institutions and individuals must consistently question self and society, make endless choices, adapt to on-going change, embrace new information and effectively reinvent themselves in the absence of ‘inherited templates, established knowledge or undisputed authority’ (West, 2004 cited in Gewirtz 2008, p.416). Giddens (1991), argued that this need for ‘reflexivity’: the need to perpetually examine, interrogate, ceaselessly review and seek to reinvent self, is necessary in order to respond to the pace and pervasiveness of change. Institutional and individual identity is no longer something that can be ‘given’ but is ‘something that has to be routinely created and sustained’ (Giddens 1991, cited in Field 2006, p. 177). This concept of reflexivity is a dominant theme in much of the discourse of lifelong learning and the learning society (Gewirtz 2008), as it highlights the perspective that initial education is no longer adequate and that learning throughout life is essential in order to cope with the change process and uncertainties of contemporary society. This viewpoint is reiterated by Edwards, Steward and Strain (2002, p.527), who state that:

...while policies for lifelong learning focus on the accumulation of skills and qualifications as an adaptation to change and uncertainty, a less passive notion of learning, one more consonant with the needs of civic participation and of agents capable of autonomously generating change for themselves, requires the development of reflexivity....Our contention here is that in order to engage with the (dis)locations associated with change

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processes, learning itself needs to become reflexive, to be part of the 'life politics' of individuals, organisations and societies.

They expand further to emphasise that many current educational policies reflect more conventional views of learning as the 'transmission and acquisition of knowledge and skills' (p. 527), which effectively appears to reinforce educational inequality and the 'exclusionary consequences' for non-participants rather than seeking to identify the factors contributing to exclusion. It is only 'through self and social questioning (reflexivity) that people are able to engage with and (en) counter – be affected by but also affect –contemporary uncertainties' (Edwards *et al.* 2002, p.527).

Neo-Marxist critiques of lifelong learning focus on the economic capitalisation of learning; in this context the marketplace dominates, the primary focus centres on profit and the training, retraining and employability of individuals for the labour market. According to this perspective

...not only must individuals be trainable, they must also see themselves as responsible consumers of, and participants in, their own learning; they must be ready to seek out and invest in those learning opportunities that will best enhance their own employability.

(Gewirtz, 2008, p.417)

Field (2003) suggests that the neo-Marxist perspective on lifelong learning is widely held by policy makers internationally because it is in keeping with the main justifications offered for lifelong learning:

...it is widely alleged that lifelong learning policies are being used to channel the education of adults into a set of reductionist and utilitarian practices that are designed to serve crude economic goals in the interests of a competitive global capitalism.

(Field 2003, p.70).

While he accepts aspects of the neo-Marxist explanation of lifelong learning, he also highlights a number of problems with this perspective including the fact that evidence would suggest that government and other state agencies have promoted on-going training rather than employers. Likewise, it assumes a largely passive and gullible population who may be considered objects of policy making, without considering why they may

have accepted this policy or considered it to be worthwhile. Lastly, it assumes that lifelong learning offers no ‘emancipatory potential’ (Field 2003).

The third sociological approach for consideration with regard to lifelong learning relates to post-structuralist theories of governmentality. On this subject, Gewirtz (2008) refers to the theories of Rose (1989) with regard to the differences between government and governance, specifically in the context of advanced liberal democracies involving the ‘rejection of the *social state* “where the political apparatus and its functionaries take the responsibility in arranging the affairs of the nation” to an *enabling state* that governs without governing “society”’ (Gewirtz, 2008, p.417). The enabling state seeks to promote individual autonomy and responsibility but in doing so is both liberating and restrictive as it promotes other forms of social control. For example, in relation to learning policy, it promotes self-determination and self-actualisation but discounts ‘ideas of mutuality and collective social action’ (Gewirtz 2008, p.417).

Each of the three sociological approaches outlined above illustrates the scope of debate, argument, contemplation and possible cynicism attributed to the concept of lifelong learning. Elements of all three are evident within current critiques of the learning society. Much discussion centres on the impact of globalisation on lifelong learning, not solely in terms of seeking to respond to the pace of technological and scientific advances, but also with regard to the growth of ‘a political movement towards trade liberalisation and market deregulation, sometimes referred to as neoliberalism’ (Riddle *et al.* 2012, p.2). Rizvi and Lingard (2011) argue that neo-liberal economic policies have underpinned educational policy in the last 20 years, focusing on promoting individual employability and striving for enhanced economic competitiveness within a globalised market. According to Crowther (2004), lifelong learning within the context of this neo-liberal agenda is essentially a form of social control, encouraging individual compliance and adaptability to a consumer-based market within an era of ‘flexible capitalism’. He emphasises the need to be cautious in view of increasing government support for lifelong learning policies potentially masking a hidden agenda,

not so much vocationalist, but more predominantly controlling. He argues that:

Lifelong learning diminishes the public sphere, undermines educational activity, introduces new mechanisms of self-surveillance and reinforces the view that failure to succeed is a personal responsibility. It is ultimately a “deficit discourse”, which locates the responsibility of economic and political failure at the level of the individual, rather than at the level of systemic problems.

(Crowther 2004, p.125)

In doing so, it serves to undermine collective voice and action attributing failure or inefficiency, to the individual citizen/consumer, with the propensity to carry consequences for both the individual and society in the grip of a powerful globalised economy (Crowther 2004; Field 2006).

Concern with regard to the potential of neoliberal economic policies to create a compliant citizenry in pursuit of economic competitiveness can also be extended to incorporate the possible effect on social cohesion (Nussbaum 2010). In a review of lifelong learning in Europe, Riddell *et al.* (2012), argue that neo-liberal policies contribute to increasing levels of economic inequality which in turn has the potential to undermine social cohesion. Green (2011) concurs with this perspective and states that ‘education and training are major determinants of an individual’s life chances, not only in employment, but also in terms of broader social outcomes’ (p.228). Social cohesion, he argues, is not so much related to average levels of education overall, but more specifically about the distribution of education and training skills, as unequal skills outcomes impact negatively on social trust and thereby cohesion. Access to education and training opportunities particularly in relation to formal education is largely determined by family circumstances, financial, emotional and otherwise. Such circumstances impact either positively or negatively on the educational experience, the point of completion of same and the future potential to for re-engagement. Jenkins (2018) highlights the impact of a number of related variables on formal educational participation:

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Patterns of participation in formal education, it is argued, are determined to a considerable extent by variables such as gender, social class, initial schooling and parental attitudes to learning.

(Jenkins 2018, p.245)

This viewpoint is re-iterated by Swain and Hammond (2011) who argue that educational processes over the individual life-span are determined by previous access to formal education, particularly in relation to the experience of initial formal education, as subsequent individual life decisions are strongly shaped on the basis of educational achievements. Similar research undertaken by Shafi and Rose (2014) focusing on relationships between initial education and returning to education later in life, identified the importance of recognising ‘opportunities’. As part of this research they present an interesting perspective relevant to ‘agency’ as a factor in returning to education by emphasising the importance of life experience in acquiring the confidence to recognise and take up opportunities: arguing that ‘...an opportunity is only an opportunity, to the extent that an individual feels ready to be able to take on the challenges presented with it’ (p.221). While recognising that, historically, formal education and training systems have been core to the reproduction of social class structures, Riddell *et al.* (2012) emphasise the role of lifelong learning as having the ‘potential to amplify or ameliorate inequality in economic, social and cultural domains’ (p.9). Research studies (Lynch *et al.* 1998; Baker *et al.* 2009; Fragosa 2014; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2016; Fleming *et al.* 2017) also indicate that returning to education as an adult learner has a positive effect as a parent on children’s attitude towards education enhancing an intergenerational “transmission” of education and educational levels. This finding is consistent with research undertaken by Churchill and Clarke (2009) who in their review of parenting education argue that the learning environment in the home created by parents and family has a significant effect on children’s academic achievements and subsequent relationships with formal education.

The relationship between lifelong learning, equality and social cohesion and the corresponding implications for the economy remain central themes

of investigation with regard to lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In truth, much of the critique of current lifelong learning policy stresses the importance of greater balance and interconnectedness of the key functions of lifelong learning; essentially, this means giving equal value to the generation of human capital, social capital and identity capital. This perspective is underlined by Riddell *et al.* (2012, p.6), who argue that all three functions are crucial and by no means mutually exclusive:

First, lifelong learning is seen as a generator of human capital, enabling states and individuals to maintain their economic competitiveness by constantly updating skills and competences. Second, lifelong learning is seen as a generator of social capital, bringing people together to engage in a shared endeavour that nurtures collective identity in an increasingly fragmented and individualised world. ....Third, lifelong learning is seen as playing a key role in the European liberal education tradition, in which learning is valued for its own sake and is seen as a means of attaining personal growth and development, as well as contributing to the social good.

In considering lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the question remains as to what extent equal weighting is actually awarded to the core functions outlined above and equally, how genuinely can one trust that the more holistic, humanist language detailed in the majority of EU and National lifelong learning policy documentation will be reflected in the reality of practice.

### **2.2.4 Conclusion**

Lifelong learning is a vague, complex and contested concept. Nonetheless, the complexity of this concept, at least in respect to the development of current policy could possibly be distilled to uncover a basic conflict (Brine, 2006): a conflict between the development of a model of lifelong learning promoting social justice, equity and emancipation, to one that promotes the development of human capital for economic competitiveness. Literature would suggest that much of the EU's policy on lifelong learning reflects this on-going tension, more specifically in relation to actual priority and practice than necessarily policy (Riddell *et al.* 2012). Despite the optimistic humanist perspective of lifelong learning as outlined in the 1970s, more recent debate on lifelong learning raises concerns for the future. The arguments for and against lifelong learning ultimately centre on the

prevailing definition of the concept, not so much in relation to the language, but rather the chosen interpretation of same. On the basis of this literature review the author concludes that the potential of lifelong learning as espoused in the 1970s remains a possibility, even if it is considered to be somewhat ambitious in the context of neo-liberal economic policies. A more equitable, just, economically sound society, which promotes personal development and social cohesion, is not beyond the bounds of the possible. Lifelong learning has a fundamental role to play in achieving this vision, but it requires an evenly balanced perspective in relation to the promotion of social, human and identity capital, within a wider framework of reflexivity. Learning to question society and self, to be reflexive throughout the life course, to equally acquire the necessary knowledge and skills so as to understand, adapt to and influence change (Williams 1990) must now take precedence in lifelong learning into the future.

Higher education as an institution of society has a specific role to play in the promotion of lifelong learning through the provision of formal learning for adult learners. Section 2.3 therefore moves on to examine higher education policy and practice in Irish society with a specific focus on the needs and requirements of adult learners.

### **Key points: Lifelong Learning**

- Lifelong learning is a complex concept with much discussion focussing on the ‘struggle for definition’
- The more humanistic vision of lifelong learning originally espoused by UNESCO in the 1970s has become distilled to a predominant economic orientation by a series of EU policy iterations
- Whilst lifelong learning within Irish policy development corresponds to a holistic humanist perspective the focus of this agenda appears to be predominantly weighted towards supporting an economic rationale for learning

- Much of the critique of lifelong learning policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century centres on the need for greater balance of all the key functions of lifelong learning; giving equal value to the generation of human capital, social capital and identity capital

### 2.3 Higher education and adult learners

... higher education has been slow to adapt its mission, structure and understanding of knowledge and learning - in short, its culture - to the demands for a more open, flexible and egalitarian system.

(Slowey and Schuetze 2012, p.4)

How relevant is higher education to the global issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? How responsive is it to the learning requirements of adult learners from a life course perspective? How accessible is higher education to adults? Why do adult learners choose or choose not to participate in higher education and what challenges does higher education face in order to encourage, promote and enhance learning opportunities and experiences for adult learners now and into the future? In the context of rapid economic, social, political and technological change, whereby traditional life course patterns; such as the notion of a job for life, have become uncertain, unstable and increasingly complex (Merrill 2009), what do adult learners now require from higher education in order to harness the potential of this continually changing landscape for themselves as individuals, but equally, for the groups and society to which they belong? These questions serve as a framework to explore the wider considerations of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners in higher education.

The goal of increasing adult participation in higher education remains a constant theme at national and international levels. In Europe, the original Bologna Declaration (1999) led to the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) which became a key driver of higher education policy change, promoting greater transparency within higher education systems and a recognised credit transfer framework, ECTS: the European Credit Transfer System (Slowey and Schuetze 2012). From the year 2000

onwards, when the Lisbon strategy (European Council, 2000) emphasised the importance of becoming a competitive knowledge economy, educational policies at European and national levels sought to elevate the participation levels of adult learners in education and to increase the educational attainment levels in Europe overall. For example, one of the targets required that 40% of the age category of 30-39 would achieve a third level educational qualification by 2020 (Council of the European Union 2009). A consolidation of the concept of lifelong learning served to reinforce the demand for a major reform of educational systems, but particularly higher education, in order to make learning throughout life a reality for all men and women. To do so however, would require the reduction of barriers, particularly for groups traditionally under-represented in higher education systems, to enable genuine access to higher education programmes recognising the lived reality and corresponding learning needs and requirements of adult learners. But reducing the barriers to participation in higher education requires a more complete understanding as to what barriers may exist at individual and structural levels. Cross (1981), identified three categories of barriers to learning for adults:

- (i) Institutional barriers: include a range of practical more structural considerations such as: programme costs, inflexible fees payment system or non-provision of discretionary fees, distance to programme venues, lack of flexibility in programme provision, absence of childcare facilities, formal entry qualifications, little or limited recognition of prior learning, poor profile and recognition of adult learners within the institution etc.
- (ii) Situational barriers: refers to barriers at a more individual level reflective of individual circumstances; for example, in relation to available finance, ability to pay course fees, availability of time due to family commitments or work commitments, proximity to programme venue, access to transport etc.
- (iii) Dispositional barriers: these may be linked to a negative experience with formal education in the past but largely refer to

poor self-esteem, lack of confidence, and a low level of self-efficacy in relation to learning.

(Adapted from Cross, 1981)

Overcoming such barriers to higher education requires both structural and individual change, but many of the individual barriers as identified may be potentially addressed by a more responsive or learner-centred higher education system (Hake 2009; Merrill 2015). A more in-depth understanding of the characteristics and motivations of adult learners may assist in identifying effective learner-centred approaches and policies within higher education structures.

### **2.3.1 Adult learners**

‘Adult learner’, often referred to as a ‘non-traditional’ or ‘mature student’, is a difficult term to define due to the many and varied interpretations of the concept, usually in accordance with the changing objectives of research or educational policy development. Learners, who commence their studies over the age of 21, are usually referred to as mature students, but in some countries this description applies only to students over the age of 23. Generally speaking however, adult learners are those who have not progressed directly to higher education from second level education and often have to overcome many constraints in order to enter higher education usually combining their studies with family, work and other commitments, largely engaging in study on a part-time basis (Lynch *et al.* 1998; Baker *et al.* 2009; Jamieson *et al.* 2009; Fragoso *et al.* 2013)

The majority of research on higher education has historically been based on under-graduates, normally aged between 17-22, at a dedicated educational life stage, in preparation for the demands of adult life. The changing demographics within higher education, however, led to increased interest and growing research on the participation of adult learners in higher education, with adult education research in the late 1980s early 1990s seeking to explore the categories of adults who participated in higher education and their reasons for doing so (Humpl *et al.* 2012). The development of various typologies of adult learners contributed to this

research, with some more comprehensive than others, but each seeking to determine the motivation of adult learners entering formal education. A new approach to the development of an adult learner typology was identified by Hefler and Markowitsch in 2010. This approach sought to address some of the limitations identified in other typologies (e.g. Houles typology 1961, and Boshier's educational participation scale, 1977, as noted in Humpl *et al.* 2012) which focused predominantly on the psychological motivations of adult learners entering formal education without due consideration for the individual's external motivations, changing motivations, social dynamics or life situation. Hefler and Markowitsch (2010) therefore developed a new typology of adult learners on the basis of a life cycle approach:

They reason that participating in a formal education program-- as opposed to pursuing non-formal education – is a life-course altering decision, as it means a “temporary re-organization” of the adult students’ time frames as well as a potential change in their portfolio, self-awareness and professional prospects. It is crucial, therefore, when conducting research into formal adult education to link participation in formal adult education to an individual's career development and developmental issues.

(Hefler and Markowitsch 2010, cited in Humpl *et al.* 2012, p.33)

Five main types of adult learners in formal education are identified within this typology: completing, returning, transforming, reinforcing and compensating, and while allowing for potential overlap within categories it sought to represent the main categories of adult learners within higher education. However, more recently Slowey and Schuetze (2012) provided a further, more wide-ranging typology of what they term lifelong learners based on three criteria: the type of admission or entry qualification; the access route to higher education; and the key motivation for higher education. In doing so, they identify seven categories of learners. Each of these will be considered below in order to outline the diversity of adult learners in higher education study.

- (i) Second chance learners: learners who come to higher education on the basis of a ‘second chance’, who for whatever reason do not have any formal qualifications for admission or formal entry purposes and enter higher education, usually in later life, through interview or other assessment criteria.

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- (ii) Equity groups: individual learners from recognized under-represented groups in higher education as identified by national policies seeking to promote equality of access and opportunity, usually having experienced or experiencing socio-economic disadvantage or social exclusion.
- (iii) Deferrers: learners who have attained the formal qualifications considered necessary for entry to higher education but who defer immediate entry on the basis of meeting family responsibilities, or in order to seek paid work, or to pursue other life experience through travel or voluntary work.
- (iv) Recurrent learners: those who have already attained a degree or diploma but return to higher education usually to achieve a higher qualification, but in some cases in pursuit of an alternative course of study and qualification to that already achieved as a result of professional or personal considerations. Recent emphasis on the recognition of prior learning within higher education systems, in addition to the national framework of qualifications in many countries have eased the path of such learners to return to higher education with the result that this category of learners are becoming increasingly evident in higher education.
- (v) Returners: learners who return to higher education having 'dropped-out' or deferred their studies and seek to benefit from whatever degree of flexibility there may exist within the higher education system to incorporate their return to learning in the context of wider life considerations. This category of learners tends to see engagement within higher education as being interwoven with their life path as opposed to being a distinct life stage.
- (vi) Refreshers: this category of learners seek to refresh their knowledge or skills through participation in adult education programmes, they may or may not already have formal qualifications in their area of professional interest but seek to update their skills and competencies through formal education.

- (vii) Learners in later life: learners within this category largely reflect the changing demographics and life patterns in the developed world. In the context of increasing life expectancy, higher education has witnessed an increase in the number of older adults coming to formal education from a wider variety of social-economic and educational backgrounds seeking to participate in higher education programmes (often non-credit) largely, but not exclusively, for personal development purposes.

(Adapted from Slowey and Schuetze 2012)

While the categories of adult learners identified above reflect to some degree the reasons as to why adults do or do not participate in higher education, the national context informing higher education structures is equally significant. The following section therefore considers higher education policies and structures in Ireland with due regard to both the historical and socio-economic developments in recent decades.

### **2.3.2 Higher education in Ireland**

The economic upheaval as experienced by Ireland since the year 2000 forms the context of this consideration of higher education (Skilbeck and Connell 2000). During this period, Ireland evolved from being a country closely associated with emigration and unemployment to become a country of economic prosperity, net immigration, and growth brought about by the onset of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ which was largely dependent on the construction industry and the property market. The subsequent collapse of the property market in conjunction with the banking crisis and the corresponding downfall of the economy led to immediate and significant change in the political, social and economic landscape of the country, culminating in the arrival of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the reality of recession (Baker *et al.* 2009; Fleming *et al.* 2017).

While the social and economic environment sought to cope with the onslaught of change, the structure of the higher education system itself remained largely unchanged, involving the university sector: (the four colleges of the National University of Ireland – Galway, Dublin, Cork and

Maynooth; Trinity College, Dublin; Dublin City University; and the University of Limerick) in addition to the technology sector: Dublin Institute of Technology, another 15 institutes of technology: a number of subject specialist colleges and a small number of private independent providers (Slowey and Schuetze 2012; Coolahan 2017). But although the structure of higher education remained consistent during this period, the nature of the relationship between the government and higher education witnessed significant change. Such change corresponded to new models of funding with increasing restrictions, greater research expectations, greater emphasis on labour market demands for qualifications and competencies, budget cuts, staff reductions, specific policy directives issued at a national level reflecting the requirements of EU and Bologna; and lastly, the arrival of non-traditional/adult learners largely due to the European and national promotion of lifelong learning (Fleming 2011; Coolahan 2017). According to Clancy (2007), this changing relationship ‘heralded the introduction of unbridled market principles into the steering of higher education and represented government’s most serious attempt to exert control over the internal workings of the university’ (p.116). The current policy discourse on higher education as determined by the state, therefore, is predominantly concerned with overcoming the economic and employment crisis:

Higher education is the key to economic recovery in the short-term and to longer-term prosperity. Our economy depends on -- and will continue to depend on -- knowledge and its application in products, processes and services that are exported.

(DES 2011, p.29)

Although there has been considerable growth in higher education participation and opportunities in recent years, this growth relates primarily to increased numbers of students progressing from second level to full-time programmes in higher education. The number of part-time students entering higher education in the academic year 2010-2011 was recorded at 17%, by comparison to 83% of full-time students for that same year (HEA 2013). The Department for Education and Skills highlighted the fact that: ‘Irish higher education students have the narrowest age-range across all OECD countries reflecting the current unresponsiveness of Irish higher education to

the skills needs of adults in the population' (DES 2011, p.46). Despite the focus on lifelong learning evident within Irish policy discourse, it would appear that the emphasis in higher education policy continues to focus on full-time provision for the traditional student cohort. Two policy documents in particular, *The National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2019)* and the *National Strategy for Higher Education 2030* (2011) critically reviewed previous documentation on national educational trends amongst the adult population and emphasised the importance of promoting increased participation and educational provision. While the focus on developing skills for the labour market remained the dominant consideration of higher education policy, the emphasis on widening participation and promoting equity of access across all age groups began to feature more prominently within a range of policy documents, usually in the context of lifelong learning. *The National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2019)*- (DES 2011) specifically named lifelong learning as an approach to enhance access to higher education with the objective of increasing higher education attainment among the wider adult population. This policy however, highlights the importance of two levels of support: individual and institutional. At the individual level, financial and other supports are a requirement for individual learners from designated socio-economic disadvantaged groups. At the institutional level supports need to be provided for the promotion of incentives for greater outreach pre-development and pre-entry programmes and information provision in addition to post-entry student supports to enhance retention (HEA, 2015).

Community education featured strongly in the institutional support for widening access to higher education, while there are a number of models of community education the model predominantly associated with higher education involves the provision of premises, resources and the design and academic accreditation of programmes for 'non-traditional students' at a community level. Although, from a higher education perspective community education was traditionally associated with the provision of formal education within a community setting, greater recognition of the

potential of community education to challenge inequality of access and opportunity to education has led to the provision of community education programmes within the wider philosophy of community development, by a number of further education and higher education institutions. Such programmes highlight the central importance of education in enabling communities, and the individuals within them, to acquire the critical skills and knowledge necessary to collectively bring about change and challenge structural inequalities (Brookfield 1986). In seeking to promote access to higher education, community education as a strategy: ‘builds the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to take part in decision-making and policy formulation within the community (Aontas 2000 pp.18-19). Such responses by higher education institutions demonstrate the willingness of the sector to actively promote not just access routes to formal education but also alter the nature of relationship between higher education and wider society by challenging the ‘elitist’ dimension of tertiary education. However, the current economic crisis with severe and restrictive cutbacks within higher education and the prevailing market-orientated focus of government raises serious concern regarding the ‘democratisation’ of access to higher education for adult learners (Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2016).

### ***2.3.3 Adult learners in higher education in Ireland***

Non-traditional learners, part-time students and mature students are all synonyms for adult learners within Irish higher education policy. But what are the requirements of adult learners in higher education and to what degree does higher education policy consider the personal, social and economic considerations of their lived realities?

In the context of changing social structures what are the wider considerations and challenges encountered by adults in entering higher education in contemporary Ireland? In 2011, Fleming and Finnegan published a paper on higher education from the perspective of non-traditional students involving consultation with adult students on their

learning experiences. This research is of particular significance as it is one of the few and most comprehensive reviews of identified needs and requirements of non-traditional learners from an Irish perspective. The document identified a number of supports and constraints to participation in higher education for non-traditional students. The following constraints were noted:

- (i) Finance: proved to be the most common constraint listed, particularly for students not in receipt of any financial support, with financial problems contributing to some degree in lack of programme completion.
- (ii) Caring duties: also featured significantly as a constraint to participation, particularly for women. Whereby, combining the care of children or ill family members in conjunction with higher education requirements, college attendance and study proved to be a major undertaking, with many students citing deteriorating family relationships and stress occurring as a consequence of their participation.
- (iii) Significant life events: such as relationship breakdown, ill-health, financial crisis or a bereavement of a family member or friend were named as constraints to continuing participation or completion of a course of study.
- (iv) Mental Health: proved to be a major constraining factor, particularly depression. While in some cases the mental health issue was as a reaction to the stress or demands of study, in the majority of cases mental ill-health had existed prior to engagement with the course.
- (v) Limited information: another of the key constraining factors as identified by adult learners related to limited information in advance of embarking on course of study. Insufficient detail about the workload, the benefits of the programme, the academic standards and expectations which in most cases were sufficiently challenging but in some cases were deemed under-challenging and lastly, lack of information regarding state or institutional supports.

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- (vi) Institutional Culture: to some degree was also a constraining factor should students feel isolated or alienated by potentially being in the minority within a wider student body. This is largely dependent on the orientation of the institution whereby being described as ‘non-traditional’ by virtue of being different from the norm of ‘traditional’ can bring its own problems and frustrations.

(Adapted from Fleming and Finnegan 2011)

Aside from the constraints outlined above however, a number of key factors promoting participation and retention of adult learners within higher education were also identified within the same paper (Fleming and Finnegan 2011). Personal resilience in order to overcome significant financial and social problems with a determination to succeed in the face of whatever unfolded was one of the most common factors named by students in continuing with their studies. The desire for social recognition was offered as an explanation for this determination and call on resilience. Although a complex concept, for the majority of students it is significant at individual and institutional levels. At an individual level it may become evident in the search for greater social ‘inclusion’ and enhanced work and lifestyle choices, reflecting the interplay of individual agency and social structure. Equally, at an institutional level, social recognition corresponded to the status apportioned to higher education by society and the perceived importance of academic credentials. In Irish society higher educational qualifications are increasingly seen as the ‘norm’ and the primary route to achieving greater work and professional qualifications with the potential of greater social mobility. This was also a concern for students who had migrated to Ireland; however, for this particular category of students, being viewed as a valid citizen was a more immediate form of social recognition. Despite the emphasis on personal resilience a number of key external supports were highlighted as essential to success of adult learners in higher education:

- (i) Financial supports: without financial support, mainly provided by the state in the form of grants or allowances, access to higher

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education would not have been feasible for many adult learners and their ability to progress with their course of study was equally dependant on the provision of this support.

- (ii) Institutional supports: the nature of student support as provided by the institution and its staff members was deemed equally significant to the learning experience and success of adult learners. With community education, adult education, career guidance and ‘access’ staff receiving particular mention in terms of institutional support.
- (iii) Emotional and financial support by family: was of major significance for the majority of adult learners, both on an on-going basis and in times of crisis or pressure. Attaining an academic qualification was viewed not just as a personal investment therefore, but a family investment in terms of the award itself and equally in terms of the example it set for other family members that they too could seek to achieve.
- (iv) Academic support: in terms of intellectual support from partners, family or friends was also considered to be an important factor to progression. In some cases adult learners may be attending college at the same time as a son/daughter often leading to mutual support in meeting academic requirements.
- (v) Peer support: in terms of academic, emotional and social support it was deemed essential to student success, particularly in times of frustration, disappointment, stress or anxiety, not just specific to college life but in relation to academic and wider life issues. For many non-traditional adult learners the dynamic of support within the learning group can have a major impact on their ability to proceed with the programme of study.
- (vi) Personal development and a ‘significant other’: the individual support or belief of a friend, tutor, or staff member was also named as being of particular importance in enabling the learner to strive to become more than he/she believed of themselves and seeking to achieve this objective.

(Adapted from Fleming and Finnegan 2011)

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The range of supports, however, identified by adult learners as being essential to success within higher education reflect the complexity of their learning lives within a higher education sector which is evidently slow to adapt. Adult learners need to actively inform higher education institutions in order to:

... move them from a position in which the student is the target of a knowledge delivery system to one in which the student is actively engaged in constructing knowledge through reflective practice; from one which removes the learner from a real world situation to one which relies on the real world situation as the learning agenda; from a concern with access to one of emancipation; and to one which recognizes the multi-disciplinary, open systematic nature of knowledge.

(Collins 2000, p.81)

Logically, therefore, as documented by many authors (Slowey and Watson 2003, Biesta 2011, Merrill 2009, Gourney 2003) learning and educational opportunities must be reflective of the life course of individuals and ultimately 'lifelong learning policies must embrace a life course approach' (Slowey 2008, p.2). Lifelong learning and higher education policy therefore need to embrace a life course approach in recognition of extraordinary changing times and the corresponding changing needs and requirements of adult learners.

As previously noted, in Ireland adult learners are predominantly students over the age of 21 (for full-time programmes they must be over 23) who did not progress directly into higher education from second level education. Generally speaking they carry work and/ or caring commitments and as a result largely engage in study on a part time/ flexible basis. In many cases this category of students have to overcome many of the constraints previously outlined in order to enter higher education and often come from lower socio-economic groups (Jamieson *et al.* 2009; Fragoso *et al.* 2013). The funding model currently in place in higher education requires the majority of part-time adult learners to pay fees as they are not eligible for the Free Fees Initiative available to full-time students. Maintenance costs for full-time students may be off-set by the Student Grant Scheme; however this is not available as an option to part-time adult learners. The Fund for Students with Disabilities seeks to provide free services and supports to full-

time students with disabilities but part-time learners are not entitled to access these supports. The Student Assistance Fund, a means tested support provided by the Department of Education and Skills to full-time students encountering financial difficulty has been extended to part-time learners in the last year (O'Sullivan 2017). Despite the 'Free Fees' initiative full-time students are required to pay a 'contribution' which in many instances equates to the level of fees required of part-time learners. However, the contribution paid by full-time learners goes directly to offset the cost of access to the full range of student services; including health services, career guidance, counselling, disability services and supports and many more (Flannery and McGarr 2014). The fees paid by part-time students largely covers tuition, and access to the range of services automatically available to full-time students are very limited and often provided on a discretionary basis. This traditional model of educational investment has largely resulted in the development of educational organisational structures predominantly focused on the needs of full-time, mainstream, young students (Flannery and McGarr 2014).

Despite the educational policy directives of widening participation and equality of opportunity and access to learning for all members of society, the current funding model within higher education is weighted towards 'those individuals who have the economic, personal and time resources to access educational services' (Grummel 2007, as cited in Flannery and McGarr 2014, p.427). This is the challenging environment within which higher education adult learning departments/ units seek to provide lifelong learning opportunities for a diverse adult population.

### **2.3.4 Conclusion**

With lifelong learning featuring so prominently within national and international discourse the culture of support and recognition for change within higher education would appear to be strong, yet the pace of such change remains relatively slow, particularly for part-time adult learners (Kearns 2014; Fleming *et al.* 2017). In terms of access to formal learning higher education has a key role to play in providing people with the

resources and conditions necessary to cope with, inform and shape a rapidly changing society. This requires a culture of change at an institutional level to move away from the traditional emphasis on front-loading initial education for full time students in order to actively embrace a more diverse student cohort with equally diverse needs (Fleming *et al.* 2017; Merrill 2015; Quillinan *et al.* 2018). The author concludes that greater equality of educational opportunity and resources are needed for part-time adult learners in Irish higher education institutions in order to genuinely translate policy into practice.

### **Key points: Higher Education and Adult Learners**

- The goal of increasing adult participation in higher education remains a constant theme at national and international levels
- ‘Adult learner’ often referred to as a ‘non-traditional’ or ‘mature student’, is a difficult term to define due to the many and varied interpretations of the concept in accordance with the changing objectives of educational policy
- The current policy discourse on higher education as determined by the Irish state is predominantly concerned with overcoming the recent economic and employment crisis
- Lifelong learning and higher education policy need to embrace a life course approach in recognition of extraordinary changing times and the corresponding changing needs and requirements of adult learners

### **2.4 Institutional context**

A brief outline of University X as the host site of this study is presented below incorporating a description of the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) as the unit largely responsible for implementing the University’s lifelong learning agenda. The final part of this section focuses on Community Development as a sub-unit of CLL and responsible for both of the programmes relevant to this study.

### **2.4.1 University X and the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL)**

University X was established in 1845; it now has 17,542 full-time students and according to the Qs World University rankings is now among the top 1% in the world. University X has five Colleges, 16 Schools and over 60 academic disciplines and offers 60 undergraduate degree programmes with a wide range (over 400) of graduate level Diploma programmes, Master Degrees, and Doctoral Research Degrees (including Structured PhDs). ‘Over 15% of the undergraduate student body are non-traditional students, including mature students, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students with a disability, members of the travelling community and ethnic minorities’ (University X 2015). This is the category of students that this research study considers with a specific focus on part-time adult learners.

The University lifelong learning agenda had been largely managed by the University Adult Education Unit from its origin in 1969. It was re-named the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) in 2012 and it continues to offer adult learners a wide range of flexible, part-time programmes. These programmes range from accredited pre-tertiary Access and Foundation programmes (Level 6) to Certificate and Diploma programmes (Level 7), right through to Degree programmes (Level 8) and a number of Master’s programmes at Level 9 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). These programmes focus on a variety of subject areas including the Humanities, Community Development, Social Sciences, Business Management, Science and Technology, and Training and Education. In recognition of the many responsibilities and commitments of adult learners, programmes are offered through traditional, on-line and blended forms of delivery (University X 2017).

The core aim of CLL is:

...to promote and support the personal and professional development of individuals through the provision of high-quality, flexible programmes. By prioritizing equality of access the Centre supports social, cultural and economic development and social cohesion, through the delivery of innovative programmes of learning and active engagement with communities (CLL–Strategic Plan, 2015 p.1).

Community engagement features across all aspects of work in relation to CLL, specifically in relation to its mission statement as outlined above, in addition to promotional materials, social media communication, and adult learning open evenings. Community Development, however, as a sub-unit within CLL is directly responsible for promoting community engagement through the provision of a broad range of community education programmes, capacity building training events and informal support structures.

### ***2.4.2 Community Development, CLL, University X***

As previously outlined Community Development is a sub-unit of the Centre for Centre for Lifelong Learning in University X. It has specific responsibility regarding the promotion of community engagement through reciprocal partnerships with the community, voluntary and statutory sectors in the design and delivery of research, teaching and learning programmes of societal concern. Such programmes highlight the central importance of training and education in enabling communities and the individuals within them, to acquire the critical skills and knowledge necessary to collectively bring about change and to challenge structural inequalities in order contribute to a more just, equitable and vibrant democracy.

The research author has worked within Community Development in University X for over 20 years. In seeking to respond to changes in educational policy, many higher education institutions created or expanded on existing 'Adult Education' type structures in order to promote the concept of widening participation and university lifelong learning for adult learners. New professions, many of which, particularly in university settings, were classed as support, administrative or non-academic posts evolved in response to the growing demand at European and national level for increased provision of lifelong learning opportunities (Finn 2015). This was the environment during the 1990s that the author as a newly qualified post-graduate was employed in order to design and deliver adult-friendly, part-time, community education programmes for disadvantaged individuals and communities, traditionally excluded from accessing higher education.

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As Adult Education was classified as an administrative unit within the University the author was employed as an academic, but categorised as administrative in accordance with the institutional streaming of all staff as either academic or administrative in line with their corresponding department /unit status.

As noted, Community Development as a sub-unit within CLL specifically focuses on building vibrant communities and supporting innovative change in society in ways that are both empowering and participative. Through its capacity building, training and education programmes (two of which form part of this study) it seeks to facilitate real change at local level and to provide participants with the relevant skills and knowledge to engage with a rapidly changing policy and practice context at national and international levels. Programmes are developed and delivered in conjunction with practitioners to provide high-quality community, family, and youth work expertise to ensure participants are equipped to work (paid/unpaid) in a variety of settings (whether private, voluntary, or statutory). This ensures that the design and delivery of programmes fully reflects and supports the actual 'lived lives' of individuals and the corresponding needs and requirements of a changing society (Community Development, University X 2017).

Core to the success of the work of Community Development in meeting the needs of adult learners in modern society has been the employment on a part-time basis of tutors with the relevant academic and practitioner expertise necessary to inform the policy and practice-based orientation of the majority of programmes on offer. As front line staff in a range of sectors, these tutors bring a specific level of expertise to the programmes and supplement the teaching capacity of core staff. Significant resources and time go into choosing adult learning tutors and inducting them into the process of tutoring itself. The changing skill requirements of flexible and blended learning provision, warrants much initial investment and frequent updating. This knowledge, in conjunction with the expertise specific to the role and responsibility of the external tutors within their sectoral area of

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work, is essential to and forms the life-blood of, the collaborative, practice-based programme learning environment.

Promoting an environment of collaborative learning, incorporating student, work-based and academic experiences facilitates genuine access to adult learning programmes which respond to the personal and professional life journey of learners.

While there is no disputing that many mature entrants to HE will harbour career and employment goals as a significant motivator for entry to HE, this is by no means a universal driver nor, in many cases, is it the only reason for undertaking further study. Intention to HE study can encompass goals relating to self-improvement and self-development, personal transformation or a cathartic exercise dealing with perceived past failings in the education sphere (Kearns 2012, as cited in HEA 2013, p.42).

Through the provision of campus and community-based learning opportunities, both formal and non-formal, incorporating a combination of effective outreach strategies and supporting services, Community Development seeks to contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of individuals, communities and wider society. The following section provides greater detail on two community education programmes provided by Community Development; the NUI (National University of Ireland) Diploma in Applied Social Studies and the BA in Applied Social Studies, as both are pertinent to the focus of this research. As already outlined the Centre for Lifelong Learning is categorised as an administrative unit within the University, therefore all academic accreditation of the range of programmes on offer must take place through formal collaborations with the relevant Schools. All Community Development programmes therefore are accredited by the School of Social Studies. See Figure 2.1 for a visual description of the institutional governance structure.

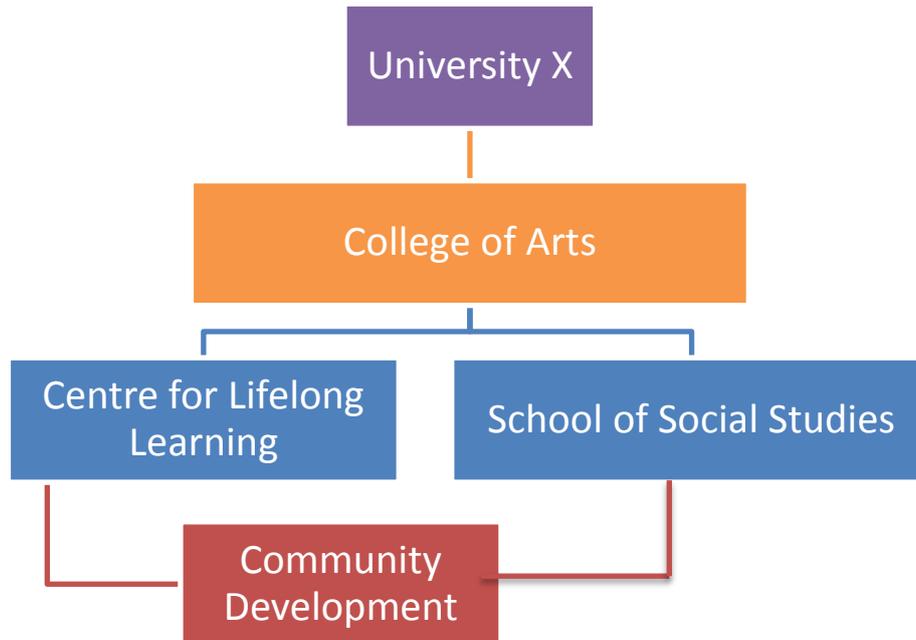


Figure 2.1 Institutional Governance Structure

## 2.5 Community education programme description (Diploma and BA programmes)

This section provides a comprehensive description of each of the two community education programmes relevant to this research study (see Table 4.1 for a brief overview). It details the context, purpose and aim of each programme, including a listing of the formal learning outcomes and potential progression routes for consideration. A brief outline of some of the key features of these programmes is also provided. The final part of this section outlines some further detail on the characteristics and background of the adult learners who have completed these programmes to date.

### 2.5.1 *NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies (Level 7, 30 ECTS)*

The NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies is a part-time course which aims to equip voluntary community activists with the skills to enable them to work more effectively in their community groups. The course content focuses on several key areas which include: social analysis; communication; leadership and group work skills; public policy; project planning, development and evaluation; research techniques and the theory and practice of community development. The course is highly participative and

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focuses on the practical experiences that each participant brings to the course.

The course is assessed through a range of individual and group assignments which are undertaken by participants throughout the year. These include: class presentations on social issues; local profiles; developing funding proposals and public policy analysis. Each of these assessments may be undertaken within the context of the participant's wider community engagement or specific group/organisation. As it is an NUI accredited course, (equivalent to 30 credits within the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)) this programme also promotes lifelong learning and enhances access routes for adult learners to third level education.

*On completion of the programme graduates will be able to:*

- Demonstrate a critical understanding of the nature of Irish society and communities
- Identify and understand the national and EU supports and schemes which are directed at local development
- Demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the public policy and administrative context in which development takes place
- Summarise the significant theoretical and practical ideas central to Community Development as a concept and a process
- Confidently present the range of skills and knowledge needed to respond to practical work-based problem, including the ability to:
  - work effectively as a member of a team
  - lead development initiatives at local level
  - communicate effectively with local groups as well as public and private agencies
  - undertake research, analyse, and present research findings

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- plan, develop, implement and evaluate local projects
- carry out feasibility studies with an emphasis on local economic development and the creation of viable enterprises
- assist local groups to establish strong organisational structures and to manage efficient projects based on good management principles.

### *Career and Progression Options:*

As registered students on the Diploma in Applied Social Studies, participants will be able to avail of the expertise of the Career Development Centre within University X. There are also direct progression options from the Diploma programme for those participants who wish to further enhance their qualifications within the field of Social Studies, Community Development, Youth and Family Studies within University X as the 30 ECTS attained are recognised as exemptions towards the BA in Applied Social Studies (Level 8 honours, 180 ECTS). In terms of career progression many programme graduates successfully achieve employment or promotion within community, voluntary and statutory settings relevant to the combination of educational and experiential knowledge attained.

Please note: the above programme detail has been adapted from community education promotional material including programme brochures and website sources written by the author.

### ***2.5.2 BA in Applied Social Studies (Level 8 honours, 180 ECTS)***

This blended learning programme is a 4-year, part-time programme in Applied Social Studies. Students are awarded a Certificate in Arts: Applied Social Studies upon the successful completion of year 1 of the programme, a Diploma in Arts: Applied Social Studies upon successful completion of year 2 of the programme and a Bachelor of Arts: Applied Social Studies on completion of the 4-year cycle. This programme is designed to enable participants to further develop and enhance their understanding, knowledge and skills relevant to Family, Youth and Community work practice and

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policy in Ireland or abroad. The main focus of the degree programme is on Applied Social studies but broadly incorporates sociology, community development, youth work; community-based family support, adolescence, health, political and general socio-economic studies.

This programme was developed in response to the continuing educational needs of personnel working in the social/community/voluntary and state sectors who are actively supporting community, youth and family life in a rapidly changing society. Graduates of this programme acquire sufficient knowledge and competencies to be prepared for the changing demands of the work-place and the required background for a career in research (either within the community/statutory sector or academia). As a part-time programme, using blended learning methods of delivery, involving a combination of class-based, online, and flexible learning provision, this programme is innovative in its approach and promotes active learning in the work place (paid/unpaid) with assessments based on real -life situations in a practice environment. All workshops are held over weekends (usually one per month) to seek to promote access to higher education opportunities for adult learners in recognition of their life-wide commitments and time limitations.

The programme is conducted over 4 years on a modular basis, through blended- learning methods of delivery. The dynamic nature of this area of study places importance on the skills of inquiry and investigation and on this basis, research is an integral component of this programme.

On completion of the programme graduates will be able to:

- analyse the social, economic, and cultural context of Social Studies, Family, Youth and Community work in Ireland and internationally
- demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the core theoretical concepts underpinning Social Studies, Community, Youth and Family work

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- demonstrate a critical understanding of the main themes and developments that characterise Social Studies, Community, Youth and Family work at the beginning of the twenty-first century
- apply a range of skills and knowledge necessary to carry out effectively their functions within Social Studies, Community, Youth and Family work settings (both policy and practice)
- demonstrate and be able to apply a range of interventions in Social Studies, Community, Youth and Family work-based settings
- apply a comprehensive knowledge of research methodologies, skills and report writing
- define the principles of project planning, development and evaluation and the application of same in addressing Social, Community, Youth and Family policy and practice concerns and issues

### *Career and progression options*

There are many career and progression opportunities open to graduates of the BA in Applied Social Studies. As noted above, many have progressed onto postgraduate study. Other graduates have gained employment within the field of social work, community development, youth work, and family support work. Graduates are employed across a range of agencies (both public and private) within the community/voluntary and statutory sectors, dealing with practice, research and policy considerations of the sector as a whole.

*Please note: the above programme detail has been adapted from community education promotional material including programme brochures and web-site sources written by the author.*

**Table 2.1 Community Education Programmes Relevant to Research Study**

<b>Programme Title</b>	<b>QQI Level</b>	<b>ECTS</b>
<b>NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies</b>	Level 7	30 ECTS
<b>BA in Applied Social Studies</b>	Level 8	180 ECTS

### ***2.5.3 Distinctive features of the above programmes***

In accordance with the ethos of community education the emphasis within all programmes provided centres on responding to the needs of individuals and communities through the provision of adult-friendly, interactive and life relevant high quality programmes with a specific focus on enhancing access to higher education for adult learners. The promotion of social and community engagement through reciprocal partnerships with the community, voluntary and statutory sectors in the design and delivery of teaching and learning programmes serves to ensure that programme content remains current to sectoral policy and practice changes whilst framed within the academic rigour of University standards. The full range of capacity building, training and education programmes currently provided therefore seeks to facilitate real change at community level by empowering participants, through the acquisition of knowledge and skills, to engage collectively so as to challenge structural inequalities and contribute to the development of a vibrant democracy. There are a number of distinctive features which are integral to the provision of community education programmes and of direct relevance to the two programmes informing this research study. These key features are briefly outlined under the following headings:

- *Assessment*

The programmes are conducted on a modular basis so assessment reflects the blended learning methods of delivery involving a combination of online, practical and face-to-face learning provision and assessment methods. The programmes promote active learning in the work place (paid/unpaid) with assessments based on real life

## Chapter 2: Literature Review: Contextual Framework

situations in a social/community/family/youth work environment. As noted above face-to-face engagement measured somewhat in terms of attendance is a core component of assessment. Attendance at workshops/classes therefore is a key requirement and part of the assessment of both community education programmes within this study as class participation and interaction with fellow learners is considered core to programme knowledge and skills acquisition.

- *Part-time*

All community education programmes are genuinely part-time in their delivery and are provided over evenings and/or weekends. Adult learners within these programmes are with a dedicated group for a minimum of one year in terms of the Diploma and up to four years in the case of the degree programme. As a result participants formed lasting relationships with colleagues, peers and tutors. Sharing the learning experience within a dedicated group with an age spectrum of 21-85 was deemed to be a more accurate reflection of real life considerations for community and society resulting in a more holistic learning experience.

- *Style of delivery*

Both programmes adopt adult friendly policies, practices and teaching methodologies that reflect adult learner needs and requirements in the context of their lives. The exchange of opinion through active debate and discussion in a class context is considered essential to the process of engaging the learner's experience within the learning programme. Group work and collaborative learning are interwoven within the programme delivery style enhancing exchange of opinion among learners and between learners and tutors. Opportunities to interweave life experience into the delivery of programme content enhances the quality of the learning experience in both availing of and contributing to real world knowledge. Effective facilitation skills on the part of the tutor are integral to the success of this approach in creating a more democratic learning

environment. The inclusion of practitioners within programme delivery is also core to ensuring that participants would have access to the full range of expertise necessary in the attainment of life relevant learning.

- *Exit, deferral and progression routes*

In recognition that life can intervene and impact upon the ability to continue within a programme of learning, all community education programmes, including the two programmes within this research study have an open deferral policy. This allows students to carry course work over the summer period to the autumn in order to proceed as standard with the next year of the programme, or complete their studies. Students also have the option, where necessary, to avail of a leave of absence in order to step out of a programme and return at a later point when it may be more feasible. Both the Diploma and BA programmes mentioned also offer programme award exit options so that students having registered for a programme can choose to leave that programme with a qualification reflecting the level of knowledge they have attained. For example, within the four year BA programme students may choose to exit with a programme award at the end of year one qualifying with a Certificate in Arts in Applied Social studies or equally, can exit at the end of year two with a Diploma in Arts in Applied Social studies. The provision of exit awards during a programme allows students to exit with a recognised programme qualification should they wish. Equally, as these awards are also issued to students as they progress through the BA programme it provides the opportunity to build educational credentials during the programme thereby enhancing employability and promotion opportunities. Access to career guidance to identify progression pathways is emphasised throughout all programmes.

- *Fees: Personal Payment Plans and Scholarships*

As part of a wider policy within the Centre for Lifelong Learning all

community education programmes offer a 30% fee scholarship leading to a reduction in fees for students who qualify for certain social welfare payments. To assist students to off-set the cost of programme fees individual personal payment plans are designed in collaboration with students to distribute fee payment throughout the academic year. This service is handled locally within Community Development as this option cannot be provided by the central fees office within the University.

#### ***2.5.4 Characteristics and background of programme graduates (Part-time adult learners)***

As noted above the term ‘adult learner’ is open to a number of different interpretations. For the purposes of this research study, however, it refers to students on the above programmes, who did not progress directly to higher education from second level education and must be over the age of 21 in order to qualify for University part-time programmes. The age category of the group in question therefore ranges from 21 to 85. As both programmes involve blended learning and outreach provision the geographic background of students is essentially nationwide, with students travelling from north, south, east and west to attend workshops, classes and exams. Outreach provision of programmes promotes access to learning opportunities within that locality, so historical provision of outreach programmes in Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim, Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, Lucan, Co. Dublin and Galway city have enhanced student numbers specifically from these areas and their surrounding counties.

As noted earlier, employability is one of the reasons named as a key motivator to enter higher education, and educational policy demonstrates that economic criteria are the primary determinants of the purpose and function of higher education. Having worked in Adult Education in a University setting for over 20 years the author has witnessed many changes in relation to the needs and requirements of adult learners at an individual level; but equally, has witnessed many changes at a higher educational policy level as the various discourses underpinning lifelong learning have had a consequent impact on the expansion or restriction of learning

opportunities for adults. Following 20 years' experience as an educationalist with adult learners in higher education, the author has become increasingly aware of the broad range of motivations, internal and external, that drives adult learners to undertake higher education. The motivations to engage are as diverse as the individual learners and the learning life paths that they have travelled. Employability and career considerations certainly feature, but in the experience of the author the adult learners/graduates of the two programmes within this study traditionally give equal and sometimes greater weighting to the wider social and personal benefits of learning. The scale of difficulties encountered by adult learners seeking to return to higher education is also something the author has been acutely aware of over the years. Lack of recognition and respect for the part-time adult learner is evident within higher education institutes predominantly favouring the full-time mainstream younger students over their part-time colleagues. Part-time adult learners do not have access to the full range of financial and other supports provided to full-time students highlighting a need for a culture of change within higher education policy and practice which fully respects and welcomes a more diverse student cohort.

### **2.6 Summary**

This chapter presented a review of the body of literature setting the contextual framework for this research study. It was divided into four sections. Section 2.2 examined the first theme, the concept of lifelong learning. It reviewed literature specific to the evolution of this complex concept in order to attain a more in-depth understanding of lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Section 2.3 considered the theme of higher education and adult learners, particularly in the context of national and international lifelong learning policy. It examined the challenges facing adult learners entering higher education and the corresponding factors for consideration for higher education institutions in terms of responding to the needs and requirements of this diverse student body within a rapidly changing society. Section 2.4 considers the university institutional context framing lifelong

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learning provision in University X as the host site of this study. Lastly, section 2.5 provides further detail regarding both community education programmes pertinent to this study and the diverse grouping of adult learners partaking of same.

## **Chapter 3: Literature Review: Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a review of the body of literature pertinent to the theoretical framework for this research study. It is divided into four sections. Section 3.2 explores the concept of learning and investigates different theories of learning including adult development and learning theories in order to achieve a greater comprehension of the learning process. Section 3.3 concentrates on life course learning as a potential reconceptualization of lifelong learning. It provides an overview of literature in relation to the life course concept and outlines different theories and contradictory perspectives in relation to the nature of the life course. It then considers the inter-disciplinary, multi-level focus of life course research and describes key principles that frame such research in advance of discussing the potential of life course learning. Lastly, section 3.4 reviews the social research theoretical considerations informing this research study. This chapter concludes with a description of a tentative conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by the critical learning from this theoretical literature review. This conceptual model will also serve as an analytical framework to guide both the research design and subsequent analysis.

### **3.2 The concept of learning and learning theories**

Learning is embedded in living. It is closely related to the way in which individuals develop in relation to their lifeworld. We simply cannot avoid learning. And since the experience of learning is continuous, so too learning is continuous. It occurs throughout life from start to finish.

(Rogers and Horrocks 2010, p.130)

What counts as learning? Who is learning, where, why, and for what purpose? What are the effects of learning beyond its traditional narrow association with formal education and employability; but equally in relation to the development of personal identity, social cohesion, and the ability to manage change? What types of learning contribute to life satisfaction and

well-being? Lastly, what factors, policies and practices can best inform significant learning at every age? (Akerman *et al.* 2011, p.8). These are all key questions for consideration in furthering an understanding of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Learning as a concept is both highly complex and contested. Understood in its broadest most generic sense, learning is life and everyone is learning as part of day to day living. It is a natural process whereby individuals seek to acquire new learning to make sense of their experience and contend with the trials, challenges and opportunities within the context of life and the changing nature of society. Learning therefore is fundamental to humanity and human behaviour; it is experiential and social: experiential in that experience informs learning and social on the basis that learning is directly affected by the social structures of society (Jarvis 2010). Rogers and Horrocks (2010) however, argue that much of the language used in relation to learning confuses 'learning' with 'planned learning', commonly associated with formal learning or education, whereby individuals are described as being 'learners' or non-learners' on the basis of their involvement/non-involvement in structured learning activities or opportunities (p.129). Such language implies that certain individuals choose not to learn or may need to be encouraged or motivated to do so, it also implies that planned or systematic learning is 'actual' approved learning contrary to the reality that learning is a continuous process about how individuals perceive, understand and make meaning of their lifeworld.

According to Jarvis, learning may be defined as:

[t]he combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person- body(genetic, physical, and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated in to the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.

(2010, p.39)

Most definitions of learning refer to individual change or the potential of change and development as a result of experience (Merriam *et al.* 2007;

### Chapter 3: Literature Review: Theoretical Framework

Jarvis 2010). Learning therefore is an individual active process whereby through experience the individual, as an agent within the wider collective of society, consistently seeks to cope with, adapt to and potentially inform the changes of everyday life. According to Rogers and Horrocks (2010, p.132) there are two main causes of learning:

There are the more or less automatic responses to new information, perceptions or experiences that result in change, and there are more purposeful activities, the result of impulses which lead us to seek out or create new experiences aimed at achieving some kind of mastery.

While the majority of adult learning in relation to day-to-day life may be described as unintended, or unintentional, for example when individuals process information as a result of social media or casual conversations, there are many occasions whereby individuals in the pursuit of a particular task or goal convert their experience into informal learning. Merriam *et al.* (2007) describe informal learning as the learning acquired as a result of the experiences of everyday living, unlike formal learning which refers to formalised learning programmes held in educational institutions undertaken intentionally and purposely by individuals. Alternatively, non-formal learning refers to organised or planned learning activities outside of educational institutions, such as community-based learning, work-based learning, cultural venues, etc. Learning then takes place within a number of different spheres and contexts strongly influenced by both the individual in terms of his/her sense of agency and the overarching influence of the social structures of a changing society.

Research undertaken by Chisholm (2008), seeks to further an understanding of learning within the context of a changing society. Within her review of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century she highlights the need to re-contextualise learning: ‘In second modernity, we should more than ever, be looking to encourage self-direction, engagement, variety and transferability in the shaping of “learning life–courses”’ (p.141). She emphasises the need to ‘find alternative ways of structuring and supporting learning’ through more effective use of the learning continuum incorporating ‘formal, non-formal and informal structures and methods’ (p.141). But equally, Chisholm highlights the reality that this may warrant a significant change in

perspective for generations of individuals for whom the formal experience of institutionalised mass education formed a sizable part of formal learning in early childhood and youth. However, this change in perspective and the need to reconsider and re-contextualise learning are necessary in response to the greater ‘fluidity’ of knowledge across different sectors and spheres of people’s lives and the increasing globalisation of the modern world (Chisholm 2008, p.142).

### ***3.1.1 Learning theories***

Seeking to reconsider and re-contextualise learning is not a simple process as it assumes, first and foremost, a common agreement of what constitutes learning or one recognised theory of learning. This is evidently not the case when one considers the sheer variety of learning theories and approaches to the study of learning currently in existence. Gould (2012), whilst recognising the complexity of the learning process emphasised the importance of learning theory as a useful tool to advance our understanding of learning. He raises a note of caution however, with regard to the rigid application of theory, on the basis that by its very nature theory seeks to simplify and generalise and therefore is rarely a complete reflection of reality. Learning, he argues, will not ‘fit neatly into the boxes that theory provides for us. What those boxes do provide though are reference points against which you can compare’ (p.3). The two learning theories he identifies as reference points are behaviourism and cognitivism and both serve as a framework to determine the ‘exact nature of learning that is taking place’(p.3). While the focus of Gould’s (2012) study of learning centred predominantly on classroom based practice, his emphasis on learning theories as reference points to inform a more complete understanding of learning is particularly valuable. This study therefore proceeds to consider four key traditional learning theories in seeking to attain a more comprehensive understanding of learning: behaviourism, cognitivism, humanism, and social learning. Having reviewed some of the traditional theories of learning this section then proceeds to examine some contemporary learning theories, as both sets of theories provide a useful

framework in order to understand the concept of learning and the learning process from an adult learning perspective.

### 3.1.1.1 *Theories of learning (Traditional)*

#### ○ *Behaviourism*

The behaviourist orientation to learning defines learning as a change in externally observable behaviour with the process of learning ‘brought about by the association or pairing of a stimulus with a response’ (Gould 2012 p.10). The origins of this theory, developed by John B. Watson, may be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with further contributions and perspectives offered by a range of theorists, with particular reference to Thorndike, Pavlov and Skinner (Merriam *et al.* 2007). Behaviourist theories of learning operate according to three key assumptions: firstly, learning is not about internal thought processes but evident change in behaviour; secondly, individual learning is informed by external processes within the environment, learning therefore is not determined by the individual who remains relatively passive within the process; and lastly, ‘the principles of contiguity (how close in time two events must be for a bond to be formed) and reinforcement (any means of increasing the likelihood that an event will be repeated) are central to explaining the learning process’ (Merriam *et al.* 2007, p.278). Reinforcement was a key component within Skinner’s theory of behaviourism, particularly in relation to ‘operant conditioning’ on the principle that behaviour which is rewarded or positively reinforced is more likely to take place again under similar conditions. Individual behaviour therefore may be deemed ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ as validated by society, with rewards for the correct response to reinforce its recurrence and discouragement of inappropriate responses so that they may become less frequent or fully eradicated (Rogers and Horrocks 2010).

Whilst being the subject of much criticism, behaviourism remains evident in a variety of learning approaches to date, particularly in relation to formal learning or education, where identified learning outcomes measuring overt changes in behaviour determine whether learning is evident and the learner has been successful or unsuccessful. Linked to the growing demand by

policy makers for evidence based practice and accountability at all levels of education and learning programmes, the behaviourist orientation to learning continues to feature strongly in planned or systematic learning in present day: ‘For many policy makers, “the best empirical evidence” consists of measurable, quantifiable changes in behaviour that can be tied to the educational intervention’ (Merriam *et al.* 2007, p.280). Learning objectives in accordance with the behaviourist orientation focus on producing evident skills and competencies within a wider context of positive reinforcement for success. Equally, from a behaviourist perspective, the concept of reinforcement determines the learner’s motivation to engage in the process; individuals learn from a young age about what is, or is not, deemed to be socially acceptable and thereby become conditioned to seek external reinforcement. Learning motivation then is extrinsic to the individual, who seeks a reward, e.g. approval, admiration or respect, in the pursuit of his/her learning goal (Gould 2012). While behaviourism brought a more scientific, systematic and structured approach to learning, it also promoted a focus on transmission-based learning or education emphasising the passive role of the learner and the more autocratic role of the teacher/tutor informed by the learning expectations of an educational system. This view of learners as passive negated any sense of individual agency and the ability of individuals to have control or direction over their own learning. Reducing the concept of learning to externally observable change in behaviour was a matter of grave concern to a number of critics:

The fundamental objection to behaviourism, however, lay in its attempt to reduce a complex process such as learning into a relatively simplistic framework which cannot account for many aspects of learning.

(Gould 2012, p.43)

This in turn led to the emergence of cognitivism and the onset of a greater focus on the needs, feelings and interests of the individual learner.

- *Cognitivism*

Cognitive theories of learning focus on the individual’s mental processes, essentially the way in which individuals process information as they learn. ‘Fundamental to all cognitive approaches...are the concepts of meaning and

understanding and the internalisation of the process of learning (Gould 2012, p.44). Gestalt psychologists in particular criticised behaviourism as being too mechanistic in its orientation; by focusing on the parts, such as action or behaviour to explain learning as opposed to the whole person within his/her environment (Merriam *et al.* 2007; Jarvis 2010). The cognitivist orientation to learning consists of a number of strands outlining different viewpoints but all are largely centred on common principles or assumptions. According to Merriam *et al.* (2007), two key principles underpin the cognitive approach to learning: (1) that the memory system organises and processes information and (2) that prior knowledge is a significant component of learning. Learning as a process therefore is internal to the individual with prior learning and experience informing the interpretation of new learning which in turn informs prior learning. Key to this process of learning is the ability to derive meaning, and understanding from the initial stimulus of learning and then the ability to draw connections/ relationships between new learning and previous knowledge (Rogers and Horrocks 2010).

Jean Piaget, a cognitive psychologist, played a significant role in the development of cognitive theories of learning. While recognising the environment as a key component in the learning process, he equally emphasised the importance of cognition as the act or process of knowing and the interaction of both the individual and the environment within a cycle of learning. 'In Piaget's terms, the key to learning lies in the mutual interaction of the process of *accommodation* of concepts or schemas to experience in the world and the process of *assimilation* of events and experiences from the world into existing concepts and schemas' (Thorpe *et al.* 1993, p.141). He developed a four stage theory of cognitive development based on the biological development of the child and the ability to cope with increasingly complex knowledge through maturation. The four key stages of cognitive development he identified are as follows:

*Sensori-motor*: The sensorimotor stage occurs within the first two years of childhood development when the child learns predominantly through action to distinguish between themselves and other objects within their external

environment. This 'period shows a remarkable evolution from non-intentional habits to experimental and exploratory activity which is obviously intentional or goal oriented' (Flavel 1963, p.107 cited in Thorpe *et al.* 1993, p.142)

*Pre-operational:* The pre-operational stage, or representational stage, occurs between the ages of 2-6 where children learn to reflect on, internalise and mentally categorise or classify external objects. The child becomes somewhat less concerned with concrete experiences and begins to consider his/her collection of different images or perspectives of the world. Learning in this stage is largely iconic.

*Concrete operational:* The third stage of cognitive development relates to the ages of 7-11 and heralds the first symbolic development stage where the child moves from the more accommodating approach to learning, associated particularly with the sensorimotor stage, to become more assimilative with regard to his/ her learning. The child now draws on theories and concepts to inform his/her learning experience and thereby engages in logical operations.

*Formal operational:* The final stage of Piaget's cognitive development theory occurs when the child moves towards engaging in abstract conceptual thought and learns through reflection to question or test his/her concepts and theories.

(Jarvis 2010; Thorpe *et al.* 1993)

While the focus of Piaget's research centred on how children acquired their knowledge through individual discovery, the final stage of his model seeks to describe mature adult learning and complex thought. His work was later extended to consider how the key learning stages outlined above inform adult learning and in doing so formed the foundation for other models of cognitive development actively linking an understanding of mental processes to instruction and lifelong learning. The work of Bruner and Ausubel in particular built on the work of Piaget and the key principles of cognitive development with a specific focus on lifelong learning. They both

emphasise the importance of organised and structured learning activities and knowledge provision in order to promote understanding and meaning through the integration of new learning with existing learning. They differ however, with regard to who should organise or structure the learning with Ausubel promoting a more hierarchical organisation of learning from ‘teacher’ to learner and Bruner arguing for a more independent role for the learner in the process of discovering his/her own learning e.g. through problem-solving approaches (Gould 2012). While different approaches emphasise various elements or aspects of the learning process, ultimately cognitive theories of learning differ from behaviourism in that the active role of the learner in mentally processing information is paramount and ‘Learning results from inferences, expectations, and making connections. Instead of acquiring habits, learners acquire plans and strategies, and prior knowledge is important’ (Hartley 1998, cited in Smith 1999, p.2).

- *Humanism*

Humanist theories of learning focus on the human potential for growth and evolved in reaction to both behaviourism, with its emphasis on individuals as objects controlled by the environment without evident free will or the ability to make choices, and the psychoanalytic approach developed by Freud, which suggests that humans are irrational beings whose behaviour is strongly influenced by the sub-conscious mind (Merriam *et al.* 2007; Gould 2012). Humanists considered the view of human nature presented within both perspectives to be a very limiting reflection of humanity and argued for greater recognition of the individuality of the person and their ability to control their own destiny (Gould 2012). Two psychologists in particular, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, actively promoted a humanist orientation towards learning founded on a common understanding that:

... human beings can control their own destiny; people are inherently good and will strive for a better world; people are free to act, and behaviour is the consequence of human choice; people possess unlimited potential for growth and development.

(Merriam *et al.* 2007 p.282)

Maslow developed a hierarchy of needs in response to the humanist motivation or ideal of achieving full human potential. At the lowest level are the physiological needs or basic needs such as hunger, thirst or shelter. Once these needs have been satisfied the next level of needs focusing on safety and security come into play. The remaining levels of need refer to belonging and love, esteem and lastly, self-actualisation. Maslow referred to the first four levels in this hierarchy as ‘deficiency needs’ on the basis that non-satisfaction of these categories of need would lead to a deficiency thereby motivating the individual to act in seeking to satisfy the relevant need (Gould 2012). The fifth category of need, self-actualisation, he described as a ‘growth need’ where the individual is intrinsically motivated by the desire for personal growth and this drive for self-actualisation is the epitome of the humanist perspective.

The work of Carl Rogers was also highly influential in the development of a humanist orientation to learning. By reinforcing the agency of the learner and arguing for a more student-centred approach to learning, he emphasised the importance of engaging with the whole person and their experiences in order to promote significant learning involving five key elements:

1. Personal Involvement: The affective and cognitive aspects of a person should be involved in the learning event.
2. Self-initiated: A sense of discovery must come from within.
3. Pervasive: The learning “makes a difference in the behavior, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner”.
4. Evaluated by the learner: The learner can best determine whether the experience is meeting a need.
5. Essence is meaning: When experiential learning takes place, its meaning to the learner becomes incorporated into the total experience.

(Rogers 1983, cited in Merriam *et al.* 200, p.283)

The emphasis on the needs and motivations of the individual learner as espoused by Rogers and Maslow are evident within many of the theories of

adult learning in contemporary society which actively seek to facilitate the learner as an independent agent seeking to achieve his/her full potential.

○ *Social Learning*

This theory of learning focuses on the learner and learning within a social context. It operates on the principle that people learn through observing others in social settings (Merriam *et al.* 2007). Through imitation and a focus on role models individuals acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes considered necessary to feel at ease within a strange environment or new social setting. From an early age children become familiar with social learning beginning in the family structure and extending from there. As adults, people continue to engage in social learning by observing the outcomes or consequences of modelled behaviour and retaining this information to determine if it may be appropriate for them in other situations (Jarvis 2010; Merriam *et al.* 2007).

Albert Bandura played a significant role in the development of social learning theory. Prior to his work, social learning research centred predominantly on observational learning and behavioural imitation and as a result was closely aligned to the behaviourist perspective of learning due to its emphasis on stimulus-response and reinforcement theory (Merriam *et al.* 2007). Bandura argued that imitation of observation/s is not required for learning to take place; that one can learn from observation alone without the need to imitate.

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.

(Bandura 1977, p.22)

He was more concerned with the information processing or cognitive aspects of social learning than the evident behaviour. While recognising the 'social origins of much human thought' (Merriam *et al.* 2007, p.289), he saw behaviour or action as the outcome of the individual's interaction with

the environment which was reciprocal in nature on the basis that people can inform their environment, but it too can inform their behaviour. The concepts of self-regulation; the ability of people to regulate their behaviour, and self-efficacy; the individual's own sense of self competence in a social situation, are significant to the nature of the interaction between the individual and the environment and therefore the social context of the learning which occurs.

Within the process of reciprocal determinism lies the opportunity for people to influence their destiny as well as the limits of self-direction. This conception of human functioning then neither casts people into the role of powerless objects controlled by environmental forces nor free agents who can become whatever they choose. Both people and their environments are reciprocal determinants of each other.

(Bandura 1977, p.vii).

With its emphasis on both the individual learner and the environment, social learning theory has made a significant contribution to adult learning theory and practice.

### *3.1.1.2 Theories of learning (Contemporary)*

The four learning theories outlined above form a useful framework of traditional understanding of both the concept of learning and the learning process, particularly from an adult learning perspective. Other theories of learning continue to emerge either drawing from aspects of the theories already outlined or offering new theories for consideration.

#### ○ *Constructivism*

Constructivism, for example, has become increasingly popular as a theory of adult learning. While drawing on aspects of existing traditional theories, it challenges the perception of learning as a transfer of information or an external body of knowledge from an expert source to the learner, but rather, emphasises the active construction of knowledge and meaning by learners from their own experiences (Rogers and Horrocks 2010). Two varying viewpoints exist within the constructivist orientation to learning: the individualist view whereby; 'Meaning is made by the individual and is dependent on the individual's previous and current knowledge structure'

and therefore intrinsic and very personal to the individual (Merriam *et al.* 2007, p.291); unlike the social constructivist view, whereby learning is constructed through the process of social interaction and dialogical discourse with other people (Rogers and Horrocks 2010). Merriam *et al.* (2007) contend however, that adult learning from a constructivist perspective can be both individual and social, citing self-directed learning as an example of the individual constructivist perspective and collaborative/ co-operative learning as examples of the social constructivist perspective, with both clearly evident within the field of adult learning.

#### ○ *Transformative Learning and Critical Reflection*

Transformative learning theory was proposed by Jack Mezirow in the late 1970s. This theory of learning seeks to explain how adults learn by interpreting and drawing meaning from their experience. Mezirow identifies a series of ten key stages by which learners may draw learning from experience leading to new meaning schemes, new perspectives and new knowledge. It is this process of challenging or re-interpreting existing knowledge, established meaning or assumptions that leads to transformational learning. Experience and critical reflection are therefore central to the learning process.

Both individual and social constructivist perspectives on learning emphasise learning from experience. Indeed, much of the discussion about adult learning centres on the debate regarding critical reflection on experience as a process of learning. Freire (1972), Schon (1983) and many others, promoted the significance of critical reflection, or critical analysis of experience as being central to the process of learning (Rogers and Horrocks 2010). Kolb (1984) identified a cycle of learning focusing on the learner's experience: this cycle, involving four key stages, starts with a *concrete experience* on the part of the individual who then moves to *reflective observation*, essentially considering the experience from a range of different viewpoints or other experiences to then proceed towards *generalisation and abstract conceptualisation*, whereby the individual seeks to create general principles or concepts from his/her observations to inform decision-making and action in relation to other contexts and other experiences, *active*

*experimentation* thus beginning the cycle of learning again. According to Kolb, each stage of the learning cycle also corresponds to a particular style of learning associated with the individual's preferred approach to learning. Learners therefore may be classified as:

- ✓ *Divergers*: learn by reflecting on concrete experiences from many different perspectives and engaging more directly with observations rather than actions.
- ✓ *Assimilators*: learn by analysing experience to create new theories or models based on the integration of new thoughts or observations
- ✓ *Convergers*: learn through experimentation and the active testing or application of new ideas from a more applied or practical perspective.
- ✓ *Accommodators*: learn by engaging directly with concrete experience, largely through trial and error rather than considered reflection.

(Kolb 1984; Honey and Mumford 1992)

While the learning styles outlined above continue to feature strongly within adult learning there has been some criticism however, of both Kolb's learning cycle and critical reflection on experience as the way in which individual's learn. This criticism is largely based on the fact that there are many processes to learning and that this is only one, with the learning cycle considered to be too prescriptive to allow for the diversity of human learning (Rogers and Horrocks 2010). Although Kolb's work still remains significant to the field of adult learning, the learner's context, or the context within which both experience and reflection take place do not feature within his learning cycle, a limitation identified by Jarvis (1987, 2001) in his consideration of the importance of biography to learning.

○ *Biographical learning*

While a theory of biographical learning has yet to be fully developed, growing interest in the relationship between biography and learning has become increasingly evident (Alheit 1995; Alheit and Dausien 2002; Tedder and Biesta 2007). Central to this theoretical perspective is an emphasis on

learning from life and all its experiences. In this regard there are evident similarities between biographical learning and transformative learning theory as proposed by Mezirow. Fundamental to this learning approach however, is the idea of ‘biographicity’ as outlined by Alheit and Dausien (2002) with the focus on learning and the learner going beyond one particular life stage to consider the wider life course, whereby learning is described as a process involving ‘...the (trans)-formation of experience, knowledge and action structures in the context of people’s life histories and lifeworlds’ (p.11). Tedder and Biesta (2007) argue that the ‘biographical turn’(p.3), a biographical approach to research, is not just about undertaking new forms of research methods and methodologies with regard to adult learning but more explicitly about bringing ‘different dimensions of the learning of adults into view’(p.3) within the context of a post-modern social reality. Biographical learning therefore offers the potential of a meaningful perspective on the significance of learning over the life course identifying the life course learning requirements of learners themselves (Tedder and Biesta 2007).

... the “biographical turn” engages with a much broader conception of learning, one which does not restrict the meaning of learning to institutional definitions, but which includes the cognitive and reflexive dimensions of learning as much as the emotional, embodied, pre-reflexive and non-cognitive aspects of every day learning processes and practices.

(p.3)

The strength of the relationship between learning and biography is reinforced by Alheit and Dausien (2002, p.15) whereby they stress that: ‘Without biography there can be no learning, without learning no biography’. While they recognise the ‘individual logic’, and ‘self-will’ (p.16) of the learner within the context of changing social structures, they equally emphasise that biographical learning is not a solitary process, highlighting the importance of narrative as a means of consideration and communication of one’s life story with others as part of the process of learning through the life course.

### **3.1.2 Adult learning: Theory and practice**

Biographical learning has been closely linked to adult learning and adult education (Tedder and Biesta 2007). Indeed many elements of the learning theories outlined within this consideration of learning in general are directly relevant to adult learning; yet no single theory of adult learning has come to the fore. Malcom Knowles concept of andragogy (1980), which he originally referred to as a theory of adult learning sought to define adult learning as distinct from childhood learning. However, while possibly ‘the best-known set of principles or assumptions to guide adult learning practice, andragogy actually tells us more about the characteristics of adult learners than about the nature of learning itself’ (Merriam *et al.* 2007, p.79).

Alternatively, Illeris (2002), in his search for a comprehensive model of learning, focuses on the learning process itself so as to fully understand learning. Although his model of learning was not developed solely on the basis of adult learning his work has become highly considered and influential within adult learning. According to Illeris, learning is based on the continuous interaction of three dimensions of learning: cognition (knowledge and skills), emotion (feelings and motivation) and environment (external interaction between learner and other people), all of which are encompassed within the wider context of society which in turn interacts with and shapes the individual’s learning. This model may be applied to any learning activity and has been lauded for its simplicity and its contribution to adult learning theory (Merriam *et al.*2007). One final model worthy of consideration from an adult learning perspective is that provided by Jarvis (1987) which also focuses on the learning process but views the person as a whole linking ‘body, mind, self and life history’ (Merriam *et al.* 2007 p.104). The starting point of learning is always based on a disjuncture between biography and experience i.e. when previous learning can no longer:

...cope with the present situation, people are consciously aware that they do not know how to act. We have to think, to plan or to learn something new. Learning then always begins with experiencing.

(Jarvis 2004, cited in Merriam *et al.* 2007, p.100)

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Jarvis's model is considered to be one of the most comprehensive models of learning to date, involving thought, emotion and action resulting in some change within the individual. While his work considers the generic human learning process he does suggest that his model may be more easily applied to adult learners than to children who would not have comparable levels of experience, cognitive ability, and emotional scope or action choices to draw from as part of the learning process. As a model of learning therefore it offers great potential in furthering our understanding of adult learning (Jarvis 2004).

The scale of theories, models and approaches outlined illustrate the variety of perspectives, interpretations and philosophies relevant to adult learning and human development. Each theoretical perspective carries different assumptions which in turn provide a broader perspective on adult development and learning and how both relate to practice in terms of adult education. Many human development theories emphasise the importance of life stages which individuals must pass through, usually in a sequential manner in order to demonstrate evidence of development (Clark and Cafarella, 1999). These stages are often age related with designated learning expectations influenced by life events or actions that precipitate progress to the next stage. Both Erikson (1956) and Levinson (1986) provide examples of such developmental stage theories and while both perspectives offer interesting in-sights in relation to aspects of individual learning, particularly in relation to one's sense of identity, both were equally criticised in seeking to present a universal theory for the individual process of learning without due consideration of the dynamics of change (Clark and Cafarella, 1999). Such critique and debate however, illustrates the scope, range, breadth and depth of adult development and learning theories informing the practice of adult education. Each adult learning practitioner will reflect components of one or many of the learning theories outlined by the way in which they engage within the learning process with adult learners and the learning environment they create. In seeking to respond in a manner that reflects the diverse individual learning needs and requirements of adults, each theoretical perspective has the potential to contribute to the variety of

teaching methodologies necessary for adult education practitioners promoting collaborative and democratic learning opportunities.

### **3.1.3 Conclusion**

Having reviewed many theories of learning, from more traditional to contemporary theories, it becomes increasingly evident that just as there is no one commonly agreed theory of human learning, there is equally no consensus on one theory of adult learning. Seeking to re-contextualise learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in response to the demands of a rapidly changing society remains an on-going challenge. But the challenge may involve embracing the variety of theories of learning that currently exist, in addition to other theories yet to emerge, to inform new perspectives or models of learning that are sufficiently flexible to recognise the unique life history and lifeworld of each individual learner within an ever-changing social context.

#### **Key points: The concept of learning and learning theories**

- Learning as a concept is both highly complex and contested. Understood in its broadest most generic sense, learning is life and everyone is learning as part of day to day living
- There is no one commonly accepted theory of learning but a whole range of theories and models that provide a useful framework in order to understand the concept of adult learning
- Adult learning practitioners will reflect components of many learning theories by the way in which they engage with adult learners within the learning process and the learning environment they create

### 3.3 Life course learning – A reconceptualization of lifelong learning?

(T) he adult with a capacity for true maturity is one who has grown out of childhood without losing childhood's best traits. He has retained the basic emotional strengths of infancy, the stubborn autonomy of toddlerhood, the capacity for wonder and pleasure and playfulness of the pre-school years, and the idealism and passion of adolescence. He has incorporated these into a new pattern of simplicity dominated by adult stability, wisdom, knowledge, sensitivity to other people, responsibility, strength and purposiveness

(Stone and Church 1973, cited in Medel-Anonuevo *et al.* 2001, p.8).

The predominance of economics as a core component of EU lifelong learning perspectives and policies reflects a narrow understanding of learning and fails to take serious account of the changing demographics and life patterns in the developed world (Slowey 2008). The synopsis of the evolution of lifelong learning, presented in section 2.2, highlights the historical influence and contribution of lifelong learning to education policy and practice to date. But, as we encounter the socio-economic considerations and rapid, successive changes of late modernity, much of the debate in relation to lifelong learning centres on the need to prepare individuals in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century adequately for the challenges of the life course and the need to re-conceptualise lifelong learning in order to do so. As Slowey and Watson (2003) assert:

As we enter the twenty-first century it is increasingly clear to professionals at all levels of the formal and informal education system that we need to refresh the concept of lifelong learning. It is no longer exclusively, or even mainly, about heroic second-chancers, isolated autodidacts, climbers of the ladder of professional qualifications, or the lifestyle choices of the relatively affluent retired. Instead, educational opportunity has become critical to social cohesion, to economic security, to personal well-being: in short, to life-chances.

(p. xix)

It is essential therefore that education researchers demonstrate the importance of the 'variety of learning processes and practices that occur throughout the life course of adults, so as to show that there is more to learning than what is acknowledged in the economic definitions of lifelong learning' (Field *et. al.* 2009, p.76).

Individuals are constantly learning as part of day-to-day life; formal, non-formal and informal learning are threaded throughout the course of the life path. Learning is fundamental to both our survival and our ability to thrive at an individual and societal level. So, how we value and organise learning matters and must be fundamental to the design and implementation of learning policies which reflect the ‘lived life’ realities of individuals and societies. There is now widespread consensus that macro-economic and social forces have had a significant impact on the life course of individuals (Bruckner and Mayer 2005). In the context of increasing life expectancy, new life patterns, and heightened requirements for frequent change and flexibility due to the demands of a global economy, teaching and learning policy and strategies cannot remain static but must be primarily reflective of the ever-evolving lives of individuals and society.

Logically, therefore, as documented by a number of authors (Slowey and Watson 2003; Biesta 2011; Merrill 2009; Gourney 2003) learning and educational opportunities must be reflective of the life course of individuals and ultimately ‘lifelong learning policies must embrace a life course approach’ (Slowey 2008, p.28). But what do we mean by a life course approach; what is the life course, and why should it become an issue of critical consideration for adult education and learning policy and practice? These questions will be considered in the context of exploring a life course approach to learning. In doing so, this study seeks to determine whether life course learning may, in effect, address the recognised need to reconceptualise lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***3.3.1 The life course***

In recent years the term ‘life course’ has become increasingly prevalent across a broad range of disciplines, but particularly the social and behavioural sciences (Alwin 2012). However, attaining a common agreement, or clear definition, of what the ‘life course’ is, has proven to be a somewhat elusive challenge. It is frequently confused with a range of other concepts including: life span, life cycle, life stage, life trajectory, life time; all of which are interrelated, yet distinct, in the study of human lives (Alwin

2012). So what is distinctive about the life course and why has it become a much contested, yet increasingly popular concept, in studying the lives of individuals and societies?

The concept of the life course features within many disciplines, including demography, biography, history, biology, psychology and sociology. The manner in which the life course is defined, perceived, theorised and researched tends to be largely determined by the relevant disciplinary context, whether that be from a singular disciplinary angle or a multi-disciplinary perspective (Green 2010). However, the two primary disciplines that feature in much of the documentation regarding the life course are sociology and psychology (Green 2010). The human life course is depicted by psychologists (particularly life-span psychologists) and sociologists (particularly life course sociologists) in a variety of ways, ‘often in opposition to one another – as individual and social, respectively’ (Settersten 2009, p.78). Both disciplines, however, share an inherent focus on studying how individuals live their lives in increasingly changing and fluid societies, leading to many intersections and potential collaborations in relation to the evolving concept of the ‘life course’. Accordingly, much of the available literature with regard to the life course reflects both an understanding and incorporation of these two different disciplines, as is evident within the following four conceptions of the life course, identified by Mc Adams (2005):

- (i) *Developmental Stages* - largely reflected in the writing of life-span developmental theorists, portraying the life course as ‘a universal and uniform set of stages through which all people pass. For example, everyone who lives to old age has been an infant, a child, a youth and an adult, and everyone dies eventually’ (Giddens 2009, p.295). The developmental stages are perceived as being determined by chronological age.
- (ii) *Contingent Trajectories* – this conception of the life course suggests that the individual’s development through life cannot simply be considered as a sequence of predetermined stages but must be understood in the context of historical events and social,

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economic, and cultural forces. As Mc Adams (2005, p.237) asserts: ‘The person moves through time along a dynamic trajectory that results from the complex interplay between human agency and the manifold forces of social structure’.

- (iii) *Personal Traits*- this conception emphasises the primary importance of individual personal traits and dispositions in determining the life course. While recognising the reality of changing contexts, transitions and turning points, the focus remains on how individuals construct their life courses in accordance with their internal dispositions.
- (iv) *Stories/Narrative*- the fourth conception emphasises subjective meaning: considering how people make meaning of their unfolding lives largely through the form of stories/narratives: ‘Narrative approaches to the life course see persons as storytellers, see lives as stories told, and see the life course as a psychosocial construction reflecting both personal inclinations and the narrative conventions and traditions that prevail in a given society’ (Mc Adams 2005, p.238).

All of the above conceptions contribute to a greater understanding of the life course from different, but related, perspectives. Key terms evident within the above conceptions warrant further consideration as they feature regularly within definitions and studies of the life course. These are: trajectories, transitions and turning points. A trajectory may be described as a pathway; it usually refers to the succession of statuses or roles that may occur longitudinally throughout the life of an individual, e.g. education, or work (Elder 2003; Verd and Lopez 2011). A transition refers to ‘changes in status and role which are generally known about and prepared for – such as from being single to married, or from student to full time worker’ (Green 2010, p.25); unlike trajectories, which are long-term, they occur over short spaces of time, sometimes on a number of occasions within a given trajectory. A turning point essentially involves a major change in the direction of one’s life and can reflect ‘the effective exercise of agency in both creating and responding to new opportunities’ (Bynner 2005, p.379).

All of these terms are significant within the biographical story or life course of the individual.

Ultimately, an understanding of the life course incorporates both psychological and sociological disciplines, focusing on the links between individual development and social structure. This perspective is reiterated by Heinz (2010) in his study of life course dynamics in which he emphasises the need for a multi-level analysis of the life course incorporating macro, meso and micro levels reflective of the social, institutional and individual dimensions of the life course. Heinz defines the life course as ‘... the interface of society and the individual because it transfers macro-social conditions and requirements via institutions (meso-level) to guidelines of individual action (micro-level) (p.230). The interrelationships between all three levels are set within the ever changing nature of society. Accordingly, the micro level focuses on individual human development and agency over the life-span in the context of changing social structures thereby reinforcing the interactive psychological and sociological perspectives. The meso level refers predominantly to the social institutions and networks that convey the transition of macro social conditions and societal expectations to the level of the individual. The macro level refers to the wider social-economic forces and structural factors which set the scene for the dynamic interplay between individual agency and social structure.

The multi-level nature of the life course reflects a series of stages (not necessarily in a given sequence) that are socially constructed but which involve ‘chronological age, relationships, common life transitions and social change’ (Hutchison 2007, p.9), all directly influenced by the wider historical, social and economic context in which individual lives unfold. It must be emphasised, however, that the individual also has a key role to play in determining their life course, intentionally or unintentionally, and that individual developmental trajectories, while contingent on structural forces, allow scope for individual choice and action. This point is reiterated by Bruckner and Mayer (2005), when they refer to the variety of developmental trajectories within the life course as being ‘partly freely chosen’ and ‘partly imposed’ (p.31). In its simplest sense, therefore, the life

course may be understood as a path through life, from birth to death, informed by the past, present and hope for the future, reflecting twists and turns evident in key transitions and more on-going developmental trajectories of evolving lives, directly informed both by the individual and the broader historical and structural context of their lives.

### **3.3.2 Life course research**

Life course research, then, 'refers to a multidisciplinary paradigm for the study of people's lives, structural context and social change' (Mitchell 2003). One of the primary scholars of the life course, Glen H. Elder (1985), identified five key principles to frame life course research from a multi-level perspective incorporating many of the different conceptions of the life course outlined above (Bruckner and Mayer 2005; Bynner 2005; Hutchison 2007; Heinz 2010). According to Elder, the principles of utmost significance are: *life-span development*- a focussing on individual development over the life-span; *agency*- analysing how individuals seek to control or determine their own life courses by seeking out opportunities and making decisions in the context of the constraints and options they may encounter; *time and place*- considering the life courses of individuals as interwoven with the historical context and places they have experienced over their lifetimes; *timing of lives* - investigating the social timings of transitions during the life course; and lastly, *linked lives* - exploring the interdependence of life courses through personal networks of shared relationships (Slowey 2008; Kok 2007).

These five principles underscore the life course as a cumulative process which seeks to contextualise people's lives in an effort to fully understand the complexities of human development and change, as individuals seek to work out their own life courses. Unlike traditional theories of human development, life course research focuses on time and timing as significant factors in human behaviour, emphasising the potential impact of historical and social change. This is a key consideration in view of the pace and frequency of change in modern society (Hutchison 2007). 'At the same time, with its attention to human Time, the life course perspective is not as

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deterministic as some earlier theories and acknowledges people's strengths and capacity for change' (Hutchison 2007, p.33). People's capacity for change and their resourcefulness, while evident in terms of individual human agency, is also a reflection of their 'linked lives' e.g. family and community, and this point illustrates the significance of the interdependence of lives in the context of structural forces throughout the life course.

In truth, one of the key considerations within much of the research and discourse regarding the life course centres on the perceived tension between identifying the life course as a product of 'human agency', or as a product of 'structure' (Settersten and Gannon 2005). As noted above, this reflects an on-going debate between the disciplines of psychology and sociology. To reiterate: human agency refers to the independent action and capacity of the empowered individual. Whereas, structure, while difficult to define and the subject of much debate among sociologists, may be considered to refer to social forces, and structural factors, such as: class, gender, ethnicity, economic and social conditions all of which have the potential to promote or constrain human agency (Ecclestone 2007).

Settersten and Gannon (2005) underline the diversity of perspectives on structure and agency within life course studies and raise concern regarding extreme models which emphasise '... 'structure without agency' (more evident within the discipline of sociology), or 'agency without structure' (more evident within the discipline of psychology)' (p.35). The first set of models, structure without agency, considers '...the life course to be largely constrained, if not determined, by the characteristics of, and processes, in social settings, and by the locations of individuals within those settings' (p.35). In doing so, this perspective is problematic politically because, if carried to extreme, it has the potential to undermine personal responsibility and apportion blame largely to external structural forces. It also undermines the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between individuals and social structures, both micro and macro, and the ability of individuals to seek to shape and influence their life course (Bronfenbrenner 1988).

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The second set of models, agency without structure, considers the life course to be a product of individual choices and actions, although recognising the existence of structure, it undermines ‘the effects of social forces and assume(s) that good planning and hard work go a long way in overcoming barriers’ (p.36). Perceived self-efficacy, a belief in one’s own ability to act in order to attain desired outcomes, would feature strongly in this context and has the potential to influence the life course directly (Bandura 1997, 1999). However, this perspective, if carried too far, is also problematic because it has the potential to blame the individual for problems, difficulties, or aspects of inequality encountered as part of the life course, thereby negating the possible contribution of structural forces towards both the problem and the solution. According to Settersten and Gannon (2005), while both sets of models offer interesting perspectives with regard to understanding human development, a third set of models is necessary to promote understanding of how the life course is partly concerned with individual choice and partly externally imposed.

These are blended models of *agency within structure*, which explicitly seek to understand how individuals set goals, take action, and create meanings within – and often despite – the parameters of social settings, and even how individuals may change those parameters through their own actions.

(Settersten and Gannon 2005, p.36)

Such models, in taking account of both agency and structure, seek to bridge the debate and the challenges of prioritising one over the other and illustrate the need to explore the expression and balance of both agency and structure throughout the changing life course. In doing so, these blended models provide greater opportunity for an interdisciplinary or even multidisciplinary approach to life course research. In effect,

The tensions between structure and agency need not be resolved as much as capitalized upon to build new social theories and research on specific life periods and on the life course as a whole.

(Settersten and Gannon 2005, p.36)

### ***3.3.3 The changing nature of the life course***

A further debate in relation to life course study relates to contradictory perspectives on the nature of the life course as a whole, due to the increasing

modernisation of societies. Shanahan (2000) argues that modernisation has contributed to both the standardisation and de-standardisation of the life course. This perspective is reiterated by Settersten and Gannon (2005):

There is mounting and conflicting evidence that the life course has become both more standardized (with regularity in life course patterns being driven by the increased “institutionalization” brought about by norms, laws, and social policies) *and* de-standardized ( or “individualized”, with variability in life course experiences being driven by the greater choices and control individuals have over their lives).

(p.49)

Much of the discourse regarding life course standardization refers to the increasing significance of the state in ordering and sequencing the life course according to age (e.g. ages of school completion, starting work, marriage, parenthood etc.), while also highlighting the mounting impact of macro forces above micro forces, for example, family and community, on the lives of individuals (Kohli 1986; Shanahan 2000). The opposite perspective of individualization, however, suggests that, as a result of modernization, individuals are gaining greater control over their lives, having been freed from the constraints commonly associated with traditional family and community norms and increasing variability in life choices. This enhanced freedom, however, also brings greater potential of uncertainty and risk for the individual, and society, as navigating new life paths reflective of the pace of change in the modern world requires on-going re-invention of self and society (Beck 1992; Mayer 2004; Giddens 1991). While most life course theorists refer to the interplay between standardisation and individualization, contemporary life course research would appear to give greater emphasis to the latter, but usually with due recognition of the wider structural context:

...with widespread belief that a wide range of macro and micro-level factors in the last few decades have resulted in life courses that are less conventional, patterned, and predictable, and more risky in private and public spheres alike.

(Settersten and Gannon 2005, p. 49)

A further element of significance with regard to the changing nature of the life course relates to the increasing application of a life course perspective to

sociological, psychological and educational research. Moreover, according to Shanahan (2000); ‘...one of the most significant advances in life course studies’ has been ‘the widespread adoption of a developmental stance by sociologists as they link the experiences of childhood, adolescence, and the phases of adulthood’ (p.675). This developmental perspective combines agency and structure in examining how individuals devise their life path reflective of their life goals, and seek to actively shape their biographies within the constraints and opportunities of institutions and the wider social structure. As Bynner (2005) asserts:

...each step along [biographical pathways] is conditioned by the steps taken previously, by the personal, financial, social and cultural resources to which the growing individual has access, and by the social and institutional contexts through which the individual moves.

(p.379)

The developmental perspective therefore highlights the potential impact of early life experiences on later life and the nature of the life course (Shanahan 2000). This viewpoint is reinforced by Clausen (1991), in his discussion of ‘planful competence’ (p.811), whereby individuals are viewed as the architects of their life courses as a result of the evaluative choices they make, linked to the competence they acquire in navigating the life course, and their active orientation towards life. The social organisation of opportunities, resources and constraints, however, cannot be disregarded in considering the life chances and life courses of individuals. Learning to navigate the life course must therefore give due consideration to the acquisition and development of key life competencies, whilst also actively negotiating within socially structured opportunities and limitations.

#### ***3.3.4 Life course learning***

Having examined various concepts and some of the complexities of the life course, the significance of education and learning in order to optimise human development in a manner sensitive to the needs and the wider considerations of individuals throughout their life course, has become increasingly apparent. In recognition of rapidly changing times and the

corresponding changing needs and requirements of individuals and society, Feinstein et al (2008, p.6) assert that:

It is the responsibility of the education system to recognise personal needs and the context in which they are expressed – so that learning opportunities are offered at the right time, in the right place, to meet needs in the most appropriate way.

Life course learning is essentially learning from life for life, in full recognition of individuals' life experiences, reflective of both their developing sense of identity and agency within the wider reality of existing structural forces and the rapidly changing economic and social conditions of society (Biesta and Tedder 2007; Heinz 2010). Life course learning has the potential to redress many of the criticisms levelled at current lifelong learning policy, by adopting a 'whole world' multi-level perspective in relation to the learner, learning practice and policy as opposed to a more narrow focus on the world of work. Further investigation, however, of what may be understood as life course learning is warranted prior to determining if it may indeed offer a real solution to the recognised need to reconceptualise lifelong learning (Slowey and Watson 2003; Biesta 2011; Merrill 2009).

### ***3.3.5 A life course learning approach***

The five principles of life course research by G.H. Elder (1985), as previously outlined, offer a particularly useful framework for studying a life course approach to learning. As each principle is significant to this consideration of life course learning, it is important to consider each in turn with regard to potential implications and contributions to learning for the life course. The first principle, life-span development, focuses on the development of the individual over the life-span. In the context of formal learning and education it relates largely to age-dependent schooling during recognised life stages of childhood, adolescence and sometimes young adulthood through formal educational institutions in readiness for working life. After compulsory schooling (a requirement normally at primary and secondary levels), tertiary, vocational or adult education, formal or informal, may occur during the life-span to further promote labour market

opportunities, work career and post-retirement activities (Settersen 2005). Life course research indicates that the manner in which compulsory education is organised or structured informs the learning opportunities, decisions and experiences of individuals as they proceed through educational institutions and has a direct impact on their life courses (Settersen 2005; Mayer 2005; Chisholm 2008). In their discussion of education as a lifelong process, Blossfeld and von Maurice (2011) outline the ‘Matthew effect’, as identified by Dannefer (1987), often referred to as the ‘cumulative disadvantage/advantage hypothesis’, which contends that ‘initial educational inequalities become magnified over the lifespan’ (pp.21-22). Although, they stipulate, that this effect offers some explanation for intra-cohort inequality in the life course, they underline the potential role of further education in ‘narrowing...the inequality gap’ (p.22). The role of the individual, however, is equally significant and for consideration within the next principle of life course research.

The second principle, that of agency is of utmost significance with regard to learning and education as it emphasises the role of the agentic individual, proactively making learning choices and decisions, which in turn, affect the nature of the life course. Bandura’s (1982) theory of self-efficacy reinforces this perspective; it views individuals ‘not simply as reactive creatures shaped by external events, but as being *agentic, self-regulating, creative, and proactive*’ (Blossfeld and von Maurice 2011, p.23; emphasis in original). One’s perception of self-efficacy: a belief in one’s own ability to take action within the constraints and opportunities of micro and macro structural forces, whether accurate or flawed, can have a long-term impact on the nature of engagement with learning and education processes throughout life. Indeed, as Blossfeld and von Maurice (2011) assert: ‘conceptions of self-efficacy formed early in life tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies by either encouraging or discouraging students from taking risks and undertaking new and challenging tasks’ (p.23). Judgements of self-efficacy directly affect human agency, as individuals avoid activity which they perceive as exceeding their capabilities and engage more assuredly in activity they perceive they can attain or master (Bandura 1982).

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Of the five principles outlined by Elder (1985), human agency is of seminal importance to life course learning.

The third principle of time and place, in the context of learning and education, considers the socio-historical lives of individuals and how this may impact their learning life courses. Age, period and cohort have been identified by life course researchers as central to this discussion (Mayer 2004; Shanahan 2000): all individuals' age and learning requirements vary accordingly. 'Period', refers to the reality that, regardless of life phase, all individuals are part of, and affected by, contemporary life history, which can equally affect education and learning requirements and experiences. Lastly, 'cohort', refers to birth cohort, particular groups of individuals who 'experience different historical conditions at certain critical periods or transitions in the life course (e.g., changing transitions; or changing labour market conditions at the time of entry into the vocational education and training system)' - (Blossfeld and von Maurice 2011, p.24).

The fourth principle, timing of lives, refers to the effects of the timing of life transitions on the life of the individual. In terms of education and learning, life events or transitions, and when they occur, can carry implications for the individual's engagement in learning and educational processes and structures. For example, choices and decisions taken at key points of transition within formal education systems, from pre-school to primary, primary to secondary etc., will influence the learning life course.

Lastly, the fifth principle of linked lives considers the effect of family, social networks and institutional contexts on the learning lives of individuals, both formal and informal, thereby, highlighting the significance of intergenerational culture, family background and relationships on the learning life course of the individual, whilst also considering the impact of relationships outside of the family, through peer groups and institutions and the influence of this type of interaction on the individual construction of the learning life course. By emphasising the interdependence of different kinds of learning and the variation of learning needs and processes across the life course, all within the wider framework of individual development and social

change, the five principles of life course research are of particular significance to this study of life course learning

### **3.3.6 Learning – to navigate the life course**

What kind of learning is necessary for individuals in order to navigate their life course? What capacities and skills do individuals require in different periods of life to manage new pathways and potential risks now associated with contemporary society? According to Settersten (2009):

... several capacities and skills seem especially useful today for adults of all ages, such as an ability to be planful but have flexibility, to have a capacity for close relationships and intimacy, to be able to relate to a wide variety of people and groups, to be self-aware and have an ability to take the perspectives of others, to be able to harness resources and exert control over the environment in pursuing developmental goals and to exercise self-control and restrain impulses.

(p.77)

In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to the diverse needs of adult learners and much of the discussion with regard to the study of learning now advocates a life course perspective (Schuller 2010; Slowey 2008; Slowey and Watson 2003; Biesta *et al.* 2011). This focus is particularly evident within the work of Tom Schuller and David Watson (2009), which seeks to provide a coherent and strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK, entitled *Learning Through Life – Inquiry into the future for Lifelong Learning*. This publication outlined two conceptual frameworks. The first focussed on ‘three capitals’ as a concept seeking to present a more complete understanding of learning throughout life, and the second concept applied a four stage model to lifelong learning, reflective of different age groups and the organisation of learning opportunities in recognition of learning diversity. Both conceptual frameworks were devised with a view to providing a more accurate reflection of the purposes and benefits of learning for life and the perspectives outlined are significant to this discussion on life course learning, with particular consideration awarded to the ‘capitals’ concept.

Central to the first conceptual framework which has been outlined is the critical emphasis on the interdependence of different kinds of learning and

the need to go beyond formal accreditation as the predominant measure of education. This framework ‘consists of three “capitals”: forms of assets which have value for individuals and for society: human capital, social capital and identity capital’ (Schuller and Watson 2009, p.15). Each of these capitals will be discussed in turn at a broader level, before seeking to identify the specific kinds of learning required in the context of each in order to determine a potential framework of learning for the life course. To assist this process, Fink’s taxonomy of ‘Significant Learning’ (2003) is extremely useful in identifying several specific kinds of learning which may be deemed appropriate to each of the three capitals and is therefore worthy of further consideration (see table 2.1). While there are many taxonomies of learning, the scheme identified by Fink emphasizes the interactive dimension of different kinds of learning to develop significant learning (see appendix 8), typified by ‘some kind of lasting change that is important in terms of the learner’s life (Fink 2003, p.3). In the context of Schuller’s capitals framework and the wider discussion on life course learning, this taxonomy is particularly relevant. Whilst realistically, as noted by Schuller (2002) and other authors (Schuller and Watson 2009, Jamieson *et al.* 2009), it can be difficult to strictly confine particular kinds of learning solely to one of the three capitals outlined, it is useful for theoretical purposes to do so as it assists in clarifying types of learning. However, the obvious potential for overlap and debate regarding the capital location of each form of learning serves to reinforce the evident complementarities of the three capitals and the interdependence of learning throughout all aspects of life.

**Table 3.1 A blended model of Schuller’s and Watson’s Three Capitals of learning and Fink’s taxonomy of Significant Learning.**

<b>Schuller and Watson (2009) Three Capitals</b>	<b>Fink (2003) Taxonomy of Significant Learning- Key Categories</b>
<p><b><u>Human:</u></b> (Formal education, skills and qualifications)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foundational Knowledge: understanding and remembering information and ideas</li> <li>• Application: skills, critical creative, and practical thinking; managing projects</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Social</u></b> (Social relationships and networks)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human dimension: learning about oneself and others</li> <li>• Integration: connecting ideas, people and realms of life</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Identity</u></b> (Self-esteem and self-knowledge)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning how to Learn: becoming a better student; inquiring about a subject; self-directing learners</li> <li>• Caring: developing new feelings, interests and values</li> </ul>

**(i) Human Capital**

Although it is obvious that people acquire useful skills and knowledge, it is not obvious that these skills and knowledge are a form of capital, that this capital is in substantial part a product of deliberate investment, that it has grown in Western societies at a much faster rate than conventional (non-human) capital, and that its growth may well be the most distinctive feature of the economic system.

(Schultz 1961, p.1)

The emergence of human capital, basically connecting capital to education and learning, may be traced back to the 1960s, and predominantly to the work of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), two American economists who identified human capital as a key concept in economic and social analysis

### Chapter 3: Literature Review: Theoretical Framework

(Schuller et al 2004; Field 2008; Karamel 2011). Education is considered to be one of the principal forms of human capital accumulation and may be assessed in the context of measured investment to rates of return in terms of growth in individual earnings, organisations' productivity and national economic growth. Human Capital, therefore, refers to both the skills and qualifications which people acquire, mainly through formal education, but equally through informal learning, which they utilise predominantly within the workplace but also within other social and community contexts (Schuller and Watson 2009).

Just as physical capital is created by changes in materials to form tools that facilitate production, human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways.

(Coleman 1988, cited in Schuller and Field 1998, p. 227)

Formal acquisition of knowledge and skills remain core to human capital development and may be deemed to correspond to the categories of *foundational knowledge* and *application* identified within Fink's taxonomy of significant learning. According to Fink, foundational knowledge: that is knowledge and understanding of key facts, ideas and perspectives (often referred to as course content) and application: the ability to apply one's knowledge to other settings through creative, critical and practical thinking, are key capabilities that employers require in prospective employees. Both categories are interactive, essential to the development of other kinds of learning and critical to the adaptability of a workforce within an increasingly complex and rapidly changing labour market (Fink 2003; Wirth and Perkins 2008; Karamel 2011).

However, according to Jarvis (2010), when the workforce is regarded as capital, then investing in continued learning for the workforce aims to promote the effectiveness of the firm or organisation and not necessarily the worker, although this may also bring some benefit to the worker; viewed as human capital 'they are not ends in themselves but means to other ends – something contrary to Kant's argument that people are ends and not means!' (p.35). In a similar vein, Harte (1992, cited in Gouthro 2002, p.344 ) argues that '... a narrow instrumental view of work translates into a view of

education which places “immediate relevance” and efficiency above concerns for overall human development and well-being’. An emphasis on human capital theory, which seeks to measure capital investment in education and training according to years spent in full time schooling to marketplace returns, contributes to the development of an educational agenda which focuses on profit rather than life at an individual and societal level (Gouthro 2002; Harte 1997).

Increasing globalisation and market-based policies reflective of a neo liberal economic approach tend to place full responsibility for economic survival and political success or failure, at the level of the individual rather than at systematic levels. In doing so, human capital promotes individual self-interest, with a key focus on increased productivity and earnings, while also reinforcing compliance with the requirements of a global economy (Coffield 1999; Ecclestone 1999; Ecclestone and Field 2003; Karamel 2011).

According to Schuller and Field (2006), human capital:

...concentrates on individuals, since it is individuals who spend the years in school and to whom qualifications are awarded, and to the extent that it does this it ignores the wider social context within which much learning takes place, and the relationships – personal and institutional – which actually constitute the vehicle or channels through which learning takes place.

(p.228)

While accepting that human capital remains ‘immensely powerful’ within learning policy and practice, they question its dominance and emphasise the importance of social capital as being equally significant for the learning life courses of individuals and of society itself.

**(ii) Social Capital**

... a great deal is known about how much people earn after having completed an additional year’s schooling, but a lot less is known about other outcomes society intends education to provide and even less about unintended consequences of learning.

(OECD 2006, p.15)

Traditionally, human capital theory with its focus on the economic objectives of learning has held a dominant position in most European

societies in relation to thinking about education and training. An extensive knowledge base already exists with regard to the measurement of human capital, linking investment in education to rates of economic returns (Taylor *et al.* 2011). However, in the context of the current economic climate and the increasing globalisation of modern society the need to go beyond pure economic measurements of education and learning to embrace non-economic learning objectives has become more and more apparent (Field 2006; Taylor *et al.* 2011; Schuetze 2012). This requires a greater comprehension and measurement of the links between learning and social outcomes leading to an exploration of social capital and learning as a potential counterbalance to human capital (Taylor *et al.* 2011).

Social Capital as a concept is difficult to define and measure. Its rise to prominence may be traced mainly to the work of Bourdieu, (1977), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1996, 2000) with evident variability in emphases and interpretation (Schuller 2001). Field (2008) expands on the differences between each of the three authors as being distinct yet related. Accordingly, he described the social capital writings of Bourdieu as being similar to Marxism in questioning unequal access to resources and power, with a more negative view of social capital as contributing to the reproduction of social inequality in securing the relative position of powerful elites within society. Coleman, he argued, demonstrated through the application of rational choice theory that social capital was potentially beneficial to society as a whole, demanding ‘cooperation between individuals who are nevertheless pursuing their own self-interest’ (p.26); whereas he described the work of Putnam as that of a political scientist, who examined civic engagement activity as a measure of social capital and underlined the importance of social capital in promoting societal well-being and social integration. While recognising the differences in the perspectives of all three theorists, Field (2008) emphasised that, for all three, social capital may be understood as referring to participation in networks, both formal and informal, with common goals and shared values:

Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interaction ... Social capital is

### Chapter 3: Literature Review: Theoretical Framework

not just the sum of the institutions which underpin society – it is the glue that holds them together.

(World Bank 1999)

The key principle behind social capital is that social relationships, an individual's family, friends, community and associates, may be considered as capital assets, at an individual, community and societal level. Portes (1998) stated: 'Whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships' (p.7). Three types of social capital have been identified in an attempt to further define and understand this concept: bonding social capital, which relates to strong connections between individuals in similar situations or a particular group, such as family or friends; bridging social capital, which refers to more distant connections beyond tight-knit groups, such as work colleagues or acquaintances; and linking social capital, which refers to connections with individuals or institutions in dissimilar situations, more commonly associated with power and authority (WBL 2011).

Unlike human capital, with its focus on the economic behaviour of the individual, social capital emphasises the importance of relationships and the norms that govern relationships within society, which in turn may affect levels of social cohesion (Schuller, 2001). It is not something that can be acquired directly through education in the same way as qualifications, but learning and education can contribute to, and benefit from, social capital by increasing access to, and participation in, networks (Schuller and Watson 2009). As Field (2005) asserts: 'social capital can influence the way in which people acquire new skills, information and ideas throughout their lifespan, and in turn create new skills, meanings and knowledge' (p.9). Much of the debate and discussion regarding social capital considers its relationship with learning and education, largely as a result of the limitations of concepts such as human capital, to explain learning processes and outcomes fully (Falk and Ballatti 2002). More recently the relationship between social capital and learning in adult life has become increasingly noteworthy, particularly among educational researchers and social scientists, in terms of how it relates to current debates regarding the learning

continuum, civic participation, identity, and social change (Field 2005; Aronowitz 2008). ‘Accordingly there is now a growing consensus that the links between personal, social and economic well-being and education need to be understood better and communicated to policy makers and the wider public’ (Desjardins and Schuller 2006, p.11)

As a direct result of this consensus, much of the discussion in relation to the connections between social capital and learning also draw on the connections between social capital and human capital; indeed, for many authors social and human capitals are inextricably linked (Balatti and Falk 2002; OECD 2007). Ballati and Falk (2002) argue that ‘only through social capital are the skills and knowledge of human capital made available for the benefit of individuals, the communities, and regions in which they live and ultimately the society at large’ (p.282). The OECD (2001) also highlighted the need for research regarding the links between human and social capital, with a particular focus on the role of social networks in promoting education for individuals and equally the potential role of education in promoting social capital. Despite the inconsistencies and debates that unfold in any examination of social capital and more specifically its relationship to human capital, it remains a popular concept, particularly among researchers of education and learning, in seeking to understand social relations, productivity and learning (Balatti and Falk 2002).

Social capital treats learning not as a matter of individual acquisition of skills and knowledge, but as a function of identifiable social relationships. It also draws attention to the role of norms and values in the motivation to learn as well as in the acquisition of skills and the deployment of new know how.

(Field and Schuller 1997, p.17)

According to Taylor *et al.* (2011), any discussion of the relationship between social capital and learning must adopt a lifespan and life-wide learning framework because learning outcomes can be conceptualised in a variety of ways; for example, ‘an adult encounters learning throughout life in the contexts of the workplace, in the contexts of social and civic life and in the milieu of home, family and leisure life’ (p.11). The ability to make connections between different kinds of learning, ideas and perspectives,

across various realms of life, corresponds to the category of *integration* within Fink's taxonomy of significant learning. Integration demonstrates intellectual ability in linking formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes from a range of different contexts throughout the lifespan. It also serves to illustrate the interrelationships and interdependence of different forms of learning. The importance of learning integration is further consolidated by the *human dimension* of learning, another category of significant learning in Fink's taxonomy. This category describes the type of learning which occurs when individuals become more self-aware, enabling 'them to recognize the personal and social implications of their knowledge and to function and interact more effectively with others' (Wirth and Perkins 2008, p.9). The ability to create linkages between different learning outcomes, across a variety of contexts and networks throughout life, in addition to developing a greater understanding of self and others through reciprocal learning underlines the intrinsic connection between learning and the concept of social capital, leading Falk and Balatti (2002, p. 281) to conclude that 'that the impact of learning on society is brought about by social capital'.

#### **(iii) Identity Capital**

Lastly, 'Identity Capital' refers to a sense of self-esteem and self-worth; essentially, it is about having a meaning and a purpose in life (Schuller and Watson 2009). According to Coté (2005, p.225):

Identity capital represents attributes associated with sets of psychosocial skills, largely cognitive in nature, that appear to be necessary for people to intelligently strategise and make decisions affecting their life courses (i.e., to individualise).

Previously, Coté and Levene (2002) highlighted the need for a specific type of capital in conjunction with, but equally separate from, human, cultural or social capital which would recognise the variety of resources and multidimensional nature of identity formation that best represent 'how people most effectively define themselves and have others define them, in various contexts' (p.142). While Coté and Levene define identity capital as referring to both tangible (i.e socially visible assets, such as qualifications)

and intangible assets (e.g. ego, self-esteem). Schuller *et al.* (2004) criticise this definition, stating that the argument to support this perspective is weak, but they recognise the value of the concept of identity capital by defining it in a more limited sense as referring solely to intangible assets:

Identity capital, then, refers to the characteristics of the individual that define his or her outlook and self-image. Our usage of it includes specific personality characteristics such as ego strength, self-esteem, or internal locus of control, but recognises that many of its components are socially shaped and not inherent personality traits.

(p.20)

Identity capital, however, has a direct relationship with learning in that the characteristics outlined above impact upon the motivation to engage with, and continue within, the learning process which in turn, depending on the learning experience, may contribute either positively or negatively to an individual's identity capital (Schuller *et al.* 2004). As Akerman *et al.* (2011, p.12) point out;

That is because who we are, what meaning we find in life, what we believe we can accomplish, whether we will triumph over adversity and develop our lives in the way we want – all depend essentially on our learning behaviour, as numerous scientific studies have shown.

The remaining two categories in Fink's taxonomy of significant learning, *caring* and *learning to learn*, clearly illustrate the interrelationship between learning and identity capital. According to Fink (2003), caring about a subject, oneself, others, and about learning itself, can have a profound effect on an individual's interests, feelings and values, all of which contribute to identity formation. Learning how to learn: how to become a better learner, how to seek and construct knowledge and how to be a self-directed learner, is a type of learning of particular importance to the development of identity capital throughout the life course as it seeks to promote effective learning and the capability to keep on learning for life (Fink 2003).

A key aspect of contemporary lifelong learning policy and practice is the idea that individuals must constantly learn in order to adapt to the pace of change in modern society. Illustrating a need to 'reflexively engage in the (re)construction of one's self and identity' (Zhao and Biesta 2012, p.332).

Zhao and Biesta (2012), compare the work of Giddens (1991) and Taylor (1989, 1991) with regard to the interrelationships between self, identity and learning in contemporary society. Accordingly, Giddens (1991) view regarding identity; the ‘reflective project of the self’ (p.32), highlights a highly individualised process of individuals reflecting/working on themselves, which explains, why, for Giddens, ‘reflexive learning concerning self and identity tends to be *adaptive, functional, and instrumental* – features that actually suit dominant policy on lifelong learning quite well’ (Zhao and Biesta 2012, p.342). However, Taylor presents the individual self as a project encapsulating life as a whole and focuses on the moral and intersubjective dimensions of the formation of identity (Zhao and Biesta 2012). He emphasises that it is impossible to define one’s identity in isolation and stresses the importance of the ‘dialogical self’:

We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us. And even when we out-grow some of the latter – our parents, for instance – and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live.

(Taylor 1991, p.33)

A similar perspective may be identified in the work of Honneth (1995), in relation to what he terms the ‘struggle for recognition’ which contributes significantly to the concept of identity capital linked to ‘both one’s “private” sense of self and one’s “public” self’ (Fleming 2011, p.6). Honneth identifies three modes of relating to the self, which he deems essential to identity development: self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, ‘the possibility of identity development depends on the development of all three modes of relating that in turn can only be achieved intersubjectively’ (Fleming 2011, p.8). Zhao and Biesta (2012) conclude that the formation of identity cannot be understood solely in terms of self-reflexivity, but must be intersubjective with a moral orientation. The role of learning in the development of identity capital therefore requires a different agenda, ‘one in which there is explicit attention to the intersubjective and moral dimensions of the formation of self and identity’ (p.342)

The predominant economic focus of formal learning processes, despite the growing body of evidence with regard to the wider personal and social benefits of learning throughout the life course, represents a highly limited understanding of the complexity and potential of learning (Akerman *et al.* 2011; Clark and Caffarella 1999; Feinstein *et al.* 2008; Schuller *et al.* 2004, Schuller *et al.* 2002). Having considered the concept of three ‘capitals’, as outlined by Schuller and Watson (2009) in conjunction with the categories of significant learning determined by Fink (2003), it would appear evident that learning to navigate the life course requires a holistic approach to learning policy incorporating life course principles with the promotion of human, social and identity capitals within a wider framework of moral knowledge and intersubjective reflexivity.

### **3.3.7 Conclusion**

The first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have demonstrated that the lives of individuals have changed rapidly with little sign of this abating in the future. Many of the assumptions that inform social institutions and policies are often based on standardised models of life that do not fully reflect human behaviour or the complexities and lifeworld factors that influence decision making throughout the life course; this disparity may have serious implications for the individual life course and for social cohesion (Evans *et al.* 2013).

On the basis of this literature review the author has concluded that there is a significant need to review social institutions and policies to ensure that they fully reflect and support the actual ‘lived lives’ of individuals and the corresponding needs and requirements of a changing society. Meeting the challenges of the life course in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reinforces the enormity of access to flexible, reflexive learning, across all spectrums of life, to inform the individual and society. Learning and educational opportunities therefore must be reflective of the life course of individuals. The predominance of economics as a primary consideration of lifelong learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflects an out-dated, unbalanced model of life and learning. Alternative approaches to structuring and supporting learning require a holistic and life-

relevant perspective, thus highlighting the need to reconceptualise lifelong learning in light of new developments in thinking about life course learning. This requires additional research relevant to the subject matter of this study. The next section therefore reviews some social research theoretical considerations informing this research study.

**Key Points: Life Course Learning – a Reconceptualization of Lifelong Learning?**

- The concept of the life course features within many disciplines, including demography, biography, history, biology, psychology and sociology. The manner in which the life course is defined, perceived, theorised and researched tends to be largely determined by the relevant disciplinary context.
- Much of the discourse in relation to the concept of the life course incorporates both psychological and sociological disciplines and centres on the debate as to whether modernisation has contributed to the standardisation or de-standardisation of the individual life course
- The key life course principles (Elder 1985) set with the three capitals of learning (Schuller and Watson 2009) incorporating the categories of significant learning outlined by Fink (2003) offer a particularly useful framework for studying a life course approach to learning
- Life course research illustrates the importance of a multi-level analysis; incorporating macro, meso and micro levels, in order to reflect the social, institutional and individual dimensions of the life course.

### **3.4 Social research theoretical considerations informing the Research Study**

...all research necessarily starts from a person's view of the world, which itself is shaped by the experience one brings to the research process (Grix 2002, p.179).

The starting position of social research reflects one's view of social reality (social ontology) as this forms the basis upon which one's theoretical perspective and epistemological position (one's perspective on the process of gaining and understanding knowledge) are grounded (Cresswell 2009; Crotty 2009). Grix (2002) argues that it is essential for a social researcher to 'understand, acknowledge and defend' (p.177) their ontological position as this forms the bedrock of the research process. However, the ability not only to understand, but to acknowledge and defend requires a comprehension of the language of social research, much of which is abstract and 'clouded in mystery' reflecting a lack of 'terminological clarity' within the discipline itself (Grix 2002, p.175). As the terms 'Ontology' and 'Epistemology' are core to social research and impact upon each aspect of the research process, the following section seeks to assist in contributing to greater clarity of terminology in relation to both, in order to establish the framework for a more detailed discussion of the positive and interpretative research traditions which directly inform this research study.

The scale of literature, debate and discussion with regard to both the philosophical and practical considerations of social research reflects the very nature of the world researchers are seeking to explore and discover -- expansive, diverse, incongruous, perplexing, challenging, uplifting and inspiring. This is the ever changing context within which social research itself must evolve. Therefore, there can be no one orderly path of human inquiry to establish meaningful and validated knowledge and conclusions about social reality, but essentially, a varied journey of investigation which unfolds in a manner determined by the individuality of the researcher and the research process itself (Crotty 2009). Arguments endorsing particular perspectives or stances to inform social research offer valuable contributions towards attaining a greater understanding of the complexity of 'social

reality' and how the view or definition of same can impact upon the researcher, the core theoretical perspective undertaken, and the social research process. Typically, the majority of these arguments may be traced back to philosophical assumptions underpinning social research, more specifically the ontological and epistemological assumptions.

As outlined above social ontology refers to ones view of the nature of social reality and it is defined by Blaikie (2000) as 'what we believe constitutes social reality' (p.8). Answering this question reflects one's ontological position. For example, if a researcher believes that social entities, objects or phenomena exist independent of social actors (Grix 2002), or 'have a reality external to social actors' (Bryman 2004, p.16) then broadly speaking their ontological position may be described as objectivism on the basis that social entities exist as independent meaningful objects which may be discovered and scientifically measured (Creswell 2009). An alternative ontological position, however, where a researcher believes that 'social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors' (Bryman 2004, p.17), that social reality/ realities and social entities are socially constructed by the different meanings people form through their engagement with their world would be described as that of constructionism. This 'implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision' (Bryman 2004, p.17). Both ontological positions in this instance offer very different understandings of social reality and in turn will directly inform different epistemological positions with regard to the social research process and the particular approach of social inquiry undertaken.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy focusing on the theory of knowledge, which ultimately seeks to explore the nature of knowledge and the how of knowing; particularly the knowledge gathering process, methods of inquiry and the potential of validation (Grix 2002; Morgan 2007). Knowledge is ever changing; new theories or models challenge or build on previous theories or concepts so that 'all knowledge is knowledge from some point of view' (Fishman 1978, as cited in Burns Cunningham 2014, p.33). Therefore the origins or assumptions that underpin that knowledge

must be understood prior to engaging in further exploration. Reflecting the ontological positions outlined above, two corresponding and contrasting epistemological positions may be identified within the social sciences; these are 'positivism' and 'interpretivism'. These differing epistemological positions have been the source of much debate and divide within the social sciences with the proponents of each position avidly defending polarised perspectives regarding the nature of knowledge and the most appropriate way of gathering it (Crotty 2009). Positivists argue that the methods of the natural sciences, which are deemed to be objective and value-free, can be applied to the study of social reality. In contrast, Interpretivists dispute the application of methods of scientific inquiry for the natural world to that of the social world on the basis that natural objects are different to people and this difference should be respected in the course of social investigation: 'a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action' (Bryman 2004, p.13). Interpretivists believe that individuals seek to understand their world and this engagement produces many varied experiences from which individuals develop meaning, both consciously and unconsciously. The construction of meaning, therefore, is open to individual interpretation and individuals may often draw different meanings from the same social phenomenon (Creswell 2009; Crotty 2009; Bryman 2004). Equally, in the context of the two epistemological positions outlined above researchers can have very different approaches to the gathering of knowledge often leading to very different views of the same social entities.

Despite many advances in the field of social research the epistemological debates of positivism versus interpretivism continues to dominate much of the discussion with regard to social research strategies and subsequent methods; with the 'value-free' inquiry of quantitative methods broadly identified as underpinning positivism, whilst the 'meaning making' inquiry of qualitative methods broadly deemed to underpin interpretivism (Feilzer 2010). The distinction between quantitative and qualitative research remains current within the social sciences with purists in each case arguing

exclusively in support of one or other research orientation on the basis of epistemological assumptions framed within their ontological position. In drawing a distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, such purists tend to focus on the differences between both approaches to research rather than on the potential similarities or complementarities that may be identified (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005). Each research approach carries certain strengths and limitations. Quantitative research focuses on the gathering and analysis of numeric data through the application of the practices of the natural sciences with a positivist orientation, thereby seeking to objectively test and quantify the outcomes of social investigation (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative data, in comparison, focuses on the interactive gathering and analysis of non-numeric data; on words, meanings, feelings, and values. With an interpretivist orientation, it moves away from the positivist application of the norms of natural sciences to the study of the social world, emphasising the exploration of ways by which individuals subjectively interpret or construct social reality.

The key features common to all qualitative methods can be seen when they are contrasted with quantitative methods. Most quantitative data techniques are data condensers. They condense data in order to see the big picture...Qualitative methods, by contrast, are best understood as data enhancers. When data are enhanced, it is possible to see key aspects of cases more clearly (Ragin 1994 p.92, as cited in Neuman 2014).

Each approach, therefore, provides different but equally valuable perspectives on a topic of social inquiry. Therefore, combining both approaches within a research process offers the potential for the attainment of richer, more in-depth and holistic social research (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005). Whilst the integration of both approaches, commonly known as mixed methods research, initially caused much turbulence amongst the opposing quantitative and qualitative research camps, with many critics arguing of the ‘incompatibility’ of both approaches from a philosophical perspective (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2012). Growing recognition within the social sciences that traditional ‘forms of data gathering using one method for data collection may not be adequate for answering complex questions’ (Hesse-Biber and Johnson 2013, p.103) has led to increasing recognition of mixed methods research as an alternative to mono-method research and a

welcome challenge to the divisive quantitative versus qualitative debates (Feilzer 2010).

As mixed methods research is not committed to any one of the two dominant philosophical world views commonly associated with the social sciences, but instead focuses more specifically on the research problem to be solved, it has become closely aligned with philosophical pragmatism as an alternative world view; which ‘accepts, philosophically, that there are singular and multiple realities that are open to empirical inquiry and orients itself toward solving practical problems in the “real world”’ (Feilzer 2010, p.8; see also, Burns-Cunningham 2013; Creswell 2009). In underpinning mixed methods research, pragmatism gives the researcher the freedom to identify the most appropriate methodology and methods necessary to fully address a research problem and related research questions in the pursuit of knowledge, both theoretical and practical, in full recognition of the influence of wider social, economic, political and historical contexts (Creswell 2009; Johnson *et al.* 2007).

### **3.4.1 Conclusion**

As a practitioner within the field of adult education, focusing on the ‘real world’ problem of the ‘lived life’ realities of adult learners in higher education, this study adopts a pragmatic research perspective, utilising mixed methods research incorporating triangulation as ‘the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon’ (Denzin 1978, p.291), In doing so this study seeks to enhance the reliability and validity of findings and thereby potentially contribute to the development of ‘socially useful knowledge’ (Feilzer 2010, p.6). The next chapter expands further on the methodology and methods used for the purposes of this study.

**Key points: Social research theoretical considerations  
informing the Research Study**

- The starting position of social research (social ontology) reflects one's view of social reality as this forms the basis upon which one's theoretical perspective and epistemological position (one's perspective on the process of gaining and understanding knowledge) are grounded.
- Arguments endorsing particular perspectives or stances to inform social research offer valuable contributions towards attaining a greater understanding of the complexity of 'social reality'. These arguments may be traced back to philosophical assumptions underpinning social research, more specifically the ontological and epistemological assumptions.
- Growing recognition within the social sciences that traditional mono-method forms of data gathering may not fully respond to complex questions has led to increasing recognition of the potential of mixed methods research.
- As mixed methods research is not committed to any one of the two dominant philosophical world views commonly associated with the social sciences, but instead focuses more specifically on the research problem to be solved, it has become closely aligned with philosophical pragmatism.

### **3.5 Summary**

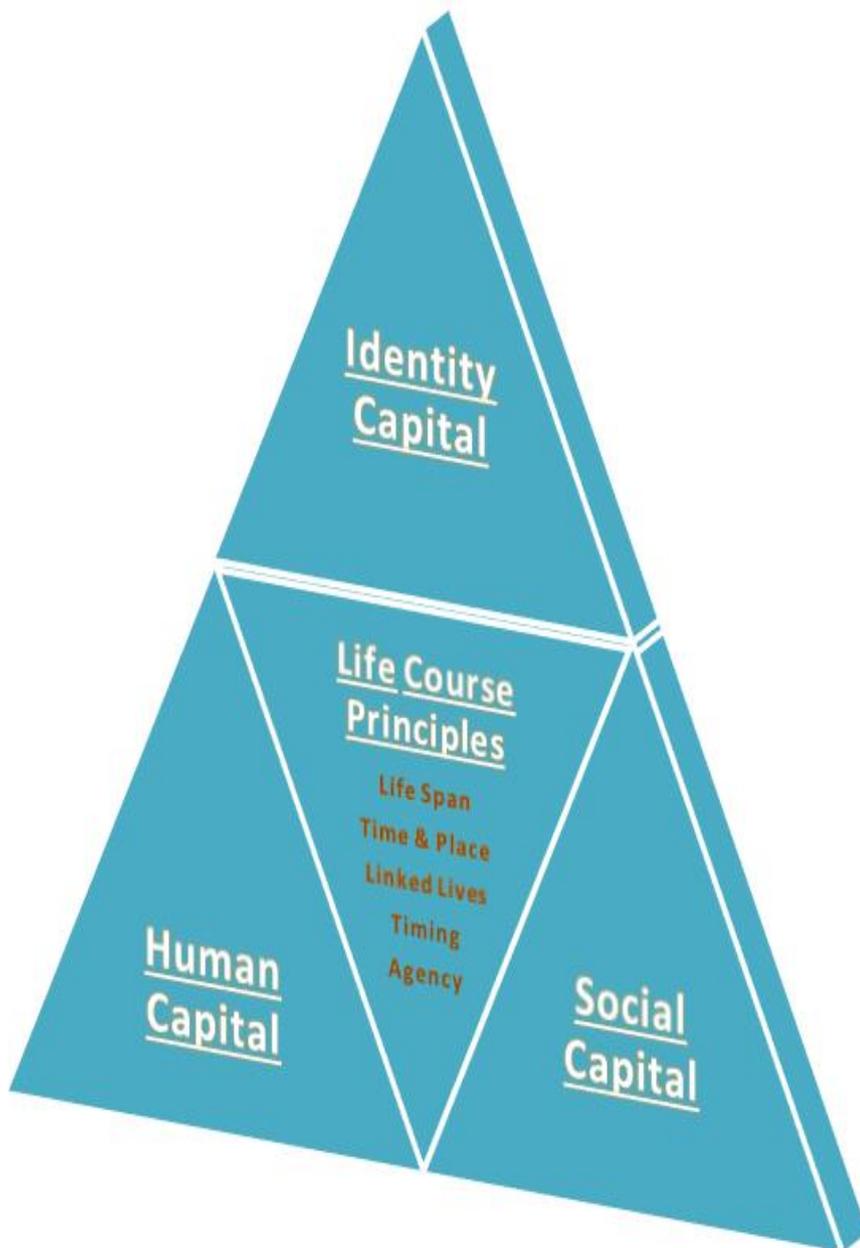
This chapter provided a review of the body of literature pertinent to the theoretical framework for this research study. It was divided into four sections. Section 3.2 explored the concept of learning and investigates different theories of learning including adult development and learning theories in order to achieve a greater comprehension of the learning process. Section 3.3 concentrated on life course learning as a potential reconceptualization of lifelong learning. It provided an overview of literature in relation to the life course concept and outlined different theories

### Chapter 3: Literature Review: Theoretical Framework

and contradictory perspectives in relation to the nature of the life course. It also reviewed the inter-disciplinary, multi-level focus of life course research and described the key principles that frame such research in advance of discussing the potential of life course learning. Lastly, section 3.4 reviewed the social research theoretical considerations informing this research study. This chapter concludes with a description of a tentative conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by the critical learning from this theoretical literature review. This conceptual model will also serve as an analytical framework to guide both the research design and subsequent analysis. Table 3.2 therefore revisits the key messages derived from the literature review chapters and Figure 3.1 provides a tentative model of life course learning which also serves as an analytical framework to guide both the research design and subsequent analysis.

**Table 3.2 Life Course Learning – A Re-Conceptualisation of Lifelong Learning**

Lifelong Learning in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	Life Course Learning for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century
A Human Capital Perspective	A Human, Social and Identity Capital Perspective
Focuses on the individual agent in the context of working life and market economy.	Focuses on the ‘linked lives’ of the individual within the context of social networks and relationships and the variation of learning needs and processes for the duration of the life course (including working life).
Focuses predominantly on informal and formal accredited learning, progressing from age-dependent schooling to learning in readiness for working life, career advancement and post-retirement.	Focuses on formal, non-formal and informal age independent learning and provision reflective of individual life course learning requirements.
Market forces determine nature of learning provision, and the learning requirements, decisions and compliance of the individual learner.	Seeks to promote the role of the agentic individual/autonomous learner in proactively making learning choices and decisions that are creative and self-directed.
Focuses on individual income and productivity.	Focuses on quality of life, civic engagement and social cohesion.
Potentially reinforces educational inequalities over the lifespan	Potentially narrows the ‘inequality gap’, changing the nature of the life course.
Focuses on learning requirements for the labour market in the context of current and future economic considerations.	Focuses on learning requirements reflective of different stages in life in the context of socio-economic and historical conditions.
A focus on identity development <i>which is adaptive, functional, and instrumental</i> and reflexivity which is individualistic and reflective of the ‘sovereign self’ as espoused by Giddens (1991, cited in Zhao and Biesta, 2012, p.339)	A focus on identity development and reflexivity incorporating intersubjective and moral dimensions whereby ‘one is a self only among other selves’ as espoused by Taylor (1989, p.35).
Focuses on the individual taking responsibility to adapt to change	Focuses on empowering the individual to understand, adapt to and influence change



**Figure 3.1 A Tentative model of Life Course Learning**

**Incorporating Schuller and Watson's Three Capitals of Learning (2009) and Elder's Life Course Principles -1985)**

## **Chapter 4: Research Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the research methodology and research methods selected for the purposes of attaining the aims and objectives of this research study. It is divided into four sections. Section 4.2 revisits the rationale, aims and objectives of the study. Section 4.3 discusses the design of the research study. It begins by exploring the concept of the life course in the context of this research with a particular focus on biographical processes in examining the learning experiences of adult learners. It then reviews the three capitals of learning concept identified by Schuller and Watson (2009) as a classification of different dimensions of learning pertinent to the nature of this research study. This is followed by an outline of the author's research position and the corresponding opportunities and challenges of this position with regard to the final choice and design of data gathering tools particular to this study. Section 4.4 focuses on the implementation of the research study, reviewing the research recruitment process, issues of ethical concern and processes of data collection and data analysis. The final section, section 4.5 identifies the limitations of the study within a wider context of potential mitigations for same.

### **4.2 Research Study Rationale, aim and objectives: A Revisit**

In the context of rapid economic, social, political and technological change, whereby traditional life course patterns; such as the notion of a job for life, have become uncertain, unstable and increasingly complex (Merrill 2009), what do adult learners require from higher education in order to harness the potential of this continually changing landscape for themselves as individuals, but equally, for the groups and society to which they belong? These questions are of particular interest to the author of this research study having worked in Adult Education in a University setting (University X) for over 20 years. During this time the author has witnessed many changes in relation to the needs and requirements of adult learners at an individual

level, but equally has witnessed many changes in terms of the culture of expectation and requirements at a structural and higher educational policy level corresponding to the prevailing definition of lifelong learning, or in many cases the interpretation of same. In the author's experience the various discourses underpinning lifelong learning have had a significant impact on the changing perceptions of the purpose and function of education and the consequent expansion or restriction of learning opportunities for adults with regard to higher education. In truth, it appears that very little is known about the specific learning needs, requirements, learning experiences and life circumstances of part-time adult learners in higher education (Darmody and Fleming 2009; Hunt 2017, as cited in Fleming *et al.* 2017). It is intended that this research study might add to the body of knowledge by providing empirical data to support policy and practice considerations for part-time adult learners in higher education.

In the twenty first century European policies promoting the concept of lifelong learning sought to instil the principle of widening participation and access opportunities to education at all levels, but particularly higher education, which had traditionally been the domain of young scholars progressing from second level education, many of whom from privileged backgrounds. In recognition of the need to respond to changes in educational policy, higher education sought to create or refocus existing adult education structures to embrace the concept of lifelong learning and to respond to the needs of a diverse student population. This subsequently led to the creation of new professions, many of which, particularly in University settings, were classed as support, administrative or non-academic posts (Finn 2015). This was the environment during the 1990s, in which the author, having qualified with an MA in Community Development, was employed by Adult Education, University X to provide community education programmes. Whilst categorised as an administrative unit within the University, Adult Education sought to promote access to academically accredited programmes for adult learners through the requisite collaboration and partnership with relevant academic schools. The author's role and responsibility in this context was predominantly academic, but also

administrative, in teaching and co-ordinating a wide range of community education programmes for disadvantaged individuals and communities, traditionally excluded from accessing higher education.

Over the years the humanistic definition of lifelong learning as espoused by Fauré (1972) and Delors (UNESCO 1996) has been distilled to more narrow understanding of learning for employment. Since the late 1990s, many EU educational policies have largely supported a concept of lifelong learning which focuses on upskilling and re-training the labour market to keep pace with the demands of the knowledge economy. This has led to the increased recognition of the need to expand the range of part-time and outreach programmes available to adult learners, in addition to the continued development of more blended, on-line and flexible programmes. All of which are welcome in terms of increasing the choices and learning opportunities for adults. But does the adult population as a whole, outside of those of within the labour market and even those of working age who have limited resources, or who for whatever reason cannot access the labour market, have equal opportunity to access higher education? If economic criteria are the primary determinants of the purpose and function of higher education, what will be the implications in terms of widening participation and access? Equally, as outlined by Finn (2015) ‘While it is accepted that employment is an important goal, education must also equip people to challenge dominant ideologies and become critical thinkers’ (pg. 15).

Much of the policy and practice of higher education has been informed by international, European and commercial bodies. The voices, needs, expectations and life realities of adult learners of all ages rarely feature in the decision making, design and implementation of programmes of higher education. Considering this rational, and 20 years’ experience as an educationalist with adult learners in higher education, the author has become increasingly aware of need for research reflective of the voices and ‘lived life’ realities of adult learners. As it has been noted above, the majority of professionals within adult learning are employed in administrative categories within higher education settings, and as a result rarely engage in research, or publish academic material (Finn 2015). There is a recognised

requirement therefore for further research in this field. In response to this gap in research the author seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge in relation to the learning needs and requirements of adult learners in higher education, from a life course perspective.

*In the context of this rationale:*

This research study explores the concept of the life course and why it may be considered an issue of critical importance in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners in higher education. It examines life course influences on adult learning and adopts a life course perspective with regard to learning and education processes in order to contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education. By choosing to adopt a life course perspective, this research seeks to understand the learning experiences of adult learners as individuals within the context of changing social structures and historical events (Withnall 2006); thereby exploring the role and interaction of agency and structure in shaping learning experiences. Using biographical approaches in drawing on the experiences and lives of graduates from two part-time, adult learning programmes, namely: the *NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies* and the *BA in Applied Social Studies*, this study seeks to inform higher education policy and practice of the life course learning requirements of adult learners reflecting the personal, social and economic considerations of their lived realities.

Therefore the aim of this research study to is examine the concept of the life course and life course influences on adult learning in order to contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education reflecting the real voices and experiences of this population.

The core objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the concept of the life course in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners with a particular focus on higher education

2. To determine the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education
3. To contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by adult learning experiences in an Irish Context
4. To review life course learning in the context of higher education policy and practice to identify potential considerations for the adult learner, higher education institutions and wider civic society.

### **4.3 The Design of the Research Study**

This section discusses the design of the research study. It begins by exploring the concept of the life course in the context of this research with a particular focus on biographical processes in examining the learning experiences of adult learners. It then reviews the three capitals of learning concept identified by Schuller and Watson (2009) as a classification of different dimensions of learning pertinent to the nature of this research study. This is followed by an outline of the author's research position and the corresponding opportunities and challenges of this position with regard to the final choice and design of data gathering tools particular to this study.

#### ***4.3.1 The Concept of the Life Course in the context of this Research Study***

Adopting a life course approach to the research (Elder, 1985) ensures a more complete investigation of the individual learning experiences of adult learners; going beyond a focus on one particular life stage to consider the wider life course, framed within changing socio-economic structures and historical events (Withnall, 2006). As previously noted within the theoretical literature review (chapter 3) much of the discourse in relation to life course research emphasises the need for a multi-level analysis incorporating macro, meso and micro levels reflective of the social, institutional and individual dimensions of the life course (Alwin 2012;

Bynner 2005; Heinz 2010; McAdams 2005; Settersten 2009). This type of analysis is consistent with a definition of the life course provided by Heinz (2010) which states that: ‘The life course concerns the interface of society and the individual because it transfers macro-social conditions and requirements via institutions (meso-level) to guidelines of individual action (micro-level)’ (p.230). In examining the concept of the life course and why it may be considered an issue of critical importance in relation to teaching/learning policy and practice for adult learners in higher education this research study adopts a multi-level analysis giving due consideration to each of the three levels: micro, meso and macro. Therefore in the context of this research study the adult learner is the focus of the micro level analysis: the micro level focuses on individual human development over the life-span reflective of changing social structures, thereby reinforcing the multi-level orientation of the life course incorporating interactive psychological and sociological perspectives. The meso level refers to ‘...institutions, organisations, social networks and local living arrangements that define social spaces for biographical action e.g. family, peers, colleagues, employers’ (Heinz 2010, p.230). In the context of this research study the meso level specifically refers to higher education as an educational institution conveying macro social conditions and expectations to the level of the individual learner. Lastly, the macro level refers to ‘cultural values, economic conditions, and socio-political and welfare structures which define social spaces for biographical action’ (Heinz 2010, p.230). In the context of this research study the macro level denotes wider civic society at a policy level and the implications of same for the meso and micro levels of higher education and the individual adult learner.

Life course research then, as previously discussed within the theoretical literature review (chapter 3); ‘...refers to a multidisciplinary paradigm for the study of people’s lives, structural context and social change’ (Mitchell 2003). Glen H. Elder (1985), one of the primary scholars of the life course identified five key principles to frame life course research from a multi-level perspective. These key principles incorporate many of the different conceptions of the life course outlined above (Bruckner and Mayer 2005;

Bynner 2005; Hutchison 2007; Heinz 2010). According to Elder, the principles of utmost significance are: *life-span development*- a focussing on individual development over the life-span; *agency*- analysing how individuals seek to control or determine their own life courses by seeking out opportunities and making decisions in the context of the constraints and options they may encounter; *time and place*- considering the life courses of individuals as interwoven with the historical context and places they have experienced over their lifetimes; *timing of lives* - investigating the social timings of transitions during the life course; and lastly, *linked lives* - exploring the interdependence of life courses through personal networks of shared relationships (Slowey 2008; Kok 2007).

These five principles underscore the life course as a cumulative process which seeks to contextualise people's lives in an effort to fully understand the complexities of human development and change, as individuals seek to work out their own life courses. Unlike traditional theories of human development, life course research focuses on time and timing as significant factors in human behaviour, emphasising the potential impact of historical and social change. This is a key consideration in view of the pace and frequency of change in modern society (Hutchison 2007). 'At the same time, with its attention to human Time, the life course perspective is not as deterministic as some earlier theories and acknowledges people's strengths and capacity for change' (Hutchison 2007, p.33). People's capacity for change and their resourcefulness, while evident in terms of individual human agency, is also a reflection of their 'linked lives' e.g. family and community, and this point illustrates the significance of the interdependence of lives in the context of structural forces throughout the life course.

Fundamental to this approach is the idea of 'biographicity' and 'biographical learning' as outlined by Alheit and Dausien (2002) whereby learning is described as a process involving 'the (trans)-formation of experience, knowledge and action structures in the context of people's life histories and lifeworlds' (p.11). Biographical methods have become increasingly evident within social research and across a range of disciplines in recent years and would appear to be particularly relevant to the nature of

this study (Withnall, 2006). Indeed, Tedder and Biesta (2007) argue that the ‘biographical turn’ (p.3), a biographical approach to research, is not just about undertaking new forms of research methods and methodologies with regard to adult learning but more explicitly about bringing ‘different dimensions of the learning of adults into view’ (p.3) within the context of a post-modern social reality. In further discussion they argue that a biographical approach offers a meaningful perspective on the significance of learning over the life course contrary to the more limited view on employability evident within contemporary policies on lifelong learning; they state that:

...the “biographical turn” engages with a much broader conception of learning, one which does not restrict the meaning of learning to institutional definitions, but which includes the cognitive and reflexive dimensions of learning as much as the emotional, embodied, pre-reflexive and non-cognitive aspects of every day learning processes and practices. (p.3).

Essentially, they highlight the potential of biographical methods to actively inform learning policies and educational processes about the specific life course learning requirements of learners themselves. The strength of the relationship between learning and biography is reinforced by Alheit and Dausien (2002, p.15) whereby they stress that: ‘Without biography there can be no learning, without learning no biography’. They emphasise however, that this does not mean that biographical learning is a solitary process highlighting the importance of narrative as a means of consideration and communication of one’s life story with others as part of the process of learning through the life course. Biographical methods therefore, in recognising that an individual’s life story cannot be viewed in isolation from social and cultural contexts, form an important part of this research study in examining both the concept of the life course, as outlined above for the purposes of this study, and life course influences on adult learning.

**4.3.2 The Three Capitals of Learning Concept (Schuller and Watson, 2009) in the context of this Research Study**

The Learning Capitals concept identified by Schuller and Watson (2009) as a classification of different dimensions of learning with a critical emphasis on the interdependence of different kinds of learning features within a number of previous research studies as a useful framework to measure the impact of learning (see chapters 2 and 3). Following a review of these studies this concept was identified as an important element of the research process for this study in seeking to attain a more complete understanding of learning throughout life. Central to this concept is the idea of three capitals as ‘... forms of assets which have value for individuals and for society: human capital, social capital and identity capital’ (Schuller and Watson 2009, p.15).

Each of the three capitals identifies categories of learning (see chapter 3 for greater detail); *human capital*, refers predominantly to the formal acquisition of knowledge and skills which are largely measured through the qualifications; *social capital*, refers to the ability to make connections between different kinds of learning, ideas and perspectives in addition to developing a greater understanding of others; *identity capital*, refers to the characteristics of the individual that define their sense of self-esteem and self-worth which impact on personal motivation to engage with and continue within the learning process. Whilst realistically, as noted by Schuller (2002) and other authors (Schuller and Watson 2009, Jamieson *et al.* 2009), it can be difficult to strictly confine particular kinds of learning solely to one of the three capitals outlined, it is useful for theoretical purposes to do so as it distinguishes between different dimensions of learning.

In an effort to further clarify the kinds of learning relevant to each of the three capitals the author reviewed various taxonomies of learning in order to contribute to an analytical framework for the purposes of this study. While there are many taxonomies of learning Fink’s taxonomy of ‘Significant Learning’ (2003), emphasising the interactive dimension of different kinds of learning was deemed to be particularly relevant to both the Capitals

concept and the wider discussion of this research on life course learning. Aspects of Fink' taxonomy therefore were incorporated into the Learning Capitals concept (see table 3.1), hereafter referred to as the Three Capitals of Learning Concept, which in conjunction with the key principles of life course (Elder 1985) combine to form an analytical framework for this research study. The purpose for doing so was to seek to attain a more complete understanding of different types of learning throughout the life course with a particular focus on the needs of adult learners.

### ***4.3.3 The Researcher's Position***

Having worked for over twenty years within a university setting promoting the concept of lifelong learning and the principle of 'widening participation' and access opportunities to education at all levels, the author has become increasingly aware of the need for research reflective of the voices and 'lived life' realities of adult learners. Therefore in response to a recognised gap in research (see chapters 2 and 3) the author seeks to contribute to the limited existing knowledge base specific to the learning needs and requirements of adult learners in higher education from a life course perspective.

By choosing to adopt a life course perspective encompassing biographical approaches within a multi-level analysis this research seeks to ensure that the voices, perspectives and lived lives of adult learners directly inform national and international educational policy. As a practitioner within the field of adult education, focusing on the 'real world' problem of the 'lived life' realities of adult learners in higher education, this study adopts a pragmatic research perspective, utilising mixed methods research incorporating triangulation as 'the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon' (Denzin 1978, p.291). In doing so this study seeks to enhance the reliability and validity of findings and thereby potentially contribute to the development of 'socially useful knowledge' (Feilzer 2010, p.6).

The decision to adopt a pragmatic perspective utilising mixed methods, combining the findings from both quantitative and qualitative methods of

data collection, was directly informed by research approaches previously undertaken within the research field. This includes research undertaken by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL) at the Institute of Education at the University of London (IOE) and the Centre for Educational Research (CERI as part of the OECD). Research publications by these institutes illustrated the importance of both quantitative and qualitative data methods in comprehensively exploring the diverse needs of adult learners (see chapters 2 and 3). Equally, in view of the dearth of empirical research in Ireland in relation to the life circumstances, needs and experiences of adult learners in higher education, particularly part-time adult learners, (Hunt 2017; Fleming *et al.* 2017) the author deemed that one method of data collection would not fully respond to the complexity of the research in question. Adopting both positivist and interpretivist orientations in combining quantitative and qualitative methods allows for a pragmatic research perspective providing the author the freedom to undertake a more holistic, in-depth piece of research in the absence of an existing comprehensive research knowledge base on this subject.

Quantitative methods of data collection therefore were identified as a necessary requirement in order to generate numerical data, usable statistics, measurable data-sets and key themes relevant to adult life course learning experiences in higher education from an adult learner perspective. The acquisition of such statistical data specific to a cohort of students previously under-researched within higher education could offer the potential of greater evidence-based higher education programme design and implementation. It is important to note however, that the quantitative methods of data collection for the purposes of this research study relate directly to the part time adult learners of two university community education programmes, therefore, the statistical results will be reflective of this cohort and are not generalizable to the full adult learner population. Nonetheless the attainment of such numerical data would contribute to achieving a greater understanding of the part time adult learner in higher education in the absence of established empirical research specific to this cohort. The lack of empirical data in relation to part-time adult learners also highlighted the

importance of undertaking a sequential mixed methods research design with the quantitative data methods seeking to condense the scope of enquiry in advance of the qualitative data methods so as to enable the author to effectively manage the potential volume of data and the subsequent time requirements of data analysis.

Qualitative methods of enquiry through semi-structured biographical interviews were designed to reflect key findings of the quantitative surveys. Undertaking qualitative data methods reflects an interpretivist orientation emphasising the exploration of ways by which individuals subjectively interpret or construct social reality. Interpretivists believe that individuals seek to understand their world and this engagement produces many varied experiences from which individuals develop meaning, both consciously and unconsciously. The construction of meaning, therefore, is open to individual interpretation and individuals may often draw different meanings from the same social phenomenon (Creswell 2009; Crotty 2009; Bryman 2004). Examining the learning experiences of adult learners through biographical interviews in recognition of this on-going-interpretive relationship was therefore deemed essential to the research process. The decision to use qualitative methods as part of this investigation sought to ensure a richer, more in-depth and interactive exploration of the potential components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education.

Utilising both quantitative and qualitative data methods provides different but equally valuable perspectives for this research study in the pursuit of knowledge, both theoretical and practical, in recognition of the limited empirical body of knowledge specific to part time adult learners. A pragmatic research perspective utilising a mixed methods research design provides the opportunity to examine and compare the learning lives and experiences of adult learners in higher education. Figure 4.1 illustrates the research design framework reflective of the author's research position.

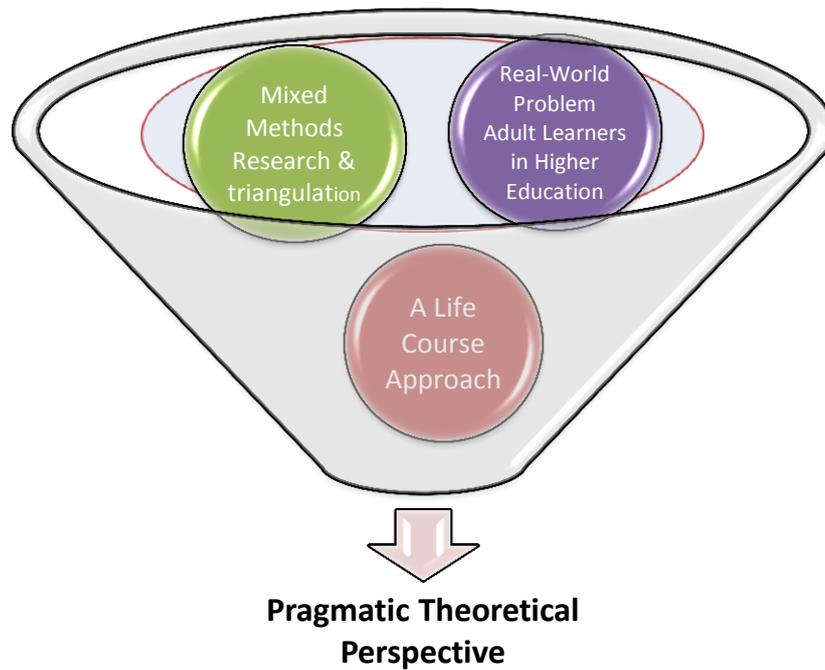


Figure 4.1 Research Design Framework

**Challenges and benefits by virtue of research position:**

Having outlined the researcher’s position it is worthwhile to equally give some consideration to corresponding challenges and benefits associated with same.

*Insider Researcher: Advantages and Disadvantages*

The concept of insider researcher is an appropriate consideration for this research study as the author works on a full-time basis within the higher education sector with part-time adult learners. The author also fulfils the role of manager and lecturer in relation to the two university community education programmes named within this study and equally during the course of this research acquired a new identity as a part-time adult learner in undertaking a doctoral dissertation.

Attaining a commonly agreed definition of the concept of insider researcher has generated much debate and discussion (Green 2014). Robert Merton (1972) argued that an insider researcher is one who has prior knowledge of the research group/community but may not necessarily be a member of that

community. On this premise therefore the outsider researcher is one who has no prior knowledge of the group/community under study. Green (2014) raises concerns regarding the insider-outsider dichotomy, stating that the role of research should ideally be viewed as that of a continuum as opposed to fixed positions and refers to a perspective offered by Naples (1996, p.140) which states that; ‘...insiderness or outsiderness are not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations’. This view is very much in keeping with reference to theories of reflexive modernity which consistently emphasise persistent change and fluid identities framed by different contexts as core features of contemporary life (Giddens, 1991). In this regard the identity of a researcher as insider/outsider may also be considered fluid and subject to positionality on a continuum depending on context. However, whilst noting the scale and scope of debate and the fact that the concept of insider researcher is not absolute, it remains a useful concept in describing research ‘...which is conducted within a social group, organisation or culture of which the researcher is also a member’ (Green 2014, p.1).

On this basis and in the context of this research study the author as a practitioner within the field of adult education holding prior knowledge of the graduates of both programmes under study with a common status as a part-time adult learner may be described as an insider researcher. Awareness of this position is significant in terms of ensuring a research process that actively seeks to counterbalance any potential biases so as to enhance the trustworthiness of the data. The status of insider researcher however, carries both advantages and disadvantages.

- *Dis-advantages of Insider Researcher Status*

In terms of academic rigour insider researchers are often accused of being subjective on the basis that existing knowledge of the research community would impede objectivity and accurate analysis (Workman 2007). On a related note insider researchers are frequently described as being inherently biased, holding pre-conceived assumptions about the research group often resulting in a reticence to ask challenging questions which may cause any

perceived ill-effect on the overall group (Crotty 2009). Issues in relation to subjectivity and the potential of bias are legitimate concerns with insider research; however, an awareness of these problems is essential in order to alleviate the potential consequences of both on the accuracy of the research. One method adopted by the author in an effort to minimise the potential of bias or subjectivity was the practice of triangulation referring to the usage of multiple methods, both quantitative and qualitative, and multiple sources in the study of the same phenomena as a way of enhancing the reliability of the research. A second method involving consistent monthly meetings with the research supervisor and on-going informal discussions with the research team, in addition to the provision of formal documentation detailing the progress of the research, served to ensure a regular review of the research process by experienced outsider researchers. This critical review functioned as a safeguard to ensure the on-going protection of research participants throughout, whilst meeting the expectations of the academic research community. Equally, recognising the importance of reflexivity as part of the research process in terms of acknowledging, understanding and developing greater awareness of one's own subjectivities was a practice the author was conscious of the need to engage in so as to counterbalance personal influences. Part of the practice of reflexivity '...discourages presumption and encourages the researcher to seek clarification directly from participants' (Blythe *et al.* 2013 p.11). This practice was particularly necessary in relation to the biographical interview process whereby an assumed understanding between interviewees and the author sometimes led interviewees to make statements such as 'You would already know' or 'As you are aware' highlighting the need for the author to prompt for further explanation rather than assuming a common understanding. This practice was also regularly discussed by the author with the research supervisor as a further safeguard and form of quality control in seeking to counteract any evident bias both in relation to the data-collection process and subsequent data analysis.

- *Advantages of Insider Researcher Status*

Having outlined some of the disadvantages of insider researcher status it is important to also recognise the advantages that this status can bring to the research process. Prior knowledge of both the research environment and participants enhances both understanding and the potential of a more meaningful exchange within the research process based on a relationship of trust in recognising the researcher's insider status (Bell 2005). This status is beneficial in terms of assisting '...with recruitment and rapport, and enabling collaboration, resulting in the generation of stories rich in content' (Blythe *et al.* 2013 p.13). This prior knowledge in the context of this research study was immensely beneficial to the author in building on an existing rapport with the research participants enhancing ease of access to the research group and subsequent motivation on the part of participants to engage within the research study. The highly positive response rates to both survey questionnaires and the scale of voluntary engagement thereafter in relation to the biographical interviews demonstrated that participants were happy to engage with the author in relation to the research. The scale of information acquired during the biographical interviews also reflect a very open, familiar and natural interactive relationship between research participants and the author ensuring detailed descriptions by participants in their own words. Such access to information had also been assisted by the author's decision to only engage with programme graduates in an effort to counter any perceived power differentials between the author as researcher and the research participant. As an insider researcher, the author's contextual knowledge of the research field and the research participants brought an additional critical lens to the analytical process in the identification of subtleties or nuances within the data that other researchers might overlook or not be privy to. Frequent discussion with the research supervisor also ensured the maintenance of an analytical critical perspective throughout.

**4.3.4 Designing the data gathering tools**

As previously outlined in advance of designing the data gathering tools to respond to the identified research objectives, the author sought to draw on the lessons from other studies of learning, more specifically the diverse needs of adult learners. This review highlighted that more recently, research studies on adult learning experiences, perspectives and the interdependence of different kinds of learning advocate the significance of undertaking a life course perspective (Biesta *et al.* 2011; Heinz 2010; Schuller 2010; Slowey 2008; Slowey and Watson 2003). On this basis the five life course principles as identified by Elder (1985) with the three capitals of learning concept developed by Schuller and Watson (2009), incorporating the key categories of significant learning outlined by Fink (2003) were combined to contribute to a tentative conceptual model of life course learning. This tentative conceptual model also serves as an analytical framework to examine the research objectives. This framework was designed on the basis of an in-depth review of literature pertinent to the concept of the life course in the context of higher education policy and practice specific to adult learners. The subsequent design of data collection tools, as outlined within Table 4.1, was set within the context of this analytical framework in order to ensure a more complete investigation of the life course learning requirements of adult learners in higher education in accordance with the aim and objectives of the study.

**Table 4.1 Matching Data Gathering Tools to achieve Research Objectives**

Four Key Research Objectives	Data Gathering Tools Identified
<p>1. To examine the concept of the life course in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners with a particular focus on higher education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualitative data through secondary data collection (literature Review) leading to tentative model of life course learning and analytical framework</li> <li>• Pilot Quantitative survey of Adult learning experiences (survey monkey – online questionnaire)</li> </ul>

<p>2. To determine the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two Quantitative surveys of Adult learning experiences (survey monkey – online questionnaires)</li> <li>• Qualitative methods of enquiry through semi-structured biographical interviews</li> </ul>
<p>3. To contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by adult learning experiences in an Irish Context</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative and Qualitative data collected from secondary data collection, surveys and semi-structured biographical interviews</li> </ul>
<p>4. To review life course learning in the context of higher education policy and practice to identify potential considerations for the adult learner, higher education institutions and wider civic society.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature and tentative model of life course learning with results and discussion of all key research objectives</li> </ul>

As Table 4.1 outlines secondary data collection through documentary analysis of current adult learning research, policy and practice from a life course perspective featured as core to addressing each of the four research objectives. Emerging concepts for consideration included; the five key principles to frame life course research (Elder 1985), in addition to Schuller and Watson’s Learning Capitals: human, social and identity (2009). This detail in addition to the author’s experience as an educationalist with adult learners in higher education for over 20 years led to the decision to undertake both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools to investigate different aspects of this broad research area.

Following discussion with the research supervisor a decision was taken to use a survey questionnaire in order to examine and compare the learning lives and experiences of adult learners in higher education (see Appendix 3: survey questionnaires). The quantitative surveys with both sets of graduates (BA and Diploma) consisted of focused questions designed to encourage

reflection on learning experiences within higher education and learning throughout the life course in the context of; the key life course principles (Elder 1985) and the three learning capitals framework (Schuller and Watson 2009) incorporating the key categories of significant learning outlined by Fink (2003). Questions within these surveys therefore were designed to promote reflection of the adult learning experience in relation to the categories of significant learning outlined by Fink (2003, see appendix 8), framed within the learning capitals concept and life course principles. Both surveys were pilot tested and subsequently adapted to redress issues of language clarity, question sequence, and some technological issues in relation to multiple choice answers and question filtering options. The use of quantitative surveys sought to identify key themes relevant to adult life course learning experiences (historical, social and cultural contexts), life span educational history, learning attitudes, motivations and potential suggestions or considerations for higher education from an adult learner perspective. As noted above the quantitative surveys sought to objectively condense the scope of enquiry and thereby form the basis for the design and implementation of the qualitative semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative methods of enquiry through semi-structured biographical interviews were designed to reflect key findings of the quantitative surveys. The decision to use qualitative methods as part of this investigation sought to ensure a comprehensive, interactive exploration of the potential components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education. This data collection tool was directly relevant to each of the key research objectives. Interview participants volunteered to proceed to this stage of data collection on completion of the previous survey questionnaire. As the number of volunteers was extremely high the author subsequently chose a purposive sampling method ensuring representatives of different age categories to reflect a life-span perspective in responding to the research question. This method of sampling is commonly used in interview data collection (Bryman 2004). In accordance with the findings of the literature review a biographical approach to interviewing was deemed to be the most appropriate as ‘interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas,

thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher' (Reinharz 1992, p.19, as cited in Merrill 2001). Lastly, the development of a tentative model of life course learning (see end of chapter 3 for graphic of same, figure 3.1) reflecting the results and combined findings of the literature review, quantitative and qualitative data outcomes would seek to specifically address research objectives 3 and 4, so as to contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education fully reflective of the real voices and experiences of this population.

### **4.4 Implementing the research**

In outlining the research implementation process this section expands: firstly, on the research recruitment process; secondly, the primary ethical concerns and considerations framing the research process; thirdly, the key stages of data collection; and finally, the methods of data analysis employed to interpret the findings of the study.

#### ***4.4.1 Research Recruitment Process***

By choosing to adopt a life course perspective incorporating biographical approaches this research seeks to ensure that the voices, perspectives and lived lives of part-time adult learners directly inform national and international policy. Therefore the target population for the purposes of this study are part-time adult learners (usually categorised within higher education as non-traditional, mature students) who have graduated from one or both of the following part time higher education programmes (applicants for these programmes must be over 21 years in order to meet University criteria for adult education part-time programmes).

(i) NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies (1 year part-time, level 7, 30 ECTS)

(ii) BA in Applied Social Studies (4 year part-time, level 8, 180 ECTS)

All graduates of the BA in Applied Social Studies were invited to participate as this is a relatively new programme with the first set of graduates completing in 2010 (full population 143). The Diploma in Applied Social Studies has had a longer history and therefore the numbers were narrowed down to all graduates of the programme over the period 2010-2014 (full population 124). Invitations to engage in the research were issued by email, informing participants of the overall aim and objectives of the research study and emphasising the value of their voluntary contribution. A link to the survey questionnaire via survey monkey was included within this first point of communication, offering further detail on the focus of the research and the content of the survey. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the survey at any stage should they wish, without further query. Participants were then asked indicate on an electronic consent form whether they would agree/disagree to partake in the research. Those participants who agreed were then able to access the survey; those who disagreed were automatically re-directed to a letter thanking them for having considered the research and offering the opportunity to engage with the author should they wish to clarify any aspect of the process. The response rate for both surveys was positive with a particularly high response from the graduates of the BA programme at 71.3% (N=102) and a strong response from the Diploma graduates at 55.6% (N=69). This detail is expanded on in greater detail in the findings chapter, chapter 5, and additional detail on the data collection process is noted in section 4.4.3 of this chapter.

As qualitative methods were also considered to be an essential part of this investigation, both survey groups were asked if they would be in a position to volunteer to undertake a subsequent semi-structured interview with the author. Due to the fact that the number of volunteers was extremely high the author subsequently chose a purposive sampling method ensuring representatives of different age categories to reflect a life-span perspective in responding to the research question. Biographical interviewing was deemed to be the most appropriate interview method in keeping with the life course approach of the research and in ensuring the individual lived life realities and perspectives of the learners were core to the research process.

The final number of biographical interviews amounted to 26 in total: 20 female and 6 male in keeping with the gender balance of the survey population. There was also representation across each of the age bands recorded within the surveys, from 21-29 to 70+, including a balanced representation from both the BA and Diploma programme graduates. The interview duration ranged from 1 hour to 2.5 hours and took place in a venue chosen by the interviewee. The author ceased interviews after 26 had been completed having determined that the saturation point of the study had been reached on the basis that any further data collection would yield similar results and not offer any fresh information (Faulker and Trotter 2017).

- *Research Participants Profile*

The survey participants were predominantly female (75% approx.) between the ages of 30-59. The majority of respondents were married and working on a full-time or part-time basis, primarily in the community and voluntary sector. Almost half the respondents had attained a 3<sup>rd</sup> level qualification in advance of undertaking further education. The majority of both sets of survey respondents indicated that they had been out of formal accredited learning for less than 5 years with 20% approx. out of formal learning for over 10 years. Further detail on the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of both sets of survey participants is presented in the findings chapter (section 5.3.1).

A profile of the biographical interview participants is provided in Table 4.2. Pseudonyms were identified to protect the identity of the interviewees. The detail outlined within this table indicates the pseudonym allocated by the author, the age category of each participant and their programme history.

Table 4.2 Biographical Interview Participants Profile

	Pseudonym	Age-Range	Programme History
	<i>Ann</i>	60-69	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Jim</i>	40-49	<i>BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Jill</i>	40-49	<i>BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Cora</i>	40-49	<i>Diploma Graduate</i>
	<i>Fred</i>	50-59	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Mary</i>	40-49	<i>Diploma Graduate</i>
	<i>Edel</i>	30-39	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Niamh</i>	50-59	<i>BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Jane</i>	30-39	<i>BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Tricia</i>	50-59	<i>BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Gail</i>	40-49	<i>BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Emer</i>	30-39	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Kate</i>	21-29	<i>Diploma Graduate</i>
	<i>Paul</i>	50-59	<i>Diploma Graduate</i>
	<i>Lorna</i>	30-39	<i>Diploma Graduate</i>
	<i>Joe</i>	40-49	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Julie</i>	40-49	<i>BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Alice</i>	70+	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Anna</i>	60-69	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Beth</i>	40-49	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Eve</i>	50-59	<i>Diploma Graduate</i>
	<i>Sean</i>	50-59	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Mark</i>	70+	<i>Diploma and BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Nora</i>	40-49	<i>BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Molly</i>	40-49	<i>BA Graduate</i>
	<i>Caomhe</i>	50-59	<i>BA Graduate</i>

#### ***4.4.2 Ethical concerns and considerations***

As per standard University research protocol, all postgraduate research must be approved by the University Research Ethics committee in advance of data collection or research implementation. All research proposals seeking ethical approval must clearly demonstrate that predictable risk to the research participant and to the researcher has been minimised. A complete account of the proposed research aim and objectives, in addition to the chosen methodology, research population, and data collection tools, incorporating the research participant information sheet (see Appendix 1) and consent forms (see Appendix 2) were submitted to the Research Ethics Committee. This detail also included a dedicated section seeking to highlight and offer a resolution towards a complete range of potential ethical considerations as outlined by the standards of the Sociological Association of Ireland. In reviewing the submission the Committee requested the author to moderate the language of the participant information sheet to ensure clarity, and then subsequently granted full ethical approval and permission to proceed in January 2014.

The issue of ethical considerations remained uppermost in the mind of author at each stage of the research process. This detail is further outlined below set specifically within the context of each stage of data collection i.e. secondary data collection, quantitative data collection and qualitative data collection considerations.

##### ***4.4.2.1 Ethical considerations: Secondary data collection – Literature review***

The author ensured to examine published documents, reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, demographics and statistics etc. to inform a framework of investigation with regard to engaging with participants in relation to life course learning. Only valid, reliable secondary sources were used and the author sought to ensure a balanced critique by correctly citing a variety of different perspectives and peer-reviewed research documentation.

*4.4.2.2 Ethical considerations: Quantitative data collection - Survey questionnaires*

Throughout the research process the author has a moral responsibility to ensure the protection of the research participants (Creswell 2009; Bryman 2004) and the integrity of the research study. In the context of quantitative data collection process the author sought to instil the following ethical principles:

- *No Risk of harm/ distress to participant:*  
Ensuring no risk of harm or distress to research participants is a core ethical principle. According to Bryman (2004) harm can be physical, mental, developmental and emotional. The author sought to protect the interests of research participants by ensuring they were fully informed with regard to the nature, content and requirements of the questionnaire prior to agreeing to engage in the research. The level and extent of participant involvement was clearly outlined, in addition to the notation of any potential risks. The author had also identified relevant support services in the event any participant became distressed by engaging in the process and offered participants the option to contact the author directly at any stage if concerns arose.
- *Informed Consent and Voluntary participation:*  
Informed consent as a key ethical principle seeks to ensure that prospective participants are fully informed about each aspect of the research study prior to making a final decision to engage, or not engage. This aspect of social research is paramount and the author consistently ensured that all research was based on the freely given and informed consent of those studied. Participants were fully informed from the outset about the research procedure in meaningful terms; more specifically, in relation to what the research was about, why it was being undertaken, and lastly, how it was to be promoted. Equally, as part of this process participants were clearly informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they had

the right to refuse participation whenever and for whatever reason they wished without any fear of penalty.

- *Anonymity and Confidentiality:*  
Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality is normally regarded as good ethical practice in the undertaking of social research (Robson and McCartan 2016). To ensure the provision of same for the purposes of this research study and in the completion of the survey, participants were not required to provide their personal details, or any other form of identification as part of the questionnaire. Only those participants who freely choose to participate within the next phase of the research (biographical interview) were asked to provide contact details. These in turn were treated in accordance with the requirements of complying with the ethical principle of confidentiality, which included the removal of identifiers, the use of pseudonyms and other technical means for breaking the link between data and identifiable individuals.

#### *4.4.2.3 Ethical considerations: Qualitative data collection - Biographical interviews*

In the context of qualitative data collection process the author sought to instil the following ethical principles:

- *No risk of harm/ distress to participant:*  
As noted above social researchers should seek to minimise any risk of harm to both the research participants and equally the researcher. In the context of the biographical interviews the author sought to protect the interests of interview participants by ensuring they were fully informed with regard to the nature and requirements of the interview prior to agreeing to engage in the research. The author also had identified a range of appropriate support services and contacts in advance of the interview in the event any participant would become distressed due to difficulties arising from the discussion topics. The author also undertook a supporting role where necessary during the

interview so as to protect the physical and emotional well-being of the research participants.

- *Informed Consent/ Voluntary participation:*  
The biographical interviews were undertaken on the basis of the freely given and informed consent of those studied. In order to ensure participants were fully informed, the researcher explained as completely as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research was about and why it was being undertaken, and how it would be promoted thereafter. Equally, participants were clearly informed that their participation was totally voluntary and that they had the right to refuse participation whenever and for whatever reason they wished.
- *Confidentiality:*  
Lastly, in advance of undertaking the biographical interview, prospective participants were informed that guarantees of confidentiality would be honored, unless there was exceptional, clear and overriding reasons to do otherwise; as in the case of disclosure of risk. Should this occur, the author, having discussed matters in advance with the research supervisor (a previous employee of the Health Services Executive) had agreed to engage in immediate consultation with the research supervisor to determine an appropriate course of action reflective of the nature of the disclosure.

#### **4.4.3 Data collection process**

The process of data collection consisted of three key stages. The first stage as previously outlined entailed the collection of secondary data as part of an extensive literature review to frame the aims and objectives of the research study. Stage two involved the collection of quantitative data through the issuing of two survey questionnaires through the medium of survey monkey (an online survey software option) to the target population of adult learners identified for the purposes of this study. Stage three focussed on gathering

qualitative data collection through a number of biographical semi-structured interviews held with survey participants who had volunteered to engage in this stage of the research process.

### *4.4.3.1 Stage one: Secondary data collection*

Provisional secondary data collection was undertaken in 2011 in advance of the start date of this research study in 2012 to determine the parameters of the research problem and focus. During the period 2012 to 2014, the majority of secondary data for the purposes of this study was reviewed and documented serving to inform the analytical framework employed in undertaking both the quantitative and qualitative data collection processes. Throughout the research study however, secondary data was consistently reviewed and updated as necessary.

### *4.4.3.2 Stage two: Quantitative Data Collection*

The quantitative surveys consisted of focused questions involving a mix of multiple choice, Likert type scale, open-ended and closed question types. These questions were designed to encourage reflection on learning experiences within higher education and learning throughout the life course. The use of quantitative surveys therefore sought to identify key themes relevant to adult life course learning experiences (historical, social and cultural contexts), life span educational history, learning attitudes, motivations and potential suggestions or considerations for higher education from an adult learner perspective (see Appendix 3: survey questionnaires). The quantitative surveys sought to objectively condense the scope of enquiry and thereby form the basis for the design and implementation of the qualitative semi-structured interviews.

The target population for the quantitative data collection stage were adult learners (usually categorised within higher education as non-traditional students) who had graduated from one or both of the following part time higher education programmes (applicants for these programmes must be over 21 years in order to meet University criteria for adult education part-time programmes):

(i) NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies (1 year part-time, level 7, 30  
ects)

(ii) BA in Applied Social Studies (4 year part-time, level 8, 180 ects)

All graduates of the *BA in Applied Social Studies* were invited to participate as this was a relatively new programme with the first set of graduates completing in 2010. The full population therefore by 2014 when the survey was issued entailed 143 graduates. The *Diploma in Applied Social Studies* had a longer history of provision and therefore the numbers were narrowed down to all graduates of the programme from the programme from 2010 to 2014 which equated to 124 graduates.

### 4.4.3.2.1 *Timeline*

Both surveys were issued in close proximity; survey one was issued to the graduates of the *BA in Applied Social Studies* in August 2014. This survey was issued to the full population of graduates from the programme since 2010 (as the BA programme started in 2006, the first group graduated in 2010) equating to 143 graduates in total. Two survey reminders were issued during the month of August. Subsequent feedback indicated that many potential respondents were away during this summer month, so the timeline of the survey was extended to the end of September, attaining a positive response rate of 71.3 % (102 respondents). The second survey was issued to the graduates of the *NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies* for the period 2010-2014 equating to 124 graduates. This survey was very similar in content to that of survey one, the only distinction in question matter related to more programme specific queries. The second survey was issued in the latter part of September 2014 (as survey one was coming to a close), two reminders were issued during the month of October and the final reminder in December, at which point the survey was closed with a response rate of 55.6% (69 respondents).

### 4.4.3.3 *Stage three: Qualitative Data Collection*

Qualitative methods of enquiry involved biographical semi-structured interviews with adult learners, graduates from both programmes, who had

volunteered to participate as part the previous quantitative survey. Twenty-six interviews of between 1.5 hours to 2 hours discussion were completed during the period May 2015 to October 2015. All participants were interviewed in a venue of their choosing. As graduates of distance learning programmes they were widely scattered throughout the country, which led to the need for significant travel and planning in advance. However, attending the chosen setting of the interviewee was deemed a priority in the eyes of the author to enhance the quality of the experience and the research in counteracting any perceived social or power differential. All interviewees' were provided with a copy of the proposed interview questions (see Appendix 4: biographical learning interview schedule) in advance of meeting, and the interview itself was conducted as a conversation and recorded through the use of a Dictaphone, in agreement with the interviewee. The biographical or life history approach undertaken during the course of the interviews promoted a greater understanding of adult learning experiences, as 'people live lives with meaning. Interpretative biography provides a method which looks at how subjects give subjective meaning to their life experiences' (Denzin 1989, p.14, as cited in Merrill 2001, p.8)

### ***4.4.4 Data analysis***

Having undertaken mixed methods research the nature of data analysis entailed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis software; namely, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and NVivo (computer aided qualitative data analysis software).

#### ***4.4.4.1 Quantitative data analysis***

The quantitative surveys for both student cohorts (Diploma and Degree) were part of a sequential (quantitative followed by qualitative) mixed methods research design. Both surveys had been pilot tested and adapted in advance of being issued through Survey Monkey, an online survey development software incorporating data analysis tools. Data gathered was exported to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) in order

to analyse and present both descriptive and inferential statistics in numerical and graphical modes. As noted previously the quantitative surveys consisted of focused questions involving a mix of multiple choice, Likert type scale, open-ended and closed question types which through data analysis condensed the scope of enquiry to form the basis for the design and implementation of the qualitative semi-structured interviews. Statistical techniques including frequency distribution, percentage distribution, spread of distribution (e.g. standard deviation), mean and ranking measures were applied to determine numerical variances and data response patterns. Data gathered in relation to open ended questions were analysed on the basis of word frequency distribution subsequently structured in accordance with emerging themes. As stated previously the data analysis of both surveys formed the basis for the design and implementation of the qualitative semi-structured interviews, and the qualitative data from the open-ended questions within the surveys was subsequently amalgamated within NVivo (qualitative data analysis software package) to undertake a mixed-methods data analysis.

#### *4.4.4.2 Qualitative data analysis*

As the number of volunteers was extremely high the author subsequently chose a purposive sampling method ensuring representatives of different age categories to reflect a life-span perspective in responding to the research question. Twenty-six respondents who participated in the survey subsequently participated in face-to-face semi-structured biographical interviews. The interview questions were based on the data findings from both surveys and the analytical framework emerging from the secondary data collection for the purposes of this study. In advance of the interviews the proposed questions were piloted to ensure that the wording was clear and that the sequencing was appropriate. All interviews were subsequently recorded, transcribed verbatim and printed. Six hard-copy transcripts were selected and analysed in terms of emerging themes which were recorded and coded. All transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo (qualitative data analysis software package) allowing for further interrogation of the data in a thorough and transparent manner. The emerging themes previously

identified remained consistent, but additional themes and sub-themes were noted and all data subsequently coded (described as nodes within NVivo) accordingly, ensuring a systematic approach to qualitative analysis. The same thematic coding (node) structure was also used in reviewing the qualitative data from the previous surveys with the data tools within NVivo, facilitating comparison across different data sets to ensure a more complete thematic investigation (See Appendix 7: Qualitative Research Analysis-NVivo Nodes). The data visualization tools and charts were particularly effective in the identification of patterns, trends and thematic insights.

### **4.5 Limitations of the research**

Having outlined the research implementation process this section expands on any research limitations identified and corresponding mitigations in an effort to resolve same. These limitations are outlined under three key headings.

#### ***4.5.1 Insider researcher bias***

As the author works on a full-time basis within the higher education sector with part-time adult learners, there is potential of bias and loss of objectivity as an inside researcher in terms of empathy towards the research respondents. This potential bias however, was duly noted by both the author and research supervisor and as a result the research supervisor ensured to quality check all aspects of the research process to counteract any evident bias. Moreover, the research supervisor emphasised the strength of being an insider researcher in terms of enriching the findings of the research as a result of the author's understanding of the research field, potentially seeing things other researchers might miss.

#### ***4.5.2 Common university setting of both programmes pertinent to the study***

As both programmes within this research study are based within a common university setting, University X, the research is contained to one higher education institution and a common student pool overall. However, as the research demonstrates adult learners are not a homogenous group, both programmes vary in terms of duration from one to four years, so the only

main commonality is the institutional setting which frames the data produced but limits the generalisability of the findings. However, it provides a useful insight into the situation of part-time adult learners in higher education.

### **4.5.3 Longitudinal research**

A longitudinal research project over a ten year period would have been ideally suited to the focus of this research study in exploring the life course learning requirements of adult learners in higher education. This approach would have provided the opportunity for the author to gather data repeatedly with the same adult learners over a sustained period. However, as this research study was undertaken on a part-time basis outside of the author's full-time post it simply was not feasible to do so. The decision by the author following discussion with the research supervisor to undertake biographical interviews as part of the research study offers an alternative method to attaining a meaningful perspective on the significance of learning over the life course.

## **4.6 Summary**

This chapter presented the research methodology and research methods selected for the purposes of attaining the aims and objectives of this research study. It was divided into four sections. Section 4.2 revisited the rationale, aims and objectives of the study. Section 4.3 subsequently provided details on the design of the research study, exploring the concept of the life course in the context of this research in addition to the three capitals of learning concept identified by Schuller and Watson (2009), as both concepts inform the analytical framework devised for the purposes of this study. This was followed by an outline of the author's research position and the corresponding opportunities and challenges of this position with regard to the final choice and design of data gathering tools particular to this study. Section 4.4 focused on the implementation of the research study, reviewing the research recruitment process, issues of ethical concern and processes of data collection and data analysis. The final section, section 4.5

## Chapter 4: Research Methodology

identified the limitations of the study within a wider context of potential mitigations for same.

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings in relation to the research study which examines the concept of the life course and why it may be considered an issue of critical importance in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners in higher education. The study examines life course influences on adult learning in relation to two University, part-time adult learner programmes, namely: the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies and the BA in Applied Social Studies. As previously noted this study adopts a life course perspective with regard to learning and education processes in order to contribute to the development of a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education.

Although many interesting findings emerged during the course of this research, for the purposes of this thesis the author is clearly outlining findings relating to the stated objectives only. Therefore the core findings of the research are provided in the context of the four key research objectives, the detail of which is outlined in Table 5.1 which maps the chapter location of each objective and the data findings in relation to same. Section 5.2 focuses on objective one, and the corresponding secondary data findings in relation to the concept of the life course in the context of higher education teaching and learning policy from an adult learner perspective. Section 5.3 presents data collected specific to objective two focusing on two quantitative surveys identifying key themes relevant to adult life course learning experiences. Section 5.4 outlines the data collated through qualitative interviews reflecting the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education. Lastly, section 5.5 provides a summary of key findings and an initial review of objective four in relation to policy and practice considerations of an emergent model of life course learning for the adult learner, higher education and wider civic society. Further detail will be presented in relation to objective four in the discussion chapter (chapter six).

Table 5.1 Findings Chapter Outline

Four Key Research Objectives	Chapter Location
<p><b>1. To examine the concept of the life course in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners with a particular focus on higher education</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Section 5.2</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. To determine the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Section 5.3</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. To contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by adult learning experiences in an Irish Context</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Section 5.4</li> </ul>
<p><b>4. To review an emergent model of life course learning for the adult learner, higher education institutions and wider civic society</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Section 5.5</li> </ul>

**5.2 Objective one:**

**To examine the concept of the life course in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners with a particular focus on higher education**

This objective reviews secondary data findings (see Chapters 2 and 3) for further detail) examining the concept of the life course in the context of higher education teaching and learning policy from an adult learner perspective. It expands on the key theoretical perspectives informing the

tentative conceptual model and the framework of analysis specific to this research study.

The life course as a concept provides a multi-level, interdisciplinary approach to the study of higher education from an adult learner perspective. It considers the interaction between different levels of analysis; macro, meso and micro levels, which in the context of this research study correspond to an analysis of social structure, higher education as an institution, and the individual adult learner. The interdisciplinary component of the life course concept, bonding both psychological and sociological perspectives focusing on the inter-relationships between the individual and society, provides a relevant framework for this study in interweaving individual development and learning with social change.

Further secondary data analysis of the life course as a concept subsequently informed a tentative conceptual model of life course learning which also served as a framework of analysis for the purposes of this study. In so doing, this analytical framework sought to ensure a comprehensive investigation of the wide ranging life course learning requirements of adult learners in higher education within a rapidly changing society. This framework combined the five principles of life course research as identified by Elder (1985); lifespan development, agency, time and place, timing of lives, and linked lives with the three capitals of learning concept; human, social and identity capital developed by Schuller and Watson (2009) incorporating the categories of significant learning outlined by Fink (2003). A more complete account of each of the components of this analytical framework may be found in Chapters 2 and 3. However, in order to frame the findings of objectives 2, 3 and 4 it is important to revisit both the key life course principles and the three capitals of interdependent learning identified. These are briefly outlined and are also illustrated in Figure 5.1.

### **5.2.1 Tentative conceptual model of life course learning/ Research analytical framework**

#### *Five life course principles*

- *Lifespan development*: focuses on individual development over the life-span, contemplating age related changes and life phases from childhood to older adulthood from the moment we are born until we take our last breath.
- *Agency*: at a personal level analyses how an individual seeks to control or determine their own life course by seeking out opportunities and making decisions in the context of the constraints and options they may encounter.
- *Time and place*: considers the impact of socio-historical context and geographic place on the individual life course and is very much interwoven with the life experience of the individual.
- *Timing of lives*: examines the impact of the social timings of transitions during the life course in the context of societal norms.
- *Linked lives*: explores the interdependence of individual life courses through personal networks of shared relationships. It explores the impact of family, institutional and social contexts on individual lives.

(Adapted from Elder 1985)

#### *Three Capitals of Learning Concept (incorporating aspects of Finks taxonomy of significant learning 2003)*

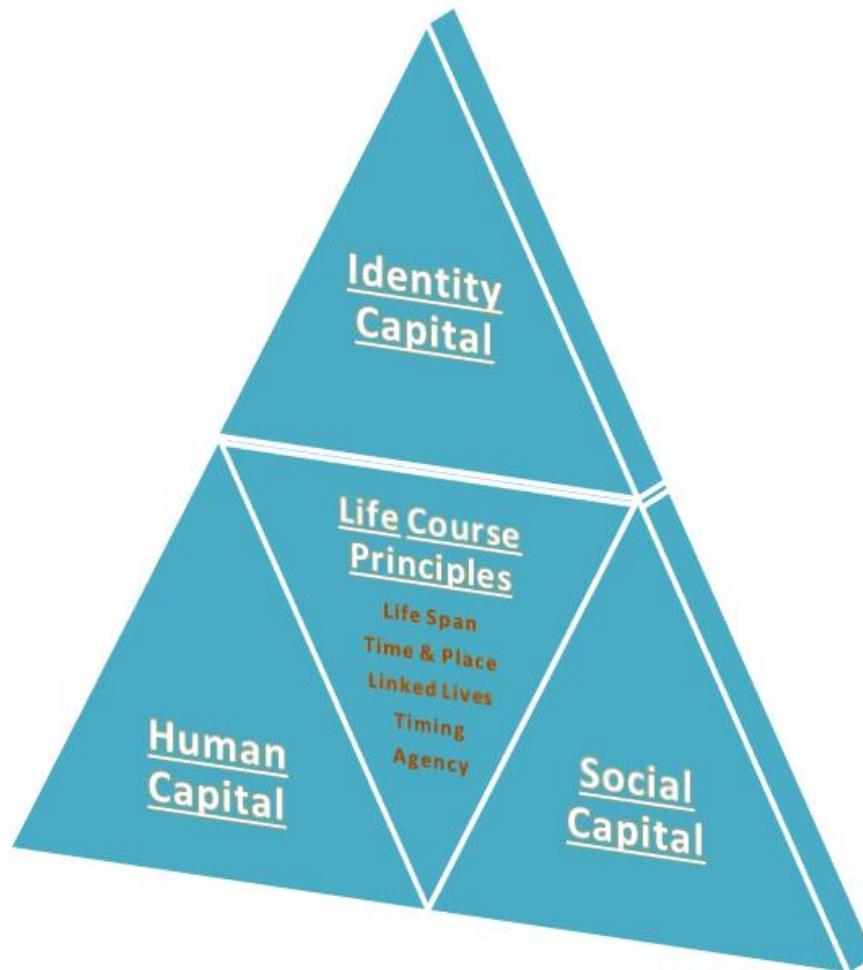
- *Human Capital*: individual human capital refers predominantly to the formal acquisition of knowledge and skills which are largely measured through the qualifications which individuals acquire and use mainly within the workplace, but also within other social contexts, to enhance productivity and increase earnings. At a societal

level human capital is measured according to investment in education and training to marketplace returns.

- *Social Capital*: emphasises the importance of relationships, connections and networks, both formal and informal, within the context of the norms, values and institutions of society. Much of the debate and discussion regarding social capital considers its relationship with learning and education throughout the life course. It reinforces the value of linkages between different kinds of learning across a variety of contexts and networks throughout life interconnecting the learning outcomes from the realms of social, civic, work and family settings. The ability to make connections between different kinds of learning, ideas and perspectives in addition to developing a greater understanding of self and others underlines the intrinsic connection between learning and social capital.
- *Identity Capital*: refers to the characteristics of the individual that define their sense of self-esteem and self-worth. It has a direct relationship with learning in that the individual characteristics outlined above impact upon the motivation to engage with, and continue within, the learning process. This in turn, depending on the learning experience, may contribute either positively or negatively to an individual's identity capital. The skills of learning how to learn in order to become a better learner in the construction of knowledge and critical ability is a type of learning of particular importance to the development of identity capital throughout the life course.

(Adapted from Schuller and Watson 2009)

Figure 5.1 provides an illustration of the key components informing the analytical framework for the purposes of this research study.



**Figure 5.1 Tentative Conceptual Model of Life Course Learning/ Research Analytical Framework**

Incorporating Schuller and Watson’s Three Capitals of Learning (2009) and Elder’s Life Course Principles (1985).

### **5.2.2 Summary of key findings for objective one**

- The five life course principles as identified by Elder (1985) with the three interdependent capitals of learning developed by Schuller and Watson (2009) collectively combine to contribute to a tentative conceptual model of life course learning which serves as an analytical framework to examine all remaining research objectives. This framework was designed on the basis of an in-depth review of literature pertinent to the concept of the life course in the context of higher education policy and practice specific to adult learners (Chapters 2 and 3).

### 5.3 Objective two:

#### To determine the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education

The following section presents data collected from two quantitative surveys previously discussed in Chapter 4 research methodology. The quantitative surveys were part of a sequential (quantitative followed by qualitative) mixed methods research design. As noted within the research methods chapter the target population for the purposes of this study were adult learners (usually categorised within higher education as non-traditional students, whom for the purposes of part-time programmes must be over the age of 21) who have graduated from one or both of the following part time higher education programmes: (1) the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies (1 year part-time, level 7, 30 ects) and (2) the BA in Applied Social Studies (4 years part-time, level 8, 180 ects). The data from both surveys will be presented in accordance with the thematic headings common to both questionnaires.

**Table 5.2 Full Survey population and response for the BA and Diploma Programmes**

<b>Respondents by programme:</b>	<b>Full population 100%</b>	<b>Survey Response</b>
<b>BA Respondents:</b>	143 (N) =100%	102 (N) =71.3%
<b>Diploma Respondents:</b>	124 (N) =100%	69 (N) =55.6%

As noted in Table 5.2, the response rate for both surveys was positive with a particularly high response from the graduates of the BA programme at 71.3% (N=102) and a strong response from the Diploma graduates at 55.6% (N=69). This section provides the detail of these findings. It is important to note when reviewing the statistics that ‘n’ denotes the number of respondents in each case presented to reflect instances where respondents may have skipped a question. It is equally important to note that any reference to ‘majority’ will automatically correspond to statistics of 55% and above reflective of respondents who answered that specific question with the same response. The findings from both quantitative surveys will be

presented under the following headings in accordance with the thematic structure of both questionnaires:

5.3.1 Sample characteristics

5.3.2 History of respondents accredited learning

5.3.3 Respondents higher education programme learning experiences

5.3.4 Learning motivation and strategies as identified by respondents

5.3.5 Best practices in higher education as perceived by respondents in relation to adult learning processes

### **5.3.1 Sample characteristics**

This section outlines the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of both sets of survey respondents. It seeks to present the specific characteristics of those who participated within the survey data collection process so as to frame the results within a background context.

#### *5.3.1.1 Age profile*

As Figure 5.2 illustrates there is some slight variation in the age profile of respondents from both programmes. The highest number of BA graduates are in the 40-49 age categories, at 36% (n=36), whereas the greater part of Diploma graduates are in the younger age category of 30-39 at 32.35% (n=22). The number of graduates aged between 21-29 is quite high in the diploma programme at 16.18% (n=11), with no representation within this programme in the over 60 age group. However, in the case of both programmes there is a relatively even distribution of graduates between the ages of 30-59.

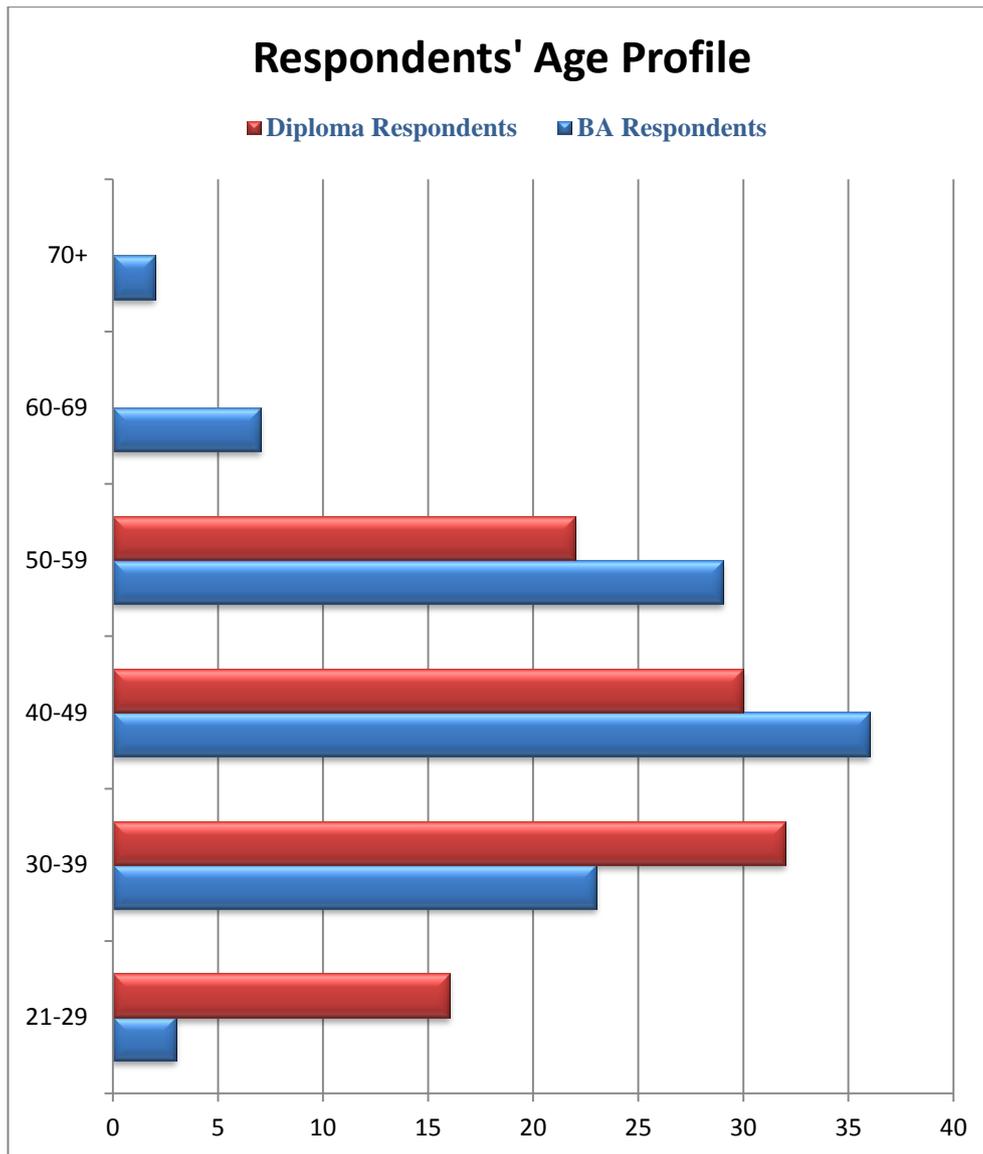


Figure 5.2 Age Profile of BA (n=100) and Diploma (n=68) Survey Respondents

### 5.3.1.2 Gender

The gender balance within both programmes is greatly weighted towards female programme participants at 75% approximately per programme. See Figure 5.3.

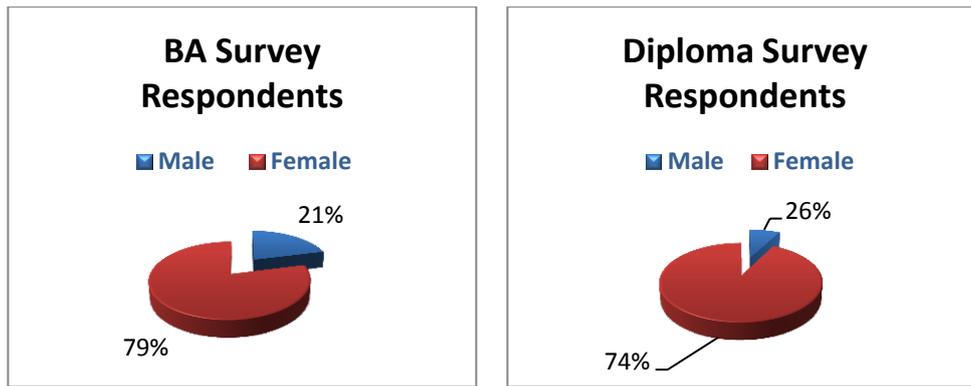


Figure 5.3 Gender balance of BA (n=101) and Diploma (n=68) Survey Respondents

### 5.3.1.3 Relationship profile

In terms of relationship status 54.46% (n=55) of BA respondents indicated that they were married, with 36.79% (n=25) of Diploma respondents stating likewise. A high number of Diploma students indicated that they were single at 30.88% (n=21), by comparison to 8.9% (n=9) of BA respondents. Whereas the number of respondents ‘single but co-habiting with a significant other’ for both programmes corresponded to 11.88% (n=12) for the BA respondents and 19.12% (n=13) for the Diploma respondents. See figure 5.4.

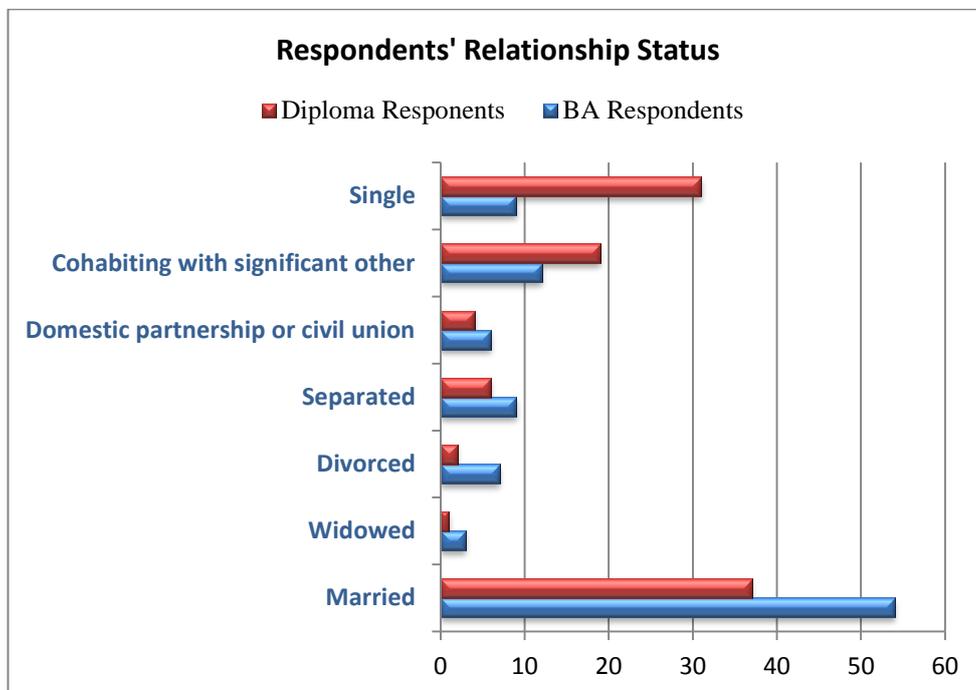


Figure 5.4 Relationship Status of BA (n=101) and Diploma (n=68) Survey Respondents

5.3.1.4 *Employment status prior and post programme of study*

As the figures in Table 5.3 indicate the majority of BA respondents were working full-time *prior* to undertaking the BA programme at 60.78% (n=62). This figure reflects the combined total of full-time self-employed at 4.9% and full-time employed at 55.88%. The number of BA respondents who recorded as working full-time fell to 51.96% (n=53) *post* the BA programme. Again this figure reflects the combined total of 3.92% full-time self-employed and 48.04% full-time employed.

For the Diploma programme the greater number of respondents were working part-time *prior* to undertaking the programme at 25.37% (n=17), with a slight increase in the number of respondents working part-time *post* the programme at 29.85% (n=20). The number of Diploma respondents who indicated that they were unemployed *prior* to the programme dropped from 13.43% (n=9) to 10.4% (n=7) *post* the programme. However, the reverse occurred for the BA respondents with 1.96% (n=2) indicating that they were unemployed *prior* to the programme, rising to 10.8% (n=11) *post*. These results might be explained, at least in part, by the difference in programme duration with the BA programme involving 4 years part-time, whereas the Diploma programme warranted 1 year, part-time.

On a separate note there was a clear reduction in numbers among both sets of respondents who recorded as being participants on a government funded scheme (e.g. CE scheme). BA respondents were 4.9% (n=5) *prior* to programme participation falling to .98% (n=1) *post* programme participation. Diploma respondents fell from 14.93% (n=10) *prior* to programme participation to 10.45% (n=7) *post* their programme of study. These figures concur with governmental restrictions in resourcing the community and voluntary sector during the period of this research study.

**Table 5.3 Respondents Employment Status Prior and Post Programme of Study - BA (n=102) and Diploma (n=67)**

	<b>PRIOR BA</b>	<b>POST BA</b>	<b>PRIOR DIP</b>	<b>POST DIP</b>
<b>Working full-time (self-employed)</b>	4.90 %	3.92 %	4.48 %	4.48 %
<b>Working full-time(employed)</b>	55.88 %	48.04 %	16.42 %	19.40 %
<b>Working part-time</b>	17.66 %	19.62 %	25.37 %	29.85 %
<b>Unemployed</b>	1.96 %	10.78 %	13.43 %	10.45 %
<b>Domiciliary Care</b>	5.88%	2.94 %	5.97 %	4.48 %
<b>Disabled, not able to work</b>	0.0%	0.0%	1.49%	1.49 %
<b>On a government funded scheme (e.g. C.E)</b>	4.90 %	.98 %	14.93 %	10.45 %
<b>Involved in unpaid voluntary work</b>	1.96%	2.94 %	10.45 %	7.46 %
<b>Student</b>	0.0 %	0.0 %	1.49 %	8.95 %
<b>Retired</b>	.98%	1.96 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
<b>Other (please specify)</b>	5.88 %	8.82%	5.97 %	2.99%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%

As the Table 5.4 indicates, the majority of respondents in employment, whether full or part-time, worked in the community/voluntary sector.

**Table 5.4 Sector of Work identified by employed (full/part-time) BA (n=81) and Diploma (n=51) Survey Respondents**

<b>Sector of Work for those employed (full/part-time)</b>	<b>BA Respondents (n=81)</b>	<b>Diploma Respondents (n=51)</b>
<b>Community/ Voluntary</b>	61.73 %	51.0 %
<b>Statutory</b>	19.75 %	11.8 %
<b>Private</b>	18.52 %	37.2 %
	100%	100%

### **5.3.2 History of respondents accredited learning**

The focus of this section on accredited learning seeks to measure participant's experiences and views of formal education from primary level to higher education. It also traces participant's engagement with formal accredited learning post compulsory education and examines the potential of continuing participation in further education.

#### *5.3.2.1 Highest academic qualification prior to undertaking programme of study:*

The diploma respondents had a higher academic achievement background to the BA respondents, with a 31.7% (n=20) having attained a degree qualification prior to undertaking the diploma programme. This detail may in part be explained however, by the fact that in some instances graduates from degrees within the social sciences and humanities applied for the Diploma programme (in community development practice) in order to gain the practical knowledge necessary to progress within the field of community development. Therefore whilst the Diploma programme is recognised as a lower level qualification to a degree programme the practice-based orientation of the Diploma was deemed to provide an additional knowledge and skill set specific to community engagement. Almost one third of Diploma respondents therefore were highly qualified continuing learners within higher education.

Almost half of BA respondents (49%, n=49) had attained a third level diploma qualification prior to undertaking the BA. However, by comparison to the Diploma group, a mere 7% (n=7) had attained a degree qualification in advance of their programme. The statistics would indicate that the BA respondents were also continuing learners with the majority building on qualifications attained post compulsory education (3<sup>rd</sup> level cert/diploma) to progress within higher education. Table 5.5 illustrates the highest academic qualification attained by respondents prior to undertaking their programme of study.

**Table 5.5 Highest academic qualification identified by BA (n=100) and Diploma (n=63) survey respondents prior to undertaking programme of study**

	<b>BA Respondents</b>	<b>Diploma Respondents</b>
<b>Primary Education</b>	0.0 %	0.0 %
<b>Junior Certificate (or equivalent)</b>	3.0 %	1.58 %
<b>Leaving Certificate (or equivalent)</b>	19.0 %	12.70 %
<b>3rd Level Certificate</b>	13.0 %	12.70 %
<b>3rd Level Diploma</b>	49.0 %	19.05 %
<b>Degree</b>	7.0 %	31.75 %
<b>Masters</b>	1.0 %	15.87 %
<b>Other</b>	8.0 %	6.35 %
	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>

*5.3.2.2 Length of time since engagement with education:*

In terms of both sets of respondents, 64% (BA n=65, Diploma n=44) had been out of formal accredited learning for less than 5 years, a further 17% (n=17) of the BA respondents and 11.5% (n=8) of Diploma respondents had not participated within further education for 5-10 years. Over 19% (n=20) of the BA survey respondents and 24.5% (n=17) of the Diploma respondents had been out of accredited learning for over 10 years with one BA respondent indicating the highest level of absence at 46 years.

*5.3.2.3 Experience of formal education*

Of the BA respondents 75% (a combination of *agreed* 51% n=51 and *strongly agreed* 24% n=24) and 84.13% (a combination of *agreed* 42.86% n=27 and *strongly agreed* 41.27% n=26) of Diploma respondents stated that their experience of primary school was positive with quite a similar correlation in relation to their experience of secondary school. However, the statistics would indicate quite a diverse range of experience overall reflective within the weighting given to each of the Likert scale categories

from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The views expressed, however, regarding the experience of further education was very evidently weighted towards strong agreement that further education was a positive experience as 95% of BA respondents (*agreed* 36% n=36/ *strongly agreed* 59% n=59), and 95.24% of Diploma respondents (*agreed* 34.92% n=22/ *strongly agreed* 60.32% n=38) indicated that formal education was time well spent having contributed to confidence in decision-making and employability. In combining both categories of *strongly agree* and *agree* a significant number of respondents (BA 84%, n=84 and Dip 77.78%, n=49) also agreed that formal education had brought about social/family benefits. Equally, a significant number of respondents *disagreed* with the statement that formal education had done little to prepare them for adult life. Figures 5.5 and 5.6 provide a synopsis of key points discussed; a more complete account of this detail is available in Appendix 5.

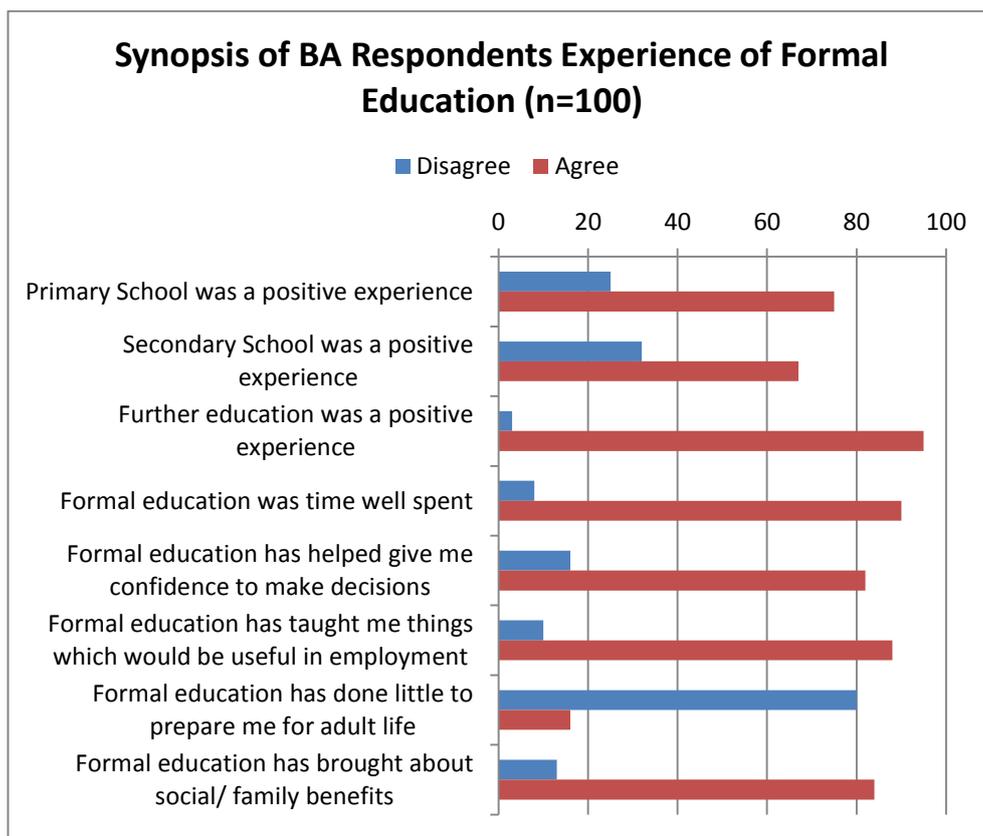


Figure 5.5 Synopsis of BA Respondents Experience of Formal Education

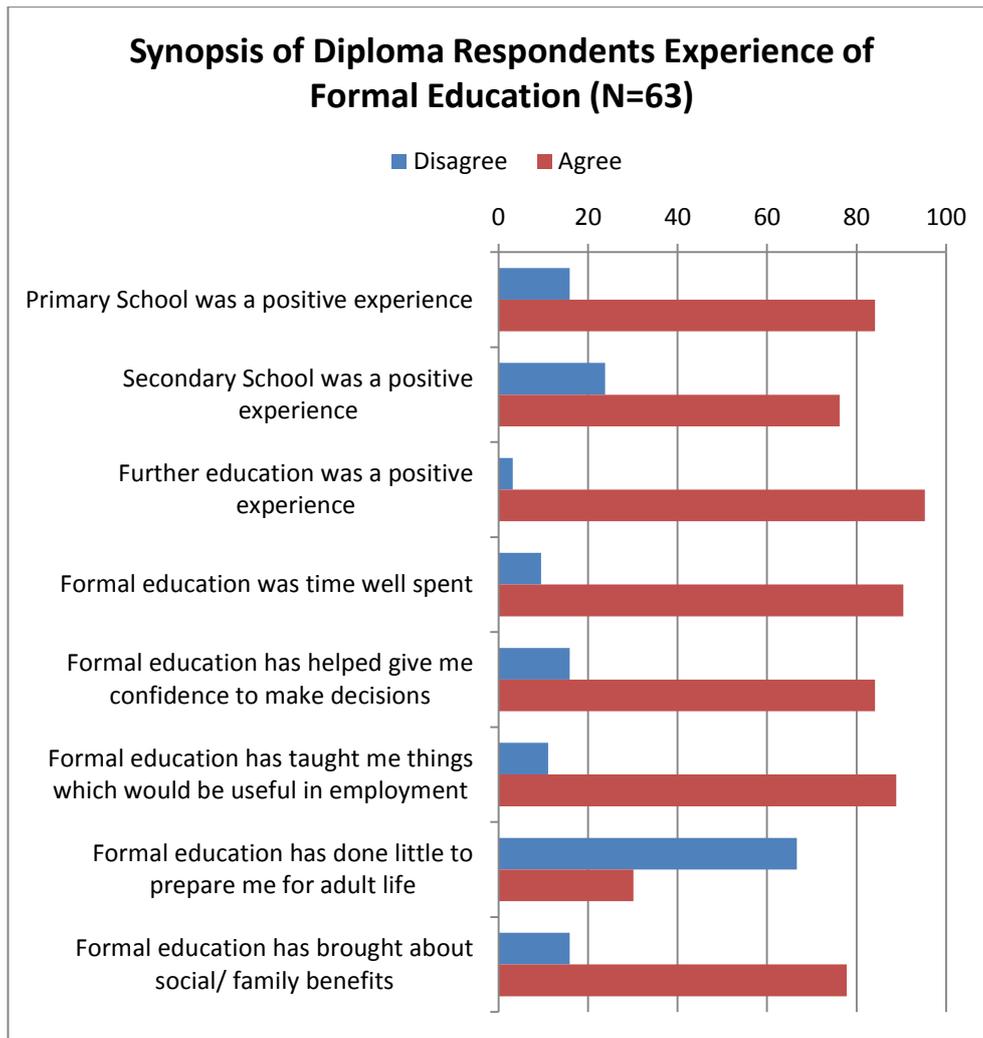


Figure 5.6 Synopsis of Diploma Respondents Experience of Formal Education

5.3.2.4 View of formal education on completion of BA or Diploma programme

When asked if their programme experience impacted on their view of formal education both sets of respondents strongly agreed that their programme experience had a positive impact on their view of formal education with 89% (n=89) of the BA respondents and 76.19% (n=48) of Diploma respondents stating ‘Yes’. This question also carried a qualitative component giving respondents the opportunity to comment further on the nature of this impact and the greater proportion of respondents chose to do

so at 83% and 63.7% respectively. A text analysis<sup>2</sup> of both sets of responses highlighted a number of common themes which are summarised below:

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Theme Description</b>
<i>Provision of part-time blended Adult Learner Centred Programmes recognising scale of commitments</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Formal education, specifically in the context of returning to learning as an adult learner within adult learner-centred programmes, was a positive experience, emphasising the importance of provision of part-time blended learning programmes cognisant of work and family commitments.</li></ul>
<i>Recognition of Life Experience within learning process</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>life-experience</i> coupled with programme content makes for an enriched learning experience and should be promoted within formal education.</li></ul>
<i>Usage of different modes and styles of learning leading to a positive learning experience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>different modes and styles of learning</i> within formal education are core to ensure a <i>positive learning experience</i> particularly in the context of the diversity of adult learners approach to learning and learning histories. Group-based learning was frequently highlighted as a highly effective learning mode.</li></ul>

---

<sup>2</sup> Text analysis" is a broad term to outline a method of research which is used to interpret the characteristics of recorded data, often qualitative, so that the data can be organized and described.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <i>Promotion of learners confidence levels</i>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• returning to formal education as an adult learner <i>increased confidence</i> levels in relation to all aspects of life, personal, social and economic.</li></ul>   |
| <i>Provision of accessible and inclusive learning processes</i>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• formal education should be <i>accessible and inclusive</i> regardless of age, family circumstances or social status.</li></ul>  |
| <i>Adult learner valued as an equal within the learning process</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• the importance of being treated and <i>valued as an equal</i> within the learning experience was deemed essential for adult learners returning to formal education.</li></ul>   |
| <i>Maintaining a culture of learner support</i>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a <i>culture of learner support</i>; tutor support, peer support, family support, financial support, support in the acquisition of specific skills and competencies e.g. academic writing featured as high priority theme throughout all responses.</li></ul> |

For those respondents who stated that their programme experience did not impact on their view of formal education the central theme of the responses indicated that they had always held a positive view of formal education and the experience on their programme did not change that. The following comment by a BA survey respondent clearly captures the main commentary submitted by respondents outlining the impact of formal education.

“

Surveys

*Education can be a challenge; however, it is in times of challenge that we learn most about ourselves, our ability, our weaknesses, and our determination. In turn it fosters our growth not just from an educational perspective, but it defines us as people, and gives us strength to live more fulfilling lives. As someone who would not have seen formal education as a positive experience earlier in my life, I can now say that my return to formal education has been a very positive experience and has changed my longstanding view of dissatisfaction and indifference to one of; formal education has something to offer everyone, and if at first you do not find what you are looking for, keep searching until you do. There are now more options available within formal education and more options are available all the time, so success at any age or stage of life can be achieved and wonderful friends can be made along the way.*

***BA Survey respondent 10***

”

5.3.2.5 Progression to further programmes

Table 5.6 Registration for further study post programme completion? (BA n=100 and Diploma n=63)

Since completing your higher education programme have you registered for any further studies?	BA Respondents (n=100)		Diploma Respondents (n=63)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
	35.0 %	65.0 %	42.86 %	57.14 %

The majority of respondents in relation to both programmes indicated that they had not registered for any further studies on programme completion (BA 65%, n=65 and Diploma 57.14% n=36). However, of those who had not registered for subsequent study almost 70% (n=45) of the BA respondents and 77% (n=28) of the Diploma respondents stated that they would consider doing so. Explanations offered for their decision not to progress in many cases highlighted the desire to proceed within further education, but equally emphasised the limitations placed on choice, perceived ability and opportunity due to financial pressures, time restrictions, family responsibilities and work commitments. In view of the fact that 73.47% (n=72) of BA respondents and 68.25% (n=43) of Diploma respondents had financed their programme participation from their own personal funds, finance as noted above, remains a particular consideration in decision-making to register for further study.



*Age and Finance, work commitments, and time. I am not in a position to fund any further programme.*

***BA survey respondent 69***

Surveys

*As soon as my children are finished 2nd level my ambition is to return to college and do a Masters if I'm*

*able and accepted. At the moment my children are my priority as I am a lone parent now.*

***BA survey respondent 85***

*As I am on Job seekers allowance and, on speaking with a Social Welfare officer ...I was told that a part time course that I had investigated did not come under their regulations as part of the Job seekers allowance. I would not qualify under their scheme to claim my benefit, which I need.*

***Diploma survey respondent 39***

*Would love to register to do degree but would like to do degree that would take 2 to 3 years part-time. At the moment caring part time for parents, as well as part time work and juggling kids. Also not affordable, if I could apply for a grant /discount hopefully could consider it in next few years.*

***Diploma survey respondent 45***

”

Table 5.7 indicates a sample of programmes of further study undertaken by respondents of both programmes (35% of BA respondents, n=35 and 42.86% of Diploma respondents, n=27), whilst varied in terms of subject matter the majority of programmes remain within the social sciences.

Table 5.7 Sample of programmes of Further Study undertaken by BA and Diploma Respondents

Programmes of Further Study – BA Respondents	Programmes of Further Study- Diploma Respondents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>MSc in Industrial Relations and Human Resource Management</b></li> <li>• <b>MA in Learning and Development</b></li> <li>• <b>MA in Mediation and Conflict Intervention</b></li> <li>• <b>Community Addiction Studies</b></li> <li>• <b>MA in Family Support Studies</b></li> <li>• <b>Masters in Management and Innovation in Social Enterprise</b></li> <li>• <b>Masters in Social Work</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BA in Community and Family Studies</li> <li>• Certificate in Applied Management</li> <li>• Certificate in Training and Education</li> <li>• Diploma in Public Management</li> <li>• MA in Public Advocacy &amp; Activism</li> <li>• MA in Community Development</li> <li>• Higher Diploma in Social Policy</li> </ul>

### 5.3.3 Respondents higher education programme learning experiences

This section seeks to determine the programme specific learning experiences of the respondents. In seeking to ensure a comprehensive examination of learning experiences this section asks respondents to consider the impact of their programme of learning on their human, social and identity capitals (Schuller and Watson 2009). Key questions explore the potential competencies and skills attained, in addition to any perceived personal, social or employment benefits/opportunities as a result of programme participation.

#### 5.3.3.1 Skills competency levels post programme completion

As part of examining programme specific learning experiences respondents were asked if their programme experience had changed their level of competency in relation to a series of skills by rating each in accordance with a 4 point Likert scale ranging from *greatly improved* to *dis-improved*.

Amongst the Diploma respondents there was quite an even distribution of opinion in relation to skill competency levels from *greatly improved* to *no-*

*change*. However, skills noted as having *greatly improved* by respondents included:

Diploma Graduates: skills perceived as having *greatly improved*:

- learning to learn (46.67%)
- communication (46.67%)
- teamwork (41.67%)
- creative thinking (40.00%)

The skills of writing, time-management, problem-solving and management/leadership were deemed to have *moderately improved*.

Interestingly, over half of the diploma respondents (54%, n=32) indicated that their computer literacy had *not changed* as part of their programme experience. This may in part be explained by the age distribution of the Diploma respondents as being weighted toward the younger age categories with 48% of respondents between the ages of 21-39 years, by comparison to 26% of BA respondents in the corresponding age group.

In relation to the BA respondent's opinion of skill competency levels, there is a greater diversity of opinion by comparison to the Diploma respondents. As evident within Figure 5.7 and 5.8, 72.73% (n=72) of BA students stated that their writing skills competency had *greatly improved*, with a further 64.65% (n=64) indicating that their learning to learn skills; their awareness of their own learning styles/approaches and ability to enhance same, had also *greatly improved*. Equally, over half (51.52%, n=51) reported communication skills as having *greatly improved*.

BA Graduates: skills perceived as having *greatly improved*:

- writing (72.73%)
- learning to learn (64.65%)
- communication skills (51.52%)

Similar to the Diploma respondents, the skills of time-management, problem-solving and management/leadership were deemed to have *moderately improved*. This categorisation of moderate improvement however, was also extended by the BA respondents to the skills of computer literacy and teamwork.

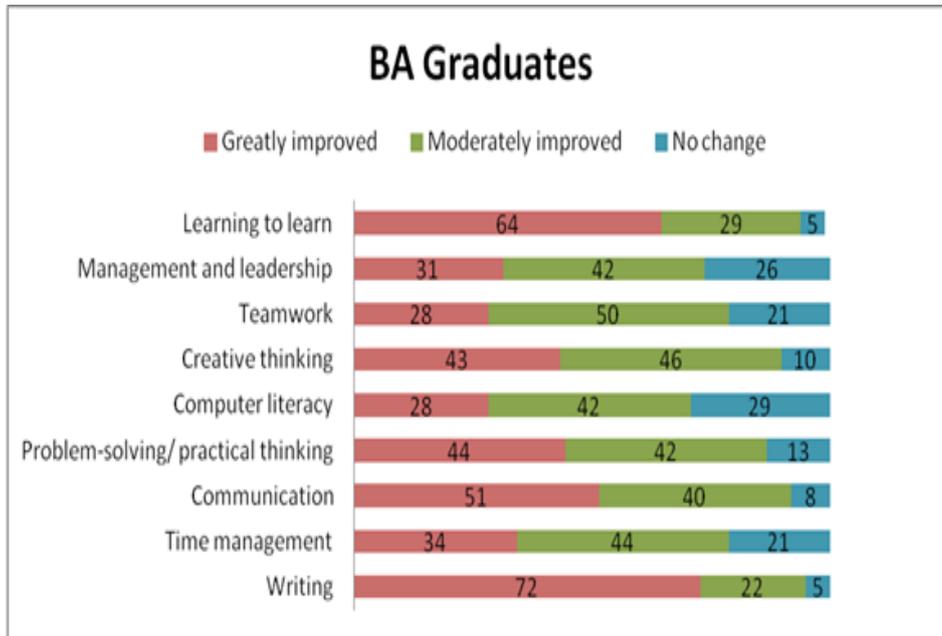


Figure 5.7 Skills competency levels post programme (BA n=99)

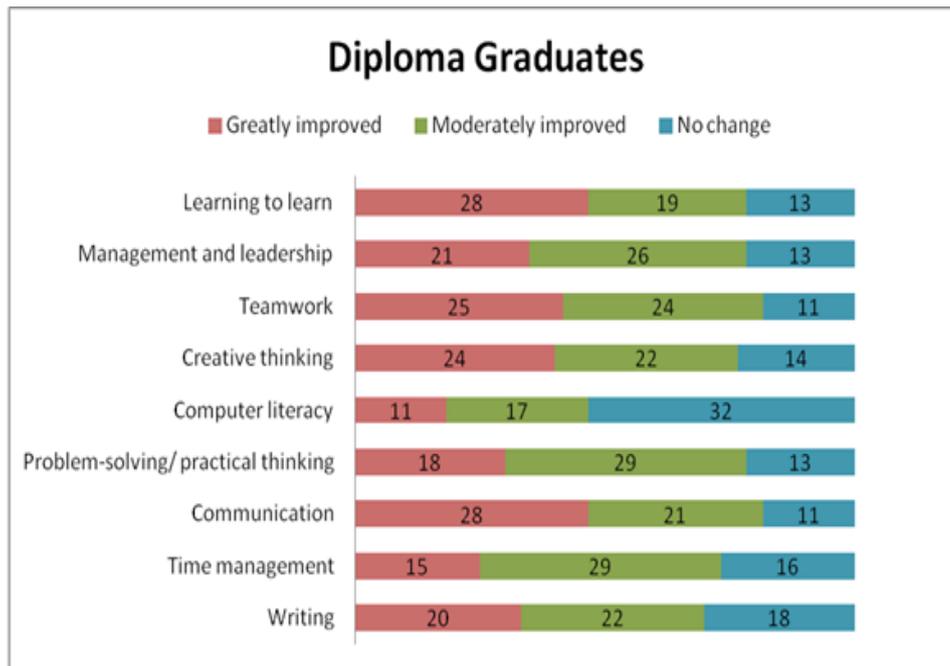


Figure 5.8 Skills competency levels post programme (Diploma n=60)

All respondents were asked to suggest other skills or competencies not listed above that had been acquired through their programme participation.

Confidence, understanding and listening skills were identified as common competencies by both sets of respondents. Research skills and presentation skills were also deemed to be important to both groups in terms of skills acquisition.

### 5.3.3.2 Perceived essential skills for adult learners in modern society

Having contemplated the acquisition of skills/competencies attained through their programme participation respondents were then asked to consider, from their own experience as an adult learner, the essential skills they would identify for other adult learners in modern society. On this occasion respondents were not asked to choose from a prescribed listing, but were given the opportunity to comment openly on their perception of key skills necessary for any adult learner on the basis of their own experience. Figure 5.9 outlines the text analysis of responses to this question. It demonstrates that the core skills identified common to both groups were learning to learn/learning, computer literacy skills, creative thinking/ thinking, teamwork and confidence. Ability (learning), problem-solving and academic writing skills also featured quite strongly for most respondents.



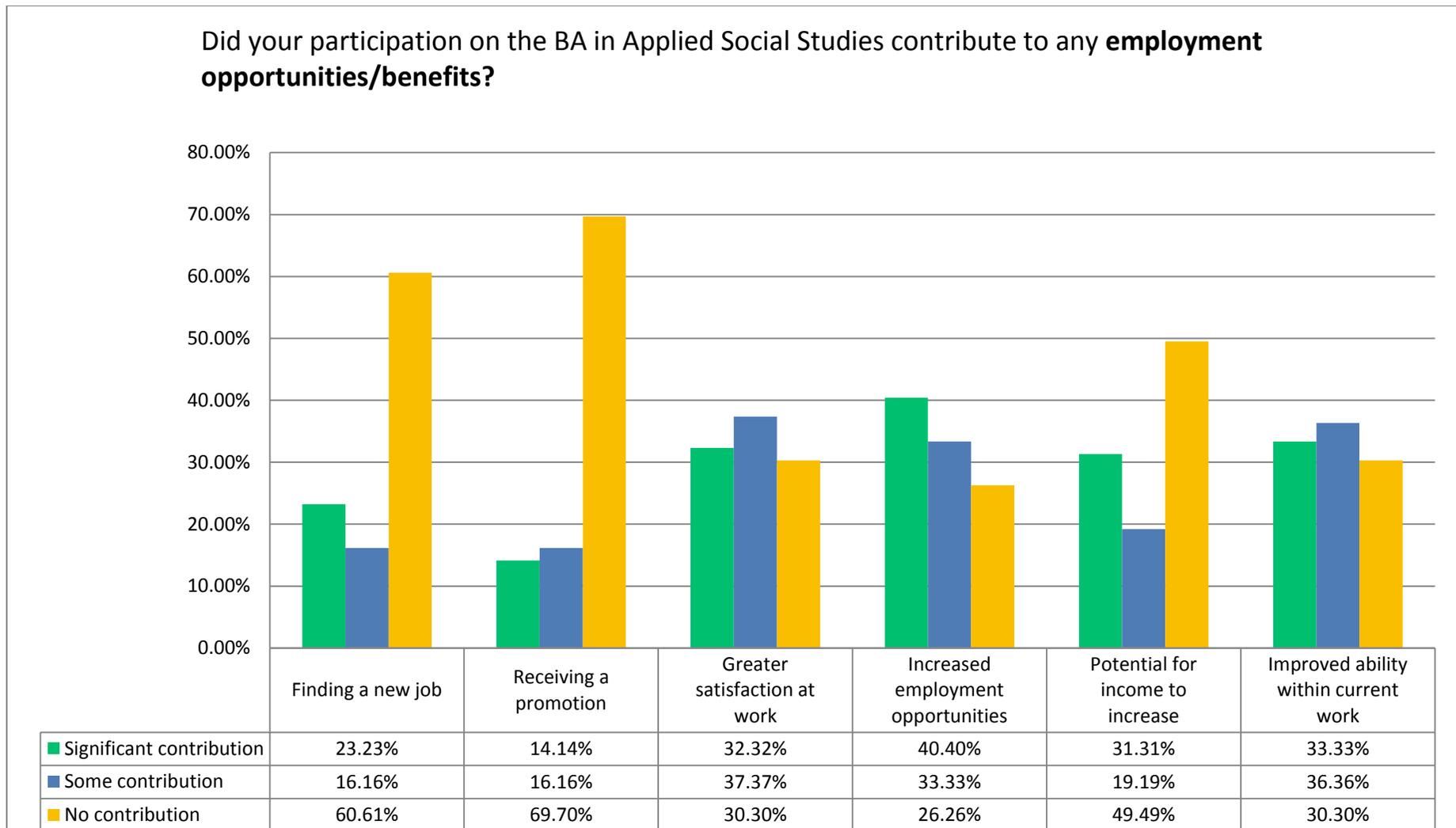
Figure 5.9 Perceived Essential skills for adult learners in modern society

### 5.3.3.3 Employment opportunities/benefits

This question sought to determine whether respondents programme participation had contributed to any employment opportunities or benefits. Again respondents were asked to rate on a Likert scale the degree to which their programme participation had contributed to employability or employment benefits. There was significant agreement among both sets of respondents (BA respondents 60.61%, n=60 and Diploma respondents 43.33%, n=26) that their participation on the programme had **not contributed** to finding a job. There was even greater consistency across both groups (BA 69.70%, n=69 and Diploma 71.67%, n=43) that their programme participation **did not lead to the attainment of promotion**. These first two statements attracted the greater weighting of opinion clearly illustrating limited job opportunities or possibility of promotion on programme completion. This trend was equally evident in relation to a later statement regarding potential for income to increase; in this case both sets of respondents (BA respondents 49.49%, n=49 and Diploma respondents 48.33%, n=29) clearly reported that their programme had made **no contribution** to potential income increase. As previously noted however, the wider context of economic recession within Ireland during the research

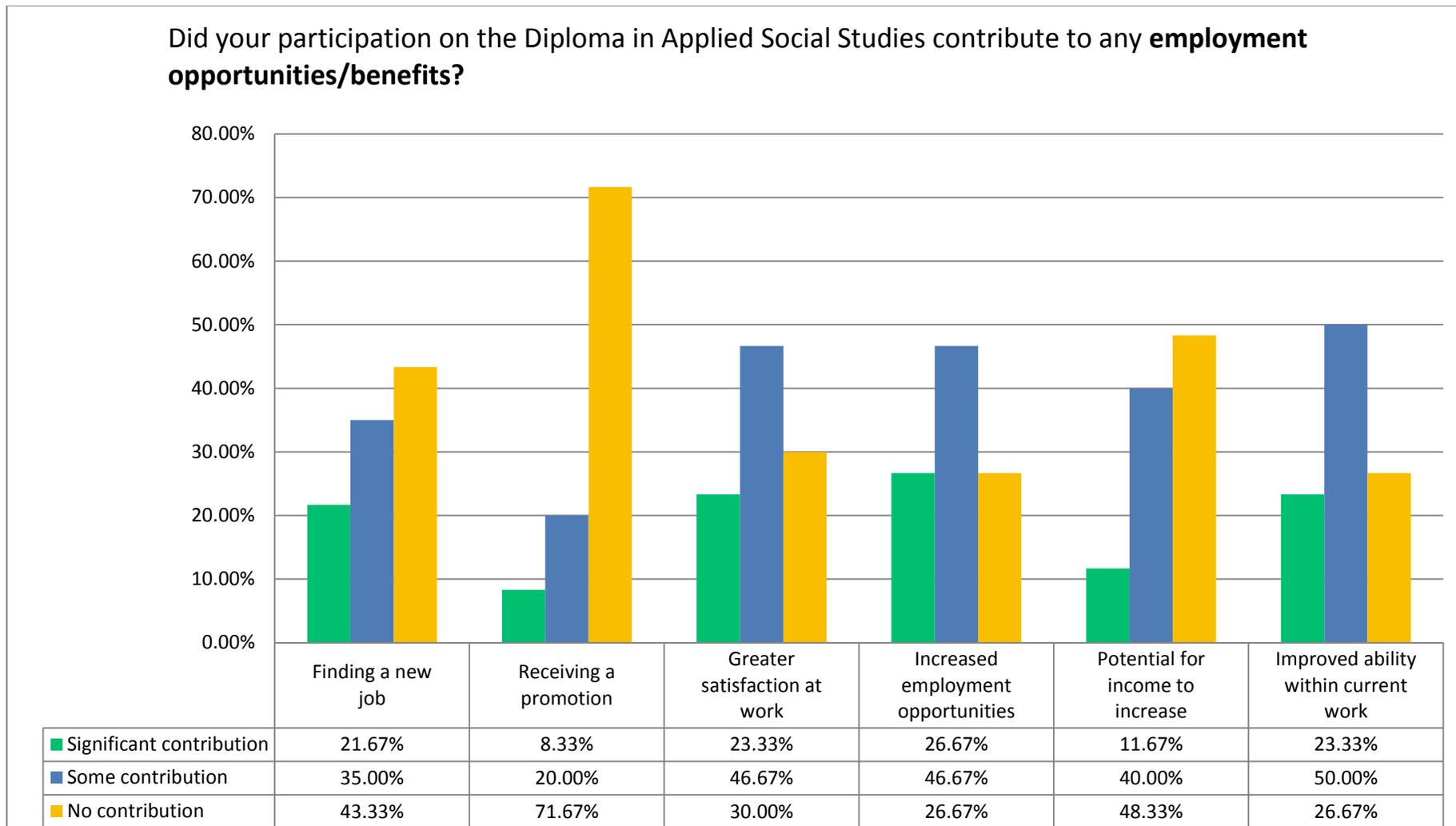
timeline may in part explain the nature of response to each of these statements.

Further analysis of the remaining statements reflects a relatively even distribution of opinion across each of the three categories of response. When asked about greater satisfaction at work, 46.67% (n=28) of the Diploma participants felt that the programme had made **some contribution**, the BA respondents however, showed a much divided opinion on this issue with a fairly even distribution of response from **significant contribution** to **no contribution** regarding work satisfaction. That said, the BA respondents (40.40%. n=40) did indicate that the programme had **significantly contributed** to increased employment opportunities, whereas the Diploma respondents (46.67% n=28) felt that the programme had made only **some contribution** to increased employment opportunities. The last statement regarding improved ability within current work again illustrated a much divided opinion amongst BA respondents with almost an even weighting of response across all three response categories. Whilst half the Diploma respondents (50% n=30) felt that programme participation had made **some contribution** to their current work ability. This detail is outlined in figure 5.10 and figure 5.11.



(Adapted from Jamieson *et al.* 2009)

**Figure 5.10** Did your participation on the BA in Applied Social Studies contribute to any employment opportunities/benefits?



(Adapted from Jamieson *et al.* 2009)

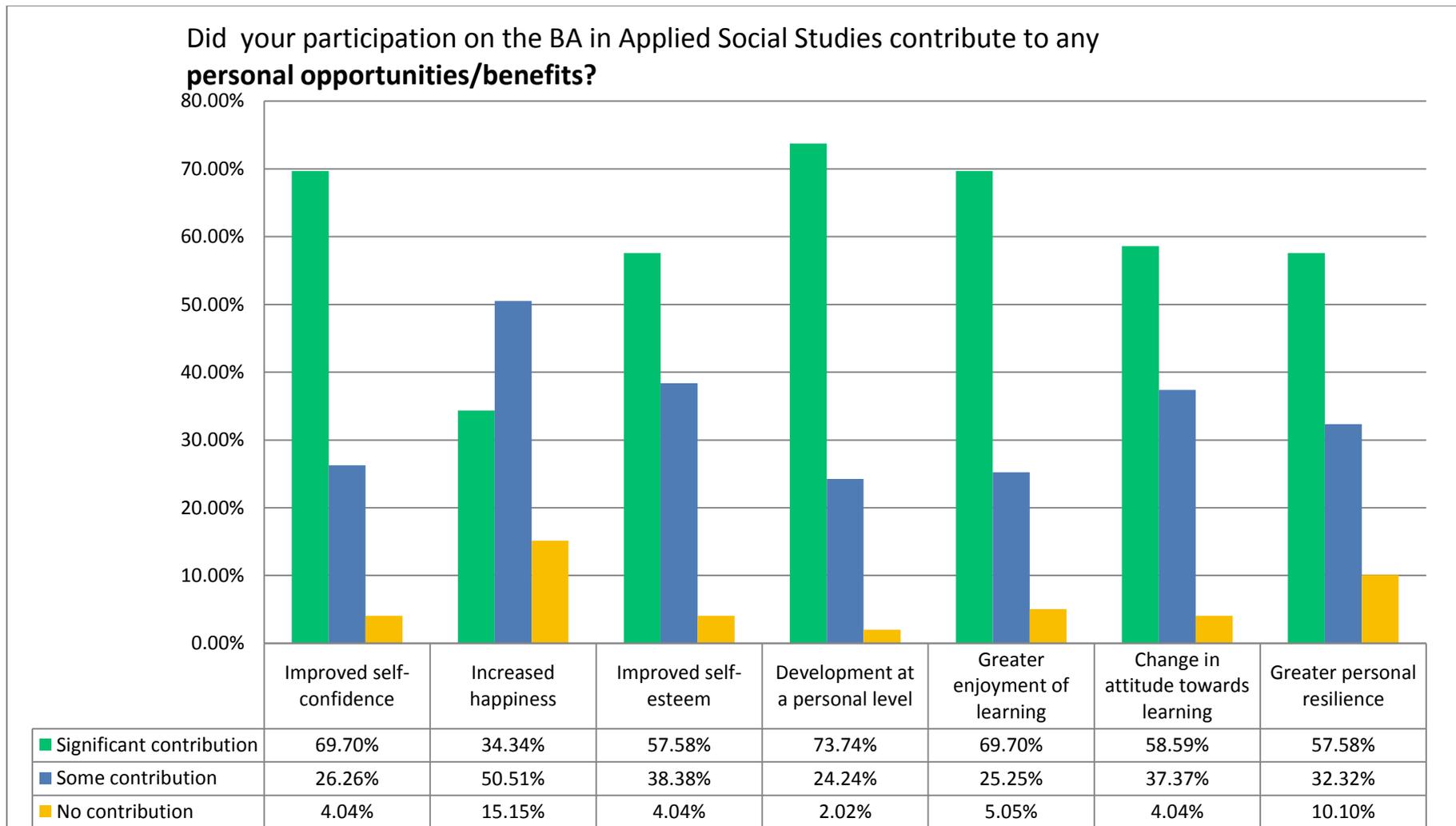
**Figure 5.11 Did your participation on the Dip in Applied Social Studies contribute to any employment opportunities/benefits?**

#### 5.3.3.4 Personal opportunities/benefits

Similar to the question above on employment opportunities or benefits, respondents were also asked to consider the potential contribution of programme participation to personal benefits or opportunities. This question on personal benefits demonstrated a high consistency of response across both sets of respondents. The majority of respondents indicated that their programme participation had made a **significant contribution** to:

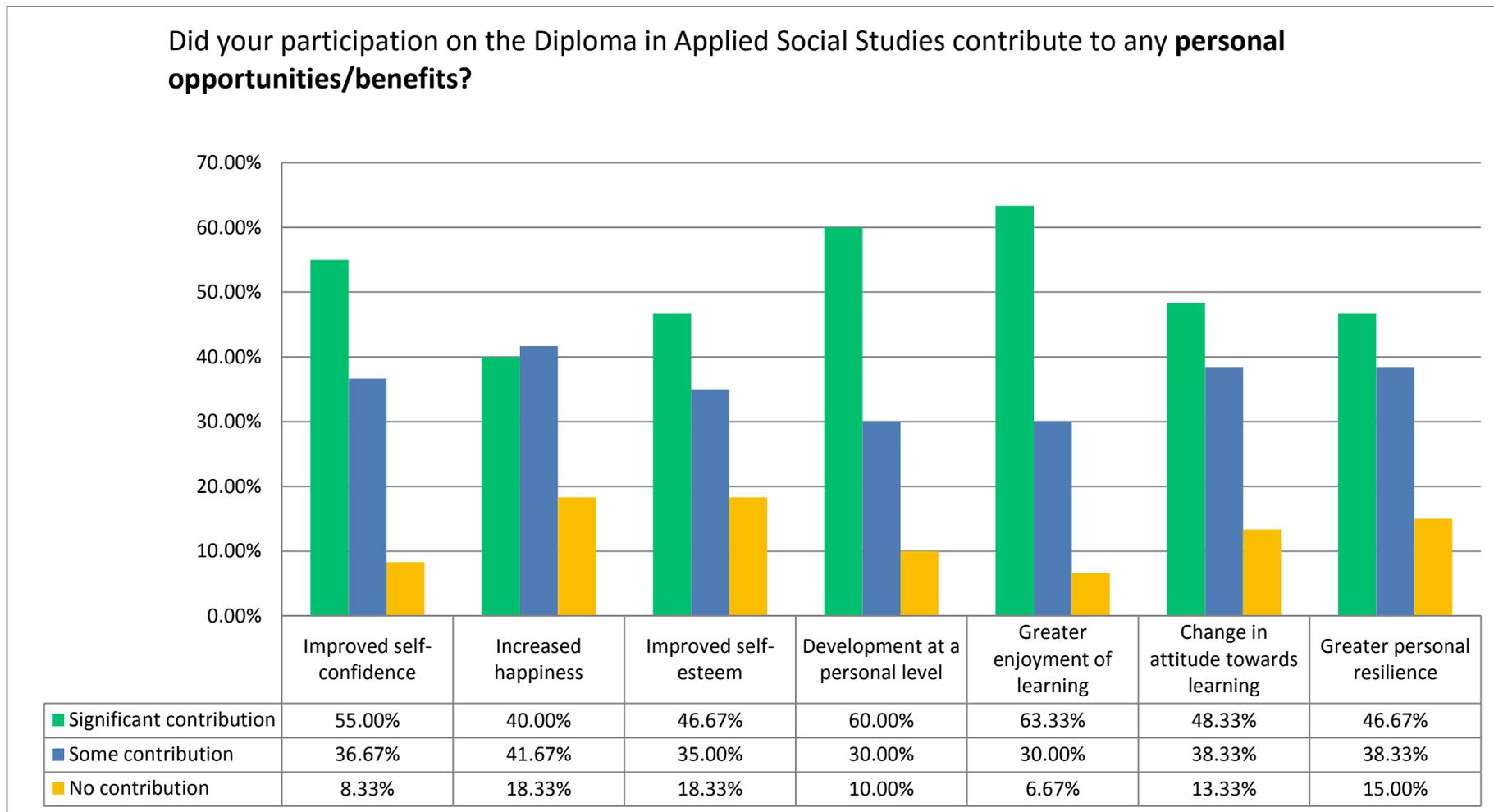
- self-confidence
- self-esteem
- personal development
- enjoyment of learning
- attitude towards learning
- personal resilience.

The only statement that demonstrated some variation related to programme contribution towards increased happiness. In this instance a significant number of both sets of respondents stated that their programme participation had made **some contribution** to their happiness levels. Figure 5.12 and figure 5.13 provide a further illustration of this detail.



(Adapted from Jamieson *et al.* 2009)

Figure 5.12 Did your participation on the BA in Applied Social Studies contribute to any personal opportunities/benefits?



(Adapted from Jamieson *et al.* 2009)

**Figure 5.13** Did your participation on the Diploma in Applied Social Studies contribute to any personal opportunities/benefits?

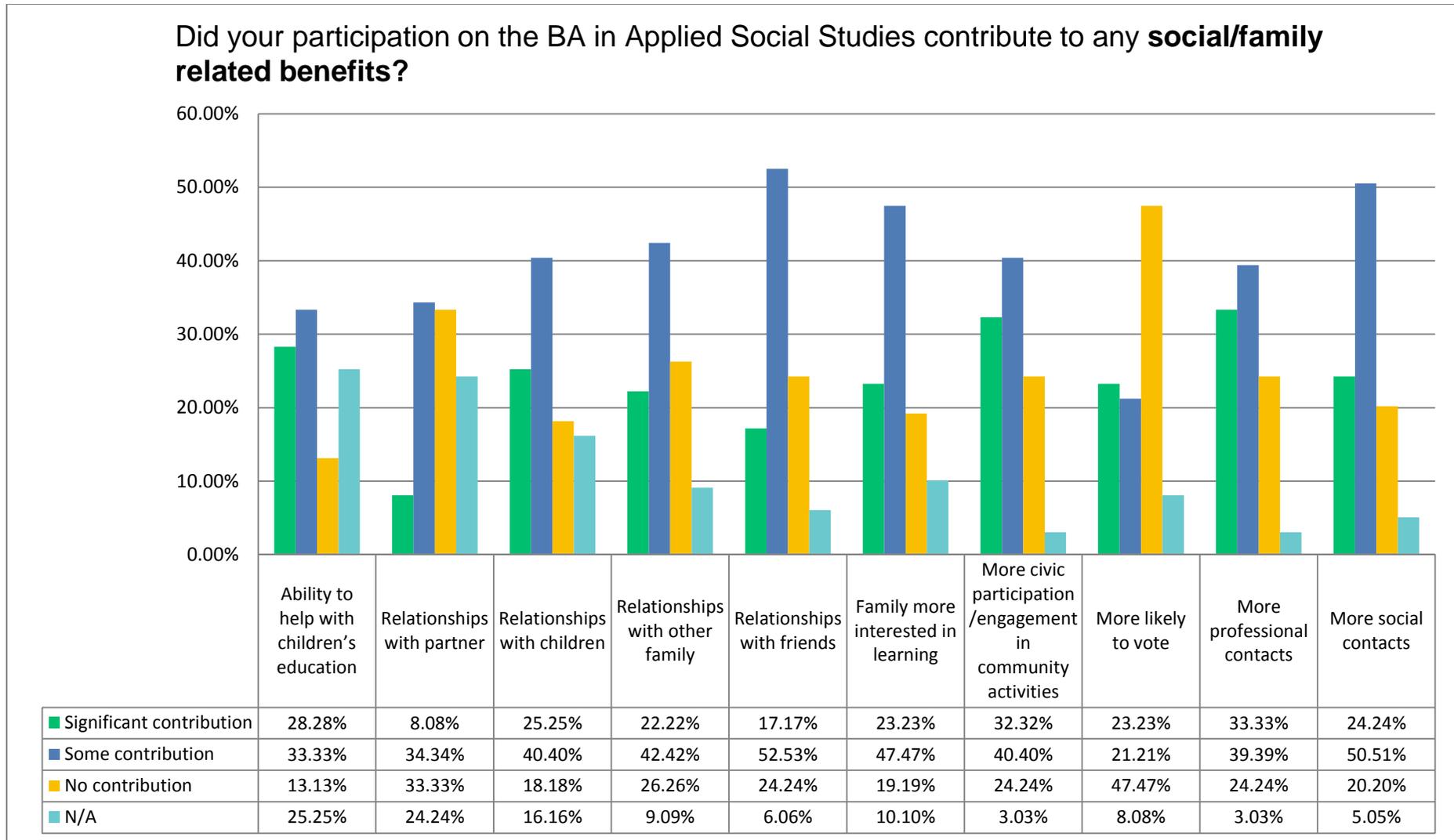
### 5.3.3.5 Social/family related benefits

In keeping with the theme of this section respondents were asked to consider whether their programme participation may have contributed to social/family related benefits. An additional point had been added to the Likert scale in this instance to reflect the potential that some of the statements may not have been applicable to all respondents. So for example, some statements were not applicable to all respondents as survey findings indicated that 18% of BA respondents and 31% of Diploma did not have children.

BA respondents were quite consistent in their response to each of the statements presented (see Figure 5.14) with the greater number reporting that their programme participation had made **some contribution** in relation to all of the family and social statements listed, particularly in the context of *relationships with friends, greater social contacts and family more interested in learning*. The only statement weighted towards a **no contribution** (47.47% n=47) related to the greater likelihood of voting and subsequent commentary illustrated that respondents were already likely to vote in advance of programme participation. This may in part be explained by the community development orientation of the programmes within this study.

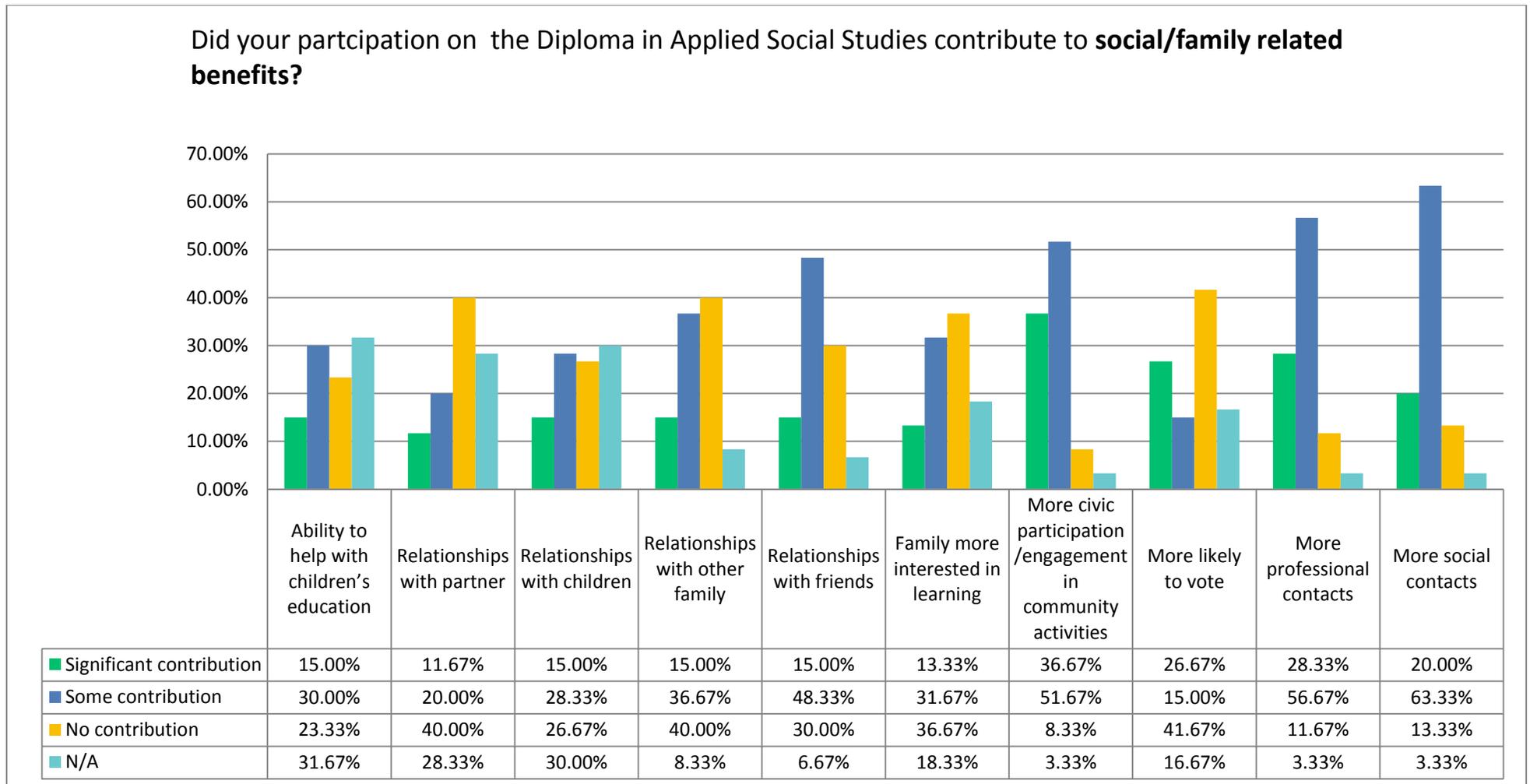
Greater variation of response was clearly evident among the Diploma respondents. Obviously as noted above a significant portion of this group did not have children (31%). Equally, the greater number of participants indicated that their programme participation had made **no contribution** to relationships with their partner or family members. This was also the case in relation to the statements in relation to whether family were more interested in learning or respondents were more likely to vote. The Diploma respondents concurred with the view expressed by the BA respondents that they were already likely to vote in advance of their programme participation. Similar to the BA respondents, programme participation was considered to have made **some contribution** to relationships with friends, greater civic engagement, and increased professional and social contacts.

The statistics in relation to **some contribution** towards greater professional and social contacts were particularly high for the Diploma respondents at 56.67% (n=34) and 63.33% (n=38) respectively. This detail is illustrated in figure 5.14 and figure 5.15.



(Adapted from Jamieson *et al.* 2009)

**Figure 5.14** Did your participation on the BA in Applied Social Studies contribute to any social/ family opportunities/benefits?



(Adapted from Jamieson *et al.* 2009)

Figure 5.15 Did your participation on the Dip in Applied Social Studies contribute to any social/family opportunities/benefits?

5.3.3.6 Professional, personal and family/Social impact: Open commentary

Each of the three Likert scale questions above regarding employment, personal, family and social benefits offered participants the opportunity to openly comment on their experience of the impact of the programme. The scale of commentary was extremely high at 88% (n=90) of BA respondents and 65.21% (n=45) of Diploma respondents. Professionally, the majority of respondents emphasised the importance of the acquisition of *work relevant knowledge and skills*, and more particularly the significance of acquiring a *qualification* for enhanced employment opportunities. For many however, the professional impact of the programme was limited largely as a result of the corresponding limitation of *employment opportunities* within the sector during recession. Core themes identified in relation to the personal impact of the programme centred on *enhanced confidence, self-esteem and self-worth*. A greater sense of *resilience* and a *changed attitude towards learning* regardless of age or learning history also featured very strongly. In terms of impact on family or social networks, thematic analysis highlighted a *greater interest in education* among family members, colleagues and friends. Greater awareness of social issues and *ability to contribute at a community and societal level* were equally emphasised. Following text analysis Table 5.8 presents a random selection of some of the commentary provided by respondents across each of the three questions in relation to programme impact:

**Table 5.8 Professional, Personal and Family/Social Impact: Open Commentary**

<i>Professional Impact</i>	<i>Personal Impact</i>	<i>Family/Social Impact</i>
<i>I don't feel at this time it has had an impact, hopefully this will change in the future with employment opportunities etc. (BA Survey Respondent 7)</i>	<i>On a personal level yes it has, achieving my honours degree increased my confidence, self-belief and determination (BA Survey Respondent 49)</i>	<i>The BA was life changing for me and my family. I was employed as a cleaner, bar person, support worker before the BA. I was the first person to ever attend a third level programme within my family ever. My own children now also value education and have gone on to further and higher education courses. (BA Survey Respondent 82)</i>
<i>Professionally - better report writing, increased confidence in advocating on behalf of target group, can 'hold my own' much better when in meetings and at events. (BA Survey Respondent 21)</i>	<i>Personally the BA programme had a significant impact on my life. It was a great experience, both the learning and the interaction with fellow students and tutors/programme co-ordinators. It improved my self-confidence and resilience and helped me put other things in my life into perspective. (BA Survey Respondent 61)</i>	<i>I feel that I am able to make a greater contribution in my community and voluntary groups with whom I have been involved. (BA Survey Respondent 6)</i>
<i>Professionally, I have become a better listener and I now see the bigger picture, I also look for research to further my learning and support my views and when I put forward an idea the research gives my suggestion weight. I am also getting more interviews when I apply for jobs (BA Survey Respondent 10)</i>	<i>I am much more confident in my personal life, I read more, am better able to articulate my point of view. I would have thought a degree was out of my reach, my thoughts are now that at any stage given the right opportunity and environment anyone can further their education (BA Survey Respondent 56)</i>	<i>Increased interest and participation in adult education by family members including my own 2 sons, my mother and my daughter in law. Queries from colleagues in work. Friends making enquiries on adult education programmes (BA Survey Respondent 2)</i>
		<i>BA Respondents in BLUE / Diploma Respondents in RED Overleaf</i>

*Professionally it has backed up my practical experience by furthering my qualifications to date*  
**(Dip Survey Respondent 9)**

*It helped me to find a job that I love, thanks to the professional contacts I made.*  
**(Dip Survey Respondent 34)**

*Although I am currently unemployed, I have been busy getting out volunteering and trying to build up a portfolio of experience to match what I learned during the course. I feel that choosing to do this course has had a tremendous impact on my life's journey and will continue to do so, with new job opportunities open and a new social circle in a new county.*  
**(Dip Survey Respondent 36)**

*Personally I feel a greater sense of worth on completing the Diploma programme*  
**(Dip Survey Respondent 39)**

*Personally it has given me a dramatic change in my attitude to learning and motivated me to go for a masters.*  
**(Dip Survey Respondent 13)**

*Personally, yes, just meeting new people, spending time with people who think along the same lines as you, but yet still to learn something new from each and every person in the group, it didn't matter what you did or where you were from or what age you were.*  
**(Dip Survey Respondent 37)**

*Family are proud and happy with my achievement. Are looking forward to my progressing in my career (and moving out of the house!)*  
**(Dip Survey Respondent 36)**

*I have more of an interest in community life. I have realised that I would like to give back something to my community*  
**(Dip Survey Respondent 10)**

*Yes I am of far more benefit to friends groups and family, being able to interact on a far deeper, insightful and supportive level with them.*  
**(Dip Survey Respondent 12)**

**BA Respondents**

**Diploma Respondents**

### ***5.3.4 Learning motivation and strategies as identified by respondents***

Adult learners may share some similar characteristics but they are not a homogenous group. In recognising that learning as a process and an experience is particular to the individual in his/her learning life, questions within this section seek to examine the motivation, learning perceptions, and learning strategies/approaches of adult learners who participate in higher education. Aside from the first question on motivation the other questions in this section presented a series of statements and asked respondents to indicate on a 5 point Likert scale the degree to which they strongly agreed or strongly disagreed with each statement.

#### ***5.3.4.1 Reasons for taking on the BA/ Diploma***

This question sought to explore the reasons or motivation of respondents in relation to their decision to register on their programme of choice. Multiple answers were possible and Figure 5.16 outlines the most common reasons identified. The Diploma respondents at 80% (n=48) clearly indicated that gaining knowledge and skills in a special field of interest was the priority reason for undertaking the Diploma programme. For the BA respondents, the greatest reason identified in relation to undertaking their programme was to advance opportunities for personal growth (71.43%, n=70). This also featured strongly as a reason for Diploma respondents at 73.33% (n=44). However, there was evident difference between the BA and Diploma respondents regarding the motivation to undertake a programme in order to receive an academic title, at 63.27%, n=62 (BA) and 21.67%, n=13 (Dip) respectively. This may in part be explained by the fact that 31% of Diploma respondents had already attained a degree qualification in advance of undertaking the Diploma in Applied Social Studies. The other two reasons predominantly offered by both sets of respondents regarding their decision to undertake their higher education programme were; to seek to advance skills essential for their job (BA respondents 52.04%, n=51 and Diploma respondents 53.33%, n=32), and lastly, to increase chances of finding a job. In this instance slightly less than half of the BA respondents (46.94%, n=46) highlighted increased job opportunities as their reason for undertaking the

degree programme, whereas just over half the Diploma respondents (56.67%, n=34) identified enhanced job opportunities as their motivation for engaging in higher education.

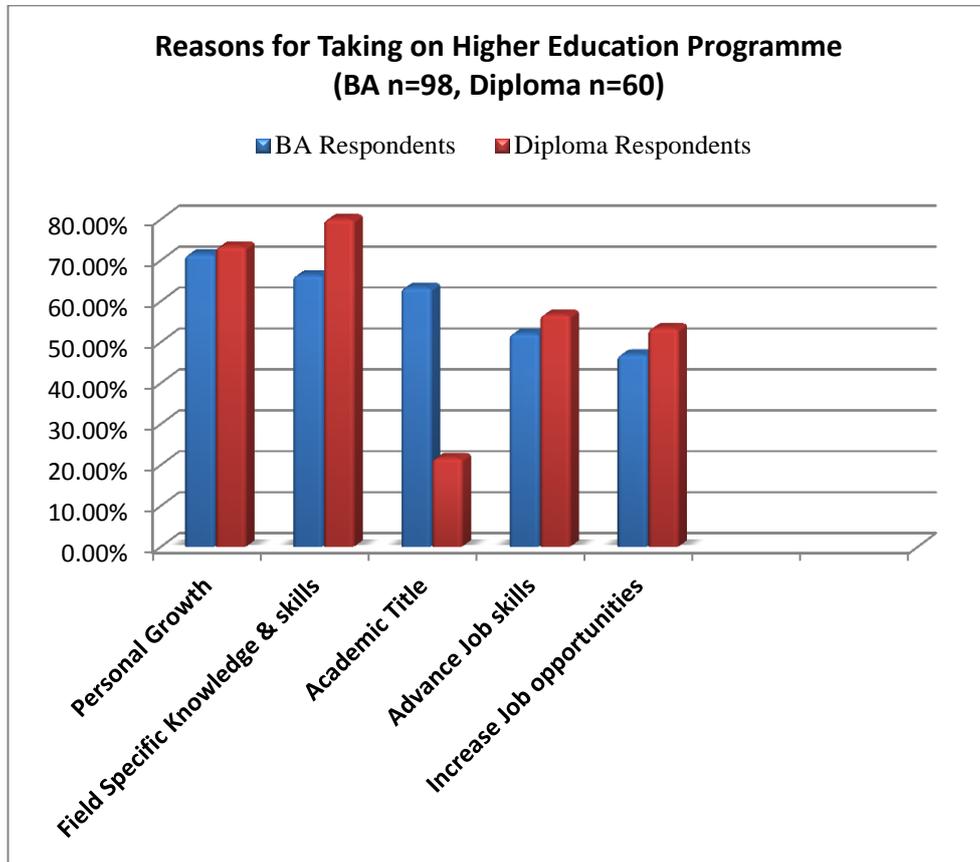


Figure 5.16 Reasons for taking on higher education programme (BA n=98, Diploma n=60)

#### 5.3.4.2 View of learning

Having outlined their motivation/ reason for undertaking higher education, respondents were then asked to reflect on their perception of learning across a range of domains in life; personal, social, economic. The following statements were presented and respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with same:

- ✚ I think that learning is important because I can use it in my daily life.
- ✚ I think that learning is important because it stimulates my thinking
- ✚ I think that it is important to learn to solve problems.
- ✚ I think it is important to participate in learning activities.

- ✚ It is important to have the opportunity to satisfy my own curiosity when learning
- ✚ I think learning is important for my personal development
- ✚ I think learning is important for my employability
- ✚ I think learning is important for my health and well-being
- ✚ I think that it is important to learn to work as a team member
- ✚ I think learning is important for effective communication
- ✚ I think learning is important for community cohesion (togetherness/co-operation)
- ✚ I think learning is important to inform the progress of a changing society
- ✚ I think learning is important for social cohesion (solidarity/togetherness)
- ✚ I think learning is important to cope with life challenges

There was universal agreement amongst both the BA and Diploma respondents in relation to each of the statements listed above, with almost 100% of respondents indicating either agree or strongly agree in relation to each statement.



Survey

*All statements would ring through with my thinking. Society needs to develop in an informed manner; this is also true at a personal level. This lack of thinking and manipulation of people can be seen in conflicts currently happening around the globe. On a lesser scale this can be seen in modern Irish society with strong lobby groups and powerful*

*people setting agendas. These all need to be questioned and alternative options aired.*

*BA Survey Respondent 52*



Both sets of respondents clearly indicated a highly positive view of learning across all domains of life as not one respondent disagreed with any of the learning statements provided.

#### *5.3.4.3 Learning strategies*

Having reflected on their perception of learning respondents were then asked to consider their own personal strategy or approach to learning. The following range of statements sought to gain further information on the personal way of learning identified by the respondents as adult learners on completion of their higher education programme.

- ✚ When learning new concepts, I attempt to understand them
- ✚ When learning new concepts, I connect them to my previous experiences.
- ✚ When I do not understand a concept, I find relevant resources that will help me
- ✚ When I do not understand a concept, I would discuss it with the tutor or other students to clarify my understanding
- ✚ During the learning processes, I attempt to make connections between the concepts that I learn.
- ✚ When I make a mistake, I try to find out why.
- ✚ When I meet concepts that I do not understand, I still try to learn them.
- ✚ When new concepts that I have learned conflict with my previous understanding, I try to understand why.

The findings in relation to this question were quite similar to the findings of the previous question regarding respondents' views/ perceptions on learning. Again, there was quite a consistent pattern of agreement or strong agreement among both the BA and Diploma respondents in relation to each of the above statements, however, in this instance the majority of respondents *agreed* rather than *strongly agreed* with each statement. Although the majority indicated agreement, a small number of respondents (between 2-5%) in both groups *strongly disagreed* with each statement, with an upper limit of 5% disagreeing. The second last statement however, was the only one provoking a relatively high level of disagreement, in terms of both sets of respondents approximately 12% of respondents (BA, n=12, Dip n=7) disagreed with the statement '*When I meet concepts that I do not understand, I still try to learn them*'. This question did not offer an opportunity for further comment, however as this discussion also featured within the qualitative interviews which followed, findings from the interviews expanded on this detail of which will be outlined in objective three.

### ***5.3.5 Best practices in higher education as perceived by respondents in relation to adult learning processes***

This final thematic section of the survey questionnaire asks survey respondents to list any problems or difficulties they may have encountered during their course of study. Through reflection on their own experience, respondents are asked to identify, the challenges or potential barriers for an adult learner with regard to undertaking higher education. Respondents were also given an opportunity to identify any recommendations/ supports to assist in overcoming the challenges outlined at both an individual level and institutional level whilst also providing some examples of good practice within higher education.

5.3.5.1 Difficulties/ challenges/ potential barriers

This first question within this section presented respondents with a list of ten potential difficulties or problems identified through secondary data analysis which may have occurred during the course of their study. Multiple answers were possible and participants were also given the opportunity to comment on, or expand on the listing specific to their own experience.

Table 5.9 outlines the six most common problems/difficulties identified.

Both groups of respondents were consistent in identifying time, stress and financial problems as the top three problems experienced. The latter three difficulties; family problems, less time to meet job demands, and childcare problems were again common difficulties identified by both groups, however the rating in relation to same varied slightly, see Table 5.9.

**Table 5.9 Common problems/ difficulties encountered in HE programme**

<b>Problems/Difficulties during programme</b>	<b>BA Respondents n=98</b>	<b>Diploma Respondents n=48</b>
<b>1. Reduction of Free Time</b>	91.84%	62.50%
<b>2. Stress</b>	66.33%	41.67%
<b>3. Financial Problems</b>	37.76%	29.17%
<b>Family Problems</b>	<b>4.</b> 36.73%	<b>6.</b> 14.58%
<b>Less time to meet Job Demands</b>	<b>5.</b> 25.51%	<b>4.</b> 25%
<b>Childcare Problems</b>	<b>6.</b> 15.31%	<b>5.</b> 22.92%

Having considered the problems/difficulties encountered during engagement within higher education, respondents were then asked to identify common barriers to accessing higher education (the total number of respondents to this question were n=98 for the BA and n=58 for the Diploma). Yet again, many of the barriers identified were common to both groups with the majority of respondents (80.61% of BA respondents, n=79, and 72.42%, n=42 of Diploma respondents) indicating that the level of fees was a

significant barrier to accessing higher education. Concern regarding ability to balance home, family and work commitments, whilst undertaking a programme, was of great concern for the BA respondents at 83.68% (n=82). But this was a somewhat lesser concern for the Diploma respondents at 56.89% (n=33). The variation in length of the programmes may partly explain this variation, with the BA programme requiring a commitment of four years part time as opposed to one year part time commitment for the Diploma programme. A common concern relating to fear of inability to cope featured strongly as a barrier to engaging in higher education for both groups at 64.28% (n=63) for the BA respondents and 51.72% (n=30) for the Diploma respondents. Additional commentary within the qualitative component of this question expanded further on this highlighting concern regarding academic writing ability and previous negative schooling experiences.

#### *5.3.5.2 Mitigation to overcome challenges*

Having considered both difficulties and barriers to accessing higher education respondents were then asked to suggest relevant supports to assist in overcoming challenges for adult learners entering higher education. This was an open question without any prescribed listing allowing respondents the opportunity to offer a range of suggested supports. The level of response to this question by Diploma respondents was relatively low at 39.13% (n=27), however, 69.60% (n=71) of BA respondents chose to respond. A text analysis of both sets of responses identified a number of common supports to overcome challenges:

<i>Supports</i>	<i>Description of supports to overcome challenges</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Financial assistance for part-time adult learners:</i></li></ul>	Change in funding policy to promote greater financial support for part-time adult learners. Equally, greater flexibility in higher education in relation to fee payment through provision of personal payment plans.

- *Time Management and Access:* Provision of time management skills to enhance learning, study and assignment completion opportunities in the context of all responsibilities as a part time adult learner. Greater support by employers in terms of promoting access to time through study day/leave provision. Equally, extending the time line of the academic year in recognition that the majority of adult learners are ‘time poor’ in view of the scale of commitments external to their course of study.
- *Accessible Information Provision:* User friendly access to information about course choices. More information events in localised centres to facilitate face to face access to information with an immediate response to queries and greater opportunity for reassurance for potential learners who may be lacking the confidence necessary to take the first step.
- *Childcare/Adult Care:* The provision of a subsidy for part time adult learners paying for childcare or adult care to facilitate access to higher education opportunities.
- *Learner Support Systems:* Need to ensure the provision of a supportive learning environment for adult learners as part of the programme experience and as a registered student within the higher education institute. Part time adult learners should have access to the full range of services available to mainstream students.

- *Change in culture of higher education* Higher education must adapt its traditional focus on full-time main stream learners in order to equally cater for part-time learners and the challenges they encounter. This requires a culture of change at an institutional level.
- *Recognition of Personal Resilience* Access to resources and supports to enable adult learners to recognise, develop and draw on their own personal resilience and life experience to enhance self-efficacy and confidence so as to successfully complete chosen programme of learning.

*5.3.5.3 Perceived importance of a range of factors regarding decision to engage in higher education:*

Survey respondents were asked to consider a range of factors identified within secondary data as being of potential import to adult learners in their decision to engage within higher education. The full listing of potential factors is available within Appendix 6. Factors identified by both groups of respondents as being either *extremely* or *very important* in impacting on their decision to engage in higher education included:

- *life experience* : BA respondents 78.57% (n=77) and Diploma respondents 70.69% (n=41)
- *potential employability as a result of programme qualification* : BA respondents 72.45% (n=71) and Diploma respondents 74.14% (n=43)
- *potential enjoyment on the programme of learning* : BA respondents 70.14% (n=69) and Diploma 77.68% (n=45)
- *perceived potential educational success* : BA respondents 69.39% (n=68) and Diploma respondents 65.52% (n=38)

- self-concept - one's sense of self, what an individual believes they are good at: BA respondents 64.29% (n=63) and Diploma respondents 63.79% (n=37)

#### 5.3.5.4 Examples of good practice in Higher Education

The final survey question was an open question allowing respondents to provide qualitative data identifying examples of good practice in higher education. This question elicited a high response from both groups of respondents at 80.3% (n=82) for the BA respondents and 59.4% (n=41) for Diploma respondents. Thematic analysis of responses to this open question identified the following examples of good practice:

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Description of examples of good practice</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Active Debate and Discussion</i></li></ul>	The exchange of opinion through debate and discussion were considered essential to the attainment of significant life relevant learning. Group work, with effective facilitation on the part of the tutor, was deemed core to the success of this approach in enabling adult learners to incorporate their life experiences within the learning process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Engaging Tutors</i></li></ul>	Tutors must be approachable, supportive and passionate about their subject area and fully competent in their ability to engage in interactive adult learning pedagogies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Stimulating Course Content</i></li></ul>	Course content needs to be current, stimulating and life relevant through the effective integration of examples incorporating theory and practice.

- *A positive learning environment*

A positive learning environment where adult learners are respected and valued as equals with relevant prior knowledge (both academic and experiential) to contribute to the learning experience is paramount. The importance of undertaking strengths based approach to promote self-esteem, confidence and motivation to succeed was also noted. Constructive developmental feedback through-out the learning process, but particularly in relation to assignments/assessment was considered crucial to this practice. Equally, feedback on actions taken based on student evaluations was also emphasised in reinforcing the value of adult learner inputs and perspectives to the programme.
- *Student Supports*

Flexible fee payment through personal payment plans was identified as a much needed student support practice in higher education. The provision of individual student support by programme staff in times of need or crisis was particularly lauded as an example of good practice, in empowering the student to identify the best course of action in relation to completing their learning programme. Student services as available to full-time mainstream students should be fully extended to part-time learners.
- *Provision of Blended*

The provision of blended learning (a combination of class-based and e-learning

*Learning Programmes* activities) programmes in higher education was highlighted as an example of good practice within higher education in promoting accessibility to learning opportunities for adults carrying a range of work and family responsibilities.

### **5.3.6 A summary of key findings for objective two**

This summary is available at the end of the chapter in section 5.5.2 as a collective account of all the key findings of this research study.

## **5.4 Objective Three:**

### **To contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by adult learning experiences in an Irish Context**

The findings of the quantitative surveys as outlined above sought to objectively condense the scope of enquiry and inform the design and implementation of the qualitative semi-structured interviews. Qualitative methods were considered to be an essential part of this investigation to ensure that the experiences and voices of adult learners directly informed the research in contributing to a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education. Interview participants had volunteered to proceed to this stage of data collection on completion of the previous survey questionnaires. As the number of volunteers was extremely high the author subsequently chose a purposive sampling method ensuring representatives of different age categories to reflect a life-span perspective in responding to the research question. Biographical interviewing was deemed to be the most appropriate interview method in keeping with the life course approach of the research and in ensuring the individual lived life realities and perspectives of the learners were core to the research process.

As noted above 26 adult learners volunteered to participate in the individual interviews, of those who participated 20 were female and 6 were male in

keeping with the gender balance of the survey population. There was also representation across each of the age bands recorded within the surveys, from 21-29 to 70+, including a balanced representation from both the BA and Diploma programme graduates. The interview duration ranged from 1 hour to 2.5 hours and took place in a venue chosen by the interviewee. Questions focused on; initial compulsory formal learning experiences, subsequent formal learning experience post compulsory learning, learning motivation and strategies as an adult learner, experience of higher education including a specific consideration of challenges and opportunities for adult learners, skills or qualities necessary for an adult learner in higher education and lastly, key considerations for higher education in terms of responding to the needs of adult learners and achieving best practice in the promotion of adult learning. Pseudonyms were identified to protect the identity of the interviewees.

#### **5.4.1 Key themes and sub themes**

All interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis of all transcriptions led to the identification of the following 6 main themes with relevant sub-themes, illustrated in Table 5.10 (also see Appendix 10: NVivo data analysis Biographical Interviews word frequency–top 50).

Table 5.10 Interview Themes and Sub-Themes

Interview Themes and Sub-Themes					
1. Lifespan development	2. Timing of Lives	3. Linked lives	4. Time and place	5. Agency	6. Adult Learner in Higher Education
Age	Learning Journey	Relationships	Life Experience	Personal Development	Skills/Qualities
Human Capital	Identity Capital	Social Capital	Structure Vs Agency	Self-esteem/Confidence	Higher Education –Best Practice

#### 5.4.2 Lifespan development: Age/ Human capital

Age and stage in life featured quite significantly in the interview data, particularly in the context of formal compulsory education systems, which were age graded and reflective of societal norms and expectations largely supported by a human capital rationale for the purposes of employability. Despite the scale of difference in age bands among the interviewees, the experience of participating in education, whether primary or secondary was something that you did because it was part of life and expected of you. The majority described their educational experience as simply a process of going through the motions of undertaking formal education: *“I just went through the motions; you’d no choice in the matter really at that stage. Primary and secondary, whatever it was, it had to be done, did your homework and exams and look at how you got on sort of thing” (Julie).*<sup>3</sup>

Bullying featured as a negative experience of formal education for 3 interviewees, lack of identification of specific learning requirements

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all interviewees.

impacted on the learning experience for a further 2 interviewees. Lack of confidence and shyness featured as a barrier to learning participation for an additional 2 interviewees: *“I wouldn’t say I didn’t like school, I actually always loved learning but I struggled in school, I would have been very, very shy; very low self-esteem, totally lacked confidence. So school every day was a challenge for me; that was school itself and then there was the challenge of coming home with grades and results; that was my early kind of years but loved the classroom. But I’d be one of those who’d sit there and so want to put my hand up but kind of couldn’t, just couldn’t, just didn’t have the confidence to do it” (Molly)*. In a number of cases family dynamics; from supportive parent/s who lacked the ability to provide academic support, limited family interest or inquiry, or the alternate of pressure to perform, or pressure to succeed, were noted as impacting on the learning experience. But for the majority, the experience of formal education overall was ‘grand’ neither positive nor negative; *“...well primary school, we were taught by Nuns, so it wasn’t a bad experience it wasn’t a good experience, it was just an experience. Secondary school would be very much the same. There was nothing there that I remember hating about it or loving about it (Tricia)*. The main perspective provided of formal education was simply that it was a time-based learning requirement specific to age in line with the expectations of society for the purposes of subsequent employment.

“

**Interview**

*I wouldn’t have taken an awful lot of notice of school to be honest with you. I’d say I probably drifted through primary school and definitely drifted through secondary school. I kinda just drifted from class to class done the best I could and sat all the state exams, the group, the inter, the leaving cert. I didn’t actually value the leaving cert as such, as I didn’t know what I wanted to do after, I never put in an application*

*for college. Had no interest in doing any further learning. Just do the leaving cert, 18, get out and get working and get on with life.*

*( Jim)*

”

Real life apparently awaited the completion of education, which for the majority corresponded with a leaving certificate qualification, or equivalent, aside from 4 interviewees who left at the ages of 14-15 on attainment of either the Group or Junior (Inter) certificate: *“I did the Group cert. I think I must have been about 14 when I left school. In those times you were actually not expected to go to second level really, you were expected to leave school, get some sort of a job and bring the money home” (Mabel)*. Despite the majority of interviewees leaving initial education with a leaving certificate qualification, many noted a lack of a sense of direction, largely as a result of poor or limited career guidance during second level education. In Sean’s experience: *“...career guidance was non-existent really, there was a nun in the convent who fulfilled the function, but she really wasn’t equipped to do that. I left secondary school not knowing what I wanted to do really.”* For others, suggested progression options by teaching staff in terms of career path or course of study were based on aspects of their learning abilities: *“...they didn’t look at the whole person, if you were good at maths you’re going to be an accountant; or good at English you go to do this” (Julie)*.

Family circumstances were also a core factor in determining life paths on completion of initial formal education. The financial resources available to families for all interviewees had a significant impact on the potential to engage in further education, the choice undertaken when it was possible to proceed, or the urgency to move into employment. Throughout the majority of discussions employment featured as the primary objective in decision-making post compulsory education. In some families financially it simply was not an option; ‘getting a job’ became the immediate consideration: *“I just finished off with the Leaving Cert in the local convent. And that was, I*

*was sixteen and a half at that stage, and that was it. That was as far as I could go for a lot of reasons, mainly financial with my family. There was just no question of going any further” (Ann).* For other families the number of family members determined the potential of progressing: “*...parents had to make a choice so they sent my brother to college and they sent me to a secretarial course, so I did that and I left that 6 months later and the next day I got a job” (Tricia).* For another interviewee the fact that he was the youngest within the family meant that he was given the opportunity to progress to third level, which was not an option that could have been provided to his older siblings.

Of the total number of interviewees 14 went straight into employment from second level. Occupations included nursing, factory work, catering, family farm/business, CIE (Irish transport system) and banking. Twelve of the 26 interviewees went onto further education, three of whom ‘dropped out’ of their course of study in the first two years, contributory factors for some included missing home, feeling overwhelmed, being unwell, and getting married. Where families could afford to fund further education the decision regarding the course of study to be undertaken was directly informed by “*where the jobs were and would be” (Sean).* Business studies, agricultural college, professional studies, courses in arts and the humanities featured predominantly for those who progressed. Initial formal education therefore, in the experience of the majority of interviewees was interwoven with life stage, the prospects of employment and employability determining life choices and developmental pathways thereafter. See Figure 5.17 for a word frequency illustration of top 50 key words used to describe initial formal education.





**Interviews**

*There was a part of me that felt that I would never be able to get a degree, that that was something that I had missed in my 20s and that I hadn't finished and that I just had to let that go*  
*(Edel).*

*I suppose all the time, throughout my life from time to time you would regret not having a university education; you would have liked the experience*  
*(Alice).*

*I felt that part of my life was wasted as far as education went and maybe the chance to do more education now, to be so lucky to get the opportunity would definitely have spurred me on.*  
*(Mabel).*



For the majority though, the motivation to return centred on employment and employability. In this context motivations were wide ranging; from the need to attain a qualification to enhance career prospects, to the need to move out of low paying employment, the need to make the transition from home-maker to the labour market, and in some cases to formally recognise years of work experience without the corresponding qualification in a changing world of work. A third level qualification was now considered a pre-requisite in place of a leaving certificate: “...*in the type of work that I was doing, I was told you can't go any further because you don't have a qualification. In time you couldn't get a basic job without a degree*” (Gail). Although employment considerations featured predominantly within the interviews as the initial motivation for returning, it was equally interwoven with a desire for personal fulfilment, not solely within the work place, but

also in terms of family and social settings, to be considered to be ‘on a par’ with colleagues, but equally with family members and friends. In some cases the need for personal fulfilment featured independently as the sole motivation to return:

*“Well maybe I’m the odd one out but I just feel that life is one long learning programme anyway and we go through, I call them chapters, you go through the chapters right, you have your youth and get married and whatever, you’ve your children, get them successfully off and then as far as I was concerned it wasn’t the time to sit back and relax; I wanted to learn as well. I wanted to be if you like on par with them too you know, to be able to converse with them, because I wasn’t educated to the level that they are. There was that, but that was only to a small degree I have to be honest with you; it was just for me” (Ann).*

As adult learners the majority of interviewees spoke of the multiplicity of roles, identities and responsibilities as a reality of life having made the decision to continue their formal learning journey. Some spoke of encountering a somewhat mixed reaction from family and friends upon hearing of their decision. The question ‘are you mad?!’ appeared to be the start of many a conversation relayed by the interviewees. In some cases the source of the question was perceived to come from a place of genuine concern regarding the scale of commitment and personal well-being: *“I think a lot of people thought I was mad, my Mom was a big one and she’s a very emotionally supportive person, ...and maybe it’s her own fear, I don’t know what it is, but she really felt like this is too much to take on, to commit to four years when you have a young child and when you’re working part time” (Edel).* For others, the source of the question appeared to be more undermining of the decision or potentially critical in the context of the expected caring responsibilities of women and the age related norms of society in relation to traditional formal education: *“I was around the 40 mark at that stage and it was like what are you thinking of? Would you not be better staying at home and minding your children? You’re too old to do a degree. You finished school years ago, what would you know?” (Molly).*

The potential of new opportunities, new roles/identities and prospects of future roles/identities associated with the acquisition of formal education appeared to provide a firm resolution to overcome, or navigate within, any challenge or difficulty encountered as part of and even before undertaking the learning process. Overcoming fear, was one of the first challenges noted, the fear of not being academically capable, fear of not being able to overcome previous 'bad' decisions in relation to education and not having made the most of initial formal education; "...*maybe people presume that this is your second time around, you should have done it the first time around, but what about people who couldn't, like people don't just drop out of education for the sake of it. Usually adults coming back to education are coming back because their circumstances didn't support them doing it when they were in their 20s, that's usually why, or they didn't have the opportunities or the money, or they couldn't, you know*" (Edel). Fear of the unknown, also featured as a challenge particularly for interviewees who had been looking after families and out of the paid work environment. Fear of being 'judged', of 'being found out' or of 'asking stupid questions' arose frequently in discussions, with interviewees emphasising the importance of the first few classes/ workshops in assisting to counter such fears. One interviewee described how as a teacher, carer, minder of her own young children in addition to running her own business, she still had to talk herself out of the need to flee in advance of the first class because of comparing herself to peers in initial education: "...*when it comes to college....you say why did I have the fear of that? I suppose the fact that there would be people that you would have known who had gone into college, from mainstream into 3rd level, and they had gone out being a teacher, or this that and the other. I suppose for years I was in awe of somebody like that, I would say 'Wow, imagine'*" (Eve). In some instances for those in community employment schemes or in paid work, full or part-time, the experience of undertaking work related training/courses such as manual handling, health and safety, first aid, computer training etc. were noted as helping to ease the sense of fear expressed somewhat, but yet the idea of a university programme instilled a fear that had to be overcome in order to take that first step in the door to proceed.

For many self-belief and self-confidence was an issue on the basis of previous learning histories which had contributed to a somewhat low self-esteem in terms of academic ability: *“I didn’t like school and I could have done better in the right circumstances. My mother was not a great support; she didn’t ever think I would amount to anything. She was probably right, you know, at school I just believed what she said, so I suppose I didn’t try as hard as I could have done” (Mabel)*. Concern regarding academic confidence was less of an issue; it was still mentioned, but not to the same scale for those interviewees who had some recent experience of higher education programmes. Of the 26 interviewees, 10 had undertaken the Diploma programme in advance of progressing to the BA programme. This learning experience was deemed to have contributed to recognition of learning ability, the consolidation of a learning identity to be further developed: *“...the diploma built my confidence in terms of my ability to learn and I felt like I was able to do a degree that was a big thing. I didn’t question my academic ability anymore, which was good” (Edel)*. Other frequent challenges noted included financial concerns, not solely in terms of programme fees, but equally in relation to childcare costs and transport costs. Stress and lack of time, particularly in the context of assignment deadlines and exam preparation were equally noted. Constantly ‘juggling’ and ‘feeling stretched’ were terms that were used to explain life by the majority of interviewees in describing their learning experience. One interviewee, in trying to maintain a balance between ‘family life, work life and college life’ spoke of trying to ensure that the programme did not impact on anyone else: *“...even in my own family it was something that operated very much in the background. My study came out of my sleep, it didn’t come out of any activities that anybody else was doing; it didn’t really negatively affect anyone else” (Gail)*.

Despite the challenge of academic highs and lows mentioned by many interviewees a range of factors were highlighted as having contributed to a growing sense of learner identity, these included; being on campus, going to the library, going to the canteen, using student ID cards: *“I’ll tell you what was really good, the student identity cards. I’m serious like. I know it was*

*only a very small thing, but to us it was a big thing. I'm a student like! I was proud, I'm an NUI student, do you know" (Beth).* One of the most interesting elements that came through the qualitative component of this research was that of all 26 interviews, not one interviewee felt that their learning journey had ended. Despite all the challenges and difficulties outlined the whole experience of learning was predominantly described in passionate terms, with an equally enduring passion to continue, not solely in terms of formal education, which certainly did feature for the majority in terms of progression, but learning in whatever capacity once the time was right: *"...once you do get a taste for it, it's very difficult to give it up. I missed it the September that we finished after the summer. It took me a while to kinda re-adjust in not going back and not doing something. There is a little bit of flame there, maybe I need to throw a drop of petrol on it, but I'd never say never now. Something will happen, maybe not this year, but maybe next year, when the time is right, definitely" (Jim).* The need to 'get the word out there' to encourage others to participate in learning often arose, many interviewees spoke of encouraging family, friends and colleagues to 'go back': *"...it is such a good experience actually learning, that I'd like others to be able to do it" (Mabel).* The predominant view offered within the interviews was that returning to formal education had been a challenging and difficult journey at times, but ultimately life changing: *"I'll be 52 this year, but I don't feel old. I feel I have my life in front of me, because I feel that over the last couple of years with all the life experiences good and bad, getting my degree and everything else, my life is beginning again. So that's the huge positive outcome of my degree" (Tricia).* The immediate transition from second level to third level in line with the perceived norms of social timing was not an option for the majority of interviewees. Returning to formal education as an adult learner provided the interviewees with the opportunity to redress this 'missing transition' and its subsequent implications on their life course.

#### **5.4.4 *Linked lives: Relationships / Social capital***

Another key theme evident within the qualitative data focused on the importance of relationships as a factor in terms of return to formal education. Interviewees emphasised that they were not returning to education as an ‘independent agent’ as such, that their lives were very much linked and in many cases, particularly for those with caring responsibilities, committed to a whole range of external relationships. Family featured predominantly in interview discussions, both as a source of support and a recipient of support. For each individual, family background influenced either directly or indirectly their perception of formal education and was a factor in their decision to re-engage with same: “I do think that family impact on you, not necessarily in a negative way or a positive way. I do think they impact on you, I know I’m 50, but yet like, you know, if you’re educated it makes a difference and family influence that” (Tricia).

Perceived lack of family support, or lack of ability to support or the reality of family circumstances, financial, emotional and otherwise, frequently arose in discussions of initial formal education outcomes and subsequent decision-making in relation to continuing with, or returning to education. For one interviewee consistently seeking the approval of her father through educational attainment as a child continued as the focus of her return to learning, even in adulthood: “And I always felt I never got that approval as a child; always kind of felt that. So then I suppose part of my learning was maybe more about trying to please my father than about achieving for myself and that probably went on even into adulthood” (Molly). The interview data clearly illustrated that family dynamics and relationships at the stage of initial formal education for interviewees contributed, both positively and negatively, to their subsequent relationship with formal education.

Whilst interviewees spoke of their own family background and relationships as part of their decision-making in relation to education, they equally reinforced, particularly for those with children, the impact that their experience of learning had in relation to their perspective on learning for

their own family. For Paul, the only one from his family to go directly from second level to third level, there was a sense of a wasted opportunity, that he had been *“more out to enjoy”* himself and as a result would *“...be more directional now with my own family than maybe my folks were to me if you know what I mean”* (Paul). As the majority of interviewees were parents, the impact of their return to education centred on their children and in some cases the changing relationships with their children. Owing to the age spectrum of the interviewees the children in question ranged from very young to grown-up. For one interviewee, being a parent meant that the option to return had to wait until her children were older: *“I don’t have regrets but I do think why the hell didn’t you do this years ago? But then the opportunity probably wasn’t there. You had children, you were putting them first and their education first and financially and every other way”* (Ann). In the majority of cases however, despite highlighting the difficulties of trying to meet the demands of family life in conjunction with college life: *“...your family is there; there’s going to be demands whatever age your family is, believe you me”* (Gillian). Interviewees spoke of the perceived benefits for their children in terms of setting an example for them:

“

**Interviews**

*Doing the degree, my children expect to go to university. They have aspirations, so I think I’ve become a role model.*

**Niamh**

*But for my children I’d say the influence on them is absolutely massive. They know that you can go back and do your degree at any point; you can access education at any point, you can do whatever you put your mind to do.*

**Gail**

*And then for my children and my grandchildren to kind of show example really that learning is*

*lifelong and if they want to change tack and go whatever journey that they still can; that I've done it before them so they can do it.*

*Caoimhe*

”

In addition to becoming a role model for family, the ability to be able to understand, relate to and communicate with their children was also emphasised, and this seemed to be particularly evident in relation to older children in further education. *“To me having gone to college and my children going to college and knowing exactly what they're talking about. I think... I don't underestimate that, I think a lot of people might take that for granted, I don't” (Tricia)*. There was a sense of being able to help, to give advice, to talk a similar language, to relate to the experience; *“...it was my knowledge of the language that she was talking about and the referencing and the style to use, this, that and the other; it kind of puts you on a par I suppose in that sense” (Julie)*. In many cases it was also about simply providing support: *“...my daughter she'll be going into her final year and because of texting and all of that sometimes they have a habit of writing text language on their assignments. So I said to her, listen send it onto me and I would proof read it for her, and again, I wouldn't have been able to do that” (Eve)*.

Both being a support for your family and needing their support and other supports to proceed within the learning experience was frequently cited; *“...as much as any skills I think you need, you equally need someone cheering you on while you're doing it” (Caoimhe)*. Social capital featured overtly in terms of the content of both programmes and possibly as a result many interviewees referred to social capital as a concept in relation to the importance of family networks and social networks within their discussion. *“It's probably this course in particular because we learned so much about social capital and what's important, so that-- I sent an email to the moms and grandparents, and friends when I was trying to finish up the degree and*

*I said, calling on my social capital, my social network, I need you now. But also maybe recognising the power in that, the value of that, my social links” (Edel).*

For some the impact of returning to education meant that their social links changed, new friends through peer engagement and wider networks of contacts were developed as part of the learning experience. There was also a perception that the nature of relationships or engagement with previous friends or colleagues had altered somehow, largely as a result of having less time available, but also a sense of being different somehow: “...*you have a different network of people as well with a lot of interests that you have. It sometimes alienates you from the people that you knew before and you really do have to gauge the company that you’re in. I could feel a bit of, that people would be a bit, I wouldn’t say jealous, I don’t know what it is, but like, may be you’re not one of us anymore since you’re in there” (Niamh).* This sense of possible jealousy, or not being part of the group anymore was noted by a number of interviewees and it certainly seemed to feature for some with regard to work settings: “...*the colleagues like that I worked with, you know, it’s funny like because my attention was on myself for a change. I think they felt I was moving on a bit or something, or that I wasn’t, I wasn’t giving them the attention that I had given them before. So that was a funny kind of thing; that was hard, very hard because I’d worked with people for many, many years and I just felt God, why can’t they just support me” (Caoimhe).* The changing nature of existing family and social relationships, the importance of family and social links for learning support, in addition to the creation of new relationships with peers were all deemed to be an important component of the formal educational experience as an adult learner. See Figure 5.18 for a word frequency illustration of top 30 key words used to describe reality of linked lives as learners returning to formal education.



Figure 5.18 NVivo word frequency cloud (top 30 words): Relationships/ Linked lives

#### 5.4.5 Time and place: Life Experience /Structure vs. agency

As adults returning to education all interviewees spoke of the significance of life experience not only in terms of impacting on their decision to return, but equally in terms of the benefits this real world knowledge brought to the quality of their learning. The decision to return was considered an individual choice; *“I felt excited I think at the prospect of engaging with something new and something relevant and something I was personally interested in”* (Sean). It was no longer a perceived expectation or requirement of society as per initial formal education, but a personal decision for whatever myriad of reasons in the face of, and even in defiance of, whatever challenges lay ahead. Many spoke of having a ‘commitment’, a ‘focus’ a ‘purpose’ that they did not believe that they would have had had they been in a position to progress straight from second to third level. *“The only thing I would have found was that from a studying point of view I would have been completely and utterly focused on doing well”* (Julie). There was a real expression of having a ‘greater appreciation’ of the opportunity to return to education not having had that choice available to them in earlier life. In truth making this decision and making it work was very much attributed to real life

experience and the persistence and resilience required in living life, dealing with problems, finding solutions and essentially navigating within the opportunities and constraints of the wider world. Life experience provided a sense of personal empowerment, inner strength and agency that many felt were lacking in their earlier educational life which had been largely determined by societal norms and expectations. There was still full recognition of the potential impact of societal factors in terms of living life and making personal decisions, the implications of the recent economic recession for individuals, families and communities was frequently discussed. So too the implications, both positive and negative, of the pace of change in society and being part of a wider global community. But this recognition of the impact of wider world realities was somehow tempered or offset by the toolkit of skills and qualities acquired through life experience.

The importance of bringing this life experience into their learning programme was equally emphasised: “I have a lot of worldly experience which informed my learning so I think that’s a good thing. That has helped me; I’ve lived the life to an extent; that came in very useful” (Caoimhe). Life experience according to the majority of interviewees was essential, not solely from a personal perspective in terms of the completion of individual assignments or projects, but equally through interaction with other fellow learners through discussion and group work. This exchange of experience ensured that the content of classes or subject matter for discussion became more real, varied and applied. Face to face engagement by coming together in class/workshop settings was deemed to be an essential factor in promoting this exchange as it contributed to the development of trust and thereby participation within the group.

“  
**Interview** *Group work is good as it makes you learn things from the people you’re sitting beside and you don’t realise how much knowledge everybody has, they might be working in something totally different and I’ve learned so much from people*

*that have been in my class and I suppose we wouldn't have got that had we not been put into groups having to talk about something, your experience or your job or whatever it is, we got to learn a lot.*

*Edel.*



Regularly coming together and sharing the learning experience as part of a wider common group with evident diversity in age was particularly noted by interviewees as not only contributing to the development of a positive and supportive learning environment, but also provided a more accurate reflection of real life in communities.

Many interviewees equally stated that the within the learning process tutors needed to be able to relate the course content to real examples, to draw connections between theory and practice. One interviewee spoke of the importance of tutors also having life experience to draw on: “...*one tutor had never actually left the academic environment themselves and so they weren't dealing with the reality of life, all the theory but they weren't dealing with the reality of the work on the ground*” (Julie). The ability to link programme content to life was considered paramount by all interviewees, theory and practice were both viewed as key components of learning that needed to be interwoven within classes, discussions, assignments, and projects. This collaboration of theory and practice many felt led to a more ‘life relevant’ qualification with greater potential for employability. Some interviewees spoke of children or family members who were highly qualified but simply did not have life experience and the difficulties they encountered in trying to get into employment: “...*really intelligent people with a lot to offer applying for jobs requiring a minimum of 5 years' experience, or a minimum of 7 years' experience. And I've been listening to that with my own children, degrees hanging out of them, no experience. How are they going to get experience?*” (Ann). That said, there was a degree of frustration expressed by a small number of interviewees that



#### 5.4.6 Agency: Personal Development /Self-esteem-Confidence

“  
**Interview** | *So I really feel; I feel if I died in the morning and I had a funeral, if they brought up my parchment I would have lived; you know what I mean? It's just a thing.*  
*Caoimhe.*”

All interviewees were absolute in their conviction that their return to formal education had an immensely positive impact at a personal level in relation to all aspects of life; work, family, community, and socially. Both self-esteem and confidence were regularly cited in discussions as having flourished ‘unbelievably’ as a direct result of having undertaken, carried through and completed the programme/s. A greater sense of personal agency, of being more capable of navigating within life’s trials and tribulations in order to determine their own individual life course was particularly evident.

Interviewees spoke of a greater sense of self-worth: *“I value myself more. I didn't, I didn't 6 years ago, absolutely didn't. It was ok that I worked and just had a little car and a house and I jogged along. But now it's like I'm the most important person in it, and it's great, it is great! Because that other place is kind of lonely and it's kind of hard and there's things wrong in your life and you don't talk about them and by-janey they eat you up after a while, whereas I think going back and giving you that bit of confidence that you can do something you always wanted to do gives you confidence in every other part of your life, it has a direct impact. You think, you know what I'm worthy of this, I can actually do this and I can do more if I'm asked to, or if I want to, so for me certainly it has done that”* (Jane).

Education was deemed to have ‘given back’, restored and enhanced confidence and esteem levels and outlook on life as a result: *“Ya it did a lot, like, I say it really gave me a focus and it was really good for my self-esteem*

*as well after not using my brain for so long and then you see other people around you on a really strong career paths, do you know, with like prospects and money and deposits on houses and things and you're still there going yep I'm another 6 years, 7 years, 8 years on the dole now, so it just, do you know, I suppose it gave a lot of hope" (Lorna).*

'Life changing' as a term arose consistently on the attainment of a learning milestone. Many spoke of looking at life through a different lens, becoming a more critical, questioning person: *"...at a personal level it [return to education] enhanced all aspects of personal development. Made you think more, made you questions things more, made you a deeper person, to go about the same business, but you question things moreso and you look at things differently" (Joe).* In a similar vein others spoke of becoming less judgemental, more tolerant: *"...because my thinking was affected, it really affected my whole life really. I think it would have improved my understanding in terms of just working with people and understanding people and tolerating people" (Sean).* As a result many emphasised the role of education in contributing to personal and societal development, but in doing so highlighted the responsibility of education to 'get it right' because: *"...it can be very daunting for the adult learner to come back into the class" (Tricia).*

The vast majority of interviewees spoke repeatedly about a sense of pride linked to the achievement of attaining the qualification itself; but equally having a new identity or status as a result: *"...when you say you have a degree it is different. You're in a club you were never in and I always felt inadequate because I wasn't in it" (Caoimhe).* Affirmation of this new status was very much linked to the importance of conferring's as a formal recognition and celebration of achievement. Photographs, parchments, the cap and gown were all seen as indicators of success providing an opportunity for family and friends to be part of the process:

“  
**Interviews**

*I'm one of 14 kids and I'm the only one who went to college. Super-duper! And at home I have photographs of this that and the other, but in the kitchen, the dining room, the hallway, the sitting room, you'll find a photograph of me on my conferring.*

***Eve***

*I suppose, I was so proud of myself for getting the diploma, for getting through to that stage in the university, was a massive thing for me and to get me piece of paper and me cap and gown and it really was a massive thing for me and I just thought 'God I didn't think I could get through it.*

***Emer***

*Probably when we went to the graduation was the first time I thought yeah; I have my degree from University. I have photographs up in my parents' house along with all the grandchildren like; there are my nieces and nephews and there's me there in the middle of them!*

***Julie***

”

The scale of agency and personal development achieved having returned to education as an adult learner was considered by all interviewees to be one of the most important outcomes of their learning experience. See figure 5.20 for a word frequency illustration of the top 50 key words used to describe scale of personal development.



through the programme of learning particularly for learners that may have been out of formal education for a period of time. The qualities identified were many and varied: patience, perseverance, conviction, self-belief, determination, to be disciplined, resilience, and a sense of humour: “...*you have to have a sense of humour anyway for a start! You have to be open, you know. If you’re going to sit there and moan about it and be grumpy about it there’s no point in being there cos you’re not going to achieve anything. Be open to the experience of it, be patient with it definitely, but enjoy it, I think enjoying is what keeps people going you know*” (Jim). The ability to overcome fear, possibly both a skill and a quality, was identified by the majority of interviewees (see Appendix 9: ‘Fear’ data analysis extract). This was very much associated with the initial decision to return to formal education and the courage necessary to overcome that fear. But it was equally noted as a factor within the learning process itself: “...*so there are things that, for adult learners, that because we are adult learners and because we are coming into an environment where there are so many young people it is a little bit scary in that you’re afraid to ask questions, and you’re afraid because of the fear of sounding stupid and that’s a very real fear, that would have been a very real fear for me. And for that reason, that can hold some people back, because you nearly wouldn’t ask the question, you just wouldn’t ask the question*” (Tricia). The library was noted as a particular source of fear in this context, warranting the mastery of courage to cross its borders. For many this fear highlighted the need to be able to ask for help, this too was considered a quality of sorts, as adults coming into education often feel that they should be independent and sometimes as a result struggle rather than speaking out and seeking assistance: “...*you need to be able to speak up if you are struggling, or if you are missing something, or if something is going on. You need to be able to speak up for yourself. Because the college will do everything they can to facilitate, that’s the impression I have, do everything within reason to facilitate students and be as flexible as they can and you certainly were with the students in my time*” (Sean).

Suggestions provided in relation to best practice within higher education for the promotion of adult learning reiterated those previously identified within the survey data:

- Active Debate and Discussion
- Engaging Tutors
- Stimulating Course Content
- A positive learning environment
- Student Supports
- Provision of Blended Learning Programmes

Additional suggestions included a change in higher education policy facilitating the provision of financial assistance to adult learners. Aside from the potential to claim back tax relief, interviewees who were working on either a part-time or full-time basis did not qualify for any financial support. In many instances interviewees indicated that trying to source fees placed a huge amount of strain on limited resources, emphasising the importance of flexible payment plans as a practice to be promoted: “...*a payment plan would be great, a lot of people don’t have a huge wage coming in, so they have to get a loan and then it depends on the bank, if they’ll give it to you or not, that decides whether you can afford to go back to college or not*” (Gail). On a related note many interviewees referred to the need for greater support from the work place, highlighting the importance of a more consolidated relationship between higher education and employer bodies in promoting access for adult learners: “...*a lot of companies say we’re a learning organisation and we believe in this and yet, if you go and do it, you do it at your own expense, in your own time, because at the end of the day you’re doing this for yourself and that has been clearly stated. There is no recognition that what you would learn might spill out or enhance what you did at work. It would make it an awful lot easier if you were supported in your work place to go back to education*” (Niamh).

One of the key suggestions in relation to best practice offered by interviewees was the need for part-time programme offerings within higher education to actually be ‘part-time’. Many spoke of the full-time orientation of higher education and its apparent automatic default to the requirements of full-time learners in the context of the traditional academic year. Part time adult learners within this system were simply ‘fitted in’ to the full-time provision without apparent recognition as a cohort with different requirements: “...*they’re offering more part-time programmes now, but what they’re really doing is rolling out a full-time programme and allowing people to sit in on different components of it. But those classes are 3 hours on a Monday, 2 on a Tuesday afternoon and whatever; that isn’t part time, that’s just trying to fit people into what we provide full-time, and it’s putting a huge strain on people*” (Paul). In this context in particular many interviewees spoke of a need for an overall culture of change within higher education to recognise and value part-time adult learners as a distinct but committed cohort with varied learning histories, a range of external commitments leading to many life challenges, requiring access to all student supports and financial assistance.

#### **5.4.7 A summary of key findings for objective three**

This summary is available at the end of the chapter in section 5.5.3 as a collective account of all the key findings of this research study.

### **5.5 Summary of key findings**

This chapter presents the key empirical findings of this research study in the context of objectives 2 and 3. Secondary data outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 (literature review) responded to objective 1 and informed a tentative model of life course learning which also served as a framework of analysis for the purposes of this study. Objective 4 however, has not yet been addressed within this chapter. This objective seeks to examine the potential considerations of an emergent model of life course learning for; the adult

learner, higher education, and wider civic society. It is therefore more appropriate to the discussion chapter (Chapter 6). Section 5.5 outlines a summary of key findings in relation to objectives 1-3, in so doing it provides a preliminary consideration of objective 4 with greater elaboration of detail in Chapter 6.

As noted above objective 1 focused on secondary data findings, specifically in relation to examining the concept of the life course in the context of higher education teaching and learning policy from an adult learner perspective. In so doing it sought to contribute to a tentative conceptual model of life course learning and served as an analytical framework to examine all remaining research objectives.

Findings collected from two quantitative surveys were presented in relation to objective 2 in identifying the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education. A comprehensive series of findings were outlined in section 5.3.6 detailing the learning experiences of adult learners in higher education and the key factors for consideration in informing a model of life course learning. This detail was further consolidated by the findings collated in relation to objective 3 which outlined the qualitative data attained through 26 interviews elaborating on the adult learning experience of higher education. These findings (summary of same in section 5.4.7) in presenting the ‘voices’, experiences and learning requirements of the interviewees directly correspond to each element of the tentative conceptual model of life course learning outlined in objective 1. Lastly, greater detail on the remaining objective for consideration, objective 4, will be presented in Chapter 6.

### **5.5.1 Objective One:**

**To examine the concept of the Life Course in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners with a particular focus on higher education**

- The five life course principles as identified by Elder (1985); lifespan development, agency, time and place, timing of lives, and linked

lives in conjunction with the three interdependent capitals of learning; human, social and identity capital, developed by Schuller and Watson (2009) are deemed to contribute to a tentative conceptual model of life course learning serving as an analytical framework to examine all remaining research objectives.

### **5.5.2 Objective Two:**

#### **To determine the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education**

- Based on experiences adult learners identified the following points as having made a significant contribution to their learning experience:
  - ▣ The provision of part-time blended Adult Learner Centred Programmes recognising scale of commitments.
  - ▣ Recognition of Life Experience within learning process.
  - ▣ Usage by tutors of different modes and styles of learning leading to a positive learning experience.
  - ▣ Promotion of learners' confidence levels.
  - ▣ Provision of accessible and inclusive learning processes are very important
  - ▣ Adult learners being valued as equals within the learning process.
  - ▣ Maintaining a culture of learner support is essential.
  
- Participation in Higher education contributed to the attainment of the following key competencies and skills:
  - ▣ Communication skills.
  - ▣ Writing skills.
  - ▣ Creative thinking skills.
  - ▣ Teamwork skills.
  - ▣ Learning to learn skills.

- In terms of **employment benefits/opportunities** the majority of adult learners indicated that their participation in higher education had *not contributed* to attaining a job or promotion, but felt that it did contribute to greater potential employability.
- Adult learners indicated that their programme participation had made a *significant contribution* to **personal benefits/opportunities**.
- Participation in higher education had made *some contribution* to **family/social benefits**, particularly in the context of relationships with friends and greater social contacts.
- Adult learners' motivation to participate in higher education centred on personal growth, career development, interest in a particular subject and attaining an academic title.
- Difficulties/challenges encountered within higher education as adult learners were:
  - ▣ Reduction of Free Time.
  - ▣ Stress.
  - ▣ Financial Problems.
  - ▣ Family Problems.
  - ▣ Less time to meet Job Demands.
  - ▣ Childcare Problems.
- Supports identified to assist in overcoming challenges for adult learners entering higher education were:
  - ▣ Financial assistance for part-time adult learners.
  - ▣ Time management skills and training,
  - ▣ Accessible information provision.
  - ▣ Childcare/Adult care subsidies
  - ▣ Learner support systems.
  - ▣ Change in culture of higher education.
  - ▣ Recognition of personal resilience.

- Good practice in higher education as identified by adult learners included:
  - ▣ Active Debate and Discussion.
  - ▣ Engaging Tutors.
  - ▣ Stimulating Course Content.
  - ▣ A positive learning environment.
  - ▣ Access to Student Supports.
  - ▣ Provision of Blended Learning Programmes.

### ***5.5.3 Objective Three:***

#### **To contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by adult learning experiences in an Irish Context**

##### ***5.5.3.1 Lifespan development: Age/ Human Capital***

Age and stage in life featured quite significantly in the interview data, particularly in the context of formal compulsory education systems, which were age graded and reflective of societal norms and expectations largely supported by a human capital rationale for the purposes of employability.

- Compulsory formal education was seen as simply a time-based learning requirement specific to age in line with the expectations of society for the purposes of subsequent employment.
- Despite the majority of interviewees leaving with a leaving certificate qualification many noted a lack of sense of direction largely as a result of poor or limited career guidance during second level.
- Family financial circumstances were core in determining life paths on completion of initial formal education in terms of:
  - ▣ The potential to engage in further education.
  - ▣ The choice undertaken when it was possible to proceed.
  - ▣ The urgency to move into employment.

- Throughout the majority of discussions employment featured as the primary objective in decision-making post compulsory education.

#### 5.5.3.2 **Timing of lives: Learning journey /Identity capital**

- Reasons for undertaking higher education were many and varied reflective of unfolding lives and changing times in terms of family life circumstances, working life challenges/ concerns, wider societal and personal changes.
- The decision to return to formal education was directly linked to a sense of timing, that somehow the ‘time was right’ and necessary due to changing times and unfolding lives.
- As adult learners the motivation to return centred on employment prospects and continuing employability as a third level qualification was now deemed a pre-requisite for the labour market.
- Personal fulfilment was equally cited as a distinct motivation in order to be able to confidently engage with work colleagues, family and friends. This motivation was interwoven with the potential of developing a new personal identity through the acquisition of a formal qualification.
- A number of challenges however, had to be overcome, in advance of, and during, the learning journey. These included:
  - Coping with fear, of the unknown, of not being academically capable, of not being able to overcome previous educational decisions.
  - Entering higher education with fragile academic self-belief and confidence on the basis of previous learning histories.
  - Overcoming financial concerns, not just in relation to fees, but equally childcare and transport costs.
  - Managing stress, anxiety and lack of time because of the scale of commitments external to the programme.

- Adult learners maintain a multiplicity of roles, identities and responsibilities as a reality of life having made the decision to continue their formal learning journey. But the potential of new opportunities, roles/identities through the acquisition of formal education provided a resolution to succeed.
- One of the most interesting elements that came through the qualitative component of this research was that of all 26 interviews, not one interviewee felt that their learning journey had ended

#### 5.5.3.3 *Linked lives: Relationships/ Social capital*

- Another key theme evident within the qualitative data focused on the importance of relationships as a factor in terms of return to formal education. Interviewees emphasised that they were not returning to education as a 'free agent' as such, that their lives were very much linked and committed to a whole range of external relationships.
- The changing nature of existing family and social relationships was highlighted as an important component of the formal educational experience as an adult learner creating 'new' relationships with family and peers.
- The interview data clearly illustrated that family dynamics and relationships at the stage of initial formal education for interviewees contributed, both positively and negatively, to their subsequent relationship with formal education.
- Interviewees equally reinforced, particularly for those with children, the impact that their experience of learning had in relation to their perspective on learning for their own family.
- The changing nature of existing family and social relationships, the importance of family and social links for learning support, in addition to the creation of new relationships with peers were all deemed to be an important component of the formal educational experience as an adult learner.

**5.5.3.4 Time and place: Life experience /Structure vs agency**

- As adults returning to education all interviewees spoke of the significance of life experience not only in terms of impacting on their decision to return, but equally in terms of the benefits this real world knowledge brought to the quality of their learning.
- Life experience provided a sense of personal empowerment, inner strength and agency that many felt were lacking in their earlier educational life which had been largely determined by societal norms and expectations.

**5.5.3.5 Agency: Personal Development/Self-esteem-Confidence**

- All interviewees were absolute in their conviction that their return to formal education had an immensely positive impact at a personal level in relation to all aspects of life; work, family, community, and socially.
- Both self-esteem and confidence were regularly cited in discussions as having flourished ‘unbelievably’ as a direct result of having participated in higher education.
- ‘Life changing’ as a term arose consistently within interviews in relation to the attainment of a learning milestone. Many spoke of looking at life through a different lens, becoming a more critical, questioning person.
- The scale of personal development achieved having returned to education as an adult learner was considered by all interviewees to be one of the most important outcomes of their learning experience.

**5.5.3.6 Adult Learner in Higher Education: Skills-Qualities/ Best Practice in Higher Education**

- The key skills and qualities identified by interviewees as necessary to succeed within higher education as an adult learner were:

**Table 5.11 Skills and qualities identified by interviewees as necessary to succeed within higher education as an adult learner**

Skills	Qualities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Computer skills</li> <li>■ Time management and organisational skills</li> <li>■ Academic writing skills</li> <li>■ Learning to learn skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Patience</li> <li>■ Perseverance</li> <li>■ Conviction/Self-belief</li> <li>■ Determination/ Disciplined</li> <li>■ Resilience</li> <li>■ Sense of Humour</li> </ul>

- In terms of best practice interviewees highlighted the need for an overall culture of change within higher education to recognise and value part-time adult learners as a distinct but committed cohort with varied learning histories, a range of external commitments leading to many life challenges, requiring access to all student supports and financial assistance.

**5.5.4 Objective Four:**

**To review an emergent model of life course learning for the adult learner, higher education institutions and wider civic society**

- Examines the potential considerations of an emergent model of life course learning for; the adult learner, higher education, and wider civic society The key findings noted above in relation to objectives 1-3 provide a preliminary consideration of objective 4 with greater elaboration of detail in Chapter 6.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

### 6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the research findings presented in Chapter 5 and to equally examine these findings in light of the tentative model of life course learning as outlined in Chapter 3 (theoretical literature review). The greater part of the findings detailed in Chapter 5 related to objectives one to three. The attainment of objective four which seeks to examine the policy and practice considerations of an emergent model of life course learning was deemed to be more suited to this discussion chapter. Whilst expanding further on the results from objectives one to three, these findings are discussed collectively and framed both within the tentative model of life course learning and the three categories of consideration specific to objective 4: (i) the adult learner (*micro*), (ii) higher education (*meso*), and (iii) wider civic society (*macro*), corresponding to the multi-level nature of the life course concept (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Discussion structure

<b>The Life Course: A Definition</b>		
<i>'The life course concerns the interface of society and the individual because it transfers <b>macro</b>-social conditions and requirements via institutions (<b>meso</b>) to guidelines of individual action (<b>micro</b>)' (Heinz 2010, p.230)</i>		
<i>An emergent model of life course learning</i>	<i>Life Course Concept – Multi Level Analysis</i>	<i>Tentative Life Course Model -Incorporating research findings</i>
<b>6.2 Adult Learner</b>	<i>Micro level: ‘...concerns individual experiences, meanings and personal agency: skills, aptitudes, and goals which define the capacity of adapting to changing contexts through learning and realistic decision making (Heinz 2010, p.230)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lifespan development: Age/ Human Capital</li> <li>• Timing of Lives: Learning Journey/Identity capital</li> </ul>

<p><b>6.3 Higher Education</b></p>	<p><i>Meso level: refers to ‘...institutions, organisations, social networks and local living arrangements that define social spaces for biographical action e.g. family, peers, colleagues, employers’ (Heinz 2010, p.230)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linked lives: Relationships/ Social Capital</li> <li>• Time and place: Life Experience/Structure vs. Agency</li> <li>• Agency: Personal Development /Self-esteem-Confidence</li> </ul>
<p><b>6.4 Wider Civic Society</b></p>	<p><i>Macro level: refers to ... ‘cultural values, economic conditions, and socio-political and welfare structures which define social spaces for biographical action’ (Heinz 2010, p.230)</i></p>	

**6.2 The adult learner: Micro**

The micro level concerns individual experiences, meanings and personal agency: skills aptitudes and goals, which define the capacity of adapting to changing contexts through learning and realistic decision making.

(Heinz 2010, p.230)

The micro level focuses on individual human development over the life-span in the context of changing social structures thereby reinforcing the multi-level orientation of the life course incorporating interactive psychological and sociological perspectives. In the context of this research study the adult learner is the focus of the micro level analysis and the findings of the study as outlined in Chapter 5 will be fully considered framed within each of the three levels: micro, meso and macro.

**6.2.1 Lifespan development: Age / Human capital**

This study found that individual adult learners undertaking higher education bring varied learning histories in terms of both formal and experiential

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learning into their programme of choice. Self-development over the life course in the context of formal education is very much age-graded and pre-determined by societal norms and expectations, typically frontloading formal education for young people for the purposes of the labour market within a highly competitive global economy (Biesta 2010; Fleming and Finnegan 2011; Slowey and Scheutze 2012). Findings outlined by research participants (both survey respondents and interviewees) indicated that initial education was simply a process of learning for future employment. It was perceived as a compulsory requirement, in line with a particular phase in life, for the purpose of knowledge acquisition and skill enhancement in advance of ‘working life’ thereafter. Initial formal learning therefore was very much associated with the human capital rationale of employability and although the majority of research participants left formal education with a leaving certificate qualification, any further potential of continuation of initial formal education was largely determined by family circumstances. Only 12 of the 26 interviewees progressed to further education, of whom three subsequently faced life circumstances that caused them to leave their formal learning experience. An important implication of these findings is that individual life pathways and choices were largely influenced by the experience of initial formal learning, family financial resources and employment considerations (Shanahan 2000; Feinstein *et al.* 2004; Swain and Hammond 2011). Educational processes over the individual life-span therefore were directly impacted by initial formal educational experience and subsequent individual decisions strongly shaped by social contexts. This finding concurs with research undertaken by Bynner (2005), as previously noted within the literature review, emphasising the developmental impact of early life experiences and decision-making on later life choices and actions conditioned by access to resources and the institutional and social contexts of the individual.

Findings from interviews in particular identified that age and anticipated stage in life by virtue of age was a key consideration for research respondents in relation to education. Much of the discussion echoed the ‘age and stage’ theoretical perspective measuring adult development previously

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outlined in the body of literature for this study. According to this theoretical perspective, development over the life course involves progressing through a range of particular life stages, often associated with age related norms of society (Levinson 1986; Giddens 2009). Research participants spoke of chronological age as a challenge to be overcome in terms of returning to formal education because of the evident human capital culture of ‘front-loading’ investment in initial formal education specifically towards young people in preparation for working life. This traditional model of educational investment resulted in the development of educational organisational structures predominantly focused on the needs of full-time, mainstream, young students (Flannery and McGarr 2014). Coming into an environment of learning orientated to young people and seeking to engage within that environment with so many people at a younger stage in life was a challenging prospect for many of the research participants as adult learners (Kearns 2014; Fleming *et al.* 2017).

A further age related concern expressed by research participants was that their learning ability as an adult learner had declined with age in line with many of the negative stereotypes of deterioration associated with biological ageing (Akerman *et al.* 2011; Clark and Caffarella 1999). Despite widespread consensus that macro-economic and social forces have had a significant impact on the life course of individuals, particularly in the context of increasing life expectancy and life patterns (Bruckner and Mayer 2005); the majority of research participants still defaulted to the age-graded traditional norms and traditional social expectations of society in their initial contemplation of return to formal education. Concerns in relation to academic ability because of age and of possibly ‘being too old’ were frequently expressed despite research proving otherwise (Akerman *et al.* 2011; Swain and Hammond 2013). In many respects chronological age still featured as a perceived societal and psychological barrier to be overcome in returning to formal education as an adult learner.

The focus on biological age as both a measure of what was possible and what was ‘normal’ in life however, appeared to ease as a primary consideration for adult learners having made the transition into formal

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learning. Coming into part-time adult learner centred programmes with people of like mind and of all ages was lauded by the majority of respondents as easing the sense of fear expressed in coming to higher education (Merrill 2015). ‘Life-changing’ as a term was consistently used by interviewees to describe the learning experience and the scale of personal development attained. Research participants appeared to be less defined by their age moving towards a greater consideration of the acquisition of knowledge and skills for both cognitive and intellectual development in their new role as learner. Being defined as a student (Rogers 2003) was particularly important in legitimising the need to prioritise individual development regardless of age as a result of the decision to engage in higher education.

For the majority of research respondents the decision to undertake formal education reflected the earlier human capital rationale associated with initial formal education. The attainment of a qualification for enhanced employment purposes contributed to the impetus to return for the greater number of research participants. Research findings illustrated however, that the professional impact of qualifications attained were limited, largely it would seem, as a result of the corresponding limitation of employment opportunities within the sector during the recession which coincided with the time line of the research study. But equally, research indicates, as argued by Biesta *et al.* (2011), that qualifications alone may not be regarded as sufficient within the labour market, as a range of other individual skills and dispositions are required to contribute to enhanced employability. The ‘three capitals’ perspective identified by Schuller and Watson (2009) and incorporated within the analytical framework of this research study equally reiterates the importance of the interdependence of different kinds of learning and the need to go beyond qualification alone as a measure of education and employability. Both the quantitative and qualitative data findings of this research study, demonstrated that whilst employment opportunities were limited post-attainment of qualification, that for the majority of research participants the achievement of same was still perceived as contributing towards increased employment opportunities. This

finding is consolidated within the work of Swain and Hammond (2013), who in their investigation of lifelong learning and life chances state that: ‘Participation in adult learning, as well as having wider social benefits, is associated with employability and with probabilities of employment’ (p.42).

### **6.2.2 *Timing of lives: Learning journey / Identity capital***

Biographical interviews in tracing participants’ past experience of initial formal education in the context of family background, subsequent working lives and key life events provided a contextual framework to assist in understanding the motivation to return to formal education. In the context of this research study the gender balance on both higher education programmes was weighted towards female participants at over 75%. This concurs with research undertaken by Ostrouch-Kamińska and Vieira (2016) whom in their exploration of gender in adult learning in contemporary society argue that: ‘It is a fact that today women predominate among adult learners at continuing education institutions, university students and graduates’ (p.44). In terms of age breakdown the majority of the research population were within the age categories of 30-59, denoting a broad range of caring and working responsibilities and a multiplicity of roles and identities across a variety of family, community, social, cultural and economic settings. Approximately 20% of research participants had been out of accredited learning for over ten years, 64% had been out of formal learning for less than five years reflecting very varied formal learning experiences.

As noted within the findings the motivation to return for the majority of participants centred predominantly on employability considerations as the attainment of a third level qualification was identified by respondents as a pre-requisite for the labour market. That said however, a desire for personal fulfilment was also identified as an equally significant motivation to return to formal education (see Figure 5.16). In many cases the personal motivation to return coincided with a particular life event, turning point or transition to be managed (Field 2009; Merrill 2009; Biesta *et al.* 2011); this included the transition from homemaker to the labour market, dealing with unemployment, lack of promotion in the absence of a third level

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qualification, children moving on to further education, or regret for a lost opportunity in terms of a perceived ‘missing’ transition in initial formal education to third level. The range of events and transitions planned and unplanned reflect the variability of the life course of the individual and reinforces the diversity of motivations, learning expectations and requirements of adult learners.

This research study identified two key factors as having a major impact in terms of fulfilling motivations to return to education; *time* and *timing*. Lack of *time* because of the scale of external responsibilities and commitments was consistently named by research respondents as having delayed their decision to return to education and for many it equally impacted on their decision to progress their studies on programme completion. This finding is consolidated by European lifelong learning statistics from a survey conducted in 2011 (Eurostat 2018) which found that lack of time due to family responsibilities (28.4%) was the highest cited obstacle in Ireland among those who wanted to participate in education and training but did not do so. The related factor of *timing* was equally noteworthy within both the quantitative and qualitative data findings. Being ‘in the right place at the right time’ (Tricia) seemed to suggest an alignment of sorts between agency and structure in acting on the motivation to return to education as an adult learner. This finding was echoed in research undertaken by Swain and Hammond (2013) whereby an adult learner within their study of part-time students equally spoke of returning to education because it was the ‘right time’ as a result of her life circumstances being appropriately ordered, leading the authors to conclude that: ‘mature students appear to be more agentic than school leavers, who may be more inclined to “go with the flow”’ (p.603).

Becoming ‘agentic’ and navigating within the constraints and limitations of societal structures to undertake formal education was for many seen as the opportunity to redress a ‘missing transition’ in terms of the perceived norms of social timing regarding initial education (Field *et al.* 2009). As previously noted, many research respondents described this ‘missing transition’ in terms of regret for an opportunity lost. Similar research undertaken by Shafi

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and Rose (2014), focusing on relationships between initial education and returning to education later in life, identified the importance of recognising 'opportunities'. As part of this research they present an interesting perspective relevant to 'agency' as a factor in returning to education by emphasising the importance of life experience in acquiring the confidence to recognise and take up opportunities: arguing that '...an opportunity is only an opportunity, to the extent that an individual feels ready to be able to take on the challenges presented with it' (p.221). The potential of future new opportunities through the acquisition of qualifications not achieved in initial education was also highlighted within their study as a particular motivation of returning adults (Shafi and Rose 2014). This motivation was also identified by the research respondents of this research study, particularly the BA respondents at 63.27%. Whilst only 21.67% of Diploma respondents identified attaining an academic title as a motivation to engage, it is important to note that 31% of Diploma respondents had already attained a degree qualification in advance of undertaking the Diploma. Although the Diploma at level 7 is a lower level programme to a degree qualification, for many applicants the practice based orientation of the programme offered the opportunity to acquire practical knowledge and skills for continuous professional development purposes, thereby building on academic credentials and agency.

The multiple motivations to return to education as discussed above reflect the multiplicity of identities, roles and responsibilities of adult learners. All of which carry a corresponding range of demands and in so doing contribute to the many challenges that adult learners encounter in trying to balance home, family and work commitments in conjunction with their programme of study. The quantitative data findings as presented in Chapter 5 outlined a broad range of common problems/difficulties encountered by research participants on their learning journey. The top six identified were: reduction of free time, stress, financial problems, family problems, less time to meet job demands, and childcare problems. These findings are consistent with a series of research studies on the challenges encountered by adult learners returning to formal education (Cross 1981; Fleming and Finnegan 2011;

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Biesta *et al.* 2011; Flannery and McCarr 2014; Fleming *et al.* 2017). Whilst the qualitative data findings concurred with the full range of difficulties/problems identified within the quantitative findings, a further challenge encountered by the interviewees is particularly noteworthy in relation to adult learning policy and practice, and this challenge is overcoming fear. Essentially, in order to return to education the majority of interviewees had to overcome fear; fear of the unknown, fear of being judged, fear of being academically weak, fear of not being able to cope. Many referred to the impact of previous learning histories, particularly in the context of initial formal education as a key contributor to this sense of fear of formal education. Research undertaken by Quillinan *et al.* (2018) on a programme of higher education study in Ireland provided through a community-university partnership also identified fear as an initial factor for the students in advance of the programme on the basis of ‘...being perceived as deficient when judged against existing university standards’ (p.10). This finding raises further questions for consideration with regard to the perception of education in Irish society, and warrants particular deliberation with regard to the principles of promoting equal opportunity, access and widening participation within higher education (Finnegan 2016; Fleming *et al.* 2017; Quillinan *et al.* 2018). More specifically it highlights the need to ask, why do adult learners fear higher education?

The range of challenges outlined above reflect the diversity of responsibilities and the array of identities adult learners already have in place in advance of and in parallel with an unfolding identity as a part-time adult learner. Seeking to acquire this new identity as learner/student featured strongly within the research findings as compensating for previous ‘bad’ decisions in relation to education and a sense of not having made the most of initial formal education; therefore ‘needing to prove to themselves (or to others) that they have the ability to work at, and succeed, as an academic’ (Swain and Hammond 2013, p.599). This finding is consistent with other research studies focusing on the impact of education on the development of identity capital; one’s sense of self and potential self. Central to identity capital are the characteristics of self-esteem and self-worth and these

characteristics impact upon the motivation to engage with, and continue within, the learning process (Merrill 2009; Field 2009, 2011; Schuller and Watson 2009). In terms of this research study the potential of a new identity as a learner/student and the perceived possibilities of what it could bring generated a firm resolution to navigate around and work through a spectrum of challenges in order to continue with the learning experience. This is an interesting finding when viewed in the context of a variety of theories of human development, but particularly in relation to Levinson's theory of adult development as one of the few theorists who argues that development continues to occur throughout the adult years (Levinson 1986).

One of the most remarkable findings to come through the data (both quantitative and qualitative) was that the 'learner identity' formed as part of the learning process was of great significance at a personal level and difficult to 'let go of' on programme completion. In truth, for the majority who were not in a position to progress within formal education, largely because of financial difficulty, family responsibilities and time restrictions, there remained an enduring commitment to sustain their learner identity in whatever capacity; formal, non-formal, informal. Despite the many challenges confronted, the experience of learning and of being a learner was predominantly described in passionate terms. Of all the 26 interviewees, not one felt that their learning journey had ended having fully embraced the identity of learner as part of their identity capital.

### ***6.2.3 Linked lives: Relationships / Social Capital***

In speaking of the multiplicity of identities, roles and responsibilities research participants were anxious to reinforce the reality of their linked lives; that they did not come to formal education as an 'independent agent' but were interwoven within a range of social networks and relationships that both required, and in turn sometimes provided, time and support.

Family dynamics and relationships featured predominantly within the findings as having had a significant impact on the 'learner identity' of the returning adult learner. This concurs with research undertaken by Fleming

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(2016) in his discussion of Axel Honneth's (1995) theory of inter-subjectivity which argues that;

Only by taking the perspective of others towards oneself can one construct a sense of self, with beliefs, desires, values and needs. These perspectives of others are shaped by culture, life history and life-narratives and we grow by internalising these.

(Fleming 2016, p.14)

Many research respondents spoke of the impact of parents or siblings on their own individual perception of their learning ability. This finding is consistent with research undertaken by Churchill and Clarke (2009) who in their review of parenting education argue that; 'The 'home learning environment' which parents and families create, especially in the pre-school years, has been found to affect children's school achievements' (p.46). For some respondents initial educational attainment became interwoven with approval, the potential of, or lack of, from parents or family. This 'learning self-belief', whether positive or negative, was perceived to be a direct result of the response of family members, usually parent/s, to the outcomes of initial formal education. In other words, individual learner competence was assessed by the formal education system and then consolidated either in a positive/negative way by significant family members and internalised thereafter impacting on subsequent relationships with formal education (Merrill 2009). Family circumstances, financial, emotional and otherwise had a substantial impact on the formal learning journey of research participants in largely determining the point of completion of initial formal education and subsequent engagement with same. As previously noted within the literature review for this study, many variables impact on patterns of participation in formal education; these include ...'gender, social class, initial schooling experience and parental attitudes to learning' (Jenkins 2018, p.245)

As the majority of research participants were parents, the impact of their return to education centred on their children. The need to prioritise the needs of their children meant often that their own needs were set to one side. This was particularly evident in the context of education provision for their

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children often to the detriment of their own access to education. As parents of ‘grown-up’ children moving to university, many had to seek a deferral or leave of absence for a period of time because of the financial constraints of trying to fund their own and their child’s formal learning progress. In many cases research participants spoke of delaying a decision to return to formal education, despite the desire to do so, until they had their children ‘set up’. Being a parent had a direct impact in a myriad of ways on the adult learner’s decision to return to education. Research studies indicate however, that returning to education as an adult learner has a positive effect on children’s attitude towards education; ‘...there is an intergenerational “transmission” of education...educating adults has the immediate effect of increasing their children’s educational levels’ (Fragosa 2014, p.61)

Social capital as a concept featured within the content of both the higher education programmes within this study. Possibly as a result many research participants referred to the importance of family relationships and social networks. Being a support to family was considered to be particularly important. The acquisition of new knowledge, skills and qualities attained through formal learning was something to be shared and used for the benefit of family members. By undertaking higher education many participants felt that they had set an example of what was possible for other family and friends to pursue and in so doing enhanced awareness of learning opportunities which would not have been considered previously. Equally, in keeping with the emphasis on social capital, the ability to call on friends and family in times of need during the learning process was considered invaluable.

Like other forms of education, university education also enhances social capital, the networks and associations that an individual participates in, and the shared values, contribution to common goals and social support from this participation.

(O’Sullivan *et al.*, 2017)

The importance of family and social links for learning support as an adult learner was consistently reiterated throughout the data. So too, the data illustrated the changing nature of family relationships and social

connections. Whilst changes in family relationships were described largely in positive terms, many noted that the nature of engagement with previous friends or colleagues had altered somewhat, as new friends through peer engagement and wider networks of contacts had developed as part of the learning experience. Whilst scarcity of time was named as one factor in this development, being perceived as different somehow and possibly feeling different somehow were also offered as explanations. This sense of being different was in part attributed to having a greater sense of awareness of societal issues and an enhanced confidence in ability to engage at both a community and societal level.

The reality of ‘linked lives’; of relationships, networks and linkages, both existing and new, was deemed to be vital component of the formal educational experience of the part time adult learner in both recognising and contributing to their store of social capital.

### **6.2.4 Time and place: Life experience / Structure vs. agency**

People live their lives within wider structures that include social, cultural, political and economic contexts, which not only constrains and determines behaviour but also enables it; that is, these contexts provide opportunities for action as well as constraints or limitations.

(Swain and Hammond 2013 p.593)

As adults returning to learning the impact of wider social and historical contexts featured strongly in their account of personal biographies. Both quantitative and qualitative data highlighted the significance attached to life experience in terms of acquiring the personal agency and empowerment to navigate within the constraints and opportunities of life to return to formal education. This finding is consistent with research undertaken by Merrill (2015) arguing that agency ‘...does not occur in isolation; the act of agency is always embedded within a social context’ (p.1862). Life experience was also deemed by many to have contributed to the problem-solving skills and personal resilience necessary to sustain participation within their programme of learning in the context of wider life realities and a higher education institute predominantly structured towards ‘traditional’ learners (Shafi and Rose 2014). The ‘real world’ knowledge attained through life

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experience was also highlighted as being of particular value in terms of enhancing the quality of learning, the experience of which for the majority of learners appeared to be more life relevant, unlike their previous experience of initial formal education. Teaching methodologies promoting exchange of opinion and debate were considered essential as part of an interactive process of encouraging adult learners to incorporate their life experiences within their learning through group work and reflection. The role of the tutor was also considered integral to the success of this approach, not solely in terms of facilitation skills to ensure effective and focused discussions, but equally in terms of their ability to interweave course content with relevant examples, drawing on their own life experience rather than a purely academic perspective. A student-centred approach to teaching was deemed essential to the quality of the learning experience, and respondents indicated that not all tutors were suited to adult learning as a lecture style approach simply would not work. This viewpoint also emerged in research on adult learners in higher education undertaken by Quillinan *et al.* (2018) in which respondents underlined the importance of teachers suited to collaborative learning emphasising the need for lecturers ‘...who were comfortable to let go of the power over teaching and blur the boundaries between teacher and learner’ (p.9).

Engaging adults as valued equals and contributors within the learning process was identified by research respondents as core to the attainment of significant learning (Fink 2003) within a positive learning environment promoting the acquisition of a broad range of additional skills and competencies. Specific skills and competencies identified in addition to the subject matter of the programme included: communication skills, writing skills, creative thinking skills, teamwork skills and learning to learn skills. All of which are core transferable skills across all domains of life. A responsive and supportive learning environment was identified as a critical requirement by the adult learners within this study in recognition of the fact that all adult learners ‘experience external personal and structural problems’ (Merrill 2015 p.1860). Whilst many noted the importance of recognising their own individual agency, resilience and coping strategies in overcoming

difficulties, they equally emphasised the importance of institutional supports in enabling learners to stay. Financial, family-friendly, time conscious, student centred supports were all identified as crucial to participation in higher education. ‘Adult students want to feel part of the academy and be respected and accepted’ (Merrill 2015, p.1869); this requires a change in the culture of higher education in recognition of the needs of a more diverse student cohort. Changes in educational policy and practice can ensure that higher education institutes provide the necessary structure to nurture and support the individual agency of adult learners.

Life experience informing personal biographies certainly impacted in a variety of ways upon learning experiences for part time adult learners in the institution of higher education, demonstrating the interplay of individual action and social structure. Higher education institutional structures however, need to embrace a culture of change to fully support, respect and value part-time adult learners.

### **6.2.5 Agency: Personal development / Self-esteem-confidence**

One of the most significant findings of the research study was the perceived impact of the learning experience on both personal agency and personal development. The core message from both quantitative and qualitative data responses was the evident conviction that the return to formal education had an immensely positive impact at a personal level in relation to all aspects of life; family, community, work and social. Enhanced confidence levels, greater self-esteem and self-worth were consistently identified as life-changing outcomes by research participants, regardless of age or learning history. A greater sense of resilience and individual competence to shape and navigate within life as an active agent was equally reinforced within the data findings, largely as a result of having attained the relevant skills and knowledge, particularly the ‘learning to learn’ skills, for successful programme completion in the face of all challenges outlined.

The majority of research participants repeatedly raised the sense of pride attached to the achievement of the qualification itself and the importance of the conferring ceremony as a formal recognition and celebration of

achievement. It equally served a purpose in conferring and confirming a new status, a new identity at a personal and a societal level. Particularly, it seems in Irish society where educational attainment is perceived as a measure of success and qualifications open up opportunities and possibilities (Fleming *et al.* 2017; Sullivan *et al.* 2018). The significance of the learning experience in terms of enhanced personal agency and empowerment was one of the most noteworthy outcomes of the research study. Demonstrating that what we think about ourselves and how we think about ourselves (Clark and Caffarella 1999) has a major influence on our personal development and sense of agency; an important consideration for educational policy in the context of the changing nature of contemporary society.

### **Key Points: Adult learner (Micro)**

- Initial formal education was seen as a dedicated compulsory stage in life for employability purposes and this human capital rationale continued to feature in terms of a decision to return to education
- Personal fulfilment featured as a significant motivation in returning to education, but two factors ‘time’ and ‘timing’ had a major impact in terms of acting on the motivation to return
- Adult learners do not return to education as ‘independent agents’ but are interwoven within a range of family and social networks which often require, and sometimes provide, time and support
- Life experience informing personal biographies impact in a variety of ways upon learning experiences for part time adult learners in the institution of higher education demonstrating the interplay of individual action and social structure
- The return to formal education had an immensely positive impact at a personal level in relation to all aspects of life; family, community, work and social

### **6.3 Higher education: Meso**

Meso level: refers to ‘institutions, organisations, social networks and local living arrangements that define social spaces for biographical action e.g. family, peers, colleagues, employers’ (Heinz 2010, p.230). In the context of this research study meso specifically refers to higher education as an educational institution transferring macro social conditions and expectations to the level of the individual learner.

#### **6.3.1 Lifespan development: Age / Human Capital**

The evolution of higher education in Irish society as outlined in Chapter 2 reflects an emphasis on modernisation of the third level sector in response to globalisation, the corresponding demands of the state and the increasing influence of the European Union. This influence is particularly evident in relation to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which through a series of reports dating from 1965 (Investment in Education) emphasised the importance of education as an investment in Ireland’s economic development (Fleming *et al.* 2017). Whilst emphasising the importance of higher education for the economy, Irish educational policy makers also highlighted the significance of education for society as a whole particularly in the context of lifelong learning. The inclusion of the concept of lifelong learning within higher education policy was initially framed within the expectations of the EU through the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, actively reinforcing on-going individual citizen engagement with education in pursuit of a dynamic knowledge economy (CEC 2000).

However, a review of literature (Chapters 2 and 3) would suggest that much of the EU’s policy on lifelong learning, and subsequently Ireland’s policy on lifelong learning, reflects an on-going conflict between a model of lifelong learning promoting social and personal development to one that promotes the development of human capital for economic competitiveness (Field 2003; Bynner 2005; Biesta 2011). Whilst much of the language of policy documentation at both national and EU level reflects consideration of both the social justice and economic benefits of lifelong learning,

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implementation of policy to practice is heavily weighted towards a human capital rationale particularly in the context of the higher education system (Riddell *et al.* 2012). According to Fleming *et al.* (2017) the Irish higher education system has ‘become far more tightly integrated in state planning and more strongly orientated to market imperatives’ (p.23). An increasingly neo-liberal ideology has become dominant in Irish higher educational policy whereby ‘...competitiveness and flexibility must be maintained whatever the social cost’ (Finnegan 2016, p.48); and the language of managerialism focusing on efficiencies and effectiveness for enhanced employability in a global market override wider social realities (Biesta 2010; Lynch *et al.* 1998; Baker *et al.* 2009).

The data contained within the research study reflects many of the implications of the neo-liberal ideology underpinning higher education in Ireland. Findings clearly illustrate that for the majority of part time adult learners the traditional and continuing focus of higher education on prioritising the needs of full-time, mainstream students in preparation for the labour market served to create a learning environment of distinction with full-time younger students persistently favoured at all levels of institutional decision making (Kearns 2014; Finnegan 2016). For many of the research participants coming into an environment evidently weighted towards, and tailored for, the needs of a younger cohort was a daunting prospect. Although educational policy, particularly in the context of lifelong learning reinforces the need for the formal acquisition of skills and knowledge throughout life, in many ways higher educational institutions are still primarily age-graded working towards a frontloaded model of initial early educational provision for employability:

Irish higher education students have the narrowest age range across all OECD countries, reflecting the current unresponsiveness of Irish higher education to the skills needs of adults in the population.

(DES 2011 p.46)

This preoccupation with an educational provision for young people as the primary consideration of higher education reflects an out-dated institutional model within wider educational policy, at odds with the rapid pace of

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change and corresponding requirements at individual and societal levels (Merrill 2009; Clancy 2007; Slowey and Schuetze 2012). Lifelong learning policy (EU 2000; DES 2000) reinforces the active role of the individual citizen in ensuring the currency of skills and knowledge to cope with the changing nature of work and life. Yet, the culture of higher education for part-time adult learners as evident within the findings remains heavily oriented to traditional full-time provision founded on free market principles. Finnegan (2016) questions this utilitarian approach to education, expressing concern that the neo-liberal ideology underpinning education is very much associated with the acquisition of credentials by individuals in building human capital to compete within a globalised market; thereby impoverishing ‘...our capacity to discuss the complex and multi-dimensional nature of learning and offers no language for exploring how education might be used to create higher levels of social equality’ (p.49).

In reviewing the lifespan of higher education policy and practice in Irish society it is evident that economic growth and productivity have always been and remain fundamental priorities. Higher educational institutions are striving to keep pace with the scale of global change and are tasked with efficiently selling education as a product for employability in meeting the economic needs of society. In the context of the economic recession in 2008, followed by austerity and corresponding resource restrictions, there have been many challenges for higher educational institutions in seeking to meet statutory economic requirements (Finnegan 2016). But what of the purpose and function of higher education to contribute to wider considerations; to create critical thinkers, engaged citizens, an active democracy to challenge ideologies and inform policy in pursuit of a more just and equal society (Settersen and Gannon 2005; Finn 2015)? This broader purpose requires a greater emphasis on social equality and the ‘democraticisation of knowledge’ (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2016, p.247); necessitating a culture of change within higher education as an institution that moves beyond assimilation of part-time learners into full-time programmes, in order to become an institution that actively embraces a more diverse student body with a variety of needs and requirements. A

future vision of higher education must find a balance between the social, personal and economic needs of society. Greater resourcing and support of adult learning opportunities within higher education would contribute to a re-balancing of the human, social and economic dimensions of life, having the potential to give equal weighting to all three.

### **6.3.2 *Timing of lives: Learning journey / Identity capital***

Higher education as an institution of society is tasked with meeting both micro and macro level needs through the provision of tertiary formal learning provision. To do so effectively in response to the variability of life course patterns and the corresponding ‘lived life’ requirements of individuals requires institutional flexibility in the provision of new modes of learning and programmes fully reflective of an increasingly diverse cohort of learners. This point is reinforced by Finn (2015) who states that higher education is ‘tasked with mediating the competing demands of institutional systems and the complex needs of students who complete their studies in university through more flexible modes of learning’ (Finn 2015 p.17). Findings of this study highlighted the importance of *time* and *timing* as factors for consideration in informing the learning journey of adult learners, particularly in the context of decision-making regarding return to higher education. Higher education therefore as noted by Feinstein *et al.* (2008) needs to ensure that ‘learning opportunities are offered at the right time, in the right place, to meet needs in the most appropriate way’ (p.6).

There is a tendency within higher education to seek to capture the diversity of this student cohort within the categorisation or label of ‘non-traditional’ student; a ‘problematic categorisation that makes all sorts of assumptions about the socio-cultural characteristics of participants’ (Fleming *et al.* 2017, p.11). All labels, as noted in Chapter 2 by Schuetze and Casey (2006), should be treated with extreme caution as the act of labelling tends to mask hidden complexities, which in turn negates the potential of higher education to respond in a meaningful and constructive way to the specific requirements of part-time adult learners. Categorising or labelling adult learners as ‘non-traditional’ seeks to confer an identity that presumes firstly,

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that higher education is dealing with a homogenous group which belies reality as the part-time adult learner cohort are equally as heterogeneous as their full-time colleagues; and secondly, it assumes that the varied needs and requirements of all learners are accurately captured within the simple dichotomy of 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' (Edwards 2011). The nature of this classification within higher education policy and practice has implications for the evolving learner identity of both categories as it narrowly defines the adult learner as 'not being' or 'the opposite of' the traditional learner based on collective assumptions of both. Whether traditional/ non-traditional, full-time or part-time, greater flexibility and corresponding resources within higher education should seek to facilitate and support all learners equally in place of the current emphasis on full-time/traditional provision (Flannery and McGarr 2014; 2015; Fleming *et al.* 2017).

The Irish Government's (DES 2011) *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* emphasised the importance of greater flexibility within higher education in direct response to the scale of concern expressed to the strategy group during the consultation process: 'Ireland's poor performance in lifelong learning and the inflexibility of higher education were among the strongest concerns to emerge through the consultations and submissions received' (DES 2011, p 46). A subsequent publication produced by the Higher Education Authority, (governing body for the Irish higher education system) reiterated the role of part-time and flexible higher education in promoting a lifelong learning agenda in Ireland (HEA 2012). It equally reaffirmed the emphasis on enhanced flexibility prioritising the need to engage 'under-represented groups such as those disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers, those who are first time mature students and those wishing to access higher education on a part-time/ flexible basis' (Quillinan *et al.* 2018, p.2).

The Irish higher education policy framework outlines a series of national policy targets clearly illustrating a commitment to widening participation in support of increased diversity and equity within higher education. However,

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as noted by Hunt (2017, cited in Fleming *et al.* 2017) whilst access to higher education on a part-time basis certainly featured within policy documents, greater emphasis on full-time participation ‘overshadowed’ part-time participation and there was ‘no specific funding or support for part-time HE. This anomaly and “lack of fairness” within the system was noted but not addressed’ (Hunt 2017, p.217 as cited in Fleming *et al.* 2017). This same point had previously been highlighted by Flannery and McGarr (2014) in their consideration of flexible learning within the Irish higher education. In examining flexible and part-time provision of higher education they noted an evident divide between the resource allocation for full-time and part-time learners as the current funding model within higher education remains weighted towards full-time learners. Part-time adult learners are required to pay fees as they are not eligible for the Free Fees Initiative available to full-time students; and as these fees predominantly go towards tuition costs the full range of student services available to full-time students is not available to part-time learners. Only recently the Student Assistance Fund, a means tested support provided by the Department of Education and Skills to full-time students encountering financial difficulty has been extended to part-time learners (2017). In view of this reality financial constraints for part-time adult learners featured as one of the primary difficulties identified by research participants as part of this research study. The majority of research participants had financed their programme participation completely from their own personal funds (73.47% of BA Respondents and 68.25% of Diploma respondents) and financial problems featured within the top three difficulties encountered as part of their learning experience. On the basis of this experience one of the most significant barriers identified in terms of access to higher education was the level of fees, with many reiterating the need for greater financial support for part-time learners in addition to greater flexibility within higher education institutions in relation to fee payment. The provision of personal payment plans as provided by Community Development, University X independent of the Fee’s office in the University was particularly lauded as an example of good practice in promoting access to higher education. The self-financing nature of part-time programmes in higher education was described as a major barrier to both

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initial engagement in higher education and continuation thereafter, with the majority of research participants indicating that financially, despite the desire to proceed, they were simply not in a position to fund further programmes.

The current funding model for higher education appears to contradict the many policy documents advocating the principles of widening participation and access within higher education. In truth the scale of access, opportunities or ‘choices’ in higher education are limited in the face of real barriers encountered by part-time adult learners. Notwithstanding the large-scale policy targets for adult learners as set out in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES 2011), data compiled by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2015) illustrates that Ireland’s performance in relation to lifelong learning at nearly 7% is well below the EU average of 11%. This is not a surprising outcome considering the diverse needs and challenges experienced by part-time adult learners entering higher education programmes (Flannery and McGarr 2014). Such challenges are further compounded by the absence of financial support and a learning environment dominated by full-time younger learners in line with the economic imperatives of government policy. The variability of individual life courses highlights the importance of access to learning of all forms throughout life (Field 2009, 2011; Biesta *et al.* 2011). In terms of access to formal learning higher education has a key role to play in providing people with the resources and conditions necessary to cope with, inform and shape a rapidly changing society. The major challenge facing higher education comprises a culture of change at an institutional level to move away from the traditional emphasis on front-loading initial education for full-time students to embrace a more diverse student cohort with equally diverse needs (Fleming *et al.* 2017; Merrill 2015). This requires a corresponding culture of change within higher education policy to translate policy into practice in real terms so as to ensure equality of opportunity through appropriate funding and support mechanisms. Supporting learning over the life course requires

...a system of funding measures that will make it possible to fund an “age-integrated”, or preferably “generation-integrated”, structure of learning

opportunities that recognizes the flexibility of life courses and supports solidarity between generations.

(Hake 2009, p.1146)

### **6.3.3 *Linked lives: Relationships / Social capital***

There is a scarcity of writing and debate about the value of HE for social and community development, for the support of citizenship and the creation of a free republic, a democracy or a vision of the emancipatory potential of learning – even in universities.

(Fleming *et al.* 2017, p.24)

As previously noted adult learners come to higher education not as ‘independent agents’. Whilst the lives of all learners, whether full or part-time, are interwoven within a range of family and social networks, research indicates that part-time adult learners face particular challenges in juggling the range of responsibilities and expectations of their family, work and social networks in the context of returning to higher education (Fleming *et al.* 2017; Flannery and McGarr 2014). The findings of this research study indicated that the time and support requirements of the ‘linked lives’ of research participants, the majority of whom were women and parents, had a significant impact on their experience of higher education. The issue of time management and feeling ‘time-poor’ with the corresponding stress of consistently trying to juggle and manage wider life in the context of deadlines and timetables was evident within both quantitative and qualitative data sets. Survey respondents highlighted both time and stress as the top two problems/ difficulties encountered during their engagement in higher education. Financial problems, family problems, less time to meet job demands and childcare problems completed the top six most common problems identified. Overcoming fear was also identified as a particular challenge by research respondents in advance of engaging with higher education. The scale of difficulties and problems identified reflect the reality of already busy lives interwoven with the demands of a higher education system ‘...that continues to favour the notion of the autonomous, eighteen year-old learner that remains far outside the experience of many mature students making their way into HE’ (Kearns 2014 p.97). Supports identified to assist in overcoming such difficulties centred again on the need for a

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culture of change within higher education to recognise part-time adult learners as a diverse cohort of learners with varying needs and a wide range of responsibilities and commitments outside of their formal programme of learning.

Research on mature students in higher education undertaken by Kearns (2017, as cited in Fleming *et al.* 2017) reinforced the specific needs of adult learners as a distinct cohort, but equally raised a related concern regarding their ability to complete their studies in an environment serving a traditional student body:

The “net result” is that mature students are at a higher risk of withdrawal from HE than their younger counterparts in a system that is often ambivalent to their specific needs.

(p.182).

Institutional policies and practices were deemed to prioritise the traditional full-time younger learner at a different stage of life with potentially greater freedom. Timetabling, semesterisation, exams and assignment deadlines framed within the standard academic year defaulted automatically to the perceived needs of the mainstream traditional student cohort and the corresponding requirements of the institution. Extending the academic year in recognition of the scale of commitments for part-time adult learners was a key recommendation identified by many research respondents within this study. The importance of part-time programmes actually being part-time was equally emphasised by the majority of research participants, identifying the evening and weekend blend of provision as per their programme experience as the only potential route open to the greater number of adult learners. But concern was also expressed regarding the limited scale of provision of part-time higher education programmes that were really part-time, as in many cases part-time programmes simply sought to incorporate part time learners within components of full-time programmes in line with full-time timetabling. Research findings clearly illustrated that greater flexibility within the institutional policy and practices of higher education must reflect a deeper appreciation of the ‘linked lives’ of part-time adult learners in supporting the needs of a more diverse student population.

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Improved links between higher education and wider society remains an on-going theme within higher education policy. Widening access to higher education in line with national policy targets is underpinned by a strong economic orientation in accordance with the demands of the knowledge economy, but central to much of the policy documentation (e.g. the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011); National plan for equity of access to higher education, 2015 etc.) is a corresponding discourse on the importance of access to learning in order to attain a more socially inclusive society through the development of social capital. Putnam argues that social capital; the development of networks and connections of shared and evolving values, can be enhanced through education and is essential for social cohesion (1995). Field (2006), in turn argues that sustainable economic growth can only be achieved and maintained when interwoven with social cohesion. Whilst economic considerations certainly featured as a primary motivation for the majority of research participants in undertaking higher education, this motivation was equally interwoven with personal and societal considerations. This is possibly an unsurprising fact considering that both the higher education programmes specific to this study focus on community development and family support as core content. However, similar findings highlighting the complexity of motivations identified by adult learners undertaking higher education echo personal and societal benefits as core motivators to higher education engagement (Fleming *et al.* 2010; Kearns 2014). Detail outlined by the research participants of this study illustrates the scale of personal development achieved and the positive impact of same on family members and their subsequent relationship with formal learning. Increased confidence in ability to ‘give back’ and contribute to community and society were frequently named as a direct consequence of the learning experience. Acquiring the critical skills and knowledge necessary to become a more critically engaged citizen certainly featured within the findings as a profoundly life changing outcome for the majority of participants. In many ways the personal, professional and social benefits identified by research participants mirrors the more humanistic vision of lifelong learning originally identified by UNESCO in the 1970s

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before becoming distilled by a series of EU policy iterations to a predominant economic orientation.

Some progress, however, is evident in relation to the enhancement of linkages between higher education and wider society (see Chapter 2 for greater detail). More recent strategies for higher education in Ireland demonstrate an increasing interest in the role of higher education in promoting civic engagement and active democracy. The HEA *System performance framework (2018-2020)* (HEA, 2018) in seeking to action the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (DES, 2011), has specifically identified wider engagement with civic and civil society as one of its six key objectives in pursuit of a ‘strong sustainable economy and a more equitable society’ (p.11). In this context all leaders of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) responded by signing a collective ‘Campus Engage Charter for Civic and Community Engagement’ (2014) actively committing to 10 key objectives towards playing a more active and engaged role in society. These developments in conjunction with the agreements or ‘compacts’ between individual HEIs and the HEA whereby public funding provision is directly linked to evidence of each higher institutions contribution to community and society are positive indications of policy implementation reflective of a broader vision for higher education beyond purely economic objectives. Reinforcing the societal and civic engagement role of higher education can lead to more empowered citizens and communities. As noted by Nussbaum (2010):

It would be catastrophic to become a nation of technically competent people who have lost the ability to think critically, to examine themselves and to respect the humanity and diversity of others...It is therefore very urgent right now to support curricular efforts aimed at producing citizens who can take charge of their own reasoning, who can see the different and foreign not as a threat to be resisted, but as an invitation to explore and understand, expanding their own minds and their capacity for citizenship.

(pp.300-301)

As outlined in Chapter 2, adult and community education structures within higher education institutes are ideally placed to respond to the civic and community engagement responsibilities of higher education in fulfilling its societal role. Historically, as far back as the early 1970s ‘...universities

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appointed adult or extramural education officers with responsibility for fostering adult and community-oriented courses' (Coolahan 2017, p.164). Further educational policy such as the *White paper on adult education* (DES 2000) led to the development of, or expansion of, adult centred structures within higher education in order to promote the concept of widening participation and lifelong learning for adult learners. New professions, many of which, particularly in University settings, were classed as support, administrative or non-academic posts evolved in response to the growing demand at European and national level for increased provision of lifelong learning opportunities (Finn 2015; Coolahan 2017).

The recent acceleration of reform within higher education with a greater emphasis on its contribution to society offers greater potential of recognition and resourcing of such community education/adult education structures within higher education settings. Traditionally, such structures have sought to meet the challenges of responding to the varying needs of a diverse adult cohort through the provision of flexible learning opportunities including part-time, blended, online and outreach delivery. Often such provision equally challenges the institutional rigidities of mainstream higher education systems requiring negotiation and creativity in determining solutions to flexible provision. The onset of austerity in 2008 placed increased pressure on all higher education institutes, the majority of whom are now 'overstretched and understaffed' (Fleming *et al.* 2017, p.8). During this time higher education adult community education structures, in particular, have struggled within a culture of cutbacks and rationalisation to continue the ethos of community education provision within a higher education environment prioritizing the economic demands of the state. The changing policy environment emphasizing the wider role of higher education offers the opportunity to re-balance priorities to include the concerns of individuals and communities. As Finn notes (2015):

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In a time where economic considerations are given paramount importance over the human struggle to live in a rapidly changing world and within an increasing culture of alienation, it is the job of universities to bring attention to and search for solutions to “problems of greatest human concern”.

(p.21)

Strategies for higher education emphasizing the importance of civic engagement and community education provide enhanced opportunities for higher education institutes to fully recognize and respond to the ‘linked lives’ of individuals and communities.

### **6.3.4 Time and place: Life experience / Structure vs. agency**

To effectively engage adults within higher education requires recognition on the part of the institution of the need to adopt adult friendly policies, practices and pedagogies that reflect adult learner needs and requirements in the context of their lives. Hunt (2017, as cited in Fleming *et al.* 2017), in her review of part-time and flexible learning in higher education highlights the dearth of research and knowledge specific to this cohort, not solely within Ireland but equally in relation to research within the United Kingdom and Northern America, as the perceived low status of part-time as mode of learning meant that the priorities of policy makers were elsewhere. This lack of research specific to part-time learners means that;

How the needs of adult learners and part-time students have been supported, resourced, and catered to across the sector and within individual HEIs is inadequately documented and researched. Furthermore, little is known about who teaches part-time students, particular pedagogical approaches or specific curriculum development responses. There is limited empirical research to establish or understand the range of experiences, practices and policies that exist locally.

(Hunt 2017 p.219 as cited in Fleming *et al.* 2017)

Findings from this study have identified a range of difficulties and challenges experienced by part-time adult learners in undertaking higher education. This detail is outlined earlier in this discussion chapter in section 6.2.3. But equally, research respondents both quantitative and qualitative were anxious to describe what they identified as best practice considerations for higher education on the basis of their learning experience. Best practice

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identified in terms of pedagogy reiterates many of the adult centred teaching practices described by Knowles in his discussion of andragogy as ‘the art and science of helping adults to learn’ (1980, p.43). As adults returning to education the importance of bringing life experience into their programmes of learning was deemed essential to contributing to the attainment of deeper more significant learning. Opportunities to interweave life experience into programme content, delivery, and assessment enhanced the quality of the learning experience in both availing of and contributing to real world knowledge. According to Brookfield; ‘When adults teach and learn in one another’s company they find themselves engaged in a challenging, passionate and creative activity (1986, p.1). Again as the focus of the programmes within this research study centred on community development and family support studies, a real world, problem solving orientation to learning was an integral component to the learning process. However, the emphasis on the integration of life experience as part of critical reflection in the promotion of praxis is a highly recognised teaching approach for all learners, but particularly evident in adult learning pedagogy (Knowles 1980; Jarvis 2010; Quillinan 2018).

The exchange of opinion through active debate and discussion in a class context was considered essential to the process of engaging the learner’s experience within the learning programme. Pedagogical approaches undertaken by adult educators within higher education programmes need to promote opportunities for group work and collaboration, enhancing exchange of opinion among learners and between learners and tutors. Effective facilitation skills on the part of the tutor, is integral to the success of this approach in creating a more democratic learning environment. According to Merrill (2015), such adult learning pedagogies contribute to positive change in social and political attitudes and contribute to greater civic engagement, a primary consideration of recent higher education policy (DES 2011; DES 2016). Discourse as part of the learning process ensures the inclusion of life experience leading to critical exchange and life relevant learning. New technologies provide a vast range of opportunities to facilitate discourse through flexible delivery modes for part-time, distance and online

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programmes. However, research participants of this study also emphasised the importance of class-based, face-to-face engagement in building a sense of trust within the group of learners and between the learners and tutors as part of achieving a more open exchange. Attendance at workshops/ classes was a key requirement of both higher education programmes within this study as class participation and interaction with fellow learners was considered core to knowledge and skills acquisition for the purposes of the programmes. As part-time programmes delivered over evenings and/or weekends, participants were with their dedicated group for a minimum of one year and up to four years in the case of the degree programme. As a result, participants formed lasting relationships with colleagues, peers and tutors. This approach to part-time adult learning provision was particularly noted by research participants as having greatly contributed to the development of a supportive learning environment. Sharing the learning experience within a dedicated group with an age spectrum of 21-85 was considered to be a more accurate reflection of real life considerations for community and society resulting in a more holistic learning experience. This perspective concurs with other research undertaken by Kearns (2017, as cited in Fleming *et al.* 2017) which highlighted the sense of isolation expressed by mature students ‘...who had expected “others like me”, only to find themselves “stranded” as middle-aged men and women in programmes and courses dominated by school leavers’ (p.188).

The ability to be able to draw connections between theory and practice, to relate course content to real examples, was a core skill identified by research respondents as an essential requirement for all adult education tutors. This equally required some degree of life experience on the part of the tutor in question and an equal measure of passion about the teaching content. Programme content needed to be stimulating, current and life relevant through the interweaving of theory and practice. It was also deemed essential that tutors would be approachable and fully competent in terms of engaging in interactive adult learning pedagogies, valuing adult learners as equals in the process. A point reinforced by Taylor *et al.* (2009) in stating that; ‘An instructor using andragogical principles focuses more on

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being a facilitator of learning instead of being a transmitter of knowledge and evaluator' (p.1). The inclusion of practitioners within programmes was also considered core to programme effectiveness in ensuring that participants would have access to the full range of expertise necessary in the attainment of life relevant learning. The engagement of tutors on a part-time basis with the relevant academic and practitioner expertise necessary to inform the policy and practice-based orientation of the two programmes documented within this study was considered by research participants to be integral to the learning experience. As front-line staff in a range of sectors, these tutors brought a specific level of expertise to the programmes thereby ensuring the development of adult learning programmes which respond to both the personal and professional life journey of learners. Research participants identified such knowledge as essential to the creation of a collaborative, practice-based programme learning environment.

To maintain the requisite standard of knowledge and skills necessary as academics/tutors/ practitioners within higher education, adult learning programmes requires a commitment to undertake research and the necessary time by which to do so in order to achieve engaged practice. This is essential not only to ensure programme content and delivery remains current to the wider policy and practice environment, but equally to allow the potential to inform and influence higher education policy regarding the specific needs and requirements of a more diverse student population. Finn (2015) highlights the importance of critical reflection as a key practice to be adopted by adult educationalists in taking on the challenge of research, as; 'Their professional experience gained in a multiplicity of contexts, is archived in their memory awaiting harvest'. But she equally notes that; 'Unfortunately, with the institutionally imposed strictures of their roles, finding space to do research is the greatest obstacle and a major issue' (p.20). Such space is crucial if higher education wants to ensure that all programmes reflect the learning requirements of adult learners. Access to real world, pragmatic research offers higher education the opportunity to combine agency and structure and in so doing nurture the development of

really useful knowledge and in turn, determine really useful policy and practice (Connolly 2015).

### **6.3.5 Agency: Personal Development / Self-esteem-Confidence**

As already noted within the Ireland's National Skills Strategy (DES 2016) educational policy seeks to '*ensure all of our people can reach their full potential and play an active role in building a better Ireland*' (p.7). Higher education as one form of learning has a valuable role to play in striving to attain this outcome. O'Sullivan *et al.* (2017) emphasise the potential societal impact of higher education in fulfilling a public role through '*...community engagement*' and '*...the amelioration of societal inequalities in order to enable full participation by all*' (p.1). Research indicates that access to education reduces social inequality, enhances social cohesion and contributes to the creation of a fair and just society (Akerman *et al.* 2011; Fleming *et al.* 2017; Field 2009; Finnegan 2016). As outlined in Chapter 2, education is deemed to be a major determinant of an individual's life changes not solely in terms of employment, but equally in relation to broader social outcomes (Green 2011). This too has a direct impact on personal agency; the degree to which an individual believes they have the capacity to determine their own life course by navigating within the opportunities and constraints of the wider world. Personal agency therefore is directly linked to educational attainment but equally to educational experience.

The research findings of this study indicated that for the majority of research participants the experience of initial formal education was underscored by a human capital rationale, and the potential to continue within formal education was directly impacted by family circumstances. For the majority, the decision to return to formal education as an adult learner continued to be driven by human capital considerations in the pursuit of employability. However, the extent of personal development, self-esteem and self-confidence attained as part of the learning experience was one of the most noteworthy outcomes of the research. This enhanced sense of

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personal agency contributed to a desire for continuing personal development through further learning, in addition to increased confidence regarding greater community and societal engagement. Many researchers have outlined the positive benefits of learning in terms of personal development and agency (Field 2009; Biesta *et al.* 2011; Schuller *et al.* 2004). Field (2011), however, also raises a note of caution regarding the potential negative outcomes of adult education on the well-being of the adult learner, particularly if the learning environment evokes within participants memories of previous negative experiences. This reiterates the need for higher education to move away from traditional forms of learning approaches towards more adult-friendly pedagogies promoting self-esteem and confidence.

Higher education as a sector also needs to demonstrate a greater degree of agency in challenging a dominant neo-liberal ideology which essentially views education as a product to be sold in line with market imperatives. In this context higher education is closely aligned to the requirements of business and the economy in the production of 'work-ready' graduates (Fleming *et al.* 2017; O'Sullivan *et al.* 2017). Critique of this narrow, utilitarian view of the role and purpose of higher education is evident within a body of research that emphasises the full range of possibilities and wider benefits of education (Schuller *et al.* 2004; Lynch 1998; Baker *et al.* 2009; Field 2009; Finn 2015; Fleming *et al.* 2017; O'Sullivan *et al.* 2017). Economic development cannot be given precedence over personal and social development in a society that seeks to promote human flourishing (Lynch 1998; Baker *et al.* 2009). Higher education institutes need to engage in critical reflection leading to the development of counter-discourse to challenge the corporatisation of education within national education policy (Finn 2015; Lynch 1998; Baker *et al.* 2009). Integral to this counter-discourse is the importance of equity within society and the role of higher education in supporting the creation of a just and caring society through the development of an engaged citizenry. Skilbeck and Connell (2000, p.3) state:

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Equity is not a partisan affair, even if often driven by special interest groups; it is not incidental to the mission of higher education, but is integral to the intellectual and other virtues of academic life.

Higher education needs to move towards a model of access and participation that fully embraces the learning requirements of all learners across all spectrums of life. This broader vision of education will not only empower individual agency, but equally empower higher education as an institution to become more agentic in fulfilling its role in shaping the changing nature of society.

### **Key Points: Higher Education (Meso)**

- The culture of higher education for part-time adult learners as evident within the findings remains heavily oriented to traditional full-time provision founded on free market principles
- The self-financing nature of part-time programmes in higher education was a major barrier to both initial engagement in higher education and the potential of continuation thereafter; financially, the majority of research participants were simply not in a position to fund further programmes
- The institutional policy and practices of higher education must reflect a deeper appreciation of the ‘linked lives’ of part-time adult learners in supporting the needs of a more diverse student population
- As adults returning to higher education the importance of bringing life experience into programmes of learning was deemed essential to contributing to the attainment of deeper more significant learning
- Access to higher education has a direct impact on personal agency; the degree to which an individual believes they have the capacity to determine their own life course by navigating within the opportunities and constraints of the wider world.

#### **6.4 Wider civic society: Macro**

Macro level: refers to ‘cultural values, economic conditions, and socio-political and welfare structures which define social spaces for biographical action’ (Heinz 2010, p.230). In the context of this research study, macro specifically refers to wider civic society at a policy level and the implications of same for the meso and micro levels of higher education and the individual adult learner.

##### **6.4.1 Lifespan development: Age / Human Capital**

The findings of this study coincide with a period of major economic recession in Irish society dating from 2008 until some evidence of economic recovery in 2014 (ESRI 2014). Higher education policy and practice, in seeking to respond to this economic crisis, further consolidated its relationship with the state and the dominant neo-liberal policy agenda (Finnegan 2016; Fleming *et al.* 2017). Market imperatives have become embedded within higher education policy and practice predominantly underscored by a human capital rationale (Flannery and McGarr 2014). As a result education is narrowly viewed as the attainment of credentials or qualifications for the purposes of the labour market. As noted by Biesta (2010) much of the discussion in relation to education has become less preoccupied with consideration of its purpose and more concerned with the processes and measurement of same, involving; ‘technical and managerial questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of processes, not what these processes are for’ (p.20). As a result there is a tendency to focus on the ‘how’ of education rather than the ‘why’, raising the question as to ‘whether we are indeed measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure’ (Biesta 2010, p.13).

Research indicates that the demographics of the modern world is changing, with increased life expectancy comes an ageing population and more complex life patterns (McNair 2009; Slowey 2008). As people are living longer, the importance of access to learning opportunities at whatever age in life becomes more apparent: ‘...increasing life expectancy changes the

arithmetic of the return to investments in human capital, and makes investment in the education and training of the middle-aged more attractive (Karamel 2011, p.7). Human capital is essential for economic prosperity and higher education is one of the principle forms of human capital accumulation (Schultz 1961; Schuller *et al.* 2004). A narrow conceptualisation of education however, linked predominantly to the world of work, does not recognise the wider benefits of learning and equally curtails access to resources for learning opportunities outside of those deemed necessary for the labour market. Schuller (2001) warns that simply increasing human capital in any society will not guarantee economic or social progress, if anything it may hinder it as groups that do not have similar access to human capital have the potential to become isolated and this ‘...isolation in turn may have a long-term negative impact on the benefit of human capital growth even to the skilled and qualified’ (p.10). Learning opportunities reflective of the changing nature of the life course of individuals must seek to achieve a balance between the individual, social, democratic and economic needs of society. The findings of this study highlight the importance of reviewing higher educational policy in order to enhance the learning opportunities and experiences of adult learners reflective of their needs and life requirements.

### **6.4.2 *Timing of lives: Learning journey / Identity capital***

As noted by Field (2016) in Chapter 2, despite the diversity of discourse in relation to lifelong learning there is evidence of one common agreement and that is simply that ‘a one off dose of school and college will not serve to get you through life’s many challenges and opportunities’ (p.1). The ability to learn continually is considered to be a precondition to cope with the demands of change and flexibility now regarded as commonplace within modern society (Field 2006; Schuetze 2012). In this context access to learning; not solely formal accredited learning, but equally non-formal and informal learning, has the potential to shape the lives of individuals and society. The challenges of the contemporary world requires the on-going development of knowledge, skills and competencies in order to empower people to navigate their life course whilst adapting to, influencing and

shaping their wider world. The motivation to engage with, and continue within, the learning process is directly linked to access opportunities in addition to the learning experience itself as both contribute either positively or negatively to an individual's identity capital. Identity capital, therefore, has a direct relationship with learning by influencing the development of the individual through interaction between the individual and their learning environment. Adult learning, in seeking to promote effective learning and the capability to keep on learning for life, is a form of learning of particular importance in contributing to the development of identity capital throughout the life course.

### **6.4.3 *Linked lives: Relationships / Social capital***

The question of what kind of education is needed in order for students to be informed and active citizens in a world that increasingly ignores their needs, if not their futures, is rarely asked.

(Aronowitz 2008, p.xii).

This research demonstrates that returning to higher education had an immensely positive impact at a personal level in relation to all aspects of life; family, community, work and social life. Corresponding discourse and research (Putnam 1995; Field 2006; Dolan and Brennan 2016) emphasise the importance of access to learning in terms of enhancing social capital and social cohesion. Sustainable economic growth can only be attained when interwoven with social cohesion. Access to learning opportunities is essential in order to acquire the critical skills and knowledge needed to become informed and active citizens within civil society. As noted by Dolan and Brennan (2016) it is '...generally acknowledged that the potential of civic education and civic skills development has not been fully tapped in either the formal or informal education and learning system' (p.18). Higher education therefore has a central role to play in promoting educational equality, democratic citizenship and creating a fair and just modern society; but to do so effectively higher education institutes require an educational policy environment that goes beyond a narrow neo-liberal policy orientation of employability and human capital enhancement to one that embraces wider individual and societal goals. Focusing predominantly on market-

based imperatives will not achieve equality or social cohesion. Greater resourcing and support of adult learning opportunities within higher education would contribute to a re-balancing of the human, social and economic dimensions of life, having the potential to give equal weighting to all three.

### **6.4.4 Time and place: Life experience / Structure vs. agency**

The purpose of education adapts to correspond to the changing economic, political, geographic and social contexts of its time. More recent educational policy development in Irish society has been primarily economic in orientation in response to the downfall of the economy following the collapse of the property market in conjunction with the banking crisis. This led to immediate and significant change in the political, social and economic landscape of the country and consequently a more utilitarian approach to educational policy development.

The Irish government's bailout programme for the banks required reforms of HE that involved a range of changes including: less dependence on the state; become more responsive to the demands of the commercial sector; deliver graduates who are "work ready"; install management systems more in line with business models; see students as customers and learning as a product.

(Fleming *et al.* 2017 p.33)

In the context of changing demographics and globalisation higher educational policy must remain current and relevant to the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This reinforces the need for the formal acquisition of skills and knowledge throughout life across all spheres of life. Defaulting to out-dated models of frontloaded initial educational provision emphasising market imperatives presents a highly limited view of the purpose of education in society negating its wider public and civic responsibilities. Higher education needs to adopt a life course approach to learning and educational provision that effectively responds to the needs and requirements of learners' throughout their lived lives.

### **6.4.5 Agency: Personal development / Self-esteem-confidence**

It is important that educational policy gives due recognition to both agency and structure for adult learners throughout the changing life course by recognising both personal learning needs and the wider social structures within which they are expressed. Higher education policy and practice must actively challenge barriers to participation and provide supports which are multi-faceted to support the evident agency of returning adult learners. According to Finnegan (2016) one of the main ideals of education should be to contribute to the creation of societies ‘...which provide people with the conditions and resources necessary to live dignified and flourishing lives’ (p.52). This, however, requires the development and implementation of meaningful access and support policies and a commitment to the provision of equal educational opportunities to enable individuals to have increased agency over their educational and learning path. One of the most noteworthy outcomes of the research study was the significance of the learning experience in terms of enhanced individual personal agency and empowerment; this in turn has a major influence on confidence levels, greater self-esteem and self-worth, an important consideration for educational policy in the context of the changing nature of contemporary society.

Higher education has a fundamental responsibility to empower citizens to engage in all aspects of life equally. To do so, however, requires a recognition on the part of policy makers that the prevailing emphasis on a ‘business model’ of education and funding models that underscore economic measures of ‘success’ do not provide higher education institutions with the freedom, resources or impetus to fully fulfil their societal responsibilities. Creating a more responsive learner-centred life relevant higher education system must become a core priority for educationalists and policy makers informing civic society. A life course perspective is a critical component in the design, development and implementation of a higher educational policy that seeks to nurture individual agency in the context of the historical, social, cultural and economic considerations of modern society. Engaging the voices of adult learners within educational policy

development is crucial to enable policy to move away from traditional structures in order to respond to the needs of a diverse student cohort and adapt to a changing society.

### **Key Points: Wider Civic Society: Macro**

- A narrow conceptualisation of education linked predominantly to the world of work does not recognise the wider benefits of learning and equally curtails access to resources for learning opportunities outside of those deemed necessary for the labour market
- The challenges of the contemporary world requires the on-going development of knowledge, skills and competencies in order to empower people to navigate their life course whilst adapting to, influencing and shaping their wider world
- Higher education has a central role to play in promoting educational equality, democratic citizenship and creating a fair and just modern society, focusing predominantly on market-based imperatives will not achieve equality or social cohesion
- In the context of changing demographics and globalisation, higher educational policy must remain current and relevant to the full spectrum of demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- A life course perspective is a critical component in the design, development and implementation of higher educational policy that seeks to nurture individual agency in the context of the historical, social, cultural and economic considerations of modern society

### **6.5 Summary**

Lifelong learning as a concept within higher educational policy focuses on the needs and requirements, primarily economic, of the state at National and European levels. It outlines a macro perspective on learning to be transferred through educational institutions at a meso level to the micro level of the individual learner. It is a top-down approach involving provision of learning ‘opportunities’ in line with the economic imperatives of the

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market and a philosophy of learning that reinforces the individual role of the citizen to consistently update skills and knowledge for the knowledge economy. The emphasis on the role of the individual citizen is largely in the context of the economic expectations of the state as opposed to civic or democratic considerations. Occasional reference to the value of social cohesion is noted but it is assumed that it will automatically coincide with the achievement of economic prosperity. Life course learning in contrast starts at a micro level in recognising the importance of the individual in the learning process. Through the promotion of learning opportunities reflective of the actual needs of the learner, it seeks to enhance both personal agency and empowerment and thereby contribute to social development. Higher education as an institution of society has a fundamental role to play in promoting the ideals of democracy and human rights; it cannot simply be defined in corporate terms and must therefore give equal emphasis to the promotion of human, social and identity capital for each individual throughout their life course for the benefit of society as a whole.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This final chapter revisits the starting point of the research; the research background and the overarching aim and objectives. This will be discussed in section 7.2. Section 7.3 will then briefly recall the key theoretical perspectives informing the conceptual model of life course learning identified following a critical review of the body of literature relevant to this research. Section 7.4 will provide a synopsis of the research methodology and methods used, whilst section 7.5 provides a reminder of the key findings. Lastly, the final section, 7.6 outlines recommendations in relation to policy and practice considerations. In doing so it outlines messages to an adult learner; recommendations for higher education institutions and actors; and lastly, recommendations for national/ international educational policy makers influencing wider civic society.

### **7.2 A Reprise of the Research Background and the Overarching Aim and Objectives.**

Much of the policy and practice of higher education has been informed by international, European and commercial bodies. The voices, needs, expectations and life realities of adult learners of all ages rarely feature in the decision making, design and implementation of programmes of higher education. In particular, very little is known about the learning needs, requirements, experiences and life circumstances of part-time adult learners. This lack of knowledge in addition to a corresponding lack of support for part-time learners returning to higher education is a recurring theme in Irish and European higher education and lifelong learning research studies.

As discussed in Chapter 1, this research study examines the concept of the life course and why it may be considered an issue of critical importance in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners in higher education. By choosing to adopt a life course perspective this research sought to understand the learning experiences of adult learners in higher education within the context of changing social structures. It is

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imperative that the needs, expectations and life realities of adult learners feature in the decision making, design and implementation of programmes of higher education. Having spent over 20 years as an educationalist with part-time adult learners as participants on community education programmes in higher education, the author had become increasingly aware of need for research reflective of the voices and ‘lived life’ realities of adult learners. As the majority of professionals working with adult learners within higher education settings are employed in administrative categories they rarely engage in research, or publish academic material (Finn 2015). As a result there is a recognised requirement for further research in this field and therefore the author seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge in relation to the learning needs and requirements of adult learners in higher education, from a life course perspective. In this context the overarching aim of this study was to:

Examine life course influences on adult learning in order to contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education, through an examination of two community education programmes, namely: the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies and the BA in Applied Social Studies, thereby establishing the challenges and considerations which may inform future learning policy and practice.

*The core objectives of this research are:*

1. To examine the concept of the Life Course in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners with a particular focus on higher education
2. To determine the key components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education
3. To contribute to a conceptual model of life course learning directly informed by adult learning experiences in an Irish Context
4. To review life course learning in the context of higher education policy and practice to identify potential considerations for the

adult learner, higher education institutions and wider civic society.

By choosing to adopt a life course perspective incorporating biographical approaches and a multi-level analysis this research sought to ensure that the voices, perspectives and lived lives of adult learners would directly inform national and international educational policy.

### **7.2 The key theoretical perspectives informing the conceptual model of life course learning**

A comprehensive review of existing literature (Chapters 2 and 3) specific to the concept of the life course and pertinent to the four research objectives identified, subsequently informed a tentative conceptual model of life course learning which also served as a framework of analysis for the purposes of this study. This conceptual model combined the five principles of life course research as identified by Elder (1985); lifespan development, agency, time and place, timing of lives, and linked lives with the three capitals of learning; human, social and identity capital, developed by Schuller and Watson (2009) incorporating the categories of significant learning outlined by Fink (2003). A brief synopsis of each perspective has previously been provided (see Chapters 2 and 6). The decision to adopt a life course approach to the research ensures a more complete investigation of the individual learning experiences of adult learners; going beyond a focus on one particular life stage to consider the wider life course, framed within changing socio-economic structures and historical events.

### **7.3 Research methods**

The research methodology and methods used for the purpose of this research study were outlined in Chapter 4. The researcher as a practitioner within the field of adult education focusing on the 'real world' problem of the 'lived life' realities of adult learners in higher education adopted a pragmatic research perspective, utilising mixed methods research integrating qualitative and quantitative data methods. By incorporating

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triangulation, this study sought to enhance the reliability and validity of findings and thereby potentially contribute to the development of ‘socially useful knowledge’ (Feilzer 2010, p.6).

By choosing to adopt a life course perspective encompassing biographical approaches within a multi-level analysis this research seeks to ensure that the voices, perspectives and lived lives of adult learners directly inform national and international policy. The target population for the purposes of this study were part time adult learners (usually categorised within higher education as non-traditional students) who have graduated from one or both of the following part-time community education programmes in higher education (applicants for these programmes must be over 21 years in order to meet University criteria for adult education part-time programmes).

- (i) NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies ( 1 year part-time, level 7, 30 ECTS)
- (ii) BA in Applied Social Studies (4 year part-time, level 8, 180 ECTS)

All graduates of the BA in Applied Social Studies were invited to participate as it was a relatively new programme with the first set of graduates completing in 2010. The Diploma in Applied Social Studies had a longer history and therefore the numbers were narrowed down to all graduates of the programme over the period 2010-2014.

The decision to use a survey questionnaire was based on the need to examine and compare the learning lives and experiences of adult learners in higher education and therefore relevant to all four research objectives. The quantitative surveys with both sets of graduates (BA and Diploma) consisted of focused questions designed to encourage reflection on learning experiences within higher education and learning throughout the life course in the context of the key life course principles (Elder 1985) and the learning capitals concept (Schuller and Watson 2009) incorporating the categories of significant learning outlined by Fink (2003).. The use of quantitative surveys sought to identify key themes relevant to adult life course learning

experiences (historical, social and cultural contexts), life span educational history, learning attitudes, motivations and potential suggestions or considerations for higher education from an adult learner perspective. The quantitative surveys sought to objectively condense the scope of enquiry and thereby form the basis for the design and implementation of the qualitative semi-structured interviews. The qualitative methods of enquiry through semi-structured biographical interviews were designed to reflect and expand on the key findings of the quantitative surveys. The decision to use qualitative methods as part of this investigation sought to ensure a richer, more in-depth and interactive exploration of the potential components of life course learning for adult learners in higher education.

### **7.4 Key research findings**

The key findings outlined in Chapter 5 were elaborated on within Chapter 6 and are outlined in brief within this section under the five thematic headings that correspond with the conceptual framework identified. In advance of same however, a concise profile of adult learners is provided, followed by a synopsis of the identified needs and requirements of part-time adult learners in higher education (see Table 7.1).

#### **7.4.1 Profile of adult learners**

Respondents were predominantly female (75% approx.) between the ages of 30-59. The majority of respondents were married and working on a full-time or part-time basis, primarily in the community and voluntary sector. Almost half the respondents had attained a 3<sup>rd</sup> level qualification in advance of undertaking further education. The majority of both sets of respondents indicated that they had been out of formal accredited learning for less than 5 years with 20% approx. out of formal learning for *over 10 years*. Despite the desire to do so, the majority had not registered for further studies because of financial pressures, time constraints, and work/family commitments. The majority indicated that their programme participation had *not contributed* in terms of **employment**, attaining a job or promotion, but many felt that it *did contribute* to greater potential **employability**. The majority of respondents indicated that their programme participation had

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made a *significant contribution* to **personal benefits/opportunities**.

Respondents from both programmes indicated that their participation had made *some contribution* to **family/social benefits**, particularly in the context of relationships with friends and greater social contacts. Adult learners' motivation to participate in higher education centred on personal growth, career development, interest in a particular subject and attaining an academic title.

Table 7.1 Synopsis of Needs and Requirements of Part-time Adult Learners in Higher Education

Factors which enhanced the Adult Learning Experience:	Competencies & Skills *Attained *Required	Difficulties/ Challenges	Necessary Supports	Good Practice in Higher Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Provision of part-time blended Adult Learner Centred Programmes recognising scale of commitments.</li> <li>+ Recognition of Life Experience within learning process.</li> <li>+ Usage of different modes and styles of learning leading to a positive learning experience.</li> <li>+ Promotion of learners' confidence levels.</li> <li>+ Provision of accessible and inclusive learning processes.</li> <li>+ Adult learner valued as an equal within the learning process.</li> <li>+ Maintaining a culture of learner support.</li> </ul>	<p><b>*Attained</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Communication skills.</li> <li>+ Academic writing skills.</li> <li>+ Creative thinking skills.</li> <li>+ Teamwork skills.</li> <li>+ Learning to learn skills.</li> </ul> <p><b>*Required</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Computer skills.</li> <li>○ Time management and organisational skills.</li> <li>○ Patience</li> <li>○ Perseverance.</li> <li>○ Conviction/Self-belief.</li> <li>○ Determination/ Disciplined.</li> <li>○ Resilience.</li> <li>○ Sense of Humour.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Reduction of Free Time.</li> <li>+ Stress/ anxiety.</li> <li>+ Financial Problems.</li> <li>+ Family Problems.</li> <li>+ Less time to meet Job Demands.</li> <li>+ Childcare Problems.</li> <li>+ Coping with fear.</li> <li>+ Fragile academic self-belief.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Financial assistance for part-time adult learners.</li> <li>+ Time Management and Access to Time.</li> <li>+ Accessible Information Provision.</li> <li>+ Childcare/Adult Care.</li> <li>+ Learner Support Systems.</li> <li>+ Change in culture of higher education.</li> <li>+ Recognition of Personal Resilience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Active Debate and Discussion.</li> <li>+ Engaging Tutors.</li> <li>+ Stimulating Course Content.</li> <li>+ A positive learning environment.</li> <li>+ Access to Student Supports and financial assistance.</li> <li>+ Provision of Blended Learning Programmes.</li> <li>+ Culture of change to respect and support part-time adult learner cohort.</li> </ul>

#### **7.4.2 Research findings: Five thematic headings**

##### **1. Lifespan development: Age/ Human Capital**

Age and stage in life featured quite significantly in the research data, particularly in the context of discussion regarding formal compulsory education systems, which are age graded and reflective of societal norms and expectations, largely supported by a human capital rationale for the purposes of employability. Family financial circumstances were core in determining life development paths on completion of initial formal education in terms of:

- The potential to engage in further education.
- The choice of educational programme undertaken when it was possible to proceed.
- The urgency to move into employment.
- Future relationships with formal education.

Throughout the majority of discussions employment featured as the primary objective in decision-making post compulsory education.

##### **2. Timing of Lives: Learning Journey /Identity capital**

As programme graduates, all participants had evidently made a decision to return to formal education. Reasons for doing so were many and varied, reflective of unfolding lives and changing times in terms of family life circumstances, working life challenges/ concerns, wider societal and personal changes. The decision to return to formal education was directly linked to a sense of timing, that somehow the ‘time was right’ and necessary due to changing times and evolving lives. For the majority the motivation to return centred on employment prospects and continuing employability as a third level qualification was now deemed a pre-requisite for the labour market. But personal fulfilment was equally cited as a distinct motivation in order to be able to confidently engage with work colleagues, family and friends. This motivation was interwoven with the potential of developing a new personal identity through the acquisition of a formal qualification. As adult learners the majority of interviewees spoke of the multiplicity of roles, identities and responsibilities as a reality of life having made the decision to

continue their formal learning journey. But the potential of new opportunities, roles/identities through the acquisition of formal education provided a resolution to succeed. One of the most interesting elements that came through the qualitative component of this research was that of all 26 interviews, not one interviewee felt that their learning journey had ended.

### **3. *Linked lives: Relationships / Social Capital***

Another key theme within the findings centred on the importance of relationships as a factor in terms of return to formal education. Respondents emphasised that they were not returning to education as an ‘independent agent’, that their lives were very much linked and committed to a whole range of external relationships. The changing nature of existing family and social relationships was highlighted as an important component of the formal educational experience as an adult learner creating ‘new’ relationships with family and peers. The findings clearly illustrated that family dynamics and relationships during initial formal education contributed, both positively and negatively, to respondents’ subsequent relationship with formal education and their consequent view of education for their own family. The reality of ‘linked lives’; of relationships, networks and linkages, both existing and new, was deemed to be a vital component of the formal educational experience of the part time adult learner in both recognising and contributing to their store of social capital.

### **4. *Time and place: Life Experience/Structure Vs Agency***

Findings highlighted the significance attached by adult learners to life experience in terms of acquiring the personal agency and empowerment to navigate within the constraints and opportunities of life to return to formal education. Respondents spoke of the significance of life experience not only in terms of impacting on their decision to return, but equally in terms of the benefits this real world knowledge brought to the quality of their learning. Life experience provided a sense of personal empowerment, inner strength and agency that many felt were lacking in their earlier educational life which had been largely determined by societal norms and expectations.

**5. Agency: Personal Development /Self-esteem-Confidence**

One of the most significant findings of the research study was the perceived impact of the learning experience on both personal agency and personal development. The core message from both quantitative and qualitative data responses was the evident conviction that the return to formal education had an immensely positive impact at a personal level in relation to all aspects of life; family, community, work and social. Enhanced confidence levels, greater self-esteem and self-worth were consistently identified as life-changing outcomes by research participants, regardless of age or learning history. A greater sense of resilience and individual competence to shape and navigate within life as an active agent was equally reinforced within the data findings, largely as a result of having attained the relevant skills and knowledge, particularly the ‘learning to learn’ skills, for successful programme completion in the face of all challenges outlined.

**7.5 Research recommendations**

This section outlines the recommendations emerging from the research presented under three headings; (i) messages to an adult learner (*micro*), (ii) recommendations for higher education institutions and actors (*meso*), and (iii) recommendations for national/ international educational policy makers influencing wider civic society (*macro*); consistent with the multi-level nature of the life course concept.

**7.5.1 Messages to an adult learner (*micro*):**

- In the context of changing times and unfolding lives you will need access to learning through-out your life course in correspondence with the range of transitions, life events and turning points now commonplace in modern society. Access to learning opportunities enhances your ability to cope with, adapt to, influence and shape the community and society you are part of, therefore learning is not a particular stage in life, but an on-going requirement that all individuals should be supported to access regardless of age.

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- It is essential that you as an adult learner are valued as an equal within the learning process and you should expect and should advocate for same. This is crucial; not only in terms of ensuring that programmes remain life relevant, but equally in recognising that for many the experience of initial formal education was directional and authoritarian, but now as an adult learner you can, and should, actively inform your own learning.
- The educational setting and environment should ensure to support you as an adult learner from the outset in terms of information provision, recruitment, learning engagement and retention practices. This requires a fundamental change in the culture of higher education as an institution to one which recognises and values a more diverse student cohort rather than predominantly supporting the full-time mainstream, younger learner.
- In order to return to education there are a range of supports which need to be made available to facilitate you as an adult learner to access and undertake learning opportunities at any stage in life. These include; accessible information provision, financial assistance for part-time adult learners, flexible personal fee payment plans, childcare/older adult care supports or subsidies, greater support by employers in terms of sponsorship and access to additional time through study leave provision.
- Fear is a very significant barrier for most adult learners contemplating returning to education. This is understandable particularly when the learning environment and curriculum is heavily weighted towards younger adults. Fear may also be founded within your own individual learning history, but it is important not to let it prevent you from accessing learning opportunities and engaging with potential resources to assist you to overcome this.
- You should have access to a broad range of part-time blended adult learner-centred programmes responsive to the scale of commitments

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of your ‘linked lives’; your family, community, work and social relationships and networks. In this regard part-time programmes really should be part-time, combining an evening and weekend blend of provision identified as the most effective route open to the greater number of part-time adult learners. Although outside of standard mainstream provision as an adult learner you should have access to the same facilities and supports provided to full-time students.

- Different modes and styles of learning should be provided to you to reflect the reality that learning is an individual process thereby promoting a positive learning experience for each individual and the group of learners as a collective. Maintaining a culture of learner support is core to ensuring the provision of accessible and inclusive learning processes.
- Life experience and experiential learning should be a valued and an embedded component of the learning process. It is also a great contributor to your reserve of personal resilience which is essential to success as an adult learner.
- Participating in programmes of learning should provide you with the opportunity to build on your existing confidence, self-esteem and sense of agency. Feedback and engagement with higher education personnel at all levels should be engaging and constructive with a developmental orientation.
- Your voice, experience and view-points are essential to ensure the development of educational policy and institutional practices within higher education which fully appreciate a more diverse student population.

### ***7.5.2 Recommendations to higher education institutions and actors (meso):***

- Higher education should be accessible and inclusive regardless of

age, family circumstances or social status.

- Higher education must adapt its traditional focus on full-time main stream learners in order to equally cater for part-time learners and the challenges they encounter. This requires a culture of change at an institutional level in recognition that adult learners do not return to education as ‘independent agents’ but their lives are directly linked to a whole range of commitments, responsibilities, family and social networks. This recognition needs to become embedded within the culture of higher education.
- There is an evident need for more information events in localised centres to facilitate face-to-face access to information with an immediate response to queries and greater opportunity for reassurance for potential learners who may be fearful, or lacking the confidence necessary to take the first step. There needs to be greater provision of user-friendly access to information about course choices. The provision of career advice or guidance for prospective learners would be invaluable to adult learners.
- Higher education institutes need to be aware of the challenges encountered by adult learners in advance of, and during the learning journey. These include:
  - Coping with fear, of the unknown, of not being academically capable, of not being able to overcome previous educational decisions.
  - Entering higher education with a fragile academic self-belief and confidence on the basis of previous learning histories.
  - Overcoming financial concerns, not just in relation to fees, but equally childcare and transport costs.
  - Managing stress, anxiety and lack of time because of the scale of commitments external to the programme.
- Higher education must ensure the provision of part-time, blended-

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learning, flexible programmes cognisant of work and family commitments. Timetabling, semesterisation, exams and assignment deadlines framed within the standard academic year defaults automatically to the mainstream traditional student cohort and the corresponding requirements of the institution. Such traditional decision-making does not reflect the needs of a more diverse student cohort and highlights the fact that higher education institutions require radical re-structuring in order to keep pace with the scale of global change and greater individual life course variability.

- Different modes and styles of learning within formal education are core to ensure a positive learning experience particularly in the context of the diversity of adult learners' approach to learning and learning histories. Group-based learning was frequently highlighted as a highly effective learning mode. Life-experience coupled with programme content makes for an enriched learning experience and should be promoted within formal education.
- Higher education must recognise that being treated and valued as an equal within the learning experience is essential for adult learners returning to formal education. Engaging adults as valued equals and contributors within the learning process is core to the attainment of significant learning within a positive learning environment promoting the acquisition of a broad range of additional skills and competencies.
- The role of the tutor is essential to the quality of the learning experience and not all tutors are suited to the collaborative style of learning required within adult learning. In this context a lecture style approach will not achieve significant learning.
- There needs to be a change in higher education funding policy to promote greater financial support for part-time adult learners. Equally, there needs to be greater flexibility in higher education in relation to fee payment through provision of personal payment plans.

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A designated funding policy for part-time adult learners would also require additional supports in the form of a subsidy for adult learners paying for childcare or older adult care to facilitate access to higher education opportunities.

- Good practice in higher education as identified by adult learners included:
  - Active Debate and Discussion.
  - Engaging Tutors.
  - Stimulating Course Content.
  - A Positive Learning Environment.
  - Access to Student Supports.
  - Provision of Blended Learning Programmes.
- Higher education needs to prioritise the provision of a supportive learning environment for adult learners as part of the educational experience. Part time adult learners should have access to the full range of services available to mainstream students.
- Higher education must provide access to resources and supports to enable adult learners to recognise, develop and draw on their own personal resilience and life experience to enhance self-efficacy and confidence so as to successfully complete their chosen programme of learning.
- Part time programmes need to be part-time not assimilated within existing full-time programmes. Programmes of higher education therefore should provide designated part-time programmes for part-time learners.
- Higher education as an institution of society has a fundamental role to play in promoting the ideals of democracy and human rights; it cannot simply be defined in corporate terms and must therefore give equal emphasis to the promotion of human, social and identity

capital for each individual throughout their life course for the benefit of society as a whole.

**7.5.3 *Suggestions for national/ international educational policy makers influencing wider civic society.***

- Much of the language of policy documentation at both national and EU levels reflects consideration of both the social justice and economic benefits of education; however, implementation of policy to practice is heavily weighted towards a human capital rationale particularly in the context of the higher education system. Policy narrative needs to fully respect all stakeholders, not solely those within the realm of the economy.
- Although educational policy, particularly in the context of changing demographics and globalisation, reinforces the need for the formal acquisition of skills and knowledge throughout life, higher educational institutions are still primarily defaulting to outdated models of frontloaded initial educational provision. In order to remain current and relevant to the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, higher education needs to adopt a life course approach to learning and educational provision that effectively responds to the needs and requirements of learners through-out their lived lives.
- Educational policy, which governs access to funding, resources, supports, structures and opportunities throughout life, needs to be translated in real terms to respond to the lived life realities of individuals living in very challenging times across all spheres of engagement. Traditional educational policies and practices must adapt to become fit for purpose for current and future generations of all ages.
- Adult learners should not fear returning to education. The fact that fear features as such a factor in contemplating returning to education raises questions with regard to the perception of education in Irish society which need to be addressed by educationalists and policy makers particularly in the context of widening participation and

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increasing access to higher education.

- This research demonstrates that returning to higher education had an immensely positive impact at a personal level in relation to all aspects of life; family, community, work and social life. Enhanced confidence levels, greater self-esteem and self-worth were consistently identified as life-changing outcomes by research participants regardless of age or learning history, re-emphasising the importance of the ‘wider benefits of learning’.
- The range of life events, turning points and transitions planned and unplanned encountered by adult learners reflect the variability of the life course of the individual in a modern society characterised by competitiveness, ‘risk’ and change. Engaging the voices of adult learners within educational policy development is crucial to enable policy to move away from traditional structures and adapt to a changing society.
- An increasingly neo-liberal ideology has become dominant in EU and Irish higher educational policy, focusing on human capital accumulation. Educational policy needs to embrace a more humanistic perspective promoting democracy, citizenship, social justice, personal and social development. Higher education has a fundamental responsibility to empower citizens to engage in all aspects of life equally. To do so however, requires a recognition on the part of policy makers that the over-riding emphasis on a ‘business model’ of education and funding models that emphasise economic measures of ‘success’ do not provide higher education institutions with the freedom, resources or impetus to fully fulfil their societal responsibilities. In an environment pressurised to ‘do more with less’, much of the reality of ‘non-profit’ civic and social engagement is denigrated to tokenistic gestures.
- Creating a more responsive learner-centred life relevant higher education system must become a core priority for educationalists and

policy makers informing civic society. A life course perspective is a critical component in the design, development and implementation of a higher educational policy that seeks to nurture individual agency in the context of the historical, social, cultural and economic considerations of modern society.

- Lifelong learning as a concept within higher educational policy has been distilled from its humanistic origins to a more narrow focus on the needs and requirements, primarily economic, of the state at national and European levels. It outlines a macro perspective on learning to be transferred through educational institutions at a meso level to the micro level of the individual learner. It is a top-down approach involving the provision of learning ‘opportunities’ in line with the economic imperatives of the market. Life course learning in contrast starts at a micro level in recognising the importance of the individual in the learning process within the context of wider structural realities. Through the promotion of learning opportunities reflective of the actual needs of the learner it seeks to enhance both personal agency and empowerment and thereby contribute to social development. The multi-level nature of the life course concept offers educationalists and policy makers the opportunity to identify new higher educational policy measures that more accurately reflect the life-worlds of individuals in an ever-changing society.

### **7.6 Summary and final thoughts**

This chapter returned to the starting point of the research reminding the reader of the research background and the overarching aim and objectives of the study (section 7.2). Section 7.3 then briefly recalled the key theoretical perspectives informing the conceptual model of life course learning identified following a critical review of literature relevant to this research. Section 7.4 provided a synopsis of the research methodology and methods used, whilst, section 7.5 provided a reminder of the key findings. Lastly, the final section, 7.6, outlined recommendations in relation to educational

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policy and practice considerations. In doing so it outlined messages to an adult learner; recommendations for higher education institutions and actors; and lastly, suggestions for national/ international educational policy makers influencing wider civic society.

This research study has been a labour of love (most of the time!) for the author, who as a full-time working mother taking on a part-time PhD encountered many challenges and set-backs, but more importantly, an even greater appreciation of the reality of life for adults returning to higher education on a part-time basis. The knowledge, humour, resilience and insights shared by respondents' remain of enormous benefit to the author in continuing to work with adult learners in higher education. In recognition of the importance of engaging the voices of adult learners within educational policy development it is appropriate that the closing words of this research study should defer to one of the many voices that informed this study. The following quote particularly stands out as poignant and the author is honoured to conclude this study with same.



**Survey**

'Leaving school at such a young age, I always thought of the idea of going to college was a dream that I could not possibly fulfil. Securing The Diploma course at the University was for me the most amazing experience of my life. I work in my community on a voluntarily basis, and through the Diploma programme I now am able to be more confident because of the knowledge I gained from the formal education I received at college. I am asked for advice on community related issues. Also, through the skills that I learned, I can now go into a meeting and share those experiences and knowledge with others. Having a formal education I believe is paramount in today's world. Formal education is a wonderful tool to have and I am so

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very proud to have achieved this. My only regret is that I did not do it sooner, however raising a family on my own was not an easy task, and their education was my priority. Now, my Diploma hangs on the wall beside theirs and they are very proud of me, as I am of myself.

**Diploma survey respondent 39**

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet**

#### ***A Life Course perspective: Life Course learning for Adult Learners in Higher Education***

##### ***An examination of the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies and the BA in Applied Social Studies***

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The above research study seeks to explore the concept of the life course (the lives of individuals from birth to death) in order to understand the learning experiences of adult learners in higher education within the context of a rapidly changing society.

#### **INVITATION TO TAKE PART**

As a graduate from the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/ or the BA in Applied Social Studies I would like to invite you to participate in this research study in an effort to inform future learning policy and practice from an adult learner perspective. This information sheet seeks to inform you about the purpose, the benefits and the risks of the research study. If any aspect of this is unclear I would appreciate your feedback, there is no obligation or expectation on you to participate, simply a genuine request that you would do so. Having worked as a staff member of University X for over 15 years the design and delivery of life relevant adult higher education programmes has always, and continues to be, an on-going professional priority. This research in seeking to identify the life course learning requirements of adult learners in modern society has the potential to contribute to higher education policy debate. Should you wish to engage in the process you will be required to complete a consent form prior to participating in the study. I fully appreciate the demands on your time, but please review the content of this sheet in full before making a final decision. Many thanks for both your time and consideration.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

To examine life course influences on adult learning through an examination of two programmes, namely: the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies and the BA in Applied Social Studies. All graduates of the BA in Applied Social Studies have been invited to participate, the Diploma programme has had a longer history and therefore the numbers have been narrowed down to graduates of the programme in more recent years. Your contact details form part of our student data-base (if at any point you wish to be removed from this data-base please feel free to contact us).

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*The core objectives of this research are to:*

1. Examine the concept of the life course and determine if it should become an issue of critical consideration for learning policy and practice?
2. Determine the key elements of life course learning for adult learners in higher education
3. Develop a model of life course learning directly informed by learning experiences
4. Consider this model of life course learning in the context of higher education policy and practice to determine what it would mean for:
  - The adult learner?
  - Universities/colleges?
  - Society?

### **TAKING PART– What it involves:**

Firstly, please note that you are not required to take part in this study it is totally your own decision. If you do decide to take part, you then sign a consent form (see detail below), but you may withdraw from the research study at any point without having to give a reason.

Taking part essentially means signing a consent form and completing an adult learner questionnaire (electronic version) of 30 minutes duration (approx.). You will normally answer by ticking a box which most applies to you. In this questionnaire, there are no right or wrong answers. Your answers should be what are right for you. All your answers will be kept confidential. Within this questionnaire you are also asked to state if you would wish to participate in a subsequent interview, you are not required to do so, you may simply indicate 'yes' or 'no' and submit the questionnaire. Only those participants who agree to participate in the interview will be asked to provide their contact details -which they may choose to document within the questionnaire or alternatively provide separately by email -otherwise all questionnaires returned will be anonymous and confidential.

As outlined above the second stage of the research involves an interview of 1.5 to 2 hours duration. This will be a semi-structured biographical interview on the theme of Life Course Learning for Adult Learners in Higher Education. Results from the first administration of the survey questionnaire will guide the focus of the interview to address specific aspects about the impact of certain life events on an adult learner's educational experience and life course learning requirements. With your permission, over the course of the interview, the answers to your questions will be recorded; however, every effort will be taken to ensure no participant can be identified or associated with any finding. In the unlikely

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circumstance in which identifiers are unavoidable, I will seek your permission in advance for using any quotations which may be directly related to you.

The last stage of the research involves a focus group invitation to the adult learners who came forward for interview in the second stage of the research. Again, please note, you are not required to participate and can withdraw at any point of the research process. Having agreed to participate in the interview process does not compel you to attend the focus group discussion. Holding a focus group at this stage of the research allows for additional feedback through group interaction to further inform the development of a model of life course learning.

### **Possible benefits of taking part:**

This study seeks to determine what adult learners require from higher education for themselves as individuals, but equally, for the groups and society to which they belong. While the study may not help you individually, the information gathered from the study may promote a greater understanding of the life course learning requirements of adult learners in higher education.

### **Possible disadvantages of taking part:**

This study explores the learning lives and experiences of adult learners in higher education and seeks to encourage you to reflect on learning experiences through your life course in order to examine your life course experiences (historical, social, and cultural contexts), life span educational history, learning attitudes and motivation. In asking you to reflect on your learning journey, looking to the past, present and into the future, you may find that you would like to talk with someone about any issues which may arise. I will be happy to recommend someone to you or provide a list of appropriate support services if necessary.

### **If you have any Complaints during the course of the study:**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should ask to speak to:

- (i) The researcher: Deirdre Hardiman – Phone  
Community Development,  
University X
- (ii) Research Supervisor: Prof. Pat Dolan – Phone
- (iii) University Research Ethics Committee: The Chairperson of the  
University Research Ethics Committee,  
c/o Office of the Vice President for Research, University X

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### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All information gathered during the course of this research will be strictly confidential. Guarantees of confidentiality will be honoured; participants are not required to provide their contact details as part of the questionnaire. Only those participants who freely choose to participate within the next phase of research (biographical interview) will be asked to provide contact details which in turn will be treated with confidentiality. Appropriate measures will be taken to store research data in a secure manner, in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act. Should a disclosure of risk occur the researcher will be required to consult with the research supervisor, a previous employee of the HSE, in order to determine an appropriate course of action reflective of the nature of the disclosure.

### **WHAT TO DO NEXT**

Think about the information on this sheet, if you are not sure about any aspect of it feel free to contact me. If you agree to take part, which I would greatly appreciate, the next step is to sign the consent form and return same either by:

- *Post* : to Deirdre Hardiman, Community Development, University X

*OR*

- *E-mail*: a scanned version of the consent form to [deirdre.hardiman@\\*\\*\\*.ie](mailto:deirdre.hardiman@***.ie)

The consent form will not be used to identify you. It will be filed separately from all other information. Once a consent form has been received you will receive confirmation of same and an e-version of the questionnaire will be forwarded to you for completion. A copy of both the information sheet and the signed consent form will also be forwarded to you for your own records. I will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time. You may contact me by phone on 087 2865096 or by email [deirdre.hardiman@\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*.ie](mailto:deirdre.hardiman@*****.ie)

**I would like to thank you most sincerely for reading this information sheet and would greatly appreciate your time and consideration should you choose to proceed.**

**Best wishes,**

**Deirdre Hardiman.**

**Appendix 2: Consent form - Biographical Learning Interview**

***A Life Course perspective: Life Course learning for Adult  
Learners in Higher Education***

***An examination of the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies and the BA in  
Applied Social Studies***

**Researcher Contact Detail: Deirdre Hardiman (Phone and Email)**

**CONSENT FORM:**

I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet for the above study and have had an opportunity to ask questions.

- I understand that my participation is completely voluntary  
and I am free to withdraw at any time
- The information I provide may be used for research,  
provided that it will be kept confidential
- I agree to take part in the above study
- I agree to have the interview recorded

**Name of Participant:**                      **Date:**                      **Signature**

**Name of Researcher:**                      **Date:**                      **Signature**

**Appendix 3: Life Course Learning Questionnaire –  
Programme Graduates – Survey Monkey**

*A Life Course perspective: Life Course learning for Adult Learners  
in Higher Education*

(Graduates of the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/or the BA in Applied Social  
Studies)

Researcher contact details: Deirdre Hardiman (phone)

[deirdre.hardiman@\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*.ie](mailto:deirdre.hardiman@*****.ie)

Introduction:

Learning is not simply about employability; it is about learning from life for life so as to acquire the knowledge and resilience to cope with life challenges, capture life chances and inform the progress of a changing society. In the context of rapid economic, social, political and technological change, whereby traditional life course patterns have become uncertain and increasingly complex (Merrill, 2009): this research seeks to understand -

**What do adult learners now require from higher education for themselves as individuals but equally, for the groups and society to which they belong?**

This research questionnaire seeks to explore and compare the learning lives and experiences of adult learners in relation to higher education in order to inform a conceptual model of life course learning for adult learners in higher education from an adult learner perspective. I would greatly appreciate it if you would kindly take the time to complete the form. Your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the research at any point without the need to give an explanation. The detail you provide will be treated with the utmost confidence and may serve to inform education policy directly regarding the ‘lived life’ learning requirements of adult learners. All information gathered during the course of this research will be strictly confidential. Participants are not required to provide their contact details as part of the questionnaire. Only those participants who freely choose to participate within the next phase of research (biographical interview) will be asked to provide contact details, which in turn will be treated with confidentiality.

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**The adult learner's questionnaire has been divided into the following parts:**

**Part A:** *Socio-Demographic/ Socio-economic,*

**Part B:** *Accredited Learning*

**Part C:** *Programme/s Learning Experiences (Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/or BA in Applied Social Studies),*

**Part D:** *Learning Motivation/strategy*

**Part E:** *Higher education and the Adult Learner.*

Please read each question and answer as honestly and as accurately as you can. You will normally answer by ticking a box which most applies to you. In this questionnaire, there are no right or wrong answers. Your answers should simply be what are right for you. The questionnaire should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. THANK YOU.

**Please note:** you will be required to complete a consent form before proceeding with the study. Please ensure you are completely satisfied with this detail before indicating acceptance.

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### **Electronic Consent Form**

***A Life Course perspective: Life Course learning for Adult Learners in Higher Education***

*Please select your choice below:*

1. ***Clicking on the 'agree' option and then the next button indicates that:***
  - *You have read and understand the above information*
  - *You voluntarily agree to participate and that you are free to withdraw at any time*
  - *The information you provide may be used for research on the understanding that all of this information will be kept confidential and will not be used in any way that can identify you.*
2. ***If you do not wish to participate in this research study, please decline participation by clicking on the 'disagree' option and click the next button.***

**Options:**

**I agree**

**I disagree**

## Part A: Socio- Demographic/ Socio-economic

This section of the questionnaire seeks to identify the socio-economic characteristics of adult learners

What is your COUNTY of residence?

[Click here to enter text.](#)

1) Please tick the relevant box in relation to your age

21-29

30-39

40-49

50-59

60 -69

70 or over

2) Are you male or female?

Male

Female

3) Which of the following best describes your relationship status?

Married

Widowed

Divorced

Separated

In a domestic partnership or civil union

Single, but cohabiting with a significant other

Single

4) Do you have children?

Yes

No

If yes: how many Children? 0-5 [Click here to enter text.](#) 6-18 [Click here to enter text.](#)

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**5 Did you have children whilst you were undertaking either the Diploma and/or BA programmes?**

Please choose one of the answers.

Yes

No

If Yes: How many children, by age, currently live in your household?

0-5

6-18

19+

**6) Do you have any of the following caring responsibilities?**

Please choose one of the answers.

Yes

No

**If yes:** Please choose one or more options from the list..

- Childcare
- Care of a relative in the home
- Care of a relative in another setting
- Other (please specify)

**Employment Status**

7). **DIPLOMA GRADUATES:** The following question should be answered if you completed the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and did NOT proceed to the BA programme.

<p><b>What <u>was</u> your employment status at the time of applying to participate on the Diploma in Applied Social Studies ?</b></p>	<p><b>What is your <u>current</u> employment status?</b></p>
<p>Working full-time(Self-employed)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Working full-time(Self-employed)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p>

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Working full-time(employed) <input type="checkbox"/>	Working full-time(employed) <input type="checkbox"/>
Working part-time <input type="checkbox"/>	Working part-time <input type="checkbox"/>
Unemployed <input type="checkbox"/>	Unemployed <input type="checkbox"/>
Disabled, not able to work <input type="checkbox"/>	Disabled, not able to work <input type="checkbox"/>
Looking after home/ family <input type="checkbox"/>	Looking after home/ family <input type="checkbox"/>
On a government –funded scheme <input type="checkbox"/>	On a government –funded scheme <input type="checkbox"/>
Involved in unpaid voluntary work <input type="checkbox"/>	Involved in unpaid voluntary work <input type="checkbox"/>

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Student <input type="checkbox"/>	Student <input type="checkbox"/>
Retired <input type="checkbox"/>	Retired <input type="checkbox"/>
Other (specify) _____ _____	Other (specify) _____ _____

8) **BA GRADUATES:** The following question should be answered if you completed the BA programme or if you completed the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and proceeded to the BA programme

What <u>was</u> your employment status at the time of applying to participate on the BA Programme?	What is your <u>current</u> employment status?
Working full-time(Self employed) <input type="checkbox"/>	Working full-time(Self employed) <input type="checkbox"/>
Working full-time(employed) <input type="checkbox"/>	Working full-time(employed) <input type="checkbox"/>

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Working part-time <input type="checkbox"/>	Working part-time <input type="checkbox"/>
Unemployed <input type="checkbox"/>	Unemployed <input type="checkbox"/>
Disabled, not able to work <input type="checkbox"/>	Disabled, not able to work <input type="checkbox"/>
Looking after home/ family <input type="checkbox"/>	Looking after home/ family <input type="checkbox"/>
On a government –funded scheme <input type="checkbox"/>	On a government –funded scheme <input type="checkbox"/>
Involved in unpaid voluntary work <input type="checkbox"/>	Involved in unpaid voluntary work <input type="checkbox"/>
Student <input type="checkbox"/>	Student <input type="checkbox"/>
Retired <input type="checkbox"/>	Retired <input type="checkbox"/>
Other (specify) _____ _____	Other (specify) _____ _____

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**9) If you are working full-time or part-time:**

9.1) Is your work in one of the following sectors?

Community/ Voluntary

Statutory

Private

Other(please specify)

---

---

9.2) Have you experienced any career advancements (eg. promotion) in the past 4 years?

Yes

No

If yes, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

9.3) Are you responsible for employees?

Yes, Ongoing responsibility

Yes, occasionally (e.g. within projects)

No

9.4) If working part-time, how many hours per week do you work?

**Part B: Accredited Learning**

**10) Please indicate the highest academic qualification you had attained and the year of graduation prior to undertaking the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/ or the BA in Applied Social Studies.**

*Please indicate the year of graduation of qualification identified and if you selected OTHER please specify the nature of the qualification*

**11) In relation to your experience of formal education PRIOR to undertaking the Dip/BA in Applied Social Studies-please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following?**

	S/D	D	A	S/A	N/A
<b>Primary School</b> was a positive experience					
<b>Secondary School</b> was a positive experience					
<b>Further education</b> was a positive experience					
<b>Formal education</b> was time well spent					
<b>Formal education</b> has helped give me					

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confidence to make decisions					
<b>Formal education</b> has taught me things which would be useful in employment					
<b>Formal education</b> has done little to prepare me for adult life					
<b>Formal education</b> has brought about social/family benefits					

12) **Has your experience on the Diploma/ and or BA changed your view of formal education?**

Yes

No

Please comment:

**13) When undertaking the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/ or the BA in Applied Social Studies, how many years approx. had it been since you had last participated in education or training?**

**13.1) Had you undertaken the NUI Diploma in Applied Social Studies prior to the BA in Applied Social Studies**

Yes

No

Please comment:

**14) How did you finance your participation on the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/ or the BA in Applied Social Studies? (Tick the relevant box/s):**

Personal funds

Sponsorship from employer

Sponsorship from Community/voluntary organization

Scholarship and employer/ community group

Scholarship and personal funds

Other (please specify)

---

**14.1) Did you avail of a personal payment plan (individual payment arrangement between the centre and student)?**

Yes

No

**14.2) Did you qualify for programme exemptions?**

Yes

No

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15) Since completing your Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/ or the BA in Applied Social Studies have you registered for, OR are you considering registering for any further studies?

Yes

No

*If yes, please complete the following detail:*

Name of course

Duration

Year of completion OR year to be completed

**Additional Course?**

Name of course

Duration

Year of completion OR year to be completed

*If no, have you considered registering?*

Yes

No

If yes, what kinds of programmes would you be interested in registering for?

If no, why have you not considered registering?

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16) Lastly, in terms of this section on accredited learning can you please indicate the highest academic qualification attained by either your parents/ guardians (Tick the relevant box)

	Parent/ Guardian: Male	Parent/ Guardian: Female
Primary Education		
Junior Certificate (or equivalent)		
Leaving Certificate (or equivalent)		
3rd Level Certificate		
3rd Level Diploma		
Degree		
Masters		
PhD		
Other: Please Specify:		

## Part C: Programme Learning Experience

The following questions seek to determine your views on what you may have learned from the Dip/BA in Applied Social Studies

17) Did your participation on the Dip/BA in Applied Social Studies change your level of competency in relation to the following skills?

	Greatly Improved	Moderately	No Change	Dis-improved
Writing				
Time management				
Communication				
Problem-solving/ practical thinking				
Computer literacy				
Creative thinking				
Teamwork				
Management & Leadership				
Learning to learn				
Other (please specify)				

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**17.1) Aside from the skills listed above do you believe you acquired new skills/additional skills through participation in the programme/s?**

Yes

No

*If yes:* Could you name up to 3 of the most important skills which you feel you acquired?

**18) From your own experience as an adult learner, what skills (of those listed above or otherwise) would you identify as essential for adult learners in modern society?**

**19) Do you believe that your participation on the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/or BA in Applied Social Studies brought about any employment benefits? For example:**

Finding a new job  Yes  No  N/A

Receiving a promotion  Yes  No  N/A

Greater satisfaction at work  Yes  No  N/A

Increased employment Opportunities  Yes  No  N/A

Potential for your income to increase  Yes  No  N/A

Improved ability within current work  Yes  No  N/A

**Other: please specify**

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**20) Do you believe that your participation on the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/or BA in Applied Social Studies brought about any personal benefits? For example:**

- |                                     |                              |                             |                              |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Improved self-confidence            | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Increased happiness                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Increased self-esteem               | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Development at a personal level     | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Greater enjoyment of learning       | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Change in attitude towards learning | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Greater personal resilience         | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |

**Other: please specify**

**21) Do you believe that your participation on the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and/or BA in Applied Social Studies brought about any social/ family related benefits? For example:**

- |   |                              |                             |                              |
|---|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Ability to help with Children's education | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Relationships with partner                | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Relationships with children               | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Relationships with other family           | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Relationships with friends                | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| Family more interested in learning        | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| More civic participation                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| More likely to vote                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| More professional contacts                | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |
| More social contacts                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> N/A |

**Other: please specify**

**22) Could you briefly describe the impact that this programme/s has had on your life? (Personally, professionally)**

Yes  No

*Please comment:*

**23) Have you identified any impact from your participation on the programme/s for other parties? (E.g. family, community/voluntary groups, friends, work colleagues)**

Yes  No

*Please comment:*

## **Part D: Learning Motivation /Strategy**

**This section briefly examines the motivations and learning strategies for adult learners who participate in higher education?**

**24) Why did you undertake the Dip and/ or BA?**

Please choose one or more options from the list. Multiple answers are possible.

- To advance skills essential for the job
- To advance prospects for personal growth
- To gain knowledge and skills in a special field of interest
- To gain knowledge and skills for everyday life

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- To meet people
- To increase chances of finding a job
- To become self-employed
- To avoid job loss
- To receive an academic title
- To gain a promotion
- To increase motivation
- Other(s)

**Other: please specify**

**25) With regard to the following statements consider your learning strategy and indicate to what extent do you agree or disagree**

	<b>Strongly Dis- agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. When learning new concepts, I attempt to understand them				
2. When learning new concepts, I connect them to my previous experiences.				
3. When I do not understand a concept, I find relevant				

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resources that will help me				
4. When I do not understand a concept, I would discuss with the tutor or other students to clarify my understanding.				
5. During the learning processes, I attempt to make connections between the concepts that I learn.				
6. When I make a mistake, I try to find out why.				
7. When I meet concepts that I do not understand, I still try to learn them.				

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26) With regard to the following statements consider your view on the value of learning and indicate to what extent do you agree or disagree

	<b>Strongly Dis-agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
I think that learning is important because I can use it in my daily life				
I think that learning is important because it stimulates my thinking				
I think that it is important to learn to solve problems.				
I think it is important to participate in learning activities.				
It is important to have the opportunity to satisfy my own curiosity when learning				
I think learning is important for my				

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personal development				
I think learning is important for my employability				
I think learning is important for my health and well-being				
I think that it is important to learn to work as a team member  I think learning is important for effective communication				
I think learning is important for community cohesion (togetherness/ co-operation)				
I think learning is important to inform the progress of a changing society				
I think learning is				

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important for social cohesion (solidarity/togetherness)				
I think learning is important to cope with life challenges				

**Please Comment:**

### **Part E: Higher Education and the Adult Learner**

**27) Did any of the following difficulties/problems arise during your actual study? Please choose one or more options from the list. Multiple answers are possible.**

- Less time to meet the job demands
- Reduction of free time
- Less time for learning
- Financial problems
- Stress
- Family problems
- Problems to organise childcare
- Problems with the arrival and departure to/from the educational centre
- Problems with fellow students
- Problems with colleagues at work

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**Other: please specify**

**28) Do you have any recommendations as to how adult learners may be supported to overcome such challenges?**

**29) Below is a list of common barriers to accessing higher education. Please review and rate the items below with regard to how significant they may have been for you when accessing higher education.**

	Not Significant at all	Not Significant	Significant	Very Significant	NA
Access to child minder					
Travel costs					
Level of fees					
Course Location					
Course Scheduling					
Place to study outside of					

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course					
Balancing commitments					
Cost of learning materials					
Fear of inability to cope					
Previous negative school experiences					
Unrewarding experiences at other college courses					
Opposition from peers					
Opposition from partner/family					
Did not want to be seen entering college					

**Further comments?**

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**29.1) Please rate the items below with regard to your experiences of higher education in relation to the Diploma in Applied Social Studies and /or the BA in Applied Social Studies**

	Not Significant at all	Not Significant	Significant	Very Significant	NA
Family demographics (family background)					
Cultural expectations (the beliefs and behaviours of those close to us)					
Previous experience of formal education					
An individual's Self-Concept (one's sense of self, what an individual believes they are good at)					
Perceived potential educational success					
Potential					

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enjoyment on the programme of learning					
Potential employability as a result of the programme qualification					
Life experience					

**Further comments?**

**30) Please rate the items below with regard to your experience of higher education in relation to the Dip/BA in Applied Social Studies**

	<b>Strongly Dis-agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
There was enough personal tuition				
The tutors were helpful				
Materials were presented interestingly				

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The classes were too long				
We were given time to do work on our own				
There were too many classes				
A wide range of subjects were covered				
Material was detailed enough				
There was easy access to computers				
Course content was too advanced				
Much guidance and support was given				
Distance learning was a positive experience				

**31) Based on your experience in higher education can you identify any example/s of good practice in the promotion of adult learning (e.g. learning environment, student support, course content, etc.)**

- 32) **If you wish to provide further information, either expanding on a previously asked question or drawing attention to something new, please use the space below to do so. Before doing so however, would you please check that you have not missed any of the earlier questions?**

- 33) **Lastly, would you be willing to participate in a follow up interview in relation to this research? Your contribution would be extremely valuable to the research and would also be greatly appreciated. If so, would you please provide your contact details for follow up communication? Alternatively, you may prefer to forward your contact details separately, if so, I would be very grateful if you would contact me at: [deirdre.hardiman@\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*.ie](mailto:deirdre.hardiman@*****.ie)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone no: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

If you wish to speak to me or acquire further detail please feel free to contact me directly.

Sincere thanks for your participation.

**Deirdre Hardiman**

## **Appendix 4: Biographical Learning Interview Schedule**

**Research Title: A Life course perspective: Life course learning for Adult Learners in Higher Education**

**Interview Schedule for:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date:**

\_\_\_\_\_

### **Introduction to Interview Questionnaire:**

Firstly, I would like to thank you most sincerely for agreeing to participate in this interview. The proposed study offers the potential to adult learners to provide an individual perspective on learning over the life course thereby seeking to identify the learning requirements of adult learners themselves in the context of their own lives. It further explores what adult learners now require from higher education for themselves as individuals, but equally, for the groups and society to which they belong. This research seeks to ensure that the voices, perspectives and lived lives of adult learners directly inform national and international policy. Adopting a life course approach to the research (Elder, 1985) ensures a more complete investigation of the individual learning experiences of adult learners; going beyond a focus on one particular life stage to consider the wider life course, framed within changing socio-economic structures and historical events (Withnall, 2006).

This form has been tailored for the purposes of guiding the course of a semi-structured biographical interview on the theme of Life Course Learning for Adult Learners in Higher Education. Results from the first administration of the survey questionnaire guided the focus of the interview to address specific aspects about the impact of certain life events on adult learner's educational experience.

Again I thank you for your participation and fully appreciate the demands on your time, the interview should require no more than two hours. The interview questionnaire comprises 15 questions. The questionnaire does not represent a rigid framework for the interview but is intended to act as a guideline

With your permission, over the course of the interview, the answers to your questions will be recorded by the interviewer. I will seek to ensure the information is subsequently presented so that your identity will not be explicitly associated with opinions offered.

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:**

AIM: TO EXPLORE STUDENTS' LEARNING JOURNEYS, THEIR EXPERIENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AS ADULT LEARNERS AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES ON A POTENTIAL MODEL OF LIFE COURSE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION.

<b>Formal Learning Life History:</b>
--------------------------------------

1. Can you tell me about your own initial formal learning experience (primary/secondary school experience?)

**Prompts:** *Primary School was a positive/negative experience?*

*Secondary School was a positive/ negative experience*

<b>1.1 Consider each of the following statements and select one (or more) which would have applied to you at school stage</b>	
---	--

<b>A</b>	I wasn't expected to do well at school
<b>B</b>	I didn't like school
<b>C</b>	I could have done better
<b>D</b>	Other things were more important at the time
<b>E</b>	None of the options

***Explain your choice in relation to same (prompt: Family perspective)***

***Time well spent / gave me confidence/ prepared for adult life***

- 1.2 Did you undertake any further course of formal learning after completing primary/secondary school (aside from either the Diploma in Applied Social Studies or the BA in Applied Social Studies)? Yes/ No

**Prompts:** *If yes, can you outline the programme/s and your experience of same?*

***Further formal education was a positive/negative experience. Formal education was time well spent /gave me confidence to make decisions/ prepared me for adult life***

**Experience on the Dip/BA in Applied Social Studies programme:**

2. How did you become involved in the Dip/BA in Applied Social Studies?
  - 2.1 What were your initial goals and motivations/reasons?
  - 2.2 Can you describe your experience on the programme? (*Prompts: positive/negative*)
  - 2.3 In your opinion, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the programme?
  - 2.4 Did you avail of supports before and during the program? Yes/No  
If yes, what supports did you avail of?
  - 2.5 What did you learn during the program about the course content? (*Prompts: difficult/life relevant/ integrated/ disjointed*)
  - 2.6 What did you learn since the program about the course content?
  - 2.7 Has the programme contributed to:
    - any **employment** opportunities/benefits (*prompts: qualifications, new job/promotion/ greater satisfaction at work*)
    - any **personal** opportunities/benefits (*prompts: increased self-confidence/happiness/self-esteem --Did the course have any influence on your perception of yourself?*)
    - any **family/social** opportunities/benefits (*prompts: more social contacts/relationships with children & family, family more interested in learning, voluntary engagement*)
    - any **Other** benefits (*prompts: any other more long term benefits or changes due to your learning*)
  - 2.8 Where benefits are identified, can you indicate how exactly the programme contributed to same (**prompts: teaching methods, learning methods, group work, subject matter etc.**)*Which elements of course generated benefits?*
  - 2.9 Refer back to table 1.1 to enquire about educational identity post the degree programme (*Disposition to learn – do you think this changed in any way due to the programme?*)

**Learning Motivation/ Strategy:**

3. How would you describe yourself as a learner? (*Prompts: Feeler/Observer/Thinker/ Doer*)

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- 3.1 What did you learn during the programme about yourself as a learner? Did anything change in your attitude to learning due to the programme?
- 3.2 What do you consider to be barriers /obstacles to learning?
- 3.3 Can you identify key educational events in your life?
- 3.4 What have you learned since the programme about yourself?  
***(Prompts: as a learner)***
- 3.5 From your own experience as an adult learner, what skills would you identify as essential for adult learners in modern society?  
***(Prompt: In what way do you think early learning experience shaped your experience of the Dip/BA?)***

<b>Higher Education:</b>
--------------------------

4. Since completing your Dip/BA in Applied Social Studies have you registered for any further studies?
- 4.1 Based on your experience of higher education can you identify any example/s of good practice in the promotion of adult learning (prompts: learning environment, student support, course content, etc.)
- 4.2 What factors would you identify as having been significant to your decision to engage in Higher Education?
- 4.3 Did you encounter any barriers to accessing higher education?  
Yes/no
- 4.5 If yes, what were these, and what recommendations would you make in order to overcome same
- 4.6 In your opinion, what should be the key considerations for higher education in terms of providing for adult learners
- 4.7 In your opinion, what individual characteristics or qualities are significant for an adult learner to succeed within their chosen course of study?
- 4.8 In what way can universities contribute to the development of lifelong learning policies/ learning opportunities reflective of the needs of adult learners?
- 4.9 What are your future learning goals?

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### **\*(Potential prompts- throughout interview)**

**Life Span:** a long term perspective on development

**Time & Place:** the individual situation of each person in historical and cultural terms

**Timing:** similar events, transitions experienced at different times in life have different consequences on the lives of people (normative timing-age graded)

**Agency:** individuals seek to control or determine their own life courses by seeking out opportunities and making decisions in the context of the constraints and options they may encounter

**Linked Lives:** exploring the interdependence of life courses through personal networks of shared relationships)

### **STATISTICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC DATA**

#### **Information concerning the interview:**

<b>Date of the interview</b>	
<b>Time and duration of the interview</b>	
<b>Location</b>	
<b>Distractions</b>	

#### **Information concerning the Interviewees**

<b>Gender</b>	
<b>Age Category</b>	
<b>Highest Educational Level</b>	
<b>Occupational Status</b>	
<b>Nationality</b>	

#### **Further remarks concerning the Interview???**

**Appendix 5: Experience of Formal Education**

**Table 5.5** *Experience of formal education for the BA (n=100) and Diploma respondents (n= 63)*

<b>Experience of formal education</b>								
	<b>BA Graduates % (n=100)</b>				<b>Diploma Graduates % (n= 63)</b>			
<i>Levels of Agreement from Strongly-Disagree to Strongly-Agree</i>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
Primary School was a positive experience	11	14	51	24	4.75	11.11	42.86	41.27
Secondary School was a positive experience	7	25	48	19	3.17	20.63	47.62	28.57
Further education was a positive experience	0	3	36	59	0	3.17	34.92	60.32
Formal education was time well spent	0	8	41	49	0	9.52	41.27	49.21
Formal education has helped give me confidence to make decisions	0	16	28	54	1.59	14.29	30.16	53.97
Formal education has taught me things which would be useful in employment	2	8	36	52	3.17	7.94	34.92	53.97
Formal education has done little to prepare me for adult life	33	47	10	6	28.57	38.10	19.05	11.11
Formal education has brought about social/ family benefits	1	12	51	33	3.17	12.70	49.21	28.57

**Appendix 6: Listing of Factors which may have been significant regarding decision to return to Higher Education**

Please review the following factors and on the basis of your experience indicate how significant each may have been to your decision to engage in Higher Education:

- Family Demographics (family background)
- Cultural Expectations (the beliefs and behaviours of those close to us)
- Previous experience of formal education
- An individual's Self-Concept (one's sense of self, what an individual believes they are good at)
- Perceived potential educational success
- Potential enjoyment on the programme of learning
- Potential employability as a result of the programme qualification
- Life experience

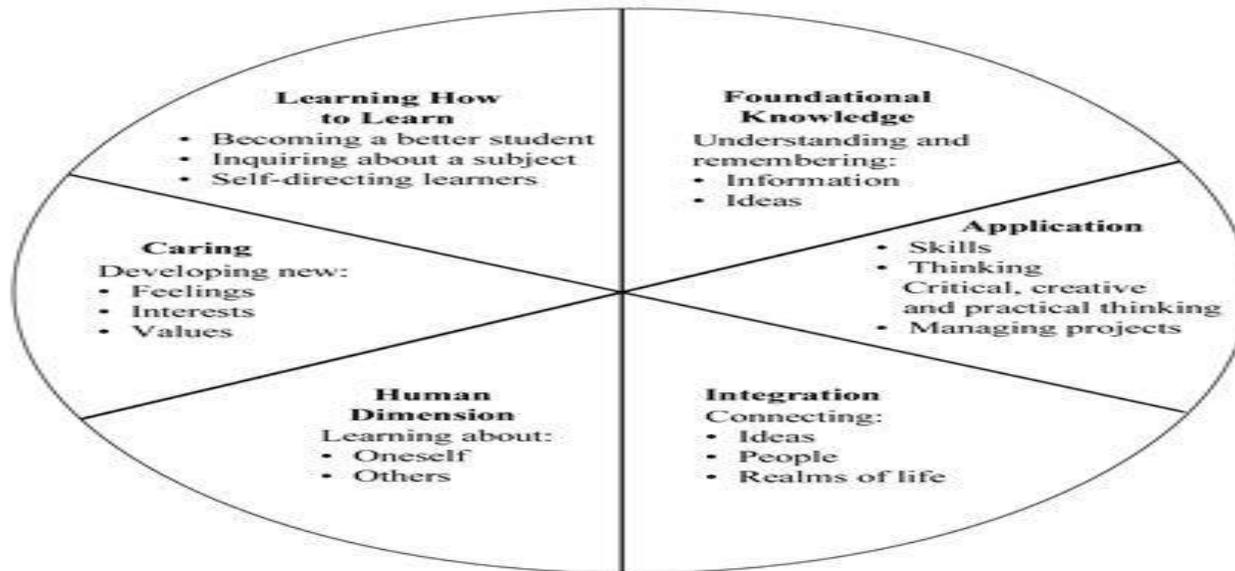
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## Appendix 7: Qualitative Research Analysis – NVivo Nodes

The screenshot displays the NVivo Pro interface for a qualitative research analysis. The main window shows a list of nodes organized in a hierarchical tree structure on the left and a corresponding table on the right. The table columns are: Name, Sources, References, Created On, Created By, Modified On, and Modified By. The nodes are color-coded, and the table rows are also color-coded to match the node's color.

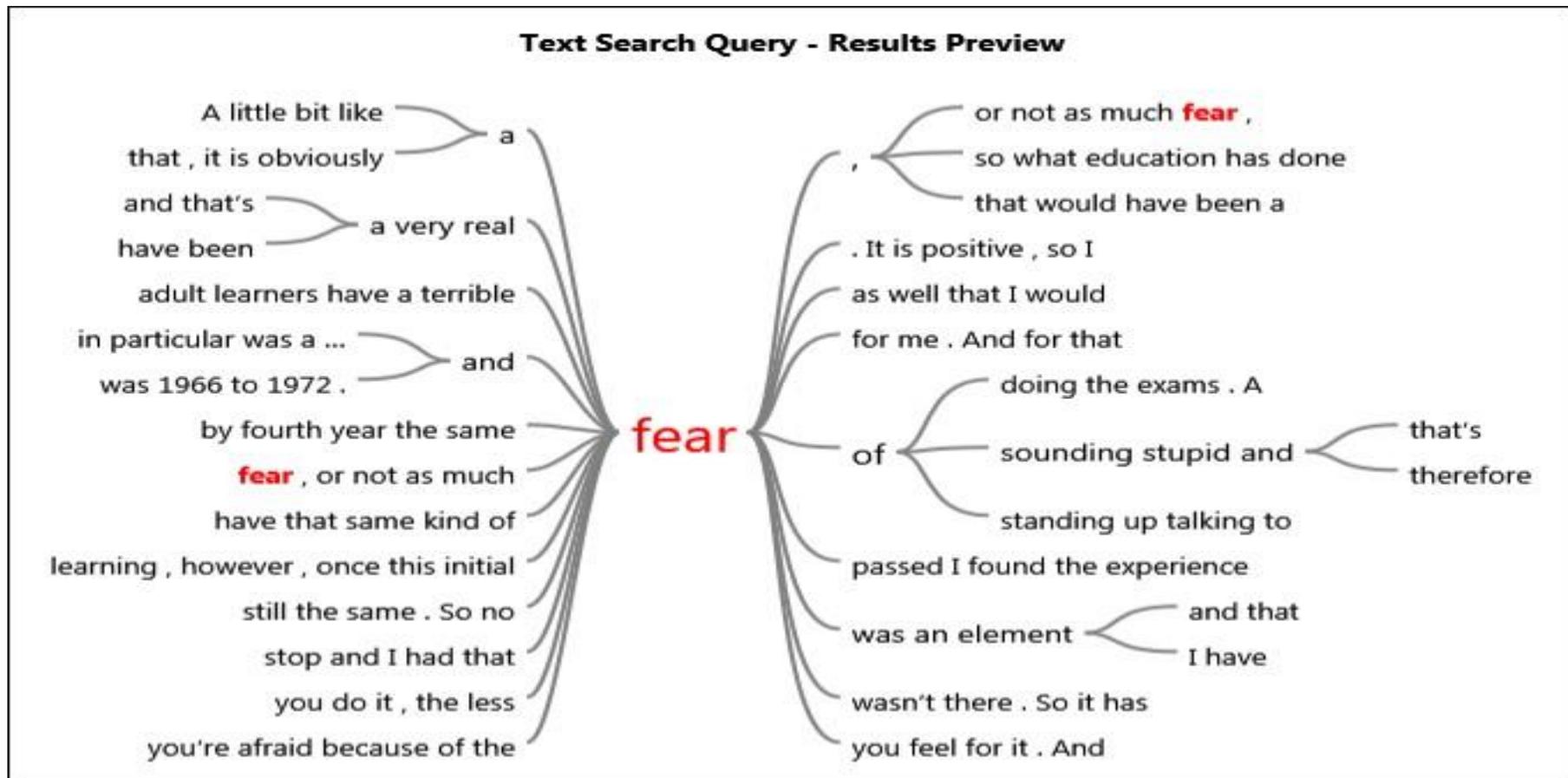
Name	Sources	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Agency - Personal Development		25	119 27/12/2017 15:36	DH	13/04/2018 17:00	DH
Self esteem - confidence		16	42 28/12/2017 12:38	DH	14/04/2018 15:49	DH
Life Span Development - Age		5	12 24/02/2018 15:01	DH	12/04/2018 14:37	DH
Life Course		6	15 28/12/2017 12:46	DH	24/02/2018 15:15	DH
Linked Lives - Relationships		3	16 24/02/2018 14:49	DH	10/04/2018 21:00	DH
Family- Social Capital		22	99 27/12/2017 15:35	DH	28/11/2018 10:04	DH
Time and Place - Life Experience		8	19 24/02/2018 14:54	DH	13/04/2018 17:17	DH
Experience		7	20 27/12/2017 15:35	DH	09/04/2018 12:22	DH
Timing of Lives - Learning Life		3	18 24/02/2018 14:53	DH	13/04/2018 16:55	DH
Learning		31	310 27/12/2017 14:57	DH	13/04/2018 17:14	DH
Education		18	63 27/12/2017 14:58	DH	13/04/2018 17:20	DH
Higher education		18	114 09/04/2018 12:04	DH	13/04/2018 17:12	DH
Learning Skills		19	119 28/12/2017 12:33	DH	13/04/2018 16:47	DH
Learning Identity -Self Concept -Adult Learner		19	60 28/12/2017 13:02	DH	12/04/2018 17:11	DH
Challenges - Difficulties		27	98 28/12/2017 13:08	DH	13/04/2018 17:04	DH
Opportunities		5	6 24/02/2018 14:57	DH	10/04/2018 21:57	DH
Employability		20	53 28/12/2017 13:41	DH	13/04/2018 17:09	DH

**Appendix 8: Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning**



**TAXONOMY OF SIGNIFICANT LEARNING**

Appendix 9: NVivo Data Analysis Extract - Fear



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### Appendix 10: NVivo Data Analysis Extract – Biographical Interviews (word frequency –top 50 words)

people	school	degree	community	family	life	adult		
		able	level	college	masters	important	higher	
	learning			home	primary	support	university	development
time		terms	feel					
	education		class	started	last	stage	learn	worked
		felt		hard	learner	love	week	sense
			social					
work	experience	working		learners	skills	employment	courses	start
			job	research	training	person	children	personal