

Mainstream and Margins: An exploration of the policy,
practice and perspectives that have shaped part-time
flexible learning in Irish Higher Education 2012-18

Phd

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Declaration

I declare that this research has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other University. This research is entirely my own work. The library may lend or copy the thesis upon request.

Summary

This case study explored the policy, practices and experiences that shaped PTF learning in Irish HE between the years 2012-2018. Irish part-time flexible HE was under-researched with limited empirical data to draw upon to inform policy and potentially enhance practice. The intention was to examine the experiences of; policy makers involved in the formation and implementation of policy, lecturers, teaching part-time flexible students and students', motivations, goals and sense of inclusion within HEIs'. The case study was not focused upon a single HEI or a single model of part-time flexible provision such an approach would have imposed limitations on the research. As Irish HE is a binary system and included independent providers then arguably a wider range of perspectives across multiple sites using various sources of evidence would strengthen the case study.

Case study can be found within multiple research domains it has a long tradition and has been established within qualitative and quantitative paradigms. This research was empirically based and set out 'to understand complex social phenomena' (Yin 2014:4). The questions underpinning the research included; Why policy makers had renewed interest in part-time flexible learning, To what extent part-time flexible learning was informed by concepts of lifelong learning and inclusion, What strategies were lecturers using when teaching part-time students, What factors constrained integration and engagement amongst part-time flexible students, What motivated students and why they persisted in their studies, To what extent were PTF students integrated within HEIs'.

The case study was bounded by time and resources. The experiences of each of the key stakeholders formed an embedded unit within the study. The case study was exploratory and instrumental, through analysis and interpretation of data it aimed to answer the key questions underpinning the research. The intention was to provide explanations as to the extent of change and development of PTF HE during the timeframe outlined. Tinto's theory of integration provided a conceptual framework for the case study.

Multiple sources of evidence informed the inquiry. A review of research and policy documents provided material for shaping interviews. One hundred and two participants took part in semi-structured interviews. Eight HEIs within Dublin, Leinster and Munster regions were involved. The researcher received ethical approval through the school of education and all those who participated in the research took part voluntarily. Participants were assured of anonymity and transcripts were forwarded on completion. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, analysed, coded and themes identified for interpretation. MAXQDA12 software was utilised for purposes of coding and analysis. Axial and open coding was applied. Part-time flexible learning was under-researched there was limited data to draw upon in relation to supply and demand for PTF HE. Therefore it was necessary to engage in mapping exercises in order to establish the range of part-time flexible programmes available across a range of Irish HEI's. In addition, a range of statistics from the CSO/HEA, were examined to track changes to part-time student participation in HE.

A review of research and policy documents indicated that part-time was under-developed and poorly conceptualised. Findings indicated that part-time flexible learning had occupied a peripheral position for policy makers who had attended to full-time HE. However the situation had changed the status of PTF within national policy was elevated. Whilst the HEA commenced collating part-time numbers and included part-time flexible within the annual grant to HEIs nevertheless there was no change to the funding situation. Despite the rhetoric encountered in policy documents to enhance and grow PTF HE nonetheless PTF learning was not equal to

full-time from a funding perspective. Whilst PTF policy was included within lifelong learning and widening participation strategies, policy makers confirmed the needs of the economy had shaped and driven policy in this area. Furthermore findings indicated in the context of the downturn the rise of PTF learning across HE was linked to providing a revenue stream within HEIs.

Thirty lecturers across eight HEIs participated in interviews which examined approaches to teaching and supporting part-time flexible students. Findings indicated that lecturers used a range of teaching strategies and approaches to engage part-time older students many of whom attended in the evening or at week-ends. Lecturers were responsive to the needs of a diverse cohort, whom they found to be committed to achieving their goal. Findings indicated that lecturers were aware of the temporal constraints involved in teaching and supporting part-time flexible students and responded using a range of strategies to actively engage students in learning. However findings also indicated that whilst part-time flexible students were not integrated within mainstream nonetheless lecturers observed that the majority completed the programme.

Sixty-three students participated in interviews across six HEIs and a range of programme levels. Part-time flexible students were diverse and findings indicated that they were not a homogeneous cohort. Student's motivation for enrolling on programmes, their sense of belonging, inclusion within the HEI and why they persisted, were examined during interviews. Students' motivations were multiple and included; a desire to up-skill, acquire a qualification, an interest in a subject and enhance their opportunities for employment. The location of the HEI and other logistical factors contributed to the choice of programme. Whilst several students indicated that they felt they belonged within the HEI this was not the case for all students. A lack of time, juggling responsibilities and course workload were factors which constrained part-time student's integration within HE. PTF students engaged in academic activities that were class based however evidence of social integration was poor. Challenges in accessing facilities and supports were noted nonetheless students persisted in their studies. Students were committed to achieving their goal which was to complete their studies and gain a qualification.

Findings indicated Tinto's theory of integration does not translate straightforwardly to part-time flexible cohorts in Irish HEIs. In addition access to supports and facilities continues to hinder integration within HE. Inclusion of PTF students within Irish HE remains a goal to be achieved across HEIs.

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1 Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The introduction outlines the focus of this study, including an overview of the main questions, methodology, and findings emerging from the research. Due to limited research into part-time, flexible learning inevitably my research-orientated toward exploration, mapping and establishing what was happening nevertheless, the intention was to collect sufficient empirical data to provide explanations and offer insight into the situation. Through the examination of the literature, a range of data sources, and semi-structured interviews with a hundred and two participants, it was possible to address the questions leading the research and pose additional questions for further research.

This case study focused on; policies, practices, and experiences, that have shaped part-time flexible learning in Irish Higher Education (HE) in particular since the late 1990s. Irish policy-makers neglected part-time flexible learning (PTF) learning. Instead, meeting the needs of school leavers within full-time, HE was prioritised by policy-makers and providers for several decades (HEA 2012). Byrne and Murray noted that part-time HE was 'underfunded and underdeveloped' (2017:26). Part-time flexible HE was low status, it was marginal and peripheral. Also students' were not counted in annual returns to HEA nor were they included in the annual recurring grant for many years (Clancy 2015).

Whilst part-time flexible learning was at the centre of this study the particular focus was on the renewed interest shown by policy makers in promoting and increasing part-time participation which coincided with the economic downturn. Also, I wanted to examine the extent to which current HE policy had been informed by concepts of lifelong learning and inclusion and establish whether such ideas informed practices within HEIs. The wider policy context provided a framework within which to explore policy-makers perspectives on part-time flexible learning and examine lecturers and

students' experiences locally within HEIs. In particular, the lecturer's experiences of teaching part-time, flexible students, including; educational strategies used to engage adult students, factors constraining engagement, as well as interaction within and retention amongst part-time was explored. Lastly, students' motivations, experiences of teaching, learning, academic integration, engagement, belonging and inclusion, as well as persistence within HE, was discussed at interviews across multiple HEIs. Before the commencement of my study, very little was known about part-time students' experiences within Irish HE equally lecturers experiences of teaching and supporting part-time learners was under-researched.

In the late 1990s, policy-makers turned their attention to access and widening participation, and progress has been made in so far as it has become a central feature of HE policy, institutional practice, further it attracted the attention of researchers nationally and internationally (Fleming et al. 2017). New widening participation (WP) strategies introduced in 2003, included part-time as part-time students were identified as an equity group within successive national access plans (NAPs) (HEA 2014). However, there was no funding to widen the participation of PTF higher education. Following the banking collapse in 2008, part-time, flexible learning was identified as a strategy providing for increased flexibility within higher education.

Notwithstanding the desire for widening participation across HE, the definition and conceptualisation of part-time, flexible learning has proven problematic (Hunt, 2017, Callender 2011). In policy terms, part-time was a feature of lifelong learning; however, this expansive and ambiguous concept included multiple ideas, such as; equity, social justice, democracy, employability, and competitiveness. As the influence of neo-liberal interests began to impact, theories of lifelong learning have taken a turn toward 'learning for earning' which resulted in economic interests taking precedence over humanistic and participatory aspects which were central to Faure's original concept (Milana, 2014, Field 2006, Biesta 2006). At a national level, part-time, flexible learning was more readily associated with up-skilling and reskilling opportunities since the economic crisis. In

particular, the government funded, labour activation scheme Springboard was launched in 2011 and offered free places on part-time programmes linked to the labour market, with some 30,000 course places filled (HEA 2016:3).

Widening participation strategies in particular part-time, flexible learning aspects were aligned with addressing the needs of the economy during the period of austerity that followed the banking crisis, which coincided with a reduction in overall funding for HE (Loxley et al. 2014). Funding HE remains a hot topic, particularly in light of the Cassells Report (DES 2016), which examined potential models of funding for HE. Nonetheless, the report continues to travel through the Oireachtas without having been implemented. These developments, coupled with increased demand for places within HE has added to pressures facing HEIs. Sustainability and maintaining quality loom large for Irish HE in tandem with issues of governance and accountability which feature prominently for policy-makers (Hazelkorn 2014, Clancy 2015).

These introductory paragraphs suggest that the landscape of Irish HE has changed and after 2008, the implications of these changes became the focus of research and some debate (Fleming et al. 2017, Clarke et al, 2015, Loxley et al, 2014). Undoubtedly a myriad of challenges for HE was now manifest; nevertheless, the situation for part-time, flexible students remains unchanged, students continue to be disadvantaged as they pay fees and are not eligible for government grants. Furthermore, the ability to access supports and facilities remains an issue locally within HEIs, as does the supply of part-time programmes, progression for, and retention of part-time students. Arguably efforts to expand flexible provision remain contentious and potentially problematic.

The terms part-time and flexible became interchangeable from 2012. Further, the divides between full-time and part-time HE were increasingly blurred. Terms such as; full-time, part-time, flexible, non-traditional and traditional, are not-straight-forward and present challenges that are discussed in chapter four sections 4.3., 4.6. While the 'diffuse concept' of

flexibility pervaded policy and resulted in an increased variety of programmes within HE, my research was not orientated toward flexible learning in so far as it was not technology focused (Schuller et al 1999:44). Furthermore, though PTF students include large numbers of mature students, this case study was not located within an 'openly ideological research', tradition (Lather 1986:63). The focus was not on learner transformation, identity or agency (Field et al 2012). Transformative or emancipatory concepts had not shaped the research design. A summary of the thesis chapters from two to nine follows.

1.2 Outline of the Thesis

Chapter two sets the context for examining part-time flexible learning within public policy in Irish HE from the 1970's up until recent years. A review of policy indicated PTF learning was overshadowed and overlooked by policy-makers for many years, as priority focused on full-time traditional student participation. Part-time was not treated as a stand-alone topic but tied to the Irish states lifelong learning and widening participation strategies. Since the economic downturn which began in 2008, PTF learning was associated with HE reform and increased flexible provision (DES 2011). In order to examine in greater depth the changes occurring over time a range of policy documents inclusive of lifelong learning, widening participation, adult education and part-time flexible learning were investigated. The focus of the policy review was to establish concepts and ideas informing the development of part-time flexible learning, to consider why this strand of HE was overlooked for so long, what characterised and defined PTF learning, why part-time students were treated differently in terms of funding and what factors underpinned the link to reform of widening participation within HE.

A review of policy documents indicated that 1) part-time, flexible learning was poorly conceptualised, 2) particular characteristics associated with teaching, supporting and 3) engaging a diverse adult population was unexplored and under-researched. Further, while there was an interest in increasing the supply of part-time, flexible opportunities, little attention was

devoted to the structural inequities associated with this mode of learning or how to sustain and fund expanded provision (Clancy 2015). There were barriers to accessing part-time, flexible HE; also students were neither integrated nor adequately supported once inside institutions.

PTF learning was linked to lifelong learning and widening participation strategies; however, the foundational aspects of this concept which, championed; democracy, participation, social justice, had been eroded in favour of addressing economic competitiveness. Examination of HE policies and strategies which coincided with the banking crisis indicated the turn toward expanding flexible provision within HE to provide up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities for 'working adults.' From a policy perspective, PTF learning provided adults, who could afford to pay fees, with opportunities to participate in HE, potentially leading to enhanced employability and meeting the changing needs of the economy. The orientation of part-time, flexible learning was increasingly linked to labour market needs and advancing instrumentalist approaches within HE.

The difficulty for part-time flexible learning policy has been the failure to treat this mode of learning to any in-depth research or analysis; rather it is presented as a variation of an existing mainstream provision. The complexity associated with providing flexible curricular options, across multiple sites required an understanding of a diverse student profile, who juggled responsibilities, and needed access to supports, this insight was absent from policy documents and strategic initiatives. The good news of HE reform, widening access, and extending flexible learning overshadowed the financial costs and implications of increased student numbers within HEIs. The policy was less strategic, more functional, and likely to involve setting and or meeting targets under the systems performance framework (SPF) agreed between the DES-HEA. There was a gap in data, and the knowledge base was inadequately informed. Consequently, policies were poorly informed.

Chapter three maps part-time enrolments across HEIs from; 2005 to 2015 inclusive. Gathering data of part-time student enrolments was relevant to

contextualising my research and establishing the extent to which there was any growth in numbers over the time-frame. Collation of numbers at undergraduate and post-graduate levels indicated that generally, they had remained stable but showed limited growth. Besides, a more detailed review of selected HEIs part-time enrolments also featured, this was undertaken to examine the extent to which some institutions had extended the scale of part-time, flexible learning programmes also to consider patterns emerging over time. This analysis was reliant on figures returned to the HEA; however, it was difficult to establish what particular programmes were offered by HEIs; consequently, a trawl of college websites and prospectus was necessary. Within institutions where the model was to provide self-financing courses, programmes that did not achieve a quota often did not run. Tracking and recording supply and expansion of PTF programmes across HEIs were challenging. Also, there was difficulty in establishing whether Springboard numbers were included in the HEA data due to timelines for counting, though undoubtedly, they enhanced national figures for part-time, flexible learning.

Chapter four is concerned with an examination of research published and unpublished, which is specific to 1) part-time and flexible learning, students experience as part-time learners, and 2) factors that inhibit and constrain participation in PTF HE. In Ireland, part-time flexible learning has been under-researched, with limited empirical data to draw upon. A review of literature across various domains with a focus on Ireland and the UK were prioritised, though the trawl of published and unpublished sources included the; EU, North America and wider. Three categories emerged from an examination of the literature: 1) policy and strategies shaping part-time flexible learning, 2) part-time flexible student's experiences within HE, and 3) the implications of increased diversity for lecturers and approaches to teaching and designing flexible curricula. From out of these main categories sub-themes were identified; defining part-time, low status and visibility of part-time, funding and equity, student profile, and experiences, motivations, identity, belonging, and retention within HE.

The literature review indicated few empirical studies examining PTF and those that were identified were small scale. An examination of research indicated that part-time, flexible learning was inadequately conceptualised and defined which was compounded with having low status within HEIs and in policy documents. The blurring of boundaries between full-time and part-time traditional and non-traditional required clarifying terms and definitions for the study (see section 4.3, 4.6) Also part-time flexible students were recognised as a heterogeneous population inclusive of varying ages and socio-economic groups. The implications of changes to funding, the lack of supports or access to facilities within institutions, and part-time students as paying their fees appeared consistently. There was no data or published material on retention of part-time flexible students in Ireland however, researchers in the UK had included this group when investigating retention within HE. Though high levels of drop out were noted, external factors were contributing to withdrawal. Research into PTF student's experiences of learning, belonging or perspectives on teaching within HEIs was limited, though a small number of articles were identified which indicated an interest in didactic lecture-based approaches in the earlier stages of undergraduate education nevertheless the findings related to novice students and the research was small scale. HEIs as inflexible and orientated toward meeting the needs of school leavers carried through to approaches to teaching and learning.

Chapter five addresses the theoretical frame for the research focusing on retention and persistence theories. Gaps identified in the literature review highlighted retention as an area that was under-researched in an Irish context. Inevitably Tinto's (1993) theory of departure and models of retention, remain central to a discussion on 'drop out' within HE. The significance of Tinto's model for Irish higher education was noted when the author launched the first of the HEA policy documents on progression in 2010. While Tinto's model has been applied and tested in multiple quantitative studies, its use in qualitative research is uncommon. Tinto's model presented departure as a slow process that took place over time and was based on ideas of student interaction and integration within a HEI. In this model students who were actively interacting and integrated socially

and academically within HE was more likely to succeed and complete their programme. Drawing on earlier theories of suicide (Durkeim) and separation (Gennep), Tinto argued that where students were experiencing anomie then they were likely to depart. Alternative perspectives were examined in particular researchers who had highlighted the limitations of the interactionist model when applied to non-traditional cohorts including part-time flexible, ethnic or commuting students (Rovai 2008, Cabrera et al 1993). Further, the negative connotations associated with the term drop out or how integration and success were framed required adaptation or modification when applied to minority cohorts (Tierney 1999). Also theories of identity were considered but not pursued for the purposes of the research.

Tinto's model of retention was used as a sensitizing concept. Qualitative researchers use sensitizing concepts to guide and support inductive data analysis also for development of theory when undertaking empirical research (Blaikie 2014; Fleming & Finnegan 2011; Bowen 2006) An examination of theories of retention led to a review of related ideas of; belonging, and engagement which had featured increasingly in research concerned with institutional retention and student persistence. While there were variations on theories and ideas informing retention, the importance of academic engagement or integration, as well as access to supports, remained critical for part-time, flexible cohorts. However, the level and relevancy of social integration were uncertain where part-time is concerned. Notwithstanding the limitations of an interactionist model, it was used as a sensitizing concept and provided a theoretical frame with which to examine persistence and aspects of identity. Progression and retention were examined by the HEA (2010); there was no data on part-time students; also, success was defined in terms of mainstream models of HE, namely completing a level 8 qualification. Arguably it was timely to re-consider models of retention and review concepts of inclusion and engagement in order to frame persistence for part-time, flexible students.

Chapter six sets out the rationale for case study as an approach and the use of interviews as a research tool to gather data. The approach to research

design was qualitative as the scale of the study was small and resources limited. A total of one hundred and two individuals participated in semi-structured interviews, including nine-policy makers, twenty-nine lecturers, and sixty-three students. The purpose was to explore a problem within a contemporary social setting using an empirical approach. Part-time, flexible learning was under-researched; there were limited published sources to draw from and, there was a lack of empirical data. In that sense, the case study was exploratory; the aim was to find out what was happening in order to generate explanations about a complex social phenomenon (Yin 2014). Using semi-structured interviews, the intention was to draw on individual experiences of policy-makers, lecturers and students as a means of answering the research questions and constructing explanations from the data gathered. Whilst case study sits within an established tradition in research design, and arguably its limitations could outweigh its assets. Case study provides researchers with an opportunity to study a subject in-depth however, on the downside, findings may not be generalizable, and theory building may be limited. However, in this instance, the benefits of case study outweighed concerns about issues of generalisability as it enabled the researcher to examine at close quarters an individual's experiences across multiple sites.

In a post-positivist era qualitative research continued to be the subject of debate and contested theories. Qualitative researchers are required to make explicit their position and attend to issues of bias and subjectivity. The challenges of undertaking research in social contexts, including epistemological concerns, the dynamics of power and issues of representation are discussed critically in chapter six. As a professional working full-time with HE my position was fluid and not fixed. I was both an insider/outsider negotiating the dynamics of power with multiple groups. I employed reflexive techniques in order to review decisions and became more self-aware about choices and the potential implications for my research.

The fieldwork stage was time consuming and at times, uncertain. All participants were adults; nonetheless, ethical concerns were central to the

research process. An ethics statement was prepared and approved; however, the process of accessing research participants, particularly staff and students within HEIs was slow and involved negotiating multiple internal ethical processes that in some instances, yielded little or no outcome. A research statement and interview questions were forwarded to participants in advance, and all completed a consent form. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and with the assistance of MAXQDA12, the data was analysed, coded and themes identified.

1.3 Findings

Three chapters, seven, eight, and nine, present findings from the interviews with policy-makers, lecturers, and students. The interviews commenced late in 2015 and continued into 2018. Chapter seven considers findings from policy-makers. Individuals who were or had previously worked directly in the formation of policy documents, and who had undertaken research relevant to part-time, flexible learning, or were involved in the implementation of strategies, or were working in organisations that influenced and shaped policy contributed to the case study. Interviews were tailored to an individual's experience and knowledge of part-time, flexible learning; nonetheless overarching themes framed the questions. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and focused on; to what extent did concepts of lifelong learning or inclusion inform policy, what factors were driving policy in this area and what was contributing to its elevation in policy terms, what defined part-time and how it differed from flexible learning, what factors inhibited growth and how might HEIs be incentivised to expand growth.

The findings indicated that part-time, flexible learning had lingered on the margins of policy for a long time; however, after 2008, the focus shifted, and there was a need to; change, reform, and expand HE. Accordingly, HE providers should become more flexible and increase part-time, flexible options in particular to adults who were likely to return to the labour market or sought to upskill for purposes of enhanced employment opportunities. Economic factors were driving policy developments. Policy-makers

acknowledged that funding and the lack of additional state resources impeded the growth of part-time, flexible learning across HE. PTF was as a revenue source for HEIs. The policy had not evolved in a coherent manner; too often it depended on bolting on a strategy or initiative, which was indicative of a short term approach to a situation or crisis but failed to grapple with fundamental challenges underpinning the development of PTF HE.

Within HEIs the experience of teaching and supporting part-time students was examined through interviews with lecturers. There was a lack of research into lecturers' perspectives of teaching part-time, flexible students within Irish HEIs, in particular, pedagogical approaches to teaching adults compared with full-time traditional school leavers. Eight HEIs were selected and thirty lecturers teaching at undergraduate and/or post-graduate level participated in interviews. The criteria framing selection of HEIs included having a range that reflected the binary HE system as well as a mixture of large and small scale institutions such as; University, IoT, Independent colleges and educational colleges. While Leinster had a larger proportion of HEIs it was important to move beyond the capital and the eastern region to include HEIs within the southern region. Subsequent analysis of the interview data indicated that part-time students were diverse, heterogeneous also, they were motivated, committed and vocal. Findings indicated that in several instances, PTF students were supported by employers; however, lecturers recognised that the majority of part-time students paid their fees and were committed to completing the programme. Part-time and full-time students were not mixing but co-existed independently.

Further, while lecturers observed that social integration was limited, they noted that the majority of students persisted. Based on the lecturers' experiences, it appeared that retention was good. According to the lecturers, their efforts to create academic integration and support engagement amongst part-time students contributed to success and completion.

In discussion with lecturers, a range of pedagogical philosophies and approaches were identified, including; critical and adult education theories, constructivism, experiential learning, applied, and instrumental methods. When teaching part-time, flexible students, lecturers were aware of responding to the needs of adults, recognising the experiences they bring, using a range of methods to engage learners who were often working and juggling responsibilities and had concerns or fears about assessment. A number of factors were identified as constraints to student engagement including; access to supports such as literacy and academic writing, limited time for teaching and study, juggling responsibilities, meeting deadlines for assessment, the need to manage students expectations carefully and provide encouragement and pastoral support to students who had been outside of a formal academic learning environment for many years. Whilst students paid their fees, this was both an inhibitor and a motivator, particularly where students had to self-finance. Findings indicated students were invested financially and often emotionally in studying. Lecturers responded positively to teaching part-time flexible students they recognised their willingness to engage and capacity to persist in order to achieve a goal.

Student perspectives and experiences were central to the discussion on the expansion of part-time, flexible learning. Sixty-three students participated in individual, small, or medium-sized group interviews, which were undertaken in a range of HEIs in Dublin, the wider Leinster and Munster regions. Large and small HEIs, historical as well as newer Universities and colleges, which form part of the binary HE system featured in interviews. HEIs with an extensive part-time, flexible provision as well as institutions with limited flexible provision and progression routes participated.

Students enrolled in flexible programmes of varying NFQ levels and duration featured in interviews. Student interviews focused on; motivations for choosing a HE programme and reasons for selecting a HEI, expectations and managing workload, experiences of teaching and learning, their sense of belonging and inclusion within the HEI, and why they persisted where they encountered a myriad of challenges and constraints. Data gathered

through interviews indicated that students examined their choice of programme and HEI extensively before enrolment; decision making reflected a process of consideration involving a review of the implications of investing; time, finances, and other resources into flexible learning. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors informed the choice of programme and logistical flexibility featured in the selection of a HEI. Part-Time, flexible learners, were committed, they juggled multiple responsibilities, often attending several evenings, plus weekends. Students acknowledged a sense of belonging yet very few believed they were included within the HEI. Such constraints were factors impinging on engagement but did not disrupt persistence.

1.4 Analysis and Discussion

Chapter ten presents a discussion based on an interpretation of the findings. The inadequacy of data about part-time combined with the failure to address equity in the formation of public policy and the inability to capture retention or persistence amongst part-time, flexible learners indicated reform or change within HE continues to be driven by funding concerns. A renewed interest shown by policy-makers in part-time, flexible learning at the time of the banking crisis led to a variety of reports and strategic initiatives such as the labour activation scheme Springboard. The expansion of PTFL was linked to economic drivers nationally. Aspects of lifelong learning, which were concerned with economic competitiveness and the implications of globalisation were foregrounded over social justice or inclusion.

My research findings indicated that lecturers teaching and supporting part-time, flexible students were responsive to their needs. A range of educational philosophies and teaching strategies suggested student-centred adult-orientated methodologies were employed. Also, lecturers attended to fostering a relational approach whilst others were concerned with preparing students for professional development and career advancement. Lecturers were positive about teaching part-time older students as they found they were motivated, committed and actively engaged. Findings indicated that

students were not integrated socially, and access to relevant supports and facilities across HEIs remained problematic.

Students demonstrated resilience, commitment to engagement and completion. Evidence emerging from findings indicated that changes had occurred in approaches to; teaching, however, experiences of inclusion within HEIs were poor and inconsistent across HEIs. Structural inequity and institutional inflexibility continue to feature within provision and policy where part-time, flexible learning is concerned.

1.5 Conclusion

The scale and limitations of the research were addressed in Chapter eleven, the conclusion. The lack of research and empirical data highlighted the need to examine experiences of the key stakeholders; policy-makers, lecturers and students. An institutional perspective though desirable, was not possible given the scale of the study, furthermore to examine a single institution as a model of part-time, flexible learning could have provided in-depth knowledge, however, as multiple models and, strategies existed the challenges of generalising or theorising would have proven problematic.

During the fieldwork phase, the difficulties encountered gaining access to lecturers, and students presented challenges. Ethical guidelines were followed; however, institutional procedures proved onerous. The negotiation of various committees which resulted in a delay or stalling of the process. Even where the requirements of various ethical committees were addressed, the call for participants was not always successful, often department or personal contacts proved successful.

Ultimately the research presented valuable insights into how policy was formulated, factors that shaped developments, and the challenges of change, particularly where systems have been established over time to address the needs of school leavers effectively. The observation that part-time students persist in spite of the system not because of it indicates that progress in part-time, flexible learning is slow, under-researched and fails

to capture student's and lecturer's experiences adequately. While inequities continue to feature for part-time cohorts in terms of funding and fees remarkably at a micro level the link between curricular flexibility, pedagogies of engagement and persistence remains under-explored. In particular as the binary 'divide' between part-time flexible and full-time diminished and definitions had blurred it could be argued that HE had diversified and minorities were included. Notwithstanding developments post-Bologna and the arrival of Springboard, it is argued that there is complexity within PTF HE which required further research specifically understanding; the heterogeneous student profile, integration, access to supports and persistence.

The introductory chapter outlines the thesis content, the parameters of my research and key findings emerging. The case study examined part-time flexible learning at a time of change and reform within Irish HE. Using interviews and discussion the experiences of key stakeholders including 1) policy-makers, 2) lecturers and 3) students were explored, data was gathered and analysed. This case study involved one hundred and two participants and aimed to contribute to knowledge and understanding of PTF learning in HE using empirical methods to address gaps in research in an Irish context.

2 Chapter Two: Context; Policy and Part-Time Flexible Higher Education (1970-2016)

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines a range of public policy documents, reports, and strategic initiatives relevant to the evolution of part-time, flexible higher education since the 1970s. The intention was to contextualise PTF learning through a chronological review of policy with specific reference to an Irish context. Figures for PTF learning are referenced in the following paragraphs however, chapter three maps part-time enrolments across HE in greater detail.

Part-time higher education was overshadowed and overlooked by policy-makers for many years as attention focused on full-time HE (Clancy 2015). Furthermore, it was attached to policy debates in the area of Widening Participation and bundled with broader policy objectives such as lifelong learning (Fleming et al 2017). Part-time, flexible learning failed to find a foot-hold within public policy, and it lacked visibility. Pinning down what defined part-time, flexible learning or attending to definitions was neither a priority nor a policy concern. As government funding for HE reduced priorities shifted, and interest in part-time, flexible learning changed. The link between HE reform, sustainability, and part-time, flexible learning, as; a tool to widen participation, address employability and where possible augment resources within HEIs began to feature. Clancy noted that 'over the past few years there has been a radical policy change in respect of part-time students and the provision of flexible learning opportunities has become a central objective of public policy' (Clancy 2015:299).

Part-time flexible HE did not warrant the attention of policy-makers and was tangential to government strategies in the area of widening participation and access (HEA, 2008, Clancy, 2015, Daly, 2015, Loxley et al 2014). Coinciding with the economic downturn in 2008, part-time flexible HE emerged as an area of interest within public policy as two documents were

published; firstly 'Open and Flexible learning' (HEA 2009) and secondly 'Part-time higher education and training in Ireland' (HEA 2012). The first of these documents was short, and ideas led, the second focused on setting targets and reporting on progress in response to the National Strategy document (DES 2011). Nevertheless, both documents set about defining an area of provision which was neglected by policy-makers for decades.

Part-time was rarely treated as a stand-alone subject but linked to wider themes such as; widening participation, lifelong learning, and HE reform, consequently for the review, and it was necessary to revert to reports in areas where there was policy activity as well as strategic and targeted initiatives.

A critical examination of policy documents presented several questions and issues for consideration such as;

1. Is part-time HE in Ireland being adequately conceptualised in policy documents?
2. What characterises an emerging policy for part-time and flexible HE, and how does this differ from a national strategy to address access and equity?
3. How is it defined vis a vis management and funding mechanisms and structures?
4. Where do flexible learning stop and part-time begin, and how do these two categories differ in policy?
5. In what way does adult and continuing education relate to part-time higher education?

These questions are examined in greater detail through a review and analysis of reports and policy documents in the remainder of the chapter.

2.2 Context

The period selected 1970-2016, represents a time of significant development and change; economically, socially and educationally. During this period formative developments propelled Irish HE toward a

sophisticated expanded system with many of the benefits, challenges, and tensions associated with mass HE (Thorn, 2018, Fleming et al. 2017, Clancy:2015, Walsh 2011). The time-frame takes account of early reports into adult education such as the Murphy report (1973), when Ireland was on the brink of joining the EEC (EU) the Kenny Report on adult education (1984), the Green and White Paper on Adult Education (1998, 2000) and included later HEA (2009, 2012) and DES (2011, 2016) policy documents relevant to part-time flexible Higher Education (HE). New structures and regulatory bodies were established such as the HEA,(1971) IUQB (subsumed into QQI), new funding mechanisms developed, the range of HE providers expanded, there was a sizeable growth in the numbers of school leavers entering HE. The range of routes into HE increased resulting in greater diversity, legislation was enacted (RTC Act 1992, Universities Act 1997, Qualifications and Training Act 1999, IoT Act, 2006, Education and Training Act 2012) the Bologna Process was implemented, a National Framework of Qualifications (2003) introduced, a National Office of Equity and Access was established (2003) and implemented successive national access plans (NAPs), thereby, these years were marked out as a time of significant change for HE.

The advances in technology improved the range of learning opportunities beyond face to face teaching and campus-based learning (HEA 2009). Similarly, legislative changes within FET (2013) resulted in the consolidation of existing structures with the intention of greater coherency of educational provision across a diverse sector. Notwithstanding these initiatives, there were elements of HE policy such as, Lifelong learning, access and widening participation that remained difficult to implement or achieve successively. Notably, student enrolments in part-time, flexible HE from 2003 (34,680) until 2014 (35,147) showed little growth (based on CSO and HEA datasets, respectively). Over the timeframe 1970-2016, part-time, flexible higher education edged out of the shadows to feature in key policy documents (DES 2011). Nevertheless, critical questions remained unaddressed, namely; how to fund and sustain an expanded flexible higher education system and why such a system might change to become more inclusive of flexible part-time learners (DES 2016, HEA, 2016, Clancy 2015).

2.3 Part-time, Flexible learning + Lifelong Learning

The initial section of the review explores links between lifelong learning and part-time flexible learning, and the implications for public policy. Within the framework of public policy, part-time flexible learning sits within established strategies for widening access and participation further it is linked to the overarching concept of lifelong learning (HEA 2012). Lifelong learning is a wide-ranging concept inclusive of; social justice, equity, active citizenship as well as addressing the impact of globalisation on economic competitiveness and employment. The ideas informing LL have evolved, however, Fleming raised concerns (HEA 2004, 2012 Fleming & Finnegan 2011, Fleming 2011) that reductive approaches influenced policy in recent years and a neo-liberal agenda determined developments. In addition, Flannery and McGarr argued that the framing of part-time flexible higher education policy thus far has been limited and the link to LL concepts and widening participation strategies was not straightforward (Flannery & McGarr 2014). As part-time higher education received little attention from policy-makers and researchers until recently, it is worth considering if it is adequately understood across the higher education sector?

Research into part-time HE and in particular, research focusing on part-time mature student's experiences of learning within higher education in Ireland was limited. The gap in research was not unique to Ireland as documented in Swain and Hammonds' recent paper concerning the UK (Swain Hammond, 2011). Similarly, there was limited research into lecturer's experiences of teaching part-time students in higher education (Merrill 2001). Such gaps in research support the claim that part-time has low status, also there was the marginalization of part-time teaching and learning as a distinctive domain within higher education policies and practice, both in Ireland and in the UK (Callendar, 2011, Darmody and Fleming, 2009, HEA 2012).

Despite the sizeable body of research amassed in the US about the impact of participation in higher education and how it affects students, part-time higher education was not extensively researched. Laird and Cruce

(2009:290) noted that there was 'the dearth of empirical research relating to part-time students and the institutions they attend.' Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) undertook extensive research into how college affects students. The significance of the work of these authors lies in their attention to examining a range of studies across multiple domains in; social and behavioural science, psychology, and economics, to establish factors that culminate in change for students and contribute to individuals' futures in a variety of ways. The accumulated research about the affects of college informs developments in higher education in terms of policy and planning. Whilst the US represented a very different context; nonetheless, the approach was relevant to the questions being considered as part of my case study.

The links between part-time higher education and LL can be confusing and complex. Part-time learning belongs within Lifelong learning policies. The underlying theory identifies with issues of; inequity, social justice, participation, re-skilling, and up-skilling opportunities, which is inclusive of access to HE for targeted groups such as; mature students, socio-economic disadvantage and disability. However the situation was not straightforward, Jackson argued that within Lifelong Learning (LLL), elements of political and ideological discourses had dominated the debate at the expense of others 'leading not to social justice but to social injustices'(Jackson 2011:431). The diverse profile of part-time students further complicated the situation. Research in the UK (Swain and Hammond 2011) and Ireland (Darmody and Fleming 2009) showed that part-time students were not a homogenous group but inclusive of a wide range of ages also individuals accessing part-time higher education were not always first-timers or second-chance learners. Lifelong learning encouraged participation in learning through-out the lifespan; nonetheless, impediments to access and limitations surrounding retention and persistence existed. To sum up, there was complexity associated with part-time, flexible learning, which failed to translate into policy.

In Ireland, until recently, government funding of HEIs did not extend to part-time students. The situation changed, the HEA now captures part-time

student numbers within annual returns, and the annual recurring grant (RGAM) to HEIs was extended to include part-time (see chapter 3). However, the HEA does not track how HEIs allocated resources at an institutional level. Therefore it remained unclear what proportion of funding supported part-time provision or how additional flexible numbers were catered to locally. Following developments in HEA data gathering, part-time student numbers were made visible at a national level, however, notwithstanding this change, part-time students continued to pay fees, and were unable to access grants or college-based supports (Fleming & Finnegan 2011). Structural inequities continued to separate full and part-time cohorts within Irish HE.

Definitions of part-time are uncommon, and ambiguity abounds (Callendar 2011, Darmody & Fleming 2009). Arguably part-time could be described simply as a mode of learning, that there was no philosophical or conceptual basis to identifying part-time flexible as different rather, it stems from the widening and expansion of higher education (Scheutze & Slowey 2002). Schuller et al (1999) noted that the student profile had shaped part-time, flexible learning. Equally part-time was presented as integral to the concept of lifelong learning, addressing notions of access and equity within higher education particularly for minority or under-represented groups such as adult learners (Callendar 2011). A question that arises then; is it possible for part-time higher education to embrace several aspects of lifelong learning, could it be a means of addressing equity, inclusion, on-going professional development, as well as delivering on economic competitiveness, employability? Or, are these dual interests in competition and cannot be achieved? The difficulty in the current context was that lifelong learning was used to describe ways of enhancing participation of larger numbers and increased diversity within higher education but without any increase in funding (DES 2011, HEA 2012). Public policy papers highlighted the need for increased attainment of higher levels of qualifications, as well as re-skilling, and up-skilling to provide for active participation within the labour market, thereby addressing economic competitiveness (DES 2016). In addition to issues of employability, PTF learning could also provide a revenue stream for HEIs. A review of IoT's

financial situation led the HEA to conclude that some IoT's had accumulated capital funds through an expansion of part-time student numbers (HEA 2016). Increased PTF generated a valuable resource in a changing HE landscape. Less attention was devoted to examining student's motivation for learning, or the benefits of participation. Learning for intrinsic purposes, including; self-improvement, personal development, active citizenship, well-being, and leisure, were under-examined.

The following paragraphs consider aspects of the literature on LL. A more detailed analysis of LL was not possible within the confines of the chapter rather, the intention was to examine formative concepts underpinning lifelong learning and consider how ideas changed over time. Also, as EU LL policy changed, the extent to which such developments were influencing recent policies and strategies in part-time higher education in Ireland was relevant. A key question within this was the extent to which policy-makers were more interested in reform of HE and the economic factors linked to employability and widening participation in HE rather than understanding or promoting learning within a broader contextual and conceptual framework.

2.4 Lifelong Learning

A review of lifelong learning from the 1960s to more recent times reveals a history that was both promising and problematic. Lifelong learning is a complex term and one that continues to be contested. It is worth examining the evolution of the concept in order to better locate the argument for part-time within higher education policy. The concept evolved over several decades; for example, Fleming describes lifelong learning as 'complex, contested and subject to reductionism' (Fleming, 2011:38). Similarly, Jackson sees the concept as 'slippery,' with competing definitions, and varying practices (Jackson 2011:431). Undoubtedly the idea of lifelong learning has been the subject of debate, and the field it occupies is not neutral but 'an uncertain and troubled conceptual space' (Edwards 2000:5).

2.5 Defining Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning (LLL) is a wide-ranging concept that celebrates learning and learners, and it promotes inclusive learning across the lifespan, it addresses notions of learning that take place in a wide range of settings; formal, non-formal and informal contexts, including work-based learning. Under this umbrella term, learning is valued by individuals, groups, and organisations, on a personal, collective, social, cultural and economic level. However, the value and meaning of learning and how lifelong learning is interpreted is the subject of debate. The difficulty with such a concept that lends itself to multiple settings across the lifespan is that at different stages, facets of lifelong learning have receded to the point that they are either partially visible or not there at all. In recent years there is a growing concern that lifelong learning has been harnessed to support arguments favouring instrumental – utilitarian- learning needs, particularly within formal education, providing for economic growth, competitiveness, and increased social cohesion (Field 2006). A simplistic reading of lifelong learning as humanistic, and radical in its early days, but lately driven by economics, and conservatism has been challenged by Field who presents a more complex picture. In a review of key themes informing lifelong learning over a forty-year period, Field reveals that earlier ideals have not been abandoned in favour of the 1990's neoliberalism (Field 2001). However, there were alternate views contesting this, which indicated that neoliberalism has impacted on developments within lifelong learning, leading to the term being tarnished and in need of being rescued and redeemed (Fleming 2011).

There are numerous interpretations of lifelong learning, some of which are disputed. Also, it is recognised as an expansive but not always coherent concept (Hager 2011). Griffin describes it as 'vague' while Jarvis (2009), considers the term to be 'ambiguous'(2009:17). Lifelong learning has been associated with related but different notions such as; lifelong education, recurrent education, continuing education, and adult education. In the early stages of development, these terms were current, though there was a difficulty with the term 'education,' and in time lifelong learning became

more readily used and recognised particularly within EU policy documents (Jarvis 2009).

Within an Irish HE context, there were indicators that LLL policy shifted toward addressing employability and economic competitiveness. The evolution of RTC's over the decades indicated the complexity of meeting dual aspects of LLL. 'The gradual upgrading of higher technical education in the Republic' from the late 1960's with the introduction of RTC's and a few years later the NIHE provided 'a distinctive technical strand' which had been lacking in the HE education landscape and strengthened the link with development at a regional level (Walsh 2011:379). As the RTC's moved out of the vocational education system and into HE to become IoT's (IoT Act 2006), the emphasis on widening access as well as having links to regional and local industry were recognised. After 2008, as the reform agenda gathered momentum IoT's were encouraged to increase part-time, flexible provision. The HEA attempted to address sustainability across the sector, the HEA and noted programmes 'with an employability focus' were 'key to driving student demand' (HEA 2016:27). The TU Act (2018) consolidated the position, as former IoTs' seeking University status were required to increase PTF and foster links with industry and FET providers locally.

Adult education theories and practices were recognised as one of the academic disciplines which exerted significant influence on the formation of lifelong learning (Rasmussen 2014). In several Irish HEIs, adult and continuing education units were strongly associated with part-time and flexible learning, i.e., Maynooth, Carlow IT, UCC. As policy focused on rationalisation and expansion across the sector (HEA 2009, DES 2011), the issue of the integration of adult education within mainstream higher education was mooted but not acted upon (HEA 2009).

This next section considers the early years of LLL policy. The purpose was to examine ideas that informed lifelong learning, particularly in its formative stage in the late 1960s, leading up the 1972/73 reports. These initial theories were based on humanistic ideals, democracy, and social action, though a review of the literature indicates that over time, these ideas have

been expanded while others have been jettisoned (Boeren, 2014). Authors such as Biesta (2006) argued that notions of liberal education had been overtaken with concerns for employability, social cohesion, and vocationalism.

2.6 Early developments of lifelong learning

The concept of lifelong learning crystallised in the 1970s, following a time of radical development in the 1960s. The term can be traced to earlier times, indeed learning throughout life, originated in the early years of the 20th century, post world war one (Field 2000). While these early pronouncements of lifelong learning in Britain serve as a useful marker in terms of identifying the idea at an early stage, it represents a form of liberal adult education that was limited in its interpretation, so it is the later policy documents arising from the 1960s period that is of interest to my research.

Two seminal perspectives shaped the concept of lifelong learning in the early stages, notably the UNESCO (1972) OECD (1973) reports. The report 'Learning; the Treasure Within' authored by a commission headed by Delors (1996) focused on 4 pillars of education, while important to subsequent developments from the mid '90s, it will not be examined in detail at this point. The UNESCO report 'Learning to Be' is the outcome of the work of an international committee chaired by Edgar Faure who was at that time the French Minister for education. At the heart of earlier definitions of lifelong education as outlined by Faure, was a humanistic call for the development of a learning society, that would involve the participation of all citizens over the lifespan, in addition, learning that would facilitate social action, leading to change and transformation of society. Faure and his colleagues affirmed their belief in democracy, bound to this belief was the right of men and women to realise their potential and education was central to achieving that goal.

The slightly later OECD report promoted ideas of recurrent education, while the Council of Europe proposed, education permanente. These early documents which promoted lifelong education, recurrent education, and

education permanente, shaped the debate around LLL. There are arguments that suggest that the concept of learning, as presented in the early years, focused on formal education more so than on informal learning and non-formal contexts (Hager 2011:13). Arguably LLL was not a singular concept the ideas informing it owed a debt to educational theories and theorists; also, the concept was the source of debate and some confusion.

2.7 Themes in Lifelong Learning Discourse

Since the 1970s with the publication of Faure's report, lifelong learning's star has risen, faded (1980s), and re-emerged (1990s). This concept has been examined, and critically assessed over the years by; policy-makers, educationists, trade unionists, academics and politicians. In an attempt to capture some of the ideas and themes within lifelong learning, a table has been compiled, though it is not definitive (see Table 1). The themes listed below were identifiable within the literature and evident in national policies and European strategies.

The themes outlined above fall into two main categories; firstly, lifelong learning as transformative, radical, a collective good, a means of addressing social justice and inequality in society, secondly; lifelong learning as a strategy for addressing employability, competitiveness, combating the impact of globalisation, encouraging cohesion and driving economic change. Since the 1990s, the concept of lifelong learning has undergone revisions, the earlier emphasis on the democratic, participatory aspects of lifelong learning have receded, and Biesta (2006:174) argues replaced with 'learning for earning' strategies that encourage employability and economic development. Biesta states that the intrinsic value of learning as an individual right, offering an opportunity to participate in collective learning, a democratic function provided by the state, has been eroded in favour of learning as an individual activity, a duty, and responsibility placed on the shoulders of the citizen in order to maintain employability over the lifetime. Similar concerns about the orientation of educational programmes linked to employment and economic development were highlighted within an Irish

context as changes within HE and FET gathered pace (Walsh 2015, Egan, 2013, Murtagh, 2012).

Table 1. Lifelong Learning Themes

| Lifelong Learning Themes | |
|---|--|
| A means of addressing social justice, inequalities in society, | A means of enhancing human capital, |
| A means of addressing equity, improving literacy problems within society, widening participation in HE | A strategy for maintaining competitiveness, employability, ensuring economic prosperity, promoting the knowledge economy, it can counteract the implications of globalisation, |
| LLL as a democratic right, participatory, collective, transformative, progressive, a social good, active citizenship, enhances democracy, | Learning as Instrumentalism Learning as a duty an individual responsibility, LL strategies related to the labour market, |
| Recognising and valuing learning outside of formal education, including informal and work-based learning, | Modernising vocationalism and training, A strategy to address youth unemployment |
| Strategies to address inclusiveness, providing for social cohesion or social control. | A means of reforming and transforming educational systems and structures, such as; the introduction of frameworks of qualifications, and the Bologna process. |
| Lifelong learning as an expanded concept, moving toward a learning society, | The semantics of Lifelong learning, distinguishing between; lifelong education, recurrent education. |

The difficulty with an expansive if somewhat ambiguous concept such as lifelong learning is finding ways to deliver on the vision and potential of the ideas as they relate to individuals and society (Griffin 2009). Over several decades policies addressing literacy issues as well as access and progression within FET and HE were prioritised and strategies implemented (Fleming et al., 2017). Nevertheless, challenges remain, and the potential for lifelong learning has yet to be achieved.

2.8 Part-Time Higher Education; Policy and Strategies

The following section examines policies in part-time higher education in an Irish context. Included is a review of documents and reports from the mid-1970s onwards and the treatment of adult education and part-time, flexible HE by policy-makers. Whilst the community and voluntary sector offer learning opportunities for adults, so too does the further and higher education sectors in terms of formal and informal educational opportunities offered through; ETB's, CTW's, and organisations linked to Solas as well as HEIs. However, within the DES separate financial and management structures cater to FET and HE sectors. Though adult education and LLL overlap sectoral boundaries, and the EU acknowledged the importance of adult education to the lifelong learning process in 2002, nevertheless, for a long time, there was limited evidence of a strategic approach to policy development that was inclusive of FE and HE (Murtagh 2012). Though the arrival of the TU Act (2018) suggests enhanced links between TU's (former IoT's) local communities, ETB's, as well as FET providers regionally.

2.9 Lifelong Learning and Adult Education

In Ireland, a small but significant number of policy documents concerned with adult education and lifelong learning have been published. In particular, the Murphy Report (1973) the Kenny Report (1984), the Green Paper on Adult Education in an era of lifelong learning (1998), and the follow on Learning for life, White Paper on Adult Education (2000). An examination of how adult education is framed and treated changed over the timeframe. Loxley et al., argue that the Murphy report is humanistic in

tone, which distinguishes it from later governments offerings in lifelong learning that 'prioritise the development of human capital' (Loxley et al. 2011;8).

Whilst the Murphy report addressed adult education exclusively, the deliberations of this committee took place at a time coinciding with the formation of UNESCO 'Learning to Be', document. The Murphy report contained a definition of adult education that celebrated adult learners, learning, and the contribution it made to culture, society and community development. Some of these themes continued to inform policy development in subsequent decades; however, arguments highlighting the economic benefits linked to adult education were increasingly foregrounded (DES 1998). The committee gathered details of the range of provision within and outside of formal education in Ireland. The view of adult education that is captured at the time in the 1970s is of a dynamic, inclusive and diverse field. Provision was characterised as vocational, as well as community-based, enabling personal and professional development contributing to social, cultural and economic development. The report highlighted the need for reform of the structures that govern and support adult learning and training, some but not all of these recommendations were implemented. Later from the 1980s onwards, adult education and lifelong learning were linked in public policy documents.

Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning (DES 1998) intended to place adult education centrally within government education policy and planning. The report recognised that adult education had an important function within society and contributed to the economy. The Green Paper included a historical overview of relevant policy, and it identified the range of providers, key stakeholders, and 'set out a basis for a National Policy on Adult education' (DES 1998:6). Further, it noted structural barriers hampering the future delivery of adult education as linked to lifelong learning goals. The paper asserted that Adult Education should be recognised 'as a component of an overall Lifelong learning system with a fundamental objective of promoting the well-being of all citizens' though simultaneously aligning adult education to themes of access, as well as

participatory democracy (ibid). Nonetheless, it was noted that 'education and skill deficiencies must not pose a barrier to any person in accessing a livelihood' (DES, 1998:7). The shortcomings of the sector with its wide range of diverse organisations, lack of identity, poor investment, and having a low status for policy-makers, were identified as challenges that could be addressed through 'new structural arrangements' (DES 1998:114). In attempting to capture the diversity of adult education as a wide-ranging practice including; adult, community education as well as training, the paper tended toward general statements, and there was a lack of detail.

The Green Paper proposed change and reform of adult education structures. Many of the structural reforms outlined in the White Paper were not progressed at that time. No immediate legislation was enacted addressing adult education. Subsequently, the Education and Training Act (1999) allowed for the setting up of Fetac, the body charged with validating and regulating programmes within adult and further education. In addition, reforms of the further education and training sectors were initiated during the economic downturn resulting in the establishment of Solas (2013), the demise of Fas, the amalgamation and rationalising of VECs, which were renamed as Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the formation of LETB's. These developments were significant as they combined further education and training. A co-ordinated approach to FET provision under the umbrella of Solas signalled an emphasis on structural coherency; also with growing demographic pressures, there was a need to present FET as an alternative as well as a potential bridge to HE (DES 2014). Adult education falls in part within this framework; for instance, one of the largest providers, the ETB's, offers PLC courses, as well as adult literacy, VTOS, BETI and community education. The structural change coincided, with an increasing emphasis within the FE sector on accountability, regulation, increasing supply, as well as providing mechanisms for progression, transfer, and skills acquisition in preparation for employment (DES 2013, Egan unpublished 2012).

Within HE, the emphasis shifted toward expansion, reform, delivery on WA strategies (DES 2011). The HEA encouraged providers to increase flexible

and part-time learning to facilitate growth in demand from school leavers as well as adults (HEA 2012, 2016). Increased supply across HE was needed to address on-going education and skills needs over a life-time within an ever-changing economic environment where issues of employability and competitiveness were to the fore. The DES continued to target the needs of disadvantaged and marginal groups in formal education through targeted initiatives within further and higher education which were supported through structural funding mechanisms (ESF). Nonetheless, PTF HE remained out of the funding loop as part-time students were not counted within annual returns to the HEA.

2.10 Irish Higher Education Policy and Part-time: 1990-2016

The next section examines developments in higher education policy from the late 1990s. Recurring themes include; increasing levels of participation in HE whilst addressing access, and widening participation. Lately, the overarching themes of reform and funding of HE have dominated (DES 2011, DES,2016). How to widen provision through flexible part-time options and continue to meet increased demand from school leavers as state funding reduced were some of the challenges facing HEIs.

Successive higher education policies focused on increasing levels of participation in full-time higher education by school leavers. A transformation in participation occurred, so much so that 'from a position of relative weakness in terms of educational attainment of the population a few decades ago, Ireland now ranks highly internationally in terms of attainment in higher education' (McCoy & Byrne, 2010:9). However, the success in achieving increased levels of participation has come about at the expense of other cohorts and sectors in education. A review of policy suggests that the needs of formal education were better attended to and that informal and adult education were marginalised (Murphy 1972, DES, 1998).

The shift toward educational planning that was more inclusive of diverse social groups within formal education was slow and incremental (DES 1998, 2008; Loxley et al. 2017). In higher education, the primary initiative was the National Plan to address equity of access through the strategic targeting of under-represented groups as a way of increasing participation (2003). A review of reports indicated national policy focused on developing structures to support the establishment of access programmes and units within HE institutions (HEA 2006). Access programmes prioritised initiatives that encouraged greater participation of; socially and economically disadvantaged students, those with a disability, ethnic minorities and mature students within mainstream full-time HE.

In the 1990s, figures for the participation of adults and mature students in higher education were low and compared unfavourably within a wider European context (HEA 2012). 'The low proportion of mature students in the overall student population illustrates that there has been a virtually exclusive focus on improving access to third level for school leavers' (Fleming, Collins, Coolahan 1999: 23) It was argued that low levels of participation amongst adults were partly due to the 'very limited provision for mature students in higher education', (Fleming, Collins, Coolahan,1999:29) Another factor limiting progression, was the lack of bridging mechanisms, 'access to higher education is through a very narrow, sequential pathway which follows from school'(1999;33). Furthermore, it was noted that 'the present arrangements discriminate against those who choose to pursue higher education as part-time students' (ibid). Clancy observed the large numbers of mature students participating in part-time higher education, '75% of mature entrants were part-time students these represented more than 80% of all entrants to part-time higher education in 1993/94'(1999:31). Part-time higher education has larger numbers of mature students; indeed, this is the case both in Ireland and the UK (Callendar 2011, Darmody and Fleming 2009).

Skillbeck in his wide-ranging document 'The University Challenged' recognised that while European universities were slow to take up the challenge of part-time education this was not the case either in Australia or

the United States, where 'for example both part-time undergraduate as well as mid-career professional programmes form a very substantial part of the higher education system'. (Skillbeck 2001:84) The author noted the importance of addressing lifelong learning through the integration of adult education within higher education and the provision of more diverse and flexible modes of learning and teaching. Arguably mainstreaming of adult education units within HEIs could potentially address several key issues related to part-time. However, strategies for the progression of such proposals were difficult to locate in subsequent public policy documents (HEA 2009).

Skillbeck identified one of the key challenges associated with increased flexibility and diversity, when he stated that universities would have to know 'how to develop a rich university experience for adults, part-time and off-campus students' (Skillbeck, Connell 2000:74) In the report, the authors inflect lifelong learning ideas across several sections of the text, most notably attaching it to the debate around equity and on-going professional development. The treatment of lifelong learning though not in-depth makes arguments for; quality, social inclusion, accessibility, personal development whilst also recognising economic and funding imperatives.

Similar themes were found in 'Higher Education; The Challenge of lifelong learning (1999) though in these conference proceedings, the subjects are treated in greater depth. Several contributors to the report established critical challenges for higher education, including; 1) structural concerns involving the development of more routes or pathways into higher education thereby making it more accessible, 2) greater flexibility in curricular provision, 3) increasing numbers of mature students and part-time students, 4) responding to and supporting increased diversity, in the student population. Surprisingly little changed over a twenty-year period.

2.11 Widening Access

Since 2000, higher education has advanced strategies to address access; however particular initiatives for part-time were lacking, this absence was

noted in an external audit of the national access schemes (HEA 2010) Nonetheless the National Access Office policy documents, stated the intention to grow part-time, flexible numbers across the higher education sector, the target set for 2013 was 17% (HEA 2008:62) this figure increased to 22% for 2019 (HEA 2015). Generally, the widening access strategy aimed to increase participation of; mature students, students with disabilities and those from disadvantaged socio-economic groups, traditionally under-represented in full-time HE. Whilst widening participation remains a key strategy within higher education policy, evidence suggests that in practice, in Ireland, the policy had focused on specific aspects of widening participation providing access to mainstream full-time without adequately addressing part-time in particular.

In 2004, an analysis of the equality agenda for HE noted that there were limitations in how the concept of participation was framed and that very little attention was paid to the experience of participation of access students within higher education or to addressing the fees issues for part-time students (HEA 2004). The issue of fees and the absence of financial supports for part-time recurred in many annual reports and evaluations, 2004, 2007, 2010, though no specific strategy was proposed to address the inequity.

The themes emerging in the 1990s continued into the present phase of policy formation, though there has been a change in emphasis with attention centred on the economic dimension of increasing and widening participation. In the opening decade of the current millennium, the argument for part-time was presented alongside flexible learning as a means of; expanding mature students participation within higher education, creating diverse access routes for first-time entrants and addressing upskilling opportunities within the labour force. The issue of extending higher education opportunities to adults and those within the workforce was increasingly relevant to policymakers (McNaboe & Condon 2012). Generally, where the argument for increased participation occurs, it is linked to notions of Ireland's continued competitiveness in a global context.

2.12 Reform, Expansion and Part-time Flexible HE

The economic downturn that followed the banking collapse presented many challenges for HE not least continuing to meet demand as government funding reduced. From 2008 several policy documents (HEA 2009, DES 2011, HEA 2012) relevant to part-time were published signalling a period of reform and change. The 2009 'Open and Flexible learning' (OFL) position paper, presented an argument for increased flexibility and expansion of HE. This document was adopted by the HEA as a strategy, and it informed the subsequent National Strategy on Higher Education (DES 2011). This short paper was packed with ideas; namely, reform of higher education based upon a combination of structural and pedagogical changes. The purpose of the position paper was to argue for greater flexibility across Irish HE structures and systems; in particular 'to establish flexible learning as a mainstream concern of Irish higher education' (HEA, 2009:9). Arguably a HE system that was more flexible could address the learning needs of adults or school leavers; those cohorts who were unable to participate full-time. The paper constructed an argument in favour of the increased flexibility of HE based on a clear articulation of societal changes, meeting diverse learning needs, and the reform of HE more generally combined with institutional leadership. Old arguments inherent to lifelong learning were resurrected such as; the need for inclusion, managing the impact of globalisation, and embedding a culture of learning that is life-wide. HEIs were encouraged to become more 'responsive to the learning and skills needs of citizens' (HEA, 2009:12).

Current developments within higher education in Ireland are shaped by the 'National strategy for higher education to 2030 (DES 2011). This policy document presented a view of higher education in Ireland that was linked to issues of maintaining economic competitiveness; also, the rationalisation of the sector was mooted. Leaving aside the significant issue of funding and higher education, the Hunt report as it became known (Hazelkorn 2014), established several recurring themes in particular that higher education was not responding adequately to the needs of adult and mature students through the provision of flexible and part-time modes of learning.

Recognising that the demand from adults for part-time provision would grow, the report noted there were difficulties regarding accessibility and supply with a 'low level of part-time study opportunities', further the absence of part-time could exclude school leavers who choose not to study full-time (DES 2011:46). The authors of the report argued that there was a need to increase levels of participation and ensure that older adults had an option to increase their skills and qualifications levels. Whilst it was acknowledged that adults generally continue with learning throughout life, the Strategy Group anticipated this form of 'recurring education' could be facilitated as a consequence of the implementation of the Bologna process. The assumption was that the Bologna initiative, which provided for modularisation amongst other things, would also provide for enhanced curricular flexibility, thereby making PTL more accessible. As with other policy documents, part-time and flexible learning were treated together, these modes of learning were identified as a way to increase access to and participation across the sector. The Hunt report borrowed heavily on existing reports from bodies such as; Forfas, OECD, and the National Office for Equity of Access. No new research was commissioned and the thorny issue of funding HE was not addressed.

In tandem with the development of the National Strategy for HE 2030, the DES adopted a Systems Performance Framework in conjunction with the HEA. The agenda for managing performance across HEIs was to operate in conjunction with the implementation of recommendations within the Hunt report. The purpose was to align 'institutional missions and strategies to national targets' (Halzelkorn 2014:1345). HEIs were to report annually on achieving national targets. One such target was increased flexible and part-time HE.

2.13 From rhetoric to reality: recent part-time public policy reports

In 2012, the HEA circulated a consultation document 'Part-time Higher Education and Training in Ireland'. This document was revised, and reappeared in October 2012, as 'Part-time and Flexible Higher Education in

Ireland, Policy practice and recommendations for the future'. The report was constructed in two phases, an initial consultation document was circulated across HEIs, and feedback was gathered which informed the final report. The primary differences between the draft version and final report rested on; a change in the title, more tightly framed recommendations, a recognition that part-time was not straightforward, and HEIs responses to part-time and flexible varied. Notably, the target set for achieving equity where part-time was concerned was achievable in the short term, particularly where government labour activation initiatives, such as Springboard, were taken into account (HEA 2012:11).

The 2012 report presented a policy framework for part-time higher education, it included a range of statistics relevant to part-time which were gathered from within the HEA and wider, a definition of part-time was provided, the diverse profile of part-time students was characterised and tables listing part-time programmes on offer across HEIs was presented. To underline the importance attached to increased part-time participation, the report assembled several arguments particularly those emphasising the economic and social implications, from existing HEA, Forfas, and EU documents. Issues about the challenges of providing flexible and part-time HE were outlined, chief amongst these were the financial inequities that persist for part-time HE, students. The report included comments from staff within HEIs also the voice of students participating in the Springboard initiative were presented. The report reports on many aspects of part-time practices and policies in HE acknowledging barriers and deficiencies but stops short of advocating on behalf of part-time flexible students.

2.14 Making the case for expansion

The framing of part-time HE policy was based on restating its place within the umbrella concept of LLL and as a feature of the HEAs widening participation, equity strategies. The report recognised that full-time undergraduate education had been prioritised and that part-time provision at undergraduate level was inadequately supported and financed across institutions. The opening paragraphs of the consultation paper connected

part-time with flexible learning and accessible higher education. More broadly the call for expansion of options other than full-time within higher education was referenced within a LLL framework. In terms of recommendation, the end goal was to provide for 'seamless equality-based provision of higher education in Ireland, regardless of mode or duration of study', which indicated that the basis for future developments in the area of part-time should be driven by equity, social justice, ideas inherent to LLL (HEA 2012:4). Nevertheless, the dual goals for part-time, flexible HE included reskilling and upskilling to promote economic growth, as well as achieving equity of access. The report aimed to inform on-going policy developments and implementation of the; national plan for equity of access, the national skills strategy to 2020 and the national strategy for HE 2030.

Within the report, there was a lack of critical examination of the ideas and philosophy that informed concepts of LLL or widening participation. The opening sections of the report made the case for increased levels of participation in lifelong learning. Higher education was the mechanism which should deliver on this, that is if HEIs become more flexible and responsive to demands from; individuals, communities and employers. 'Part-time higher education and training' presented broad brushstrokes, examining or resolving the tensions inherent to widening participation and part-time, such as; the fees issue, or who should and can avail of part-time higher education options; first-time entrants, second chance, or returners remained unaddressed. Instead, the argument was for increased participation in terms of ensuring greater levels of educational attainment and acquisition of skills particularly in light of the economic downturn. Strategies and details as to how to fund increased participation were lacking.

The consultation paper suggested that higher education institutions should provide more part-time and flexible options to meet targets set at a European and national level. However, the proposal raised multiple questions and challenges for HEIs, including their capacity to meet the needs of an expanded provision, how to cover course costs and the

provision of additional supports and facilities required for a flexible student population.

2.15 Limitations of 2012 HEA Report

The 2012 report was produced in response to priorities set out within the 2030 national strategy document. The report was an update on the implementation of the strategy document it ticked a box in terms of the systems performance agreement between the HEA-DES. The research informing the report was based on a review of government reports and analysis of data from the; CSO, Forfas, Euro-student survey, OECD, as well as analysis of the student record system. Additional sources including; journal papers, survey material and government publications were examined. The report presented statistical information about part-time participation levels across higher education and used comparative data to detail how Ireland fares within a European context. Higher levels of participation in part-time programmes at the initial stages of the qualifications framework, level 6 and 7 were observed. Also, the Institutes of Technology had higher numbers participating in part-time programmes, as did Independent colleges, the university sector fairs less well in relation to part-time and flexible numbers. Such findings are not unique to Ireland and echo developments in the UK (Yorke & Longden 2008). The humanities, social sciences and business emerge as the areas with a high level of enrollment with a range of part-time programmes on offer, while the sciences and engineering were less prominent.

The absence of empirical research on part-time flexible HE was problematic. There were gaps in research particularly an analysis of students and teachers experiences. There was limited detail about the types of programmes available, the duration of part-time programmes, or how part-time programmes differ from full-time. There was no material to draw from which offered an insight of lecturers experiences of teaching part-time students, further it was not known whether full-time staff and or temporary associate academic staff taught part-time students, nor was there detail of approaches to assessment used to facilitate flexible learners. Students'

experiences as part-time learners, their motivation for accessing higher education, their identity within higher education, levels of retention, progression or persistence, was not evident.

The report was short on specifics or analysis, for instance, one wonders whether some academic disciplines were better suited to part-time flexible options and others less likely to adapt to the needs of learners or whether growth in this area was to be driven by demand. There was no analysis of HEIs responsiveness to policies or what practices were in place to support or grow a range of part-time and flexible learning regionally or nationally. The implications for admissions policies of expanding modularised part-time routes for higher education providers was not examined. The problem of guidance and support for part-time was identified as an issue requiring attention, though no solution was proposed.

The consultation document referred to on-going discussions between the HEA and HEIs as the primary mechanism for addressing increased part-time flexible provision. During the consultation process, it emerged that finance remained critical to resolving the implementation of any related strategy, though no detail was outlined as to how this could be addressed. Research conducted in the UK provided a comprehensive analysis of financing part-time higher education and the implications for particular socio economic groups of non participation. Callendar presented a detailed analysis of the lack of financial supports and argued that it had significant implications for lifelong learning (Callendar 2011). The research was prompted in the wake of significant changes to grant aid and supports for part-time students in the UK, particularly those returning to higher education courses with an equivalent level qualification. Comparative research of a similar depth or quality was absent within an Irish context.

2.16 What is Part-time flexible learning?

The HEA 2012 document revealed part-time flexible HE was inadequately conceptualised and poorly defined. A range of policy reports had presented part-time alongside flexible learning as a mode of provision, which

facilitated increased participation of adults and mature students within higher education (HEA 2009, DES 2011). Arguably providing PTF programmes which could increase employment opportunities for adults who wanted to participate in the workforce was a productive and positive message to circulate publically during the economic downturn, further it could assuage influential stakeholders such as employer bodies and unions who may have argued that there was a lack of supply of PTF options and that HE needed radical reform. The opening statement within the consultation paper maintained that 'part-time and flexible learning opportunities are essential to increasing access to higher education by adults who need to combine study with work or caring responsibilities'. (HEA, 2012:3) Policy documents combined part-time and flexible learning as modes of learning, (HEA 2009) and a means of widening participation (DES 2011). PTF was presented as a solution to an economic problem and emphasised the instrumental problem solving approach that was informing HE policy. Growth of PTF programmes was linked to the Springboard labour activation scheme which was funded through NTF and employer representative bodies. Evidence indicated it was easier to achieve change where ideas informing policy were straightforward and linked to the economy. Arguably where ideas were complex or ill-defined they could not be easily packaged making it difficult to inform or change policy (Campbell 1998).

Though part-time and flexible shared characteristics, such as learning occurring in ways and at times that were suitable to the needs of adult learners with busy lives, nonetheless it should not be assumed that flexible and part-time were synonymous. A flexible programme was not necessarily part-time, and a part-time student may not be engaged in flexible learning. Typically flexible learning refers to how the learning was 'delivered' often through the use of technology thereby enabling students to study using blended or on-line learning approaches. Part-time was characterised as participation that was not full-time in the traditional sense of attending during the daytime and accruing 60 ECTS over an academic year. The HEA report defined part-time as 'those attending part-time courses extending over a full academic year and leading to an academic award and occasional

students taking courses, modules not leading to an award'(HEA, 2012:8). The HEA definition though limited provided a guideline for fieldwork conducted as part of this case study.

Part-time was not straightforward or simple, there was complexity attached to part-time and flexible curricula. Similarly, the profile of part-time students varied in terms of age, socio-economic background, prior learning also included first time matures and returners. Across HEIs there was a mix of part-time options which included: dedicated part-time programmes targeting part-time students at UG and PG levels, also part-time routes within existing full-time programmes that provided for students to incrementally accrue credits over a longer time frame. Also, part-time provision within and across HEIs does not always provide for transfer or progression opportunities for students, the HE system was not flexible.

2.17 Conclusion

A review of policy documents since the 1970s indicated lifelong learning remained on the policy agenda and was evident in multiple reports (DES 1998, HEA 2001, DES 2011, HEA 2012). Part-time flexible higher education was not a priority even though it was included within strategic policy initiatives within successive National Access Plans. The situation was summed up in the following comment from the HEA, 'it is fair to say that the emphasis in policy and practice in Ireland remains mainly on full-time provision and support and that this is focused primarily on the school leaver cohort'(HEA 2012:6).

The HEA report 'Part-time higher education and training in Ireland', signalled proposed changes to remedy the situation however there was a lack of detail to ensure delivery of such proposals. Increasing part-time flexible provision became a priority for policy makers, however evidence indicated that strategies to implement changes to promote and support part-time were lacking. Policy documents had a symbolic function. Widening participation policies focused on access strategies for designated non-traditional categories of socio-economic disadvantage, disability and

mature students within full-time. Part-time was ill-defined and less visible within strategies which were funded. Part-time was conceptually linked to lifelong learning and it was presented as a means to address, up-skilling or re-skilling opportunities for working adults. The expansion of PTF programmes provided a revenue stream for HEIs. However, increasing the range of PTF programmes linked to the labour market should not be confused with achieving enhanced flexibility of the HE system.

A review of policy indicated part-time was under-researched as a result policy formation relied on an examination of statistics. What emerged from an uncertain economic context was that part-time strategies were driven by pragmatics and opportunity, leaving open the potential for reductive or short term approaches to policy development. A lack of empirical research of part-time flexible students learning experiences and motivations suggested policy makers had a limited understanding of the challenges associated with providing for increased diversity and expanded part-time flexible provision.

3 Chapter Three: Mapping Part-time flexible HE in Ireland

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines part-time enrolments within higher education in Ireland between 2004-2015. Mapping programmes offered by HEIs at undergraduate and post-graduate levels provides data on the supply of part-time flexible learning and highlights gaps in provision. The national strategy document argued for enhanced flexibility and increased part-time flexible learning across HE indicating that there was insufficient supply (DES 2011). An examination of data indicates numbers enrolling remained largely static over the timeframe. However, as there was no change to the funding of HE the potential to grow flexible provision was limited.

The years 2004-15 spans a period of economic prosperity, growth and downturn, followed by fiscal constraint, increased emigration and a reduction in public funding for HE. Coinciding with significant economic and societal developments, this timeframe also signalled a period of reform for Irish higher education (DES 2011). In addition the relationship between the state, the funding body and HEIs altered, previously the level of interaction between key stakeholders was limited, this approach was replaced with; increased regulation, proposed rationalisation, an emphasis on governance, monitoring of educational outputs, as HEIs were required to address key performance indicators linked to national policy through the submission of annual institutional compacts in consultation with the HEA. HEIs were increasingly squeezed, with greater student numbers, an embargo on recruitment of staff, coupled with a reduction in central funding (HEA 2016). Arguably there was far greater intervention within HE and HEIs than previously experienced by senior managers, administrators and academic staff (Walsh 2014).

The questions shaping the mapping section include:

- What type of programmes do HEIs offer and at what levels?

- What patterns-if any- can be observed in terms of enrolments in disciplinary areas over the time-frame, both at under-graduate and post-graduate levels?
- To what extent do some HEIs have an expansive range of part-time programmes on offer and others do not?
- What is the format, duration, credit allocation of part-time awards across HE?

The first part of the chapter provides a summary of part-time numbers nationally and reviews key aspects of provision, the second section focuses on specific HEI part-time flexible programmes, the last section considers the government-led strategic initiative in part-time ie Springboard.

3.2 Background to Mapping Exercise

The HEA gathers statistics on an annual basis from government-funded HEIs. In recent years the HEA provided greater detail on participation levels within HEIs. The wealth of data about; who is participating, where, at what level, in which mode, or discipline, provides a quantitative resource but does not offer insight about part-time; student experience, retention, levels of progression, programme duration, workload nor how to sustain or grow part-time provision. The recent addition of the national student survey (ISSE) which includes part-time has increased statistical data and analysis of aspects of the student learning experience within HE, nevertheless where PTF is concerned gaps in data persist.

There is a dearth of detailed, up to date information on the range and type of part-time flexible programmes, to complement numerical data available through the CSO, HEA, ISSE and Eurostudent. HEA data does not include programme listings, therefore to carry out a mapping exercise the focus remains at an institutional level. However, the situation is not straightforward as part-time higher education is largely self-financing enrolments can be demand-led consequently sustaining provision year on year, presents challenges for HEIs. In some instances, part-time programmes were unlikely to run where there were insufficient resources or applicants to sustain a programme. The government-funded labour

activation scheme Springboard which was introduced during the downturn remains an exception, programmes offered under this scheme (6,100 places in 2014-2015) were linked to the labour market with 54 million in exchequer funds committed by 2014 and climbing to 105 million a year later (HEA 2015).

A range of secondary sources providing data and information about part-time both nationally and at institutional level was examined, including; the HEA website, individual HEI college prospectus, college websites, the Central Statistics Office website, Eurostudent survey and the Irish survey of student engagement (ISSE).

3.3 Part-time higher education; sectoral, local and institutional variations

An examination of part-time during the period 2004-15, indicated a constant but not a consistent provision. Between 2004 and 2015 there was limited growth in part-time higher education showing a modest increase from 34,000, (2004), 35,147 (2014) however by 2015 this figure has grown to 36,036 (CSO). Whilst the majority of HEIs offer part-time flexible undergraduate options, depending on the size of the institution, the options vary from limited to a wide selection of routes and pathways in specific disciplines. The majority of HEIs provided post-graduate part-time options inclusive of dedicated PTF programmes. IoT's provided a wider selection of part-time programmes, particularly at an undergraduate level. In addition, a review of programmes indicated IoT's offered a wide range of programmes that were vocational or focused on employment. Whilst part-time numbers across HE have been maintained and in some instances show limited growth, programmes vary substantially in terms of; duration, mode, contact time, credits, and options for progression.

Five types of part-time programmatic options were discernible across HEA funded HEIs:

(1) In this case part-time was a longer version of full-time, whereby a programme was offered full-time for one year, or two years part-time. This type was common at post-graduate level. Similarly, an undergraduate BA may be offered flexibly and part-time over a longer time-frame for part-time students. The stretching out of a programme, making it longer, was a common form of part-time found within HE. Nevertheless, part-time students formed a distinct cohort, that is, the programme catered for dedicated part-time flexible cohorts.

(2) A second type that was found to exist was where students registered part-time but participated on a full-time programme, accumulating modules and credits incrementally, but over a longer time-frame. Here the part-time student shares modules along-side full-time students, but attendance would be fragmented.

(3) A third type was where an existing full-time programme has a module, or modules accredited at a sub-degree, or degree level, offering credits, or a stand-alone certificate, diploma, with an exit option at different stages. This third option provided flexible participation but with defined; credits, certification, exit and progression options. This type offered up-skilling opportunities within specific disciplines.

(4) A fourth type is where a full-time programme is offered part-time flexibly over a similar time frame, but at different times, such as; a combination of evenings, weekends and or full-time blocks. In such instances, the part-time flexible programme may be linked to industry, particular sectors or disciplines; such as engineering, computer science or health sciences.

(5) This fifth category was a more recent development and sits within a continuous professional development frame whereby flexible programmes were provided to students wanting to up-skill while employed full-time. Typically programmes were of one or two-year duration and linked to professional pathways or industry. Such initiatives involved attendance monthly.

An initial review of programmes indicated that part-time and flexible modes shared common features. Nevertheless, there was a great deal of variety and limited uniformity across the sector. Whilst flexible options were

available in some disciplines and institutions, such options were not found to be widespread or consistent. Inevitably separating; part-time, from flexible and full-time modes, was challenging.

Similarly how part-time was managed, organised and structured within institutions differed, with two types of approach in evidence. In some instances, IoT, educational colleges and independent institutions had extended part-time offerings across under-graduate and post-graduate such as; CIT, ITT, LIT, DIT, NCI. An examination of individual programmes in the cases noted above indicated part-time flexible was embraced at an institutional level but driven and managed locally at departmental or school-level.

In other cases, part-time provision was managed and coordinated within a centralised dedicated lifelong learning unit or department such as; UCC, MU, DKIT, ITT, IT Carlow, National College of Art and Design. Accordingly, a dedicated unit managed recruitment and admissions with students dispersed across departments and multiple programmes. Furthermore, within this type, there were additional variations, in some cases whilst the provision may be extensive, it may not be internally integrated within institutional structures and systems, with limited options for progression or transfer (UCC, NCAD). The credential *cul de sac* was a feature belonging to an earlier era when a popular extramural provision was held outside the walls of the academy (Kelly 1994). Historically extramural, outreach provision, with numerous sub-degree programmes had lower status within the institution and was held separately from mainstream departments and schools. Though this type of provision morphed into accredited pathways for part-time learners over time, in some instances it remained partially integrated, as historical, structural and other contractual factors influenced the status and position of students and staff within the institution.

The institutional rationale for part-time expansion was not always explicit, in some cases, it was unclear whether programmes were devised in response to; national policy in lifelong learning, or to demands in terms of the economy and industry. Whether part-time modes of delivery were a

means of reaching out to new cohorts who could not access full-time higher education, addressing professional development or whether they were a means of increasing student numbers and generating revenue in the teeth of reduced government funding was less clear.

At post-graduate level, there were more part-time flexible options as many HEIs offered both full-time and part-time pathways within a programme. Distinguishing between full-time commitment and part-time can be difficult as the difference between the two may be minimal. Often where full-time ends or part-time begins was unclear, at times the two appeared to merge. In some cases, a full-time Masters programme could be intensive and completed in a single academic year, or over an eighteen-month period. In some instances, separating full-time from part-time at post-graduate level was a challenge, as full-time students may be on campus for limited periods (6-9 hours weekly) throughout the programme similar to part-time, but where part-time students had a longer time to complete the final stages of the programme.

Examination of programmatic offers indicated there were differences across institutions and disciplines in terms of; contact time, mode, and duration of programmes. Whilst it would be impractical to standardise the format of part-time, or strive for uniformity, nonetheless, the variation that existed raises questions about the nature of enrolment status, student engagement and equity. Nonetheless curricular flexibility, part-time participation and persistence remained under-explored. Whilst institutional guidelines and discipline requirements shape programmes it was unclear what factors informed the design and development of part-time flexible programmes.

In addition to curricular variation, differences between full-time and part-time higher education existed in terms of status and supports, in practice part-time had a lower status, with students experiencing difficulty accessing supports and facilities. As noted by the HEA, 'part-time students are currently treated differently to those who are participating on a full-time basis' (HEA 2012:23).

3.4 Statistics and part-time higher education

This section examines a range of HEA statistics and secondary sources particular to part-time higher education provision from 2004-2015. This period covers the Celtic tiger years as well as the economic recession that followed the banking crisis in Ireland. In this time frame, the HEA moved toward increasing the level of institutional data provided on their web pages regarding HEIs that received annual government funding. The publishing of data by the HEA is in keeping with changes to how higher education institutions were funded, accordingly it provided for increased accountability, furthermore, it could act as an indicator of institutional performance, as well as a means of tracking levels of demand in disciplinary areas.

The National Strategy report set (DES 2011) out a series of reforms for HE, part of the task included an increased emphasis on gathering and presenting statistics about the performance of HEIs. According to the HEA, 'the performance of higher education institutions is under the spotlight to an unprecedented degree' (HEA 2013:4). Further expanding on the theme of efficiency, the HEA stated the function of HE is to maintain 'economic competitiveness' as HEIs are the providers of 'human capital' they are relied on 'as the powerhouses of the global economy' (2013:4). The emphasis on enhanced performance, addressing competitiveness and an increase of part-time flexible learning across HE, remains an objective for public policy.

The HEA presented a range of statistics which included enrolments across HEIs as well as graduate numbers. Following 2006 the HEA commenced collating data from the IoTs'. Details for the Universities and colleges were presented separately to the IoT's, also statistics for full-time and part-time are presented separately as well as in combined format. The increased range of statistics and level of detail in terms of institutional data being published was a recent development. The statistics indicated the numbers of male and female enrolments, graduates, the field of study, in tandem with types of award such as certificate, diploma ordinary or honours degree. What was not presented was the awarding body, the title of the award,

credits allocated, progression trajectory, retention figures or the duration of the programme. To obtain additional information and augment this source it was necessary to trawl through University, IoT and college prospectus as well as websites.

In recent years the HEA required HEIs to supply data in a particular format and at a greater level of detail, therefore the onus was with the HEI to present data that was accurate and up to date. A note of caution concerning statistics was raised by one senior academic interviewed during the fieldwork stage of my research who questioned whether some of the data could be trusted. Whilst it may be assumed that the data was accurate and presented in the format required it was possible that for some institutions the request presented a challenge where software was inadequate or in other cases it provided an opportunity to round up part-time figures to equate to full-time equivalents in order to be included in the recurrent grant model (see chapter 7).

3.5 HEA Statistics 2004- 15: Part-time Flexible Options

A summary review of the HEA statistics from recent years 2008-09 until 2012-15, indicated that while there was a fall-off in part-time student numbers both within the IoT's and Universities, it is not a dramatic reduction, indeed it appears as though numbers recovered in recent times (see Table 2). Since part-time flexible learning was not included in the RGAM and students were paying fees, then the ability to consistently attract part-time students into HE was impressive.

At the onset of the banking crisis in 2007-08, the figures for part-time within the Universities amounted to 8016 undergraduates and slightly more post-graduate 8502 enrolments, whereas the IoT's had significantly larger numbers of undergraduate part-time students 12,997, and fewer post-graduates, 2471 (HEA 2009:26). In 2012-13, there were 8,239 undergraduate students with 11,076 postgraduates within the University and college sector. These figures demonstrate a relatively small increase in undergraduate numbers as well as greater post-graduate numbers. The

IoT's had enrolled 12,891 undergraduates and 2975 post-graduates. A crude interpretation of these statistics indicated the IoT's had larger numbers of part-time undergraduate students in contrast to the University sector where there are larger numbers of part-time postgraduate students enrolled. Whether students within the IoT part-time under-graduate programmes were progressing and or transferring within the structures is not known this would require a more detailed examination of SRS, which was not possible within this study. Students motivation or progression routes was not captured, furthermore why students sign up for awards such as undergraduate certificates or diplomas at level 6 or 7, whether they are interested in a stand-alone, special purpose awards and or whether they were intending to progress was unknown. However, evidence indicated that a small number of IoT's (ITC, ITB, ITS) had increased the range and volume of part-time flexible options at undergraduate levels thereby growing their student numbers and enhancing their revenue reserves (HEA 2016).

Traditionally the IoT's provided awards at sub-degree level, such as; higher certificates, diplomas, as well as ordinary and honours degrees. The range of awards evolved over several years. The model was inherited from an earlier phase in the history of the sector when the NCEA (the validating body for IoT's at that time) existed, though the functions of this body were later subsumed into HETAC, which was to disappear into the newly constituted QQI in 2012. This new regulatory body assumed validation and quality assurance functions for the HE and FE sectors combined. Typically in the University sector, the tendency has been to provide undergraduate honours degrees rather than sub-awards leading to a degree. The arrival of the NFQ (2003) and the positioning of awards and designation of levels on the framework had significant implications, not just in terms of data collection and presentation of enrolments.

In keeping with established practices, the numbers of full-time undergraduates enrolled out-stripped the number of part-time students both within the University and IoT sector. In 2012-13, there were 72,265, a full-time student enrolled in the University sector, 8,077, in Colleges, and 62,376, within IoT's. However the situation at postgraduate level changes,

within the University sector full-time post-graduate numbers continue to exceed part-time numbers but within colleges and IoT's the numbers can vary, in some years there are more part-time enrolments though generally, the difference between full-time and part-time post-graduate numbers was minimal (see Table 4 & 5).

Though several national initiatives were in place to widen participation, HEIs cater primarily to school leavers. This remains the dominant model within an Irish HE context. That higher education focuses on the educational needs of school leavers is not unique to Ireland. Chen (2014) observed that despite large numbers of mature students enrolling in universities in North America the view persists that 'universities are youth centric' providing programmes and learning experiences primarily for a younger age group (Chen 2014, 406). Furthermore, Chen argued that there was 'uneven support for adult learners' in American Universities, similar concerns have been identified concerning Irish and UK higher education (Chen 2014: 407)

Whilst the HEA statistics included the age profile of students enrolled, the figures presented combine full-time undergraduate and post-graduates. Consequently, it was difficult to establish numbers of part-time undergraduates who were mature though it is likely that the majority of post-graduate students would fall within the mature 23+ age group. It was noted that the HEA provided reports on statistics in an annual report for the years 2004-07, which was inclusive of part-time enrolments for designated institutions and IoT's at the undergraduate level.

Table 2. Part-Time enrolments: Under-Graduate 2015-2004

| Year | IoT | Colleges | Universities | Total Female | Total Male | Grand Total |
|---------|--------|----------|--------------|--------------|------------|-------------|
| 2014-15 | 13,968 | 515 | 6,414 | 10,149 | 10,748 | 20,897 |
| 2013-14 | 13846 | 566 | 6316 | 10,866 | 9,862 | 20,728 |
| 2012-13 | 12,891 | 736 | 7,503 | 10,891 | 10,239 | 21,130 |
| 2011-12 | 12,414 | 778 | 7424 | 10,464 | 10,152 | 20,616 |
| 2010-11 | 12,--- | (704) | 6470*** | 9,406 | 9,949 | 19,355 |
| 2009-10 | 12,921 | (682) | 6176*** | 9,261 | 9,836 | 19,097 |
| 2008-09 | 12,921 | (694) | 7535*** | | | 20,456 |
| 2007-08 | 13,438 | (367) | 8016*** | | | 21,454 |
| 2006-07 | | (261) | 8,506*** | | | |
| 2005-06 | | (317) | 8742*** | | | |
| 2004-05 | | (258) | 9727*** | | | |

Table 3. Part-time enrolments Post-Graduate 2015-2004

| Year | | IoT | Colleges | Universities | Total Female | Total Male | Grand Total |
|---------|--|-------|----------|--------------|--------------|------------|-------------|
| 2014-15 | | 3,762 | 2136 | 9,241 | 8,445 | 6,694 | 15,139 |
| 2013-14 | | 3439 | 1410 | 9231 | 7,985 | 6,434 | 14,419 |
| 2012-13 | | 2975 | 1745 | 9331 | 7,732 | 6,319 | 14,051 |
| 2011-12 | | 2636 | 1806 | 8343 | 7,273 | 5,512 | 12,785 |
| 2010-11 | | 2610 | | 10250* | 6,046 | 4,204 | 12,860 |
| 2009-10 | | 2529 | | 10272* | 6,958 | 5,843 | 12,801 |
| 2008-09 | | 2104 | | 9138* | 6,304 | 4,938 | 11,242 |
| 2007- | | 2471 | | 8502* | 5,122 | 5,320 | 10,973 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---------|--|-------|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 08 | | | | | | | |
| 2006-07 | | Xxx** | | 7950* | 4,576 | 3,374 | 7,950 |
| 2005-06 | | xxx | | 7573* | xxx | xxx | |
| 2004-05 | | xxx | | 6977* | xxx | xxx | |

Table 4. Post-Graduate enrolments: Part-time & Full-time

| Year | IoT PT | IoT FT | Colleges PT | Colleges FT | University PT | University FT |
|-------------|---------------|---------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2012-13 | 2975 | 2663 | 1745 | 1041 | 9331 | 18 076 |
| 2011-12 | 2636 | 2691 | 1806 | 973 | 8343 | 17 896 |
| 2010-11 | 2610 | 2766 | | | 10250* | 19 114 |
| 2009-10 | 2529 | 2939 | | | 10272* | 19 480 |
| 2008-09 | 2104 | 2572 | | | 9138* | 18 128 |
| 2007-08 | 2471 | 2238 | | | 8502* | 16 569 |
| 2006-07 | | | | | 7950* | 16,224 |
| 2005-06 | | | | | 7573* | 15,688 |
| 2004-05 | | | | | 6977* | 15,339 |

Table 5. CSO data, Part-time HE enrolments 2004-13

| Year | Part-time | Full-time | Springboard |
|-------------|------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| 2014-15 | 36,975 | 173,649 | 5,102 |
| 2013-14 | 36,153 | 169,254 | 6,184 |
| 2012-13 | 35 778? | 164,863 | 6,266 |
| 2011-12 | 33 778 | 163,068 | 4,907 |
| 2010-11 | 32, 622 | 161647 | |
| 2009-10 | 32, 806 | 156 973 | |
| 2008-09 | 33,027 | 146 068 | |

| | | | |
|---------|---------|----------|--|
| 2007-08 | 33,883 | 139 134 | |
| 2006-07 | missing | 138 362 | |
| 2005-06 | 31, 354 | 136 719 | |
| 2004-05 | 34,509 | 133, 691 | |

*Inclusive of post-graduate student numbers from the colleges including occasional students

** No data available for IoT's during these years

*** This figure is inclusive of college numbers

3.6 Examples of providers

The following section considers examples of a range of providers and programmes on offer within specific institutions and reviews provision across selected HEIs. Several IoT's, Universities, and colleges were selected to indicate the range of part-time options that exist at a regional and national perspective. Criteria which shaped the selection included; obtaining a regional spread, institutional scale, range of programmes, as well as providing a mix of University, IoT, colleges and non-HEA funded institutions. Examination of all HEIs within the state would have been impractical. College websites and on-line prospectus examined included the following, firstly Universities: UL, UCC, UCD, UCG, Maynooth University, TCD, and DCU. Secondly, IoT's including; CIT, ITC, DIT, DKIT, LIT, IT Blanchardstown, ITT, IT Carlow, and IADT. Thirdly, Colleges: Marino, St.Patrick's Drumcondra, Mary Immaculate, NCAD, and lastly Independent colleges: GCD, and NCI.

Generally Universities do not demonstrate strong evidence in growing part-time flexible student numbers at undergraduate level, though University of Maynooth and DCU present positive figures, nonetheless regardless of these regular performers, it is more likely that increased part-time student presence can be found within IoT's, which show greater consistency in attracting part-time numbers particularly at undergraduate level. Throughout the period under review, full-time student enrolments continued to exceed part-time however there were a small number of HEIs, namely

NCI, Carlow IT, where the gap between full-time and part-time was minimal, both of these HEIs also provided Springboard programmes. The following paragraphs examine part-time programmes on a regional basis. A summary of each HEIs part-time programme is provided with details of how the programme is managed and administered.

3.7 Institute of Technology Carlow

Institute of Technology Carlow has expanded part-time options and offers programmes outside of the main campus which is located in Carlow town. Additional outreach campuses are located in, south-east Wicklow, Wexford town and Dublin. In addition, IoT Carlow provides accreditation to community-based providers such as; An Cosan. There is a wide selection of programmes outside of Carlow, though the main campus has the largest number and widest variety of programmes on offer.

At the Wicklow campus, the range of part-time options included higher certificates and pathways to Degrees. Subjects include; Law, Humanities, Business, Marketing and Science. There are also options for stand-alone Certificates at level 8, level 9 whereby students accumulate credits in subjects which provide professional development opportunities for those interested in a specific module and want to upskill. Similarly, at Wexford, there are a variety of single-subject certificates, as well as degree programmes, higher diploma and Masters at level 9.

Generally, part-time programmes at undergraduate level take place in the evening and occasional weekend slots. The duration of a degree is either three or four years part-time. Students may attend one or two evenings weekly.

At Carlow main campus, there is a wider selection of programmes on offer at the undergraduate level and also part-time master degree options at level 9. Postgraduate programmes are typical of two years duration, involving at least two nights attendance weekly, occasional weekends feature in some disciplines. At the undergraduate level, the options include level 6, 7, and 8 programmes, in a range of disciplines including; business,

engineering, computer science, health sciences, the humanities include law, social care, media, and design. Short module options typically require attendance over a semester for one night whilst higher certificates can be completed in two years requiring attendance two evenings a week.

According to HEA figures, IT Carlow in 2013, enrolled 1,681 part-time students, and 3,688 full-time. By 2015, the total part-time enrolment for Carlow was 2,085, these figures compare favourably when considered with the total part-time enrolments for 2005-06 which was 653 (CS0). The suite of part-time programmes in 2014 included thirty-seven for Wicklow, sixty-three for Carlow and thirty-two for Wexford. The lifelong learning unit based at Carlow campus co-ordinates the part-time programme across Carlow and Wicklow campus, Wexford takes responsibility for admissions within that campus.

3.8 Dublin Institute of Technology

DIT is the largest of IoTs in the country with multiple sites and campuses across the city. In 2012-13 full time students were 12,728, and part-time 3,963. DIT traditionally provided part-time programmes and pathways in a range of vocational subjects and disciplines. There was the consistency of numbers and growth in the range of programme options available over the time-frame. In this case, the four schools within DIT -Arts and Tourism, Business, Engineering and the Built Environment, Sciences and Health- co-ordinate and manage part-time options within the respective school, with admissions and programme administration located within the school.

Part-time options include pathways from the higher certificate (two years), to an Ordinary degree, to Honours degree (three to five years). There are opportunities for CPD certificates (attend for one semester) or diploma's (attend for two semesters), awarded by the institution. Short course certificates are also offered. Generally, there are greater numbers of CPD and short course options to choose from within DIT at the undergraduate level. Most all of the part-time and short course offerings are accredited either through awarding of a QQI qualification or through an internal DIT

certificate of attendance. Across the schools, DIT offers twelve degrees in a range of disciplines - and eight higher certificates at the undergraduate level. The college of engineering and built environment offers the largest number of part-time flexible higher certificates and degrees in engineering and surveying.

At the post-graduate level the number of part-time programmes is extensive including; Higher Diploma's, Graduate Certificates and Masters' Degree, in total there are over sixty-five programmes offered. Masters programmes typically are of four or five-semester duration. Depending on the discipline, students attend in the evenings or for full or half days, or a combination of day, evening and weekend. Evidently, the range of programmes and capacity for part-time modes at post-graduate level was greater.

3.9 National College of Ireland (NCI)

National College of Ireland is based in the centre of Dublin and is an independent college. The college provides a wide selection of sub-degree, degree and post-graduate programmes in; business, management, marketing, computer science, web technologies and teacher education. The college promotes part-time and flexible learning which includes blended and online programmes. NCI used the full range of the NFQ placing part-time flexible awards at levels 6, 7, 8 and 9, however certificates could be located at level 6 or 8, whilst higher diplomas were placed at L8 and postgraduate diplomas at L9. In this way there are options for students at entry-level, with progression routes to higher awards, similarly, students can access modules at higher levels possibly for professional development purposes and exit with an award.

At NCI there are a variety of sub-degree and degree awards, approximately thirty-two undergraduate qualifications, including; certificates, higher certificates, higher diploma, ordinary and honours degrees. The college also offers a substantial amount of post-graduate qualifications, approximately nineteen. NCI occupies a unique position amongst the HEIs

in so far as it places similar emphasis on part-time as full-time, this has resulted in similar enrolment figures with full-time pulling ahead slightly. According to CSO data, in 2013, there were 1,615 full-time and 1,426, part-time students enrolled, indicating a small increase on the previous years' intake. Also, NCI was successful in attracting large numbers of Springboard courses and students on a part-time basis during the period of the economic downturn.

3.10 National College of Art and Design (NCAD)

NCAD is a dedicated art and design college, it offers art and design qualifications at undergraduate and postgraduate degree level. The majority of NCAD programmes are catering for full-time school leavers, as the college has increased numbers of first-year students. Lifelong learning and part-time continuing education at an undergraduate level are provided through the centre for continuing education. The part-time provision is for a mature student population and offers certificates, and diploma L7 though there is no option for a part-time BA at this time. At undergraduate level NCAD offers three part-time certificates, two of which can be completed within a year, whilst another flexible programme, offering multiple modules can be completed over a longer time frame.

Part-time undergraduate art and design courses nationally are limited with only one dedicated programme flexible programme on offer through DIT, though two IoT's (LIT, GMIT) provide for the accumulation of credits through modularised full-time programmes over a longer duration.

3.11 Maynooth University

Maynooth University offers a wide range of part-time options at post-graduate level and a smaller number of part-time undergraduate degrees. Maynooth has a long tradition of providing adult and community education (ACE) programmes on campus and in outreach facilities nationally through the adult and community education department. The bulk of the ACE provision offers undergraduate qualifications, such as Certificates and

Diploma's, which are linked to or provide routes to, part-time BA programmes. The Adult and Community Education Department co-ordinate and manage the majority of part-time accredited programmes at an undergraduate level. The Department offers ten certificates, two diplomas, post-graduate diplomas and Masters degree. Typically part-time Certificates carry twenty ECTS and Diploma sixty ECTS. Certificates are at level 7 and level 8 with options for the accumulation of credits toward the part-time BA programmes in; Local Studies or Community Education. The modular BA programmes involve other departments in teaching and assessment and can be completed over five years which may extend to a six-year period. There is also a part-time BA in early childhood teaching and learning which is offered over three years. Part-time options are also available in the outreach facility at Kilkenny.

At postgraduate level, individual departments manage part-time programmes, with centralised admissions taking responsibility for processing applications and enquiries. The majority of post-graduate programmes at level 9 were typically one year full-time or two years part-time, there were variations, with diploma programmes of one-year duration, carrying sixty ECTS and some masters programmes stretching out to three years. Generally, postgraduate part-time masters' degrees are for ninety ECTS, with part-time students having a longer time to complete a thesis or research project.

3.12 Cork Institute of Technology

CIT is one of the larger Institutes of Technology and is inclusive of some smaller colleges (Crawford College of Art, Cork School of Music, National Maritime College of Ireland). The Institute has a dispersed provision across several sites within the city. CIT offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate part-time programmes. Evidently, CIT has engaged in the design of customised programmes specific to industry in the area of, computing, business and manufacturing. In some cases, an external professional body may provide recognition and some but not all of these qualifications are linked directly to ECTS and QQI levels. In many

instances, a course may carry a small number of credits, such as five ECTS, though there are several full awards at level 7, 8 and 9.

The range of part-time programmes is impressive including; tourism, arts, engineering, business, science, computing, music and maritime studies. The options in disciplines such as science, construction and engineering are greater providing part-time students with an opportunity to move from higher certificate to degree. However in the arts; fine art, media, design, and music there are fewer options, though there are a small number of stand-alone awards at sub-degree level there were no options at degree level. Nevertheless, there are options at the post-graduate level to undertake Masters programmes in art and design education.

Typically a student intending to complete a level 8 award, would progress from a higher certificate to level 7 and then to a level 8 award over five years, involving a minimum of two evenings or approximately eight hours of class-based learning weekly. Postgraduate programmes vary, though generally, the minimum duration is of three semesters involving attendance two evenings a week.

3.13 University of Limerick

There is a range of undergraduate and postgraduate options at UL. The Department of Lifelong learning and outreach acts as a coordinating unit for part-time and continuing education programmes with links to the faculties providing undergraduate and postgraduate programmes with pathways from certificates to degree and onwards to graduate awards. Part-time undergraduate degrees are of three or four years duration depending on the subject, some programmes offered blended learning others are lecture and classroom based. Part-time undergraduate programmes were usually scheduled for the evening and weekend with some exceptions such as engineering which involves attendance for one full day and an evening every week.

The four faculties include; the Kemmy business school, Health and education, Science and Engineering and Arts and Humanities. The Kemmy business school offers several undergraduate options including Certificates,(2) Diploma,(2) part-time Degrees,(3) at postgraduate level there are several MA (6) and one professional diploma. The KBS actively recruits students for part-time programmes with strong links to business. Within health and education, there are no part-time undergraduate degree options, there is a diploma option, whilst at postgraduate level, there are several offers including graduate diplomas (3) and MA (4). Within Science and engineering, the part-time options appear to relate to niche areas including; health and safety and supply chain management. However, the three year BA in electronic engineering combines day time and evening to facilitate individuals in the workplace. Within arts and humanities, there were two part-time undergraduate degree options, also certificates as well as post-graduate masters.

3.14 Springboard

In 2011, the government introduced the Springboard initiative which aimed to provide a pathway for unemployed to return to education to upskill and reskill in light of the economic downturn and changing work patterns. Springboard followed on from earlier labour market activation funded initiatives (LMA) similarly targeting individuals seeking a route back into employment.

Through this mechanism (co-ordinated by DES/HEA) multiple places on programmes at the undergraduate and postgraduate level were offered across HEI on a part-time basis. The intention was to provide unemployed people –subject to criteria being met- with options 'leading to qualifications in areas where there are employment opportunities' (Springboard online 2018). Programmes were generally part-time and of one-year duration. Applicants were required to meet specific criteria also applications were centrally co-ordinated through an on-line admissions system. At the outset, more places were available within IoT's and private colleges than within Universities. Many of the programmes within IoT's were at undergraduate

level whilst universities provided programmes at L8 and post-graduate level. Since the introduction of this initiative, the exchequer allocated over one hundred million to support Springboard courses. According to a recent HEA report (HEA 2014), forty-two of the HEIs offered six hundred and forty-two courses, a further six thousand one hundred places were to be offered on Springboard courses in 2014-15. Though mostly men were taking up Springboard options the numbers of women participating increased over time. Notably, levels of attrition amongst Springboard participants was high. Many of the students taking up Springboard opportunities already have a higher educational qualification.

The types of programmes offered relate to areas where there are potential employment opportunities; such as ICT, manufacturing, and 'cross-enterprise skills', bio-pharmachem or niche areas of the construction industry. Springboard is a unique and timely initiative linked to the economic downturn. Evaluations suggest that the opportunity to attend third level part-time programmes for free and without losing social welfare benefits has proved popular. (HEA 2012, HEA 2014) As there is no indication when the programme will cease therefore there is continued recruitment of new students with an offer of additional places nationally.

3.15 Conclusion

In the past decade, part-time higher education enrolments remained stable with a small increase noticeable in recent years. Full-time continues to outstrip part-time as evidence supports the reality that most HEIs focus on providing for school leavers. Across HEIs, practices involving part-time were characterised by a range of local approaches including;

- Part-time students enrolled in a full-time programme, who attend flexibly,
- Part-time students who incrementally accrue credits over a longer time-frame, either to obtain sub-awards available through a modularised system or with a view to progression,
- Part-time students enrolled in dedicated part-time programmes, providing progression to a full award,

- Full-time programmes with dedicated part-time pathways.

In practice, it appears that part-time higher education has evolved in response to demands from students, employers and policymakers. Also, data indicates in a small number of cases IoT's have strategically developed part-time flexible options to widen participation and increase revenue. Part-time is often a variation on existing full-time options providing for full-time programmes to be extended over a longer time frame or it can be full-time augmented, with sub-degree exit routes and pathways. In a small number of cases, part-time programmes have been developed specifically to address part-time cohorts. Part-time is also characterised by a myriad of local practices and disciplinary based approaches. An institutional approach was observed in terms of the organisation of admissions and internal structures associated with the provision, as well as the adaptation of the national framework of qualifications to institutional needs.

A review of part-time higher education indicates that only a small number of Universities provide part-time undergraduate programmes and those are limited to 'newer' universities. Within the humanities and arts, the undergraduate programme can be a composite, that is, a range of modules based around a more generalised liberal arts programme, (UL, Maynooth) typically this type of programme is offered in the evening. In other disciplines such as engineering or science; the programme may be configured differently to accommodate part-time participation or offered flexibly. Within IoT's and independent colleges, there is a wider range of undergraduate programmes with exit qualifications at a sub-degree level and blended learning options. In some institutions, the approach adopted is to create multiple certificates and diploma's from the accreditation of modules within a degree programme, thereby creating options for professional development and exit opportunities (IT Carlow). Whether such an approach harms curriculum coherency and contributes to fragmentary learning experiences is not known and requires further research.

Whilst there are limited options available for part-time participation at the undergraduate level, the situation at post-graduate levels is very different,

where individual departments, schools or faculties, drive the development and teaching of programmes. Generally, part-time post-graduate programmes are offered as a complementary option to full-time whereby students take longer to complete a programme. In other cases part-time was a dedicated option, often linked to professional development.

Inevitably part-time lags behind full-time HE in terms of; student numbers, programme options, pathways, resources and supports for students engaged in learning. Resources for part-time higher education are unpredictable as providers and policymakers argue over funding. Evidently, there were resourcing problems within HE, and part-time flexible HE, in particular (DES 2016). The resourcing and financing of part-time higher education students was a recurring issue in the recent HEA report where 'there was universal agreement that a new policy on financial support for part-time students needs to be developed' (HEA 2012). Schuller's call for 'an end to the discrimination against part-time, where individual and institutional funding favour full-timers' continues to remain relevant (Schuller 2010: 116).

4 Chapter Four: Scoping Part-time Flexible Research

4.1 Introduction

In Ireland, part-time higher education or part-time learners experiences of HE was not extensively researched (Hunt 2017). Part-time higher education was not treated as a stand-alone subject also it had become interchangeable with the term flexible (Flannery & McGarr, 2014, HEA 2009, 2012, DES 2011). As a mode of learning, part-time was embedded within policy agendas linked to concepts such as; flexible learning, widening participation, access, distance education, lifelong learning and reform of higher education (HEA, 2012, DES, 2011, HEA 2009). In addition, considerable variation existed across the EU in terms of how part-time learning was resourced and provided within HE, in so far as; traditions, policies and practices differed (Boeren 2014). In the UK a body of literature though not extensive had specifically attended to part-time HE. When the funding situation changed in the UK the result was fewer part-time enrolments and a reduction in employer support for part-time study (Callender, 2018, Mason 2013, Shaw, 2013,).

This review set out to examine research in an Irish, UK and wider context. International literature including articles or reports from; EU, Canada, North America, Asia and Australia were identified specifically those that addressed part-time flexible HE, however, only studies in English were examined. The focus centred on published materials including; textbooks, on-line journal articles, reports, unpublished material and academic theses that prioritised part-time flexible HE. Articles with a single theme were prioritised however those with a more generalised approach inclusive of aspects of part-time flexible HE featured in the search. The scope of the examination was concerned with part-time flexible in terms of; its evolution, links to HE policy, funding, students' experiences, lecturer's experience and perspectives on teaching and supporting part-time students in HE. The pedagogical and curricular implications of increased diversity and flexibility within HE were included. The scale of research and variety of methods

employed in studies particularly those that were empirically based were noted (Anderson et al, 2012, Askam, 2008, Merrill 2001). Widening participation (WP) remains a dominant subject in the literature undoubtedly it had influenced the discourse surrounding part-time flexible learning and arguably at times the 'discourse of disadvantage' overshadowed it (Woodfield 2011:421). Notwithstanding the relevance of WA it does not form a central plank of the review.

The chapter is organised thematically. The first part considered research focused on factors which shaped part-time HE, in particular; policies and strategies that influenced how provision was organised and resourced, how part-time was conceptualised and defined, expansion of flexible and part-time provision, the implications for HEIs, and related issues of access to institutional supports and structural inequity. The second part examined students within higher education including; student experience, motivations, decision making when accessing part-time, factors contributing to retention, persistence, belonging, also, managing learning, workload, benefits of learning, approaches to learning and teaching. This is followed by the summary research table 6 and conclusion.

4.2 Background to literature review

In Ireland, empirical research examining part-time flexible learning experiences in HE was in short supply. It was a subject that was neglected by researchers and marginalised by policy makers. However, in the UK several studies that focused on part-time, policy, institutional practices, retention and part-time students' experiences of HE (Callender, 2011, Jamison et al, 2009, Yorke & Longden 2008, Kember et al, 2005, 2001). During the 1990s, research into the evolution of part-time higher education and levels of participation was undertaken in the UK (Callender, Kemp, 2000, Schuller, 1999, Schuller et al 1997). Kember noted that the rise in part-time student numbers did not correspond to, 'a growth in research studies that address the issues and problems of part-time study (Kember, Lee, Li 2001:327)'. At that time research into part-time higher education was not extensive and tended to overlook areas such as outcomes or

examining student learning experiences. Merrill drew attention to the lack of research into part-time adult students learning experiences of higher education (Merrill, 2001).

Whilst in the UK some research began to surface, the situation in Ireland remained stagnant, indeed the 'absence of any comprehensive research on part-time students' was noted in an unpublished report commissioned by the HEA into demand for flexible programme options (Sheerin date unknown:15). The situation remains largely unchanged as noted by Darmody and Fleming, 'very little is known about the overall workload and general life situations of part-time students' (Darmody and Fleming 2009:71). Further, the authors argued the absence of empirical research 'makes planning and policy difficult to formulate or interpret' (Darmody and Fleming 2009:67).

Research into part-time HE has focused on impediments to participation, inequity and the implications of increased diversity and flexibility for policy as well as institutional practice. Whilst levels of participation and funding featured prominently for researchers (Callender 2011) a small number of studies went beyond a survey approach to examine; part-time students' decision-making and motivation for learning, the benefits of participation, persistence, the implications of diversity within HEIs, also lecturers' perspectives on part-time learning and the pedagogical implications of increased flexibility (Osborne et al., 2004, Merrill 2001). Surprisingly there was limited research examining part-time students who combined studies with employment. The subject was embedded in survey studies examining; student profile, motivations and workload, yet there was a limited exploration of students perspectives on combining part-time study with employment. By default, researchers' attention turned to full-time students managing part-time employment and the likely impact on study and retention (Yorke,2008, Callender, 2011, Darmody & Smyth, 2007, Eivers et al. 2002). In the UK employers contribution to part-time students' tuition fees and the likely benefits were examined in a report at a time when changes to HE funding were being introduced (Mason 2013). In an Irish context, this area was under-researched. While employers contributed to

the national training fund (NTF) nonetheless there was a lack of examination or data evident as to employer's financial support for part-time learners.

A review identified multiple themes and sub-themes these fall into three categories as listed below.

Policy and Strategies; external factors shaping provision

1. Defining and conceptualising part-time learning,
2. The low status of part-time higher education policy and practice,
3. Part-time as a subset of widening participation: the access agenda and increased accessibility-flexibility of higher education,
4. Funding, fees, and part-time HE
5. The implications of widening participation policy for part-time,
6. The profile of students; social, educational background,
7. Attrition, and retention, within part-time HE,

Part-time flexible learners within HE,

1. Student experience in HE,
2. Decision making and motivation of part-time students accessing HE,
3. Access to and availability of supports for learners,
4. Persistence of part-timers within HE,
5. Visibility of part-time students within HE, peripheral and marginal status,
6. Students' conceptions of learning and teaching, and academic expectations of higher education,
7. Benefits and outcomes of part-time study for older students
8. Identity formation for part-time students,
9. Sense of belonging within higher education,
10. Transitioning into academic culture, managing learning, workload, and other commitments,

Implications of flexible, part-time learning for lecturers

1. Increased diversity, the implications for teaching and supporting part-time students,
2. Approaches to teaching and curriculum development,

Part-time higher education has struggled to assert its identity as a subject worthy of the attention of researchers and where it was examined often the issues of; status, funding, equity, and marginalisation were fore-grounded. Informing and critiquing policy featured in research (Flannery McGarr, 2014, Callendar, 2011, Darmody & Fleming 2009) in an attempt to address gaps or reform existing strategies. A survey-based approach was encountered with little empirical material or case study approach evident. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the themes outlined above though where they overlap they are collated under a single heading. It seems appropriate to commence by asking fundamental questions as to what is part-time HE.

4.3 Defining Part-time Higher Education

It was difficult to define part-time higher education. In addition, establishing how it differed from other modes of learning was challenging. Schuller considered the evolution of part-time within a broader construct linked to changing work patterns. The author recognised the difficulty in defining part-time as it 'can mean a variety of different things' depending on the context and levels of understanding encountered amongst different groups be they; policy makers, providers, guidance counsellors or academics (Schuller, 1999:52). To add to the complexity the boundaries between full and part-time HE has become increasingly 'blurred' as students take on part-time employment to support full-time study (Darmody & Smyth 2007, Keating, & O'Sullivan 2002, Schuller 1999). Jamieson et al, noted the lack of a formal concept of part-time in many countries but concluded that 'in practice it is clear that in most countries many students' combine their studies with 'other commitments' including work 'and are de facto studying on a part-time basis' (Jamieson et al, 2009:245) Consequently 'the emphasis on difference as a way of defining part-time higher education' could be problematic, as Schuller noted, it failed to take account of the diversity of part-time furthermore boundaries between full and part-time were unclear (Schuller 1999:49). Schuller's conducted interviews with policy-makers, senior academics as well as administrative staff in HE, for this group, often the key distinguishing feature separating full-time from part-time was the issue of fees and subsidy. Similarly, in Ireland, part-time

students do not have access to grants and part-time students were not counted by the HEA for statistical purposes until recently. A report on mature student participation at UCD noted that while the differences between full and part-time can be 'a moot point' for students, nonetheless 'at a structural level a distinction continues to be drawn between the two (Keating, & O'Sullivan 2002:10)'.

Part-time HE was often treated in conjunction with flexible learning, as a mode of learning providing for increased accessibility and expansion of higher education. When Tight examined part-time higher education in several countries he concluded that 'part-time provision remains the most pragmatic means for expanding access and for encouraging the shift from elite to mass higher education (Tight 1991:80). Inevitably 'part-time provision was seen as potentially making a significant contribution to access and openness in HE (Schuller, 1999:10)'. The intertwining of flexible with part-time has added to the confusion, creating additional challenges when attempting definitions (HEA 2009). Flannery & McGarr, have drawn attention to the inadequate conceptualising of 'flexibility in higher education', and the willingness of policy-makers and researchers alike to present flexible learning 'unproblematically as beneficial and straightforward concepts'(Flannery & McGarr,2014:1). In their examination of policy, flexible higher education was not separated from part-time learning generally the two were subsumed within a singular notion of making provision more accessible and flexible. Flannery & McGarr argued policy-makers needed to be challenged as they presented flexible and part-time learning within a limited, simplistic understanding of lifelong learning. Furthermore, key DES, HEA policy documents (2011, 2012) presented flexible and part-time learning as to how reform of HE could be achieved. Flannery and McGarr (2014) noted a lack of clarity or specifics as to how reform might happen in the absence of changes to established funding practices within HE.

The HEA report 'Part-time and Flexible higher education in Ireland' (HEA 2012) recognised part-time was made up of multiples of very diverse groups, the definition provided was expansive and inclusive of 'students

who were attending part-time courses extending over a full academic year and leading to an award and as well as occasional students'(HEA, 2012:4). Callendar noted the lack of definition within the UK maintaining that 'part-time students are those that do not fit into the definition of a full-time student (2011:470)'. Earlier Tight recognised part-time as diverse and not homogeneous furthermore it was possible to identify categories or dimensions within part-time such as; part-time sub-degree, part-time sandwich, part-time continuing education, part-time first degree, part-time post-graduate(Schuller, 1999:45). This categorising of part-time emerged within the UK nevertheless, it had relevancy to an Irish context. Particularly as IoT's traditionally provided sub-degree Certificates, Diploma, and Higher Diploma awards and were associated with increased diversity (Mooney Patterson 2010). Also, Irish Further Education and Training (FET), had undergone significant restructuring and consolidation following legislative changes in 2013. Nonetheless, Irish FET remains relatively underdeveloped when compared with the UK, where partnerships between FE and HE providers were established and options for bridging and sandwich courses to support transition or progression within HE programmes have been in place for some time (Schuller et al 1999).

Whilst part-time has been defined by policy-makers, equally, definitions were shaped by the range of providers, as much by the multiple diverse combinations of options on offer; day-time part-time, part-time evening, part day, part evening, day release, and so on. Within the UK, 'level and sector are two key dimensions of variation within part-time higher education', additional variations included smaller colleges and Universities, each having different levels of provision (Schuller et al 1999:53). Schuller added another 'variation' contributing to a definition, that is the student population, their profile, age, educational and social background, their motivation 'for study' and response to the part-time learning experience (ibid).

PTF was not easily defined it was ambiguous. For the purposes of the case study, the definition employed by the HEA (2012) provided a guideline for my research as the majority of HEIs included in the fieldwork was funded

through HEA mechanisms (see chapter 6 section 6.16. 6.25). The HEA definition was broad and operated as a tool to capture statistical data. By default and implicit to this definition was a reliance on a binary frame of reference similar to Callender's observation re UK HE in so far as what was not full-time must be part-time. I also employed a working definition for research purposes. PTF students were a minority that was under-represented within HE. In a post-bologna era, PTF had been characterised by but not limited to; logistical and pedagogical flexibility, however at the undergraduate level, it was underpinned by structural inequities where students had to pay fees but may not have access to institutional supports (HEA 2012). My perspective was that part-time HE was a complex construct shaped by a range of competing stakeholder perspectives that were subject to changeable labour market demands. Also, part-time students were a heterogeneous group made up of multiple categories. I speculated that it was loosely informed by lifelong learning ideals and was under-funded (see Table 1, section 2.7).

4.4 The status of Part-Time HE

The neglect and marginalisation of part-time higher education was a recurring theme noted in multiple studies over two decades (Schuller,1999, Sheerin, Kember,2001, Calendar,2011, Darmody & Fleming, 2009). In the UK Shaw (2013: 4) acknowledged the disparity between government policy promoting part-time and lifelong learning and the reality within HEIs where part-time students were often invisible 'because they study on work-related courses with less prestige than full-time programmes'. When Schuller et al (1999) examined the development of part-time within higher education the authors 'noted the marginal role of part-time provision in undergraduate HE', and wider within policy and 'public debates' and that this had been the case since the second world war (Schuller et al 1999:37). Similarly, Kember et al (2001) asserted part-time study as 'having lower priority than full-time (Kember, Lee, Li, 2001:327)'. In Ireland, Darmody and Fleming drew attention to the poor status of part-time higher education, which 'has been undermined by the absence of coherent policy or resources to develop structured provision for part-time learners' (Darmody and Fleming

2009:67). As indicated earlier, the neglect of part-time higher education was not confined to Ireland but was evident in the UK, where it was noted that 'provision for part-time and mature students is often seen as the least resourced, least valued, and least well understood' (Swain, Hammond 2011:592). Callender argued that part-time was peripheral within HE and 'sidelined in the HE policy agenda' (Callender 2011, 469). In their case study of part-time research students, Neuman & Rodwell drew attention to 'the invisibility of part-time students, ' which was described as 'endemic' within Australian HE (2009:56). In the US, where there was a long tradition of gathering data on the affects of college on students, Laird and Cruce noted that part-time students, 'are among those who have been largely ignored in the literature on college impacts' (2009:290). Similarly, in the UK, researchers at Birbeck, one of the largest providers of part-time courses, noted that 'although many students in HE are mature part-time learners, they have not been the specific focus of much research or policy interest (Swain & Hammond, 2011:591)'.

The status of part-time higher education and the peripheral positioning of part-time students changed little over the decades (Teeuwssen et al. 2014). Despite the expansion of and increased diversity within higher education, the general view is that 'part-time study is seen as having a lower priority than FT' (Darmody and Fleming 2009:70). In the UK, Callender maintained that higher education institutions' interests were on 'full-time courses and their students' (Callender 2011:69). What emerges from several studies was that low status brings with it a range of challenges such as; lack of supports or access to supports for students and increased attrition (Woodfield 2014, Kember 2001, Yorke,1999). Furthermore, being on the margins raised questions concerning quality and comparability with full-time, if part-time learning was undervalued at institutional and policy level, then it may not be on a par with full-time.

Since the 1980s, the move toward mass higher education with larger numbers and more diverse cohorts entering third-level gathered momentum. In Ireland and the UK, as higher education expanded some HEIs adopted more flexible, inclusive approaches, diversifying provision,

enhancing part-time flexible options, though notably, older universities were less likely or slower to respond (Swain and Hammond 2011, HEA,2012, Scheutze & Slowey,2002, Merrill,2001). In the UK post '92 colleges were recorded as having higher levels of part-time students (Yorke & Longden, 2008) than older universities. Similarly, in Ireland IoT's had a reputation for greater diversity and part-time enrolments (HEA 2010, McMahon 2000).

Strong arguments continued to be made for recognising part-time and flexible learning as a way of making HE and FET accessible (Mooney, O'Rourke 2017, HEA 2012). Encouraging greater numbers to access and participate in HE provided a valuable human resource, particularly in a competitive global market, also it confirmed credentials and status on those who could afford to invest in education. Successive government reports suggested that part-time and flexible learning could be a short cut to achieving widening participation strategies, particularly where resources were limited (HEA 2016). Growing part-time as a way of 'making more effective use of resources and of increasing student numbers at marginal cost' was signalled by Schuller et al., as potentially a negative development in the context of change within HE (Schuller et al. 1999:11). Callendar (2011) Swain& Hammond (2011) and Flannery & McGarr (2014) have considered the downside of an expanded HE provision, which was poorly resourced, supported and inadequately conceived.

Nevertheless, the cost-effective argument cannot be ignored, Neumann and Rodwell noted in their Australian case study analysis of satisfaction and completion amongst Phd students, that despite the part-time 'invisible' and marginalised nature of post-graduate students, typically they completed their research studies faster than full-time equivalents, and were potentially more beneficial to Universities(Neumann, Rodwell 2009: 66).

4.5 Funding, Equity, and Part-time, flexible HE

Despite strategies to widen participation amongst under-represented minority groups such as part-time and mature students, issues of inequity persisted in HE (Fleming et al., 2017, DES, 2016). Research confirmed that

'patterns of access to higher education has for a long time been associated with the costs of higher education' (Ranhle 2011:15) Though the numbers of mature and part-time students improved, figures indicated that Ireland does not compare favourably with international levels in terms of participation amongst older adults (Solas 2016). According to Darmody and Fleming, 'part-time and mature students have remained underrepresented in HE' (2009:72). In the UK, Callender argued that changes in funding mechanisms impacted negatively on part-time students and programmes, 'the system of government financial support favours full-time HE at the expense of part-time' (Callender 2011:469). Following extensive research into part-time, the author argued that the very premise of widening participation through part-time, offering opportunities for accessing higher education to those most in need, was impeded by changes in financial supports for students in the UK. Evidence indicated that financial constraints were a factor in limiting the growth of part-time provision and increasing the participation of part-timers in higher education (HEA 2012, DES, 2016, Darmody and Fleming 2009). Until recently, there were larger numbers of students coming from low-income backgrounds accessing part-time higher education in the UK, though this changed when funding was withdrawn (Callendar,2011).

Darmody and Fleming (2009) analysed data gathered from an earlier eurostudent survey of Irish higher education to consider themes of equity and part-time. The researchers revisited the survey and focused on data relating to four key questions concerning part-time students: who are they, why they choose to study part-time, what shapes their experience of third-level, and how satisfied they were with the workload. The authors highlighted many similarities with international developments, such as; growth in part-time numbers within higher education, and the under-representation of socio-economic disadvantaged amongst part-timers. In an Irish context due to the absence of financial supports for part-time students in higher education, a perception persisted that undergraduate education was primarily for full-time students coming directly from school and that higher education addressed the needs of traditional learners. Darmody and Fleming argued that the HE system 'offers few resources or supports for

part-time learner's (Darmody Fleming 2009: 68)'. Part-time students in Ireland, and increasingly those students in the UK, were faced with a financial burden, which makes their situation 'both untenable and inequitable.' (Darmody and Fleming 2009:79) The earlier eurostudent data was the basis for analysis. While the sample size of students taking part-time undergraduate options was small (N=545) making generalisability difficult, there was also limited material to draw on in the form of commentary from part-time students on their experiences of higher education. The paper highlighted the lack of development in part-time higher education policy but offered limited insight into student experiences as the researchers were drawing on data extracted from an on-line survey.

Funding for part-time HE and financial implications of participation in HE remained overarching themes within the literature; also, it was linked to the issue of equity. The lack of financial support for part-time students was identified in multiple reports (DES 2011). Callender and others undertook extensive research into funding and the implications for learners and part-time students in particular (Callender and Kemp, 2000; Callender, 2011). In the UK, Callender (2018, 2011) and Shaw (2013) drew attention to changes in HE funding, which had detrimental implications for part-time enrolments and participation. Funding remains a deterrent to participation in part-time HE in Ireland and latterly the UK. Shaw (2013) used on-line focus groups of 212 students to explore pending changes in HE funding amongst part-time mature students in the UK. Findings indicated students considered the proposed changes as a negative development potentially discouraging participation simply as older students could ill afford to incur additional debt or place such a burden on a family particularly where there may be younger family members who would be going to HE and needed to take out loans in due course. Also, the research drew attention to assumptions that increased levels of qualifications were linked to improved employment or better career prospects. Indeed several authors argued that it was no longer a certainty nor should it be an expectation where older students were concerned (Fleming et al. 2017, Shaw 2013, Fleming & Finnegan 2012). However, Woodfields' (2011:410) examination of full-time mature students' employment prospects following graduation challenged the

notion that they were 'less employable' and countered the 'narrative of disadvantage' encountered in widening participation studies.

4.6 Widening Participation

This section considers part-time within widening participation. WP is the term used within policy documentation to describe strategies and initiatives that addressed increased participation of non-traditional learners and minority groups within HE, such as; mature, disadvantaged, disability, lone parents, and ethnic minorities. Researchers have questioned the usefulness of definitions such as non-traditional or whether such categories apply where there was increasing diversity and blurring between full and part-time HE (Ranhle, 2011). Fleming advised caution where terms such as non-traditional were employed, 'categories that are used to corral individuals can become reified or fetishized by HEIs and policy-makers' (Fleming et al., 2017:11). In keeping with this perspective, the authors go on to indicate both non-traditional and traditional are a heterogeneous group where multiple schemas may be applied. This perspective chimed with my interpretation and was adopted for the research. Despite queries about definitions the categories have been employed in research and government strategies.

Widening participation research was established within the literature, with themes of access, participation, and inequality dominating research (Fleming et al. 2017). A review of widening participation literature indicated a shift occurred in the 1970s. The field broadened to include critical perspectives; Neo-Marxist, phenomenological, ethnographic and feminist approaches. Nevertheless, multiple barriers to participation persisted, including; institutional, structural, cultural, social, demographic, dispositional and financial (Burton et al., 2011, McCoy, Byrne 2011). Identifying barriers and examining the implications of impediments to participation was prioritised though arguably, researchers had not adequately captured the depth or complexity attached to such concepts (Fleming et al., 2017). Kettley argued that much of the research resulted in 'incomplete accounts of the barriers to higher education' as they 'do not

fully explore the relationship between students' social characteristics, learning experiences, and university careers' (Kettley 2007:333). As WP became established within HE, the dominant themes of access and barriers to participation were overtaken as different issues emerged. Researcher's attention moved their toward non-traditional students transitioning into HE. Student identity, retention and ensuring 'equity of treatment and opportunity within higher education' for WP students also featured (Hinton-Smith 2012:295).

Since the late 1990's the widening participation policy agenda in Ireland has been dominated by arguments; for increasing disadvantage numbers, understanding levels of participation amongst non-traditional groups and providing for greater diversity within mainstream full-time higher education (HEA 2004, Ranhle 2011). Fleming et al. stated that WP was a central part of Irish HE and integral to how HE understands itself (Fleming et al., 2017:1). Whilst equity issues continue to dominate the discourse; additional perspectives emerged; for example, Keane examined students experiences of learning and outcomes, comparing both traditional and non-traditional full-time students over time (Keane 2011). The findings challenged notions that diversity and inclusion could lead to a lowering of academic standards, an argument which featured in earlier debates on WP in higher education (Jones 2008).

Widening participation research remains relevant to part-time, where overlap between issues of access and flexibility exists and continues to influence the debate around lifelong learning in HE. Whilst the profile of part-time students was predominantly mature, and female, it was unclear whether designated WP cohorts including disadvantaged or minority groups figured within part-time, primarily as there were gaps in data which made it difficult to provide further analysis (Darmody & Fleming 2009). Furthermore, the issue of fees remained a mitigating factor prohibiting the participation of WP cohorts within part-time HE. Also, lack of flexibility within HE and FET was identified as an inhibitor to participation (DES 2016, Mooney, O'Rourke 2017, DES, 2011). Research undertaken by Amarch into barriers to participation within Irish FET provided detailed evidence about

the complexity of participation for vulnerable and difficult to reach groups. This mixed-method study used interviews and focus groups involving key stakeholders (providers, educators, employers) and those most at risk of exclusion (students) from FE and lifelong learning in order to draw out the implications for the economy and society. Findings indicated that though the sector was undergoing significant change, many of those working within FET, as well as students, stated that there was a lack of flexibility in the delivery of programmes and that there should be a greater 'emphasis on part-time' (Mooney, O'Rourke, 2017:40).

From a policy, perspective widening participation and access strategies have frequently if conveniently overlooked part-time and issues of flexibility within HE. Flannery & McGarr argued that lifelong learning policy shifted from being a 'socially inclusive discourse' to one that was concerned with 'widening participation in higher education in order to enhance employability (Flannery & McGarr 2014:4)'. The authors stated government policy was directed toward presenting part-time and flexible learning as 'embedded within arguments for reform in Ireland's higher education sector (Flannery & McGarr 2014:1)'. In keeping with notions of change, part-time and flexible learning was presented as a strategy for expansion (HEA 2011), a means to increase participation, presenting opportunities for re-skilling and up-skilling linked to the labour market (Flannery & McGarr 2014, Callendar 2011).

As WP strategies were implemented within FT mainstream higher education, issues of social justice and inclusion were being addressed, though the situation for part-time remained unaddressed. In Ireland, part-time higher education was located within widening access strategies; therefore, part-time students formed an equity group; nonetheless, there was no funding other than temporary labour activation funding such as Springboard to support the participation of part-time students. Increasingly provision was driven by strategies to achieve economic competitiveness and labour market needs (Flannery & McGarr, 2014; Callendar, 2011:485, Boeren 2014).

4.7 Profile of Part-time, flexible students

Diversity and part-time go hand in hand this was found to be consistent across multiple articles where profile was discussed, in so far as researchers acknowledged that part-timers were predominantly mature, with greater numbers of women participating, showing a range of ages and socio-economic groups (Callendar 2011, Darmody Fleming 2009, Yorke and Longden, 2008). However, it was also recognised that part-time students were not a homogenous group (Merrill 2001; Skillbeck & Connell 2000).

Profiling of part-time students and mature entrants featured strongly in the literature, and the focus typically was on examining whether policy objectives in terms of increased participation of socio-economic disadvantage and minority groups within higher education were being addressed. Regrettably, there was limited evidence arising in an Irish context that could establish whether part-time students were first times, returners, or those taking continuing professional development options having already acquired undergraduate qualifications. Callendar examined the profile of part-time students and found whilst '89% of full-time undergraduate students study for a first degree only one-third of part-time students do (Callendar 2011:471)'. Similarly, when Swain and Hammond conducted their research into part-time students at Birbeck/OU, they found that 'many already had qualifications and were returners (2007:37)'. Yorke and Longden (2008:21) had similar findings in their survey of part-time students where 'high levels of students' identified as having prior experience of HE.

Inevitably the diversity of age groups, professional background, and experiences of students can make for differing learning experiences in higher education. How HEIs catered for diverse part-time cohorts in terms of; pedagogy, supports, and curriculum development remains under-researched. Anderson et al. conducted an interesting examination of part-time adult's expectations of higher education, approaches to teaching, and learning (Anderson et al. 2012). This subject is considered in greater detail in the final section.

4.8 Part-time Student Experience

This section is divided into sub-themes related to student experiences such as; motivation, persistence, identity, and approaches to learning within HE. Why students choose to study part-time, their expectations, how they manage, overcome challenges, and why they persist within HE, was the focus of many studies and papers.

Yorke and Longdens' (2008) web-based survey of part-time students in the UK provided insights into students' experiences of learning. Eleven post-1992 universities participated in approximately 2871 valid responses. The research was undertaken before changes to the funding of HE and at a time when numbers participating in part-time HE were greater. This survey found that students were generally positive in their responses as programmes were positively rated as was students' interaction with teachers. However, part-time students were less positive about institutional organisation and administration in so far as the interests of part-time students were viewed as secondary to full-time peers. Particularly negative comments arose from part-time students on full-time courses, leading the authors to conclude, 'there was virtually no positive comment on the situation where part-time and full-time students were co-present on a programme' (Yorke & Longden 2008:35)

The survey examined students taking undergraduate and post-graduate courses though admittedly, there was an orientation toward vocational type programmes. Establishing why students chose to study part-time and the relevance of a flexible option for students was important. Furthermore, researchers found in the majority of cases, students themselves had chosen the programme of study.

4.9 Motivation and benefits of participation

Findings emerging from various studies indicated the motivations prompting adults to return to university were varied, multiple and complex (Ho et al., 2012; Swain & Hammond 2007:21). Also, students' motivations differed

depending on the level at which they were studying. Ho et al. noted that 'undergraduate students sought an opportunity to experience higher education while professionals undertook post-graduate study for career advancement (Ho, Kember, Hong 2012:324)'. Ho et al. examined students' motivations for enrolling in part-time post-graduate taught programmes in Hong Kong. The authors undertook a small scale study involving twenty-one students across six institutions using semi-structured interviews, with the use of software (NVivo) and constant comparative methods for analysis. A conceptual model was devised to capture 'a complex pattern of interacting motivations (Ho et al. 2012:332)'. It was argued that extrinsic factors such as 'obtaining higher qualifications,' 'desire to advance within their current career or enhance job opportunities in the future' were identified as key to enrolment, with intrinsic factors, such as interest in the subject, also featuring in decision making (Ho et al. 2012:327). These findings chimed with Yorke and Longdens' earlier and larger survey (2008) of undergraduate and post-graduate students, which established that students chose part-time as it offered flexibility whereby students could manage other commitments such as work and or family, equally, at that time students identified part-time as affordable. Yorke and Longden found that many students had chosen to study part-time to improve their options about employability. Though personal satisfaction also featured, it was most marked in those studying at Bachelors' level (Yorke and Longden 2008:12).

Darmody and Fleming (2009) identify motivation as important, though their study was not focused on this area in particular. The authors acknowledged that 'many learners are motivated to participate for personal reasons and motivations' (Darmody and Fleming 2009:70). Nevertheless, the authors reverted to the literature and identified issues of; flexibility, combining study with other responsibilities, acquisition of skills, enhancing career options as factors in making choices. Whilst they acknowledged that motivational factors and benefits from the part-time study were important in shaping provision and policymaking, there was limited material to draw on from the survey. The Eurostudent survey data could not elucidate the subject of motivational factors and part-time students' choices within HE in an Irish context.

Merrill investigated adult's experience of learning using a life history approach and noted that returning to learning 'was the result of a period of reflection upon their past and present lives (Merrill 2001:8)'. Some years later a small scale study involving eighteen students at Birbeck in the UK was carried out by Swain and Hammond, which presented an insight into students' motivations. The authors argued for authentic voices to be heard, when they stated, 'that research needs to include students own accounts so that policy may be better informed by the reality of peoples lives'(Swain, Hammond, 2011:592). Building on an earlier quantitative study the authors purposively selected eighteen students who participated in interviews. The authors found that motivations for study were 'inextricably linked to the student's identities,' in terms of where they were in their lives and where they wished to be (Swain & Hammond 2011:599). Furthermore, the evidence supported claims made elsewhere in the literature that motivations were influenced by context and social lives. Swain and Hammond employed a methodology adopted in several studies, namely to examine student's decision making processes using an intrinsic and extrinsic model (Ho, Kember, Hong 2012; Swain & Hammond, 2011). Intrinsic motivations were those prompted by a desire for personal development and pursuing learning for its own sake, while extrinsic motivations tend to be instrumentally driven, where the purpose was to enhance employment opportunities. Using the concept of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as an analytical device, the authors categorised students' motivations and found them to be 'complex and multiple' (Swain, et al. 2007:21). In establishing the benefits of studying part-time, the authors classified these into forms of capital, finding that 'the leading two assets were personal and economic (Swain Hammond 2011:609)'. The researchers concluded that there were 'major benefits of studying when a person is mature' and that they were greater than had these individuals decided to study when younger (Swain et al. 2007:7). This research was based on a small scale study. Furthermore; participants were drawing on past experiences having completed their programme in 2003 and were interviewed sometime later in 2005-06. Nevertheless, the authors argued in favour of the benefits accruing from adult learning from an economic as well as a social perspective.

Arguably the benefits of participation for older adults in HE can be significant. A study was undertaken in Australia (Imlach et al. 2017) into predictors of academic performance amongst older adults (n=329) studying part-time in HE found that 'ageing does not impede academic achievement' (Imlach et al. 2017:1). Further, a major finding was that prior engagement with 'cognitively stimulating leisure activities' was a stronger predictor of success in higher education in later life than an individuals' history of engagement in education (op.cit:13). .

4.10 Retention and Persistence

Decision making and motivation were areas of inquiry when considering why mature students choose courses and return to study. Linked to this subject was the issue of retention and persistence, particularly when it was reported that large numbers of students drop out of distance, open and part-time learning courses (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011 2012, Kember,2001, 2005, Castles, 2004). Most recently, Woodfield (2014:8) reported that part-time undergraduate students in the UK were more likely to withdraw than full-time equivalents. Why part-time students were susceptible to non-completion was a matter of debate whether it had more to do with institutional or external factors that remain central to the discussion. Equally, the issue of what is measured remains contentious, whether it was a unit of learning such as a module or a sub-award or whether it was non-completion of a degree programme (Ranhle 2011) has a bearing on the data reported. Factors identified as impacting retention included; external pressures such as work, family, finances, which could be greater for part-time students (Yorke 2004). For older students integrating within the social context of HE was less of a priority than with younger cohorts, and therefore, Tinto's integrationist model appeared inadequate in this instance. This is not to say that part-time students do not relate to their class group, teachers, or department (see chapter 9); however, as discussed in the next section, identity for older part-time students within HE was more complex.

Woodfields' (2014) report on retention and attainment indicated that across multiple disciplines, part-time students in many instances had lower levels of attainment than their full-time equivalent. Though this extensive review of undergraduate data examined many factors and variables, there was little insight into institutional inputs, or whether full and part-time students were treated similarly within HEIs or if they had access to equivalent supports, and resources, instead the focus was on educational outputs.

Castles' study of OU students in NI examined factors characterising persistence amongst adult students (Castles 2004). Based on an analysis of relevant literature, factors were identified, and a model was devised for testing. It was found that fundamental to persistence amongst distance education students was the support they received or accessed to continue in their study and successfully complete it. Furthermore, students who were identified as self-confident were more likely to cope better with the demands of HE.

Retention and withdrawal from HE have been the focus of much attention (Ranhle 2011, Yorke 1999, Tinto 1993) not only because of the cost to the public purse but to establish what factors contributed to non-completion and how to reduce and address the problem. Factors contributing to withdrawal were different for full-time and part-time students; also, where students were mature, different challenges existed. When Yorke (1999) examined non-completion amongst undergraduates both full and part-time in the UK, it was found that generally full-time students withdrew primarily due to dissatisfaction with the educational experience, and for financial reasons. The issue of dissatisfaction with educational experience also featured part-time as this factor was inclusive of; the lack of support from staff, other students, quality of teaching, and to a lesser extent, wrong choice of programme, lack of flexibility, or meeting the needs of mature students. Whilst financial problems were a factor for full and part-time students, the authors concluded for the latter group, withdrawal was typically the result of external pressure, such as employment and other responsibilities (Yorke, 1999).

Frequently research indicated that part-time students juggled roles, commitments, and learning (Teeuwesen et al. 2014, Ranhle, 2011, Keane 2009). The issue of juggling roles, responsibilities, coping and managing workload was particularly important for part-time adult learners within HE (Frith, Wilson, 2014, Yorke&Longden 2008). A small number of studies were concerned with these issues in terms of; identifying what the workload (Darmody and Fleming 2009) was, how to manage it and how students cope with multiple responsibilities whilst studying part-time. Kember et al. conducted an analysis of data collected from an on-line forum of adult education students and identified 'sacrifice, support and the negotiation of arrangements' as critical where part-time students were concerned (Kember et al. 2005:231). Further, these mechanisms operated in 'four domains, namely work, family, social lives and the self' (Kember et al. 2005:230). This was a small scale study involving fourteen adult students. Students who adopted coping mechanisms as outlined above, were more likely to succeed, though it was noted that student's past educational experience and the coherence of the class were also factors contributing to persistence.

In Ireland, the subject of retention amongst part-time students has not been examined. In their illuminating and detailed research into progression and retention within Irish higher education, McCoy and Byrne (HEA 2009) addressed full-time students but excluded part-time students from the analysis. Whilst Fleming and Finnegan examined retention amongst non-traditional cohorts in Irish HE, this empirical study involving over one hundred and twenty-five interviews focused on full-time students. (Ranhle 2011:1)

4.11 Identity and belonging

Merrill noted that 'adults experiences of learning at University is a relatively under-researched area' and 'for part-time students, the experiences are different (Merrill, 2001:6)'. Askam explored the impact of context and identity formation amongst a group of twenty-two adult, non-traditional learners (2008). Recognising that the environment of higher education could appear confusing, that is; a mixture of new, alien, limiting and hostile, this longitudinal study explored how adults with an existing professional

identity attempted to construct a student identity when entering higher education for the first time. Though this was a small scale study the author used a range of data sources such as diaries and interviews to capture student experiences over a period of time (Askham 2008:85). In particular, Askam's research was of interest as it offered insights into the types of supports required for part-time learners as they negotiated the culture of academia.

When making the transition into higher education the formation of an identity as a student was important as it encouraged engagement and enhanced learning. In contrast with full-time cohorts, the formation of a student identity was less straightforward for part-time older students. Before students could be encouraged to engage in learning, they must first form an identity as a student, which can be particularly challenging for part-time learners and those participating in online courses. Full-time students can immerse themselves within the campus, getting involved in a range of social and academic activities and acquire an identity sooner; for part-time students, the acquisition of an identity as a student cannot be assumed. Martin et al. noted that 'identity is fluid'(Martin 2012:8). Picking up on this notion of identity as changing, Swain and Hammond argued that 'identities are socially constructed' though Askham considered identities as 'fragmented and contradictory' (Askham 2008:89). In their examination of doctoral students, Teeuwsen et al. (Teeuwsen et al., 2014:680) maintained that part-time students were often 'distanced from the University' and have 'constantly shifting identities.' Nevertheless, it was agreed that constructing an identity as a student was critical for learning. It was also likely, where mature and part-time students returned to higher education, they can have more than one identity and that this can cause confusion and uncertainty for the learner.

As part-time students consist of a range of age groups, issues of transitioning into higher education can be challenging, particularly where the dominant model of mass higher education catered to full-time school leavers. The context in which adult part-time students find themselves may appear alien. Arguably where mass higher education caters to a

homogenised cohort of school leavers, then the challenge in responding to diverse cohorts can be particularly acute. The challenges for part-time students entering HE include; adapting to institutional culture, overcoming fears on returning to learning, understanding the language of academic disciplines, accessing appropriate supports and facilities, having opportunities to interact with full-time students and staff. 'Adults entering university have to learn and adapt to a new social situation' (Merrill, 2001:6).

Students' experiences of learning were shaped and influenced by the context and environment in which they were situated. Yorke and Longden (2008:34) stated that 'HE is at heart a social process.' Kember examined ways to cultivate a sense of belonging amongst part-time students at the University in Hong Kong. Fostering a sense of relationship or belonging within HE can be challenging for part-time students to achieve. Drawing on Tinto (1993), Kember argued that 'students persist in their studies if they were academically and socially integrated' (Kember, Lee, Li, 2001:327). Cultivating a sense of belonging was important in achieving a better learning experience and outcomes for students. The author proposed several ways of fostering a sense of belonging, including a role for teaching staff in developing good relations with students, using interactive teaching methods, and encouraging cohesion within class groups (Kember et al. 2001).

The subject of belonging is linked to theories of integration and retention. Research in this area was often associated with Tinto's earlier work, examining student attrition, which continues to be a significant problem for higher education. Tinto's model was associated with full time HE in the US, where a different funding model applies. The model identified academic and social integration as key factors in persistence and ensuring completion. Though influential, Yorke was critical of the Tinto model, identifying limitations in the approach which the author argued was formulated 'at too general a level,' making it less useful (Yorke 1999:120). However, Kember was less inclined to agree with Yorke, arguing that such studies were limited and tended to overlook 'why students who face similar external pressures

such as employment demands, do succeed in completing their programme (Kember 2005:231)'. Nonetheless, the Tinto model has proven influential and was adopted to examine issues of retention amongst non-traditional students. For instance, Field and Klein examined the importance of social networks as one of several factors in persistence and retention for WP students, though the formation of student identity and cultivating belonging proved significant also.

4.12 Pedagogies and Part-time higher education

In addition to examining the impact of external factors on students learning, researchers focused on students' conceptions of learning and how this had informed the learning experience within HE. Evidence indicated that part-time students learning experience were strongly shaped by their conception of learning. Merrill found that students at Warwick University arrived 'with pre-conceived ideas about teaching approaches, ' assuming that lecturers would employ 'didactic and formal' methods. (Merrill 2001:8)

In an attempt to establish part-time students' perception of good teaching, Kember and his colleagues conducted interviews with 53 students at different universities in Hong Kong (Kember et al. 2004). The student body was varied and included novice and experienced students and this, in turn, influenced the outcomes of the study. Generally, it was found that novice students expressed an interest in more didactic teaching and reproductive learning while experienced students sought a more facilitative approach that enhanced their understanding and could be transformative. Students' concepts of learning were linked to approaches to learning.

More recently, Anderson et al. (Anderson, Johnston, McDonald 2012) examined adult part-time student's patterns of learning. This study was empirically based using semi-structured interviews where the researchers did not mention any of the background terminology or theory relevant to the research within interviews 'to minimise the risk of our distorting the participants' responses' (Anderson et al. 2012:2). Whilst the eighteen students participating in this study were enrolled in a university access

course; nonetheless, the findings resonated with Kembers earlier research. The access students were adults returning to education, accordingly their preference for; 'didactic lecture-based presentations over other forms of learning experience' was noted (Anderson et al. 2012:13). In recent years there has been a shift to more student-centred and interactive approaches to teaching and learning, encouraging deep learning, and indeed it was suggested in general 'adult learners tend more towards deeper learning than surface learning (Laher, 2007:387)'. Based on findings emerging from this small scale study Anderson argued that at the outset of HE, beginning students 'may simply not be ready to tackle tasks that presuppose a sophisticated epistemology or that require a degree of self-regulation they do not yet possess'(Anderson et al., 2012: 4). The authors' research built on earlier work and suggested that as students advance through their undergraduate studies, then the move 'toward learner-directed self-regulated methods' may be appropriate (Anderson 2012:3). Anderson's research focused on how adult students learn and queried the common view that student-centred learning was the best approach for adults returning to HE, particularly in the early stages of undergraduate degree programmes.

Merrills' earlier research used life history methods to explore student's experiences of learning, as well as lecturer's experiences of teaching PTF students; also the impact of institutional values and norms on students was examined. This small scale study included part-time full-time and flexible students with thirty students taking part in interviews. Findings indicated that over time student's attitude and approach to learning altered, in particular, they learned 'to change their attitude towards learning' if they were to succeed in their assignments (Merrill 2001:12). Though it was found that student's identities and attitudes had changed, 'teaching approaches and institutional structures remain geared towards younger students (Merrill, 2001:17)'.

Table 6 Shows a summary of the dataset reviewed inclusive of materials that were part-time specific as well as embedded within related areas of; widening access, flexible learning, expansion, and reform of HE and FET. Irish research presented few part-time specific studies.

Table 6. Research Literature summary

| Category | Ireland | UK | EU | Wider |
|-------------------|---------|----|----|-------|
| Journal Articles* | 6 | 28 | | 11 |
| Textbooks | 2 | 3 | | |
| Reports | 3 | 4 | 1 | |
| Unpublished | 2 | | | |
| Total | 13 | 35 | 1 | 11 |

*Articles were catalogued based on authors affiliation to HEI and where Journals originated

4.13 Conclusion

An examination of part-time higher education revealed that this subject had been under-researched; also, it was ill-defined and poorly conceptualised by researchers and policymakers. The field of widening participation has a tradition of research and continues to draw scholarly interest; however, researchers have been less active when it comes to part-time, flexible higher education. In Ireland, HE was not extensively researched, PTF was not treated as a stand-alone topic; it lacked status within policy, also the HEA failure to collate data contributed to researchers overlooking the subject. The lack of empirical research into part-time student's experiences of learning gave rise to concerns that policymakers had an inadequate understanding of the implications and challenges associated with increased diversity and an expanded part-time, flexible HE in an Irish context.

Evidence of a lack of understanding was to emerge in the context of the economic downturn. The national strategy report (2011) noted that part-time and flexible learning was facilitated by Bologna and the structural changes that had followed this EU initiative. However, equating modularised programmes with increased flexibility and participation, implying that by making programmes modular, the learning experience, regardless of the subject domain, was somehow equal and that progression routes were straightforward. This perspective needed to be challenged and

investigated further. Evidence indicated that structural inflexibility and inequity persisted. Part-time programmes catered to a diverse profile, they were scheduled in the evening, at weekends, furthermore time constraints imposed limitations which could impact on the teaching and learning experience.

HE policy was orientated toward increased participation of part-time, flexible students encouraging HEIs to shift toward flexible provision. Yet little was known about; the supply and range of part-time, flexible courses, to what extent –if at all- part-time and full-time programmes differed, the pedagogical implications of flexible programmes, part-time students access to supports and facilities or developments in customised learning for particular cohorts of part-time, flexible students. Surprisingly terms such as traditional and non-traditional continued to be used even where the student profile was demonstrably heterogeneous. Multiple categories and classifications pertain within the student cohort which the terms traditional and non-traditional were masking. Aside from full-time part-time, students may be engaged in; open, distant, flexible, award and non-award bearing programme options, equally, students may also fit within a range of social, economic and cultural groups.

Notwithstanding the increased diversity of HE, full and part-time were dichotomous due to structural inequities underpinning provision, particularly at the undergraduate level. I set out to explore and examine such themes through fieldwork involving key stakeholders to add to the discourse the experiences of students and lecturers as to the benefits and challenges of part-time, flexible learning and participation within HE.

5 Chapter Five: Examining perspectives on Tinto's theory of retention

5.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to problematize two interrelated concepts; retention and persistence and to discuss multiple perspectives that underpinned research in this domain. In addition, there is an exploration of integration and related concepts of engagement and belonging in terms of part-time students' persistence within HE. Tinto's interactionist model was used as a sensitizing concept together with ideas of belonging and engagement. These concepts acted as a point of reference to guide and frame the research also to support the analysis of the data (Blaikie 2010). Such concepts were relevant to my case study as it emerged retention of part-time students was not recorded by the HEA, DES, even though policymakers promoted the expansion of this mode of provision.

The literature on retention has been described as 'voluminous,' furthermore, a variety of terms and theories have evolved to analyse this complex problem (Tinto 2006). Despite this, Tinto's theory of academic and social integration remains influential and continues to inform research, policy, and practice on retention. Furthermore, the theories of integration, tend to rely on interactionalist and assimilationist ideas which apply favourably to homogenous cohorts of students, particularly those students who transition directly from second level to full-time higher education. Integration, as applied to persistence amongst diverse or minority groups such as part-time students, presented challenges.

The subject of persistence and part-time has not been examined in any detail thus far in an Irish context. Recent research which examined retention and progression within Irish HE does not employ interactionist theories (Mooney et al., 2010). The arrival of ISSE provided a mechanism for monitoring related concepts of student engagement in Irish HE. Through annual surveys, students were encouraged to respond to a myriad of

questions including their 'sense of belonging' within HEIs. Student engagement described as 'a far reaching construct' has been linked to retention theory, with belonging and active teaching presented as strategies to enhance student integration and aid completion (Zepke and Leach 2010).

Theories of retention and persistence are not straightforward, and evidence indicated that the process of 'departure' was complex and took place over time (Tinto 1993, Nora 1990). As HE continued to expand and central funding reduced, it was timely to examine persistence amongst part-time students in Irish HE. Though part-time forms part of the national strategy for widening participation and includes many older students, it has not featured in research on retention (Fleming & Finnegan 2011). Arguably existing theories of; retention, integration, and models of engagement, may not adequately capture persistence amongst diverse part-time students in Irish Higher Education. Concepts such as inclusion, which are examined in this chapter, could provide an alternative to understanding part-time, flexible persistence.

The chapter consists of three sections; firstly, a review of terminology and theories of retention, secondly, a critical exploration of integration and related ideas such as belonging, engagement, thirdly an examination of retention research in Irish HE, and a discussion on inclusion as a way to frame persistence of part-time students.

5.2 Terminology: the language of retention, persistence, and progression

Various terms can be found in the literature associated with retention and persistence; these include progression, completion, drop-out, stop-out, voluntary departure, non-voluntary departure, withdrawal, non-completion, and attrition. Such terms carry positive and negative meanings that required unpacking and examination before application (Laing & Robinson 2003). Retention, completion, and progression were equated with success both from a student and institutional perspective, the outcome was positive. Drop out, non-completion inevitably signalled the opposite; the student

does not achieve; the institution loses students and revenue. Ensuring completion was of benefit not just to the individual, and society, arguably it demonstrated that public funding was 'utilised with maximum efficiency (HEA 2010:10)'. Accountability remains a driver in the debate on retention (Thomas 2012). Similarly, maintaining student enrolments and sustaining provision across HE remains relevant to the discussion. However, framing departure as negative has been challenged, leaving early can have positive outcomes for students who voluntarily leave college (Tinto 1993, Laing and Robinson 2003, Mooney et al. 2010). Besides, voluntary departure may not be permanent as a student can return to education at a later stage.

Capturing progression and completion of part-time students presents challenges as terminology, definitions, and practices across HE vary (Mooney et al., 2010; Dwyer 2012). Progression, retention, and completion were the preferred terms employed in an Irish context and refer to students who continued with studies beyond year one at the undergraduate level and completed an award (Morgan, Flanagan, Kelleghan, 2001, HEA 2010). The debate around terminology highlighted what little was known about part-time students' persistence within Irish HE. Research into progression and retention in an Irish context dates to the 1990's, when researchers and policymakers turned their attention to this subject, which renewed interest in strategies to highlight and address concerns about retaining students in HE (Dwyer 2012, Mooney et al 2010, Eivers et al 2002, Morgan et al 2001). However, retention rates amongst full-time students have been the primary focus of interest (Fleming & Finnegan 2011). The HEA has not tracked the progression of part-time students. Lack of data in this domain was not unique to Ireland, Jones observed of retention within UK HE that there was 'no consensus about the meaning of retention and success for part-time students and hence little clarity about data collection requirements (Jones 2008:2)'. Consequently, levels of progression or completion amongst part-timers were unknown, and gathering data to establish levels of persistence would require investigation locally within individual HEIs, combined with an examination of annual returns to the HEA. It was argued that there was greater complexity attached to tracking completion amongst part-time students as they may; stop out, or transfer (Jones 2008). It could be

argued that establishing when exactly a part-time flexible student completed a programme and attains an award presented a barrier to capturing data. Nevertheless, since modularised, part-time, flexible programmes have become established across Irish HEIs, it appears reasonable to assume that alternative mechanisms could have been investigated to capture the progression of part-time flexible students.

Further, there were conflicting views about 'what constitutes student persistence' as to whether persistence should be defined as; continuous enrolment in the same institution or across the system, or successful completion of a degree, fulfilling a goal having entered college (Tinto 2006). Tinto describes 'persistence' as 'enrollment of individuals over time that may or may not be continuous and may or may not result in degree completion (Tinto, Pusser, 2006:1)'. Pinning down disputed terminology, he stated that 'success' was equated with 'the completion of a college degree (ibid)'. Accordingly, completion was 'critical to a person's future occupational success' (op cit.2006:2). Success has been wrapped up rather neatly as; progression, completion, and employability (Zepke and Leach 2010). Combining progression with employment assumes all students who 'succeed' will secure employment of sorts whether this is their intention or not. Thomas defined success as more than completion; it 'meant helping students to become more engaged and effective learners (Thomas 2012:10)'. Over the years, Tinto's extrapolation of theories on attrition expanded toward 'institutional persistence,' or actions institutions should take to encourage student persistence.

Retention and persistence do not mean the same thing. There were differences that were important to identify for research purposes; notably, persistence referred to students 'persistence' across higher education systems, whilst retention tended to focus on student's completion within their original institution (St. John et al., 2013:114, Jones 2008). Evidently there was debate as to whether persistence and retention could usefully describe a process which takes place over time or whether the student rather than the institution or system should be at the centre of the debate

on attrition, withdrawal, and non-completion (Rendon 2011, Tinto & Pusser, 2006, Jones 2008, Tinto 1993).

Models of retention and persistence recognised completion but do not reward or count participation. Despite widening participation strategies and lifelong learning policies, Ireland has been 'ranked below the EU average in terms of its share of adults engaging in lifelong learning activities (EGFSN/Solas, 2016:1)'. Fleming noted that in parts of Scandinavia, establishing drop out was of limited interest, as the HE system encouraged students to 'drop in' (Fleming 2010:2). In Ireland, there were higher levels of part-time participation at sub-degree levels, as shorter qualifications encouraged participation amongst adult cohorts and tended to be more vocationally orientated (HEA 2010). However, there was a decline in the number of qualifications offered by HEIs at levels 6, 7, which was linked to changes in funding. Equally part-time students enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes could take longer to complete a programme. Also, part-timers were predominantly an older population, with more females than males participating in programmes (Darmody & Fleming 2009; Kember, 2001; Tinto 1993).

In Ireland, methods of capturing ~~student~~ retention focused on full-time students enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes. Progression and success were measured in terms of degree or sub-degree completion within the same HEI; however, student persistence defined as continuous enrolment has not been tracked. SRS employed across HEA funded HEIs tracked full-time students, and the system does not appear to cater for increased flexibility in terms of enrolment or mode of study. As a result, a gap emerged in relation to progression and retention data for part-time students. However, it was unclear why part-time had not been captured, possibly it was due to limitations of the student record system or because success and completion were ill-defined and undervalued or simply it had not been a priority for policymakers (see chapter 7). Public policy encouraged increased flexibility and growth of part-time higher education; however, the exclusion of part-time students from retention data suggested that in terms of policy implementation, there was a disconnect.

5.3 Retention and Persistence: Tinto's theory

The issue of persistence and degree completion has attracted the interest of researchers for several decades (Cabrera et al. 1993, Pascarella and Terezini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1975). Students dropping out of college early has been the subject of research primarily to establish why this happens, what factors contribute to this, how to alleviate the situation and improve completion. In the 1970s, Tinto devised a model for analysing attrition, which has been acclaimed, modified, and critically examined over time. Tinto's theory of voluntary departure was described as 'foundational' and having 'near-paradigmatic status' (Braxton, Milem Sullivan 2000:569). Fundamentally Tinto's theory of departure was based on notions of institutional integration and levels of interaction, social, and academic that students have during their time at college. The model Tinto proposed was based on theories of suicide, separation, membership of communities, and rites of passage as put forward by Durkeim and Van Gennep, respectively. Durkeim's (1897) theory of suicide rested on notions of withdrawal from society, whereby individuals' who experienced anomie were unlikely to survive in the absence of strong social ties. The impact of industrialisation and the rise of individualism informed Durkeim's perspectives. Tinto's model also included a host of related factors which were also examined as variables impacting on departure such as; student profile, finance, intention, commitment to subject-programme, prior educational attainment, whether students reside on campus, also external commitments such as employment, family duties, and a number of other factors, all of which could contribute to voluntary departure.

For Tinto voluntary departure from HE had significant implications for the student, college, society and the economy. To establish causes contributing to retention, he devised a model that 'seeks to explain how interactions among different individuals within the academic and social systems of the institution and the communities which comprise them lead individuals of different characteristics to withdraw (Tinto 1993:113)'. A key feature of Tinto's model was its focus on interaction and integration as factors contributing to successful completion (Rendon 2011). Furthermore, Tinto's

model was institutionally focused he maintained that it was what happened inside of the college after students entered that contributed to departure (Tinto 1993:81). Accordingly, it was argued that students who successfully integrate within the college community, with their peers, within sub-cultures, who interact formally and informally with academic staff, were more committed to completing. The model was devised to fit homogeneous cohorts more so than accommodate diversity. The difficulty with assimilationist ideas was the notion that students were required to fit within pre-existing structures, which may or may not suit their needs or interests. Arguably the degree to which adult and part-time students intended to integrate either socially and academically required negotiation contingent to the context.

Whilst Tinto initially focused his research on full-time undergraduate students, over the years, the debate around attrition extended beyond the traditional, as part-time and minority students began to feature. By the time of the second edition of 'Leaving College,' Tinto had revised sections to take account of additional research which had focused on non-traditional students, particularly adult, part-time students, as well as minority and ethnic groups. Tinto acknowledged that part-time students were motivated by different concerns the author maintained that for adults, education had a utilitarian function for namely 'future employment' (Tinto 1993:77). Equally, it was argued that adults similar to minority groups 'can feel marginal to the mainstream of institutional life (op cit 76)'. Nonetheless, Tinto maintained that persistence for adults was 'still influenced by the availability of supportive faculty and student groups on campus' (op.cit 77).

In later editions (1993), Tinto placed the classroom and learning as a central feature that contributed to persistence. Accordingly, Tinto argued that institutions contributed to persistence by undertaking to commit to students at institutional and classroom level by introducing active learning methodologies and developing supportive social and educational communities. Students were likely to persist where academic, social and personal support was also provided institutions that fostered learning were more likely to retain their students (Tinto 1999).

5.4 Critical perspectives and alternatives to Tinto's Model

Tinto's model has been adapted, elaborated, tested, and revised over the years. However, questions have been raised about the 'validity' of Tinto's model and its applicability to non-traditional and diverse cohorts of students (Rovai 2003, Sandler 1998). Laing and Robinson (2003) highlighted the limitations of the integrationist approach, which was considered overly concerned with 'student conformity and adaptation to the institution' further they queried whether this model could apply to UK contexts (Laing & Robinson 2003:176). This section considers critical responses to Tinto's theory of interaction and considers alternative models.

5.5 Model of Attrition

Bean and Metzner's (1985) model of attrition focused attention on adult students as the authors maintained it was poorly understood why these students in particular drop out of college. It was acknowledged that in the US, increasingly larger numbers of adult students were participating in HE; equally, large numbers were not completing. Though there was 'spectacular growth in non-traditional students enrolments, the likelihood of non-traditional students finishing a degree program is much less than for traditional students' (Bean & Metzner 1985:487). Bean and Metzner wanted to examine what were the differences in attrition between traditional and non-traditional. Recognising that it would prove difficult to agree satisfactorily 'an acceptable formula' that distinguishes traditional from non-traditional students, the authors identified three characteristics in their definition: age, 25+, non-residence and being part-time. Either one or all of such featured within a definition of the non-traditional student. The author's argued that non-traditional students were more likely to be attending HE for academic reasons, including vocational, certification and other utilitarian purposes. As no theoretical model existed to examine non-traditional departure, then the authors proposed a conceptual model based on an extensive review of the literature and consideration of existing

models as devised for understanding departure for traditional students. The attrition model emphasised 'environmental variables' as having greater importance than 'academic variables' for non-traditional students (1985:491). According to the authors, when environmental and academic variables were good the student persisted; when the academic variables were good, but the environment was not, then the student would leave, where 'environmental support is good and academic support is poor' the student is expected to continue (opcit 492). The attrition model took account of a number of academic and non-academic variables including; social background, prior educational attainment, age, gender, whether the student was commuting, enrolment status, educational goals, finances, employment, other responsibilities, there were also a number of academic and environmental variables identified, which contributed to voluntary departure. However, most importantly, the researchers did not fasten much importance to 'social integration variables' within the college in contrast to Tinto (Bean & Metzner, 1985:493). Accordingly, for non-traditional adult students, this was 'assumed to be of comparatively little importance' and was omitted as a variable of the model (ibid). The authors maintained that social variables outside of college were more likely to impact on retention than college social integration variables. The researchers deduced that adults and by default part-timers were not best served by an integrationist model that focused on homogeneous cohorts within full-time degree programmes at residential colleges.

Increased diversity of the student population presented challenges for Tinto's model of persistence, which favoured homogenous cohorts of students. Rendon (2011, 1994) provided a critical analysis of Tinto's model, questioning the concepts underpinning it particularly where minority non-white students were concerned. Accordingly, it was argued that interactionist theory was informed by assimilation/acculturation perspectives, which were influential in the 1960s. The adequacy of such defining theoretical perspectives was questioned even though they had become embedded in the literature on retention. Rendon revisited particular concepts key to the interactionist model; namely student involvement and engagement, the importance of external community as a

negative factor leading to departure, and the notion that the individual bore responsibility for departure more so than the institution. For Rendon, alternative concepts such as dual socialisation were equally relevant as a source for understanding departure particularly for minorities. Summing up the situation it was argued that 'students will elect to stay or leave college not so much because of a theory but because college and university faculty and administrators have made transformative shifts in governance, curriculum development, in-and out of class teaching and learning, student programming and other institutional dimensions that affect students on a daily basis' (Rendon, 2011:245).

5.6 Integrated and Composite Models

Some researchers have tested Tinto's model (Pascarella & Terenzini 1993) others have identified limitations (Bean & Metzner, 1985, Carbera et al. 1993) whilst others still have proposed alternative theoretical lenses through which to examine retention (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011, Thomas 2002, Tierney 1999). To explain persistence alternative models have been devised or existing models adapted. Composite or integrated models that combine aspects from established models have been developed. Several examples were reviewed, which highlight the complexity associated with capturing persistence and these are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Cabrera et al. (1993) examined the overlap between Tinto's integrationist model and Bean and Metzner's model of attrition and considered how the underlying concepts informing the two models could be merged to provide an integrated model that explained persistence amongst traditional and non-traditional students. The authors noted Tinto's model emphasised educational goals and institutional commitment but failed to attend to external factors adequately. Bean & Metzner's psychological model was linked to organisational behaviour and behavioural intentions. Whilst there was a high degree of overlap between the two models, the attrition model emphasised intention and environmental factors as having a greater influence on persistence. A structural equation modelling approach was used to test the integrated model on a student population in urban college

in the US. The authors argued that the 'integrated model' yielded a 'more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between, individual, environmental and institution factors' associated with persistence (Cabrera et al. 1993: 135). Interestingly it was argued that Tinto had under emphasised the importance of environmental factors, and in the integrated model, these factors were found to have an important role to play in the socialisation and academic experiences of students. Combining variables to include encouragement from family and friends with social integration was also deemed important.

Accordingly, it was the 'complexity of the relationships amongst the variables' that was found to influence persistence (Cabrera et al., 1993: 136). Cabrera et al. argued for institutions to make a concentrated effort to bring together the 'different student support services' to address attrition rather than focusing on a single measure or intervention.

Similarly, Milem and Berger (1997) identified a link between theories of involvement and Tinto's interactionist model. The authors tested a modified conceptual model borrowing from Astin's theory of involvement to understand the Tinto interactionist model. Astin's (1999) theory of involvement rested on behavioural theory, his earlier study of persistence, 1975, concluded that involvement informed persistence of students. Astin defined involvement as not so much what individuals think rather 'what the individual does, how he or she behaves,' and was not to be confused with perception (Astin 1999:519). However, Milem and Berger aimed to unite the perceptual and behavioural components from the respective authors and test these at a private residential university. A longitudinal study using structural equations examined the persistence of first-year undergraduates. These findings indicated that social integration was more influential in predicting persistence; however, it was acknowledged the student profile was a factor here. Further, the authors argued that 'various forms of involvement do influence students' perceptions of institutional support and peer support' (Milem & Berger 1997:398). Also, earlier involvement assisted full-time students' transition and persistence.

Rovai (2003) examined persistence across distance education programs. The author identified that the majority of distance education programs catered to adult, non-traditional students, namely students that were twenty-four years of age, who are also working and had family commitments. Having examined multiple models including psychological (Bean and Metzner 1985), student-institution fit, ie Tinto, (1993), Rovai (2003) maintained that persistence was best explained by combining elements of both models. Arguably an alternative model was required to accommodate distance programs and on-line students if persistence was to be enhanced. Using an amalgamation of Tinto (1993), Bean and Metzner (1985), and research in on-line student skills (Cole 2000) and needs (Workman & Stenard, 1996), a composite persistence model was proposed. The composite model included three elements: (1) student characteristics and skills before entry (2) internal and (3) external factors following admission. Rovai's model provides additional insights into the needs of on-line distance students and how institutions could enhance persistence by attending to students' experience of learning through the development of pedagogical experiences that supported a range of learning styles, as well as access to supports to connect students with the college and program. Interestingly the model included social integration, such as students having access to services, interaction with peers, faculty, and staff and developing an identity associated with the school so that students would not view 'themselves as outsiders' (Rovai 2003:11).

Fike & Fike (2008) evaluated predictors of first time in college student retention in a community college where the profile of students demonstrated higher levels of diversity with larger numbers of minority, first-generation students as well as part-time and older students attending. This quantitative study examined data collected over four years. Importantly Fike & Fike findings indicated that students enrolled in developmental courses in mathematics and particularly reading were predictors of academic success and retention. Importantly the relationship between hours enrolled was a factor in student persistence.

Sandler (1998) devised a model which built on earlier integrated and integrationist models (Cabrera et al. 1993, Tinto 1993, Bean Metzner 1985). This 'new structural equation model' included two additional variables that were deemed particularly relevant to older non-traditional students. The new model was tested on a group of non-traditional older students attending a private HE college for two to four-year degree programs. The additional variables, 1) career decision making and self-efficacy (CDMSE), which was linked to self-confidence, and 2) financial difficulty was deemed particularly relevant for older students. The author found that through testing the additional variables, the model provided an 'interactionist perspective of social cognitive learning,' which arguably made it more 'inclusive and dynamic '(Sandler 1998:26).

Alternative theories associated with identity formation which feature within the discourse on student retention were consulted. Identity formation remains an influential concept and whilst it extends across the lifespan it is primarily a 'key developmental task of adolescence' (Klimstra et al. 2009:150). The theory of identity which is associated with Erikson, argues that young people undergo a period of transition during the mid and later adolescence stages. A period of exploration and experimentation concerning various roles and commitments can coincide with the transition to university or college. Notwithstanding the importance of educational context as a factor impacting on identity formation in later adolescence, older part-time students have established commitments and responsibilities. The profile of PTF students is different, key developmental transitions associated with a younger cohort do not apply to the same degree. Older part-time students have established an identity also their motivations and intentions differ from full-time younger cohorts entering HE. Nevertheless, the concept of identity and transformative experiences of adult students remains relevant to access and widening participation discourse, as highlighted by Fleming and Finnegan as part of their narrative enquiry amongst non-traditional students (Fleming & Finnegan 2011). Similarly ideas of 'fitting in' and belonging for full-time and part-time students within HE remains relevant however the degree to which it is important for the two cohorts differs.

Student persistence and retention remains a complex problem. Evidence indicated that the complexity associated with retention required a range of models to capture and predict persistence in particular where there was increased diversity. Tinto's interactionist model remains influential though additional research into non-traditional cohorts highlighted the importance of variables that were situational, cultural, and recognise the interplay between individual and environmental factors as influential. Different theories have been used to examine persistence, and quantitative methodologies have been employed extensively to test models across a large number of students; however, such options were not selected for this study. Notwithstanding the limitation of an interactionist model, it was used as a sensitizing concept to inform my research to explore social and academic integration of minority cohorts and the potential intersection with policy, teaching, and learning. My research was preliminary, exploratory and qualitatively based.

5.7 Integration

Although Tinto's model evolved, the concept of integration has remained central to theories of persistence. Tinto maintained that integration was a combination of 'involvement,' and 'contact' between the student with peers and faculty, such 'effort' impacted on persistence. Students' were assimilated into 'membership' of college sub-cultures and communities. Integration in the academic system was more important than in the social domain; nonetheless, it was the interaction between social and intellectual communities that provided for student integration. The more students were willing to commit and put effort into interaction the more likely they were to achieve their goal of degree completion. Therefore the less integrated the student was within the social and academic communities the increased likelihood of departure. While full integration in both social and academic life was not required, it was unclear whether there was a spectrum or continuum on which student integration could be measured. The quality or quantity of social integration was not examined in detail.

Berger and Braxton (1998) maintained that social integration was left unexplained and that Tinto's model was theoretically incomplete. Also, there had been 'no systematic inquiry into the different roles that student peers and faculty played in the process of social integration' (Berger & Braxton 1998:107). Using survey methods, the authors examined social integration with specific reference to how 'students experience the organisational attributes of an institution (Berger and Braxton 1998:105)'. The findings supported the argument for including organisational attributes as a source of social integration; also it was argued that they contributed to persistence. Social integration was more likely where students had increased input into organisation decision making, where there was a clear articulation of policies, rules, and expectations, and that these were implemented fairly. This study was undertaken amongst full-time students in a 'private, research university with a very homogeneous population'; as a result, the generalisation of the outcomes was limited, particularly where diversity was concerned (1998:114).

Despite the wealth of research into retention and persistence, the nature of social integration amongst part-time older students remains unclear little is known about; how it is characterised, whether it changes over-time, levels of integration, or how success might be determined in terms of part-time. In an Irish context, there is little research to provide insight into the day to day, semester to semester interactions that provide for integration and persistence particularly where part-time students were concerned. As retention research and theory evolved, the idea of belonging and concept of engagement has increased in prominence, such notions hinged on how institutions actively responded to and engaged with students transitioning into HE. As part of the sensitizing approach, these ideas are examined in detail below.

5.8 Belonging

Themes of belonging, involvement, and engagement recur within the literature on retention (Thomas:2012, Rendon:2011, Jones, 2008, Kember et al.: 2001, Tinto, 1993). Kember investigated part-time students' sense

of belonging at HK University, and the author argued that belonging was 'closely equated to the concept of integration,' which was used in the study of attrition within HE (Kember et al. 2001:327). As the number of part-time students in HE increased, the study set out to explore whether a sense of belonging was present as this would indicate whether 'part-time students were accorded appropriate status by their institution (Kember et al., 2001:327)'. Drawing on Tinto, and subsequent models of persistence and integration, Kember et al., undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with 53 students enrolled in postgraduate education programmes. Students were interviewed about how they related to classmates, teaching staff, department, and university. Belonging was characterised as a spectrum starting from 'a strong sense' moving to 'no sense of belonging' (Kember et al. 2001:328). This study also examined what the focus of the belonging amongst students was.

Kember et al. (2001) findings indicated that while many students had developed a sense of belonging, there were 'significant numbers' who had not developed any such sense. Accordingly, students' sense of belonging was associated firstly with the class group, teaching staff and department and less so to the institution. Such findings resonate with later research undertaken by Thomas, where it was asserted 'the academic department or programme to which a student belongs has a huge influence on the attitudes and expectations of its students and crucially on their overall sense of belonging' (Thomas, 2012:31). Kember et al. found that a sense of belonging was more likely to develop towards smaller units where there was person to person contact. Where a sense of belonging existed, students were more likely to complete their studies and find the learning experience more enjoyable. In conclusion, Kember maintained there was a need to cultivate a sense of belonging through proactive measures including active teaching and learning methods-

Thomas (2012) examined belonging amongst full-time students at a time of change in HE. 'What works' was a funded research initiative involving seven colleges in a project investigating retention. This UK based research project sought to establish and employ appropriate practices to foster

belonging to improve retention rates. Belonging in educational environments was primarily associated with students' academic engagement though not exclusively so, as social engagement also contributed to belonging through student's participation with services as well as informal networks and activities. Findings from the research which focused on FT students across seven different sized HEIs presented a 'compelling case' that in higher education belonging is critical to student retention (Thomas 2012:10)'. The majority of the case studies were based on surveying and interviewing, first and or second-year undergraduate students; a single case study included part-time and mature students though the numbers involved were comparatively small.

The idea of 'belonging' was informed by 'psychological and sociological traditions,' furthermore, it drew on Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital. Tinto's theory of social and academic integration and the later idea of belonging and engagement share common elements. Though Thomas maintained that belonging was complementary to Tinto's model of integration nevertheless integration and belonging shared similar features. However, unlike Tinto's theory of integration, belonging does not require students to assimilate, though it involved interaction; the term was not employed to describe belonging. For Thomas, belonging was aligned to 'the concepts of social and academic engagement' (Thomas 2012:12). Belonging and engagement were inter-linked and were the favoured terms used to describe and explain retention. Belonging was characterised as connectedness and was the result of engagement. Further analysis established characteristics for belonging as; regular contact with staff, interpersonal relationships, students' assessing the fit between their background, and the way the institution functions. Accordingly, students who felt connected and were involved academically were likely to persist.

5.9 Engagement

Student engagement has become a 'buzzword in higher education,' it is recognised as having a 'critical role in achievement and learning (Kahu, 2013:758)'. Engagement research is extensive particularly as the multi-

layered construct has become established as having a key role in measuring student outcomes as part of national student surveys such as; NSSE, AUSSE, and ISSE. Zepke and Leach (2010) reviewed research on engagement and identified four perspectives: student motivation and agency, transactions between teacher and students, institutional support and students and institutions working toward active citizenship. Their research favoured the institutional dimension with an emphasis on what institutions could do to influence engagement. Researchers have focused on how to improve engagement through institutional actions, or attend to what educators can do to enhance engagement and student agency and still, others critique the model or search out the student voice as it relates to engagement (Kahu, 2013, Wimpenny, Savin-Badin 2013, Zepke & Leach 2010). Kahu (2013) queried whether the engagement was straightforward and maintained that it had been ill-defined and inadequately conceptualised. Kahu noted that there was 'a lack of distinction between the state of engagement,' the variables that influence it, and the consequences of engagement (Kahu 2013:758). An alternative framework was proposed to capture the complexity associated with engagement giving more weight to the interlinked aspect of engagement.

Evidence indicated that engagement has multiple strands; furthermore, it was neither neutral nor static; rather it is 'disputed topic' with multiple meanings (Ramsden & Callendar 2014). Arguably engagement was a 'shared responsibility' involving students, teachers, institutions, and government (Kahu 2013, Wimpenny & Savin Badin 2013).

Thomas (2012) maintained that academic and social engagement should be encouraged through a range of strategies to ensure student success and progression. Though the author was cautious about students having to conform to a uniform approach of engagement, nevertheless institutions should devise a range of formal and informal opportunities to encourage student engagement. Thomas believed there were levels, degrees, and sites of engagement. By introducing a range of measures to support engagement, the intention was to counter reluctance to engage or address an 'instrumental' approach adopted by part-time mature students, which

were interpreted as devaluing the social aspects of the HE experience. Arguably it should be expected that part-time mature students approach social and academic engagement differently to school leavers entering for the first time. Too often, models of engagement or retention focused on the majority population of students, leaving part-time students to fit in with mainstream full-time.

Engagement forms a central plank of several national student surveys. Such surveys use quantitative methods and focus on the quality of learning where engagement has been defined as 'students engaging in activities within HE linked to quality learning outcomes' (Trowler 2010:7). Achieving the desired outcomes aids retention and increases student success; such goals feature prominently in HEI strategies and government policy. Kahu (2013) argued that NSSE and related models tended to favour a behaviourist approach that focused on what was assumed to be 'effective teaching' and tended to overlook other aspects of engagement.

ISSE represented a new initiative for Irish HE. The national survey intended to build momentum across the sector to enhance understanding of student engagement within the learning environment. ISSE has significant potential to influence policy and impact on practice across HE. ISSE is an 'instrument' to implement the national strategy for HE 2030, using on-line survey methods to establish insights on students' experiences of college life and 'inform national policy (ISSE 2015:10)'. The survey included both full time and part-time students, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate, degree and sub-degree programmes'. The survey was distributed across HEIs. Therefore the model should fit all scales and sizes, without regard as to how institutions provide or indeed offer services, or how students accessed these locally. The one survey applied across all disciplines and should translate across multiple domains. The limitations imposed by a survey method have been questioned, particularly the capacity to provide a voice for students or adequately capture diversity across disciplines or student populations (Fleming et al. 2017, Kahu 2013).

ISSE follows similar surveys such as NSSE. Student engagement is measured through a range of engagement and outcomes indices including; academic challenge, active learning, student-staff interactions, higher-order thinking, work-integrated learning, career readiness, and supportive learning environment. The institution remains the focus of attention in terms of what it can or should do to 'engage' students. The survey was introduced as a pilot in 2013 and repeated annually thereafter. In 2015 the response rate amongst part-time remote students was 13.9%, compared to 23.8% for full-time. Responses showed that full-time students had greater interactions with teachers than part-time; furthermore, that mature and part-time students tended to collaborate less with their peers than younger cohorts (ISSE 2015:56). Generally, comparing full and part-time outcomes indicated that the work integrated learning score for part-time was far greater than full-time, and that full-time students scored higher for general outcomes development and career readiness than part-time. Part-time students indicated a higher level of overall satisfaction. Students were questioned about the quality of relationships within the institution and asked whether they felt relationships were supportive and if they had a sense of 'belonging (2015:21)'. The meaning of belonging was not explained, and it was unclear how students understood the term or how they related it to their experience locally. The data generated was not cross-referenced to consider, prior educational attainment, financial concerns, workload, or employment. The report though useful does not offer additional insight into the 'state of engagement'; we learn nothing about what it is 'to be engaged' or how the experience may differ depending on the situation.

ISSE sets out to explain student engagement within learning contexts that were ill-defined but arguably differed substantially in scale and culture. Findings were based on large populations of students making it difficult to establish a student voice that was authentic to the experience of engagement within a particular context. There are limitations in the use of an online survey as a tool that can capture the complex, situational, and dynamic nature of engagement. Students were invited to have their say, to translate their experience of engagement into relevant data thereby

contributing to the change and development of HE. Yet levels of advocacy or empowerment of students arising from participation in ISSE over time are unclear.

The ISSE survey found that mature and part-time flexible students tended to collaborate less with other students but were 'more likely to engage in class with staff '(ISSE 2015:88). This outcome is not unexpected given the profile of the cohort; nevertheless, it was suggested that 'institutions' should find ways of devising collaborative learning to fit the needs of time strapped part-time students. Evidence indicated that collaboration enhanced engagement; however, to find collaboration enriching, and academically challenging, a different approach would be required where mature students are concerned.

5.10 Active learning, Teaching, and Retention

As researchers revised Tintos' theory over the years, other facets that encourage persistence have been examined; in particular, Braxton et al. (2000) considered the importance of active learning methodologies as contributing to social integration. Using a longitudinal method, the authors found that active learning influenced social integration and contributed to persistence. Braxton et al. argued that student learning and teaching methods should inform theories of departure, as 'faculty classroom behaviours play a role in the student departure process (Braxton 2000:581)'. In an Irish context, Dwyer (2012 unpublished) examined the use of active teaching methods as a factor influencing persistence amongst first-year students in an IoT setting. In this instance, organisational factors were significant, as a student's ability to fit in and adapt proved to be a key contributor to departure, followed by limited active teaching and dissatisfaction with teaching experiences. Findings from this research showed that 'active teaching experiences were found to be associated with students' intentions to persist in college (Dwyer 2012:112)'.

5.11 The Irish Context

Capturing completion rates across higher education has been the focus of attention in the US and within the OECD area for a long time. While there has been a 'long tradition of theory-based research on retention and persistence in higher education,' this has not been the case within an Irish context (St. John et al., 2013:114). The HEA report on progression (2010) was a 'comprehensive' and 'definitive' study of new entrants to full-time undergraduate programmes within HEA funded HEIs. The HEA report focused on progression, based on an examination of the SRS (student record system) for the single year 2008-09. Earlier studies had undertaken a retrospective review of completion within the University and, subsequently, the IoT sector during the early and mid-1990s (Eivers, Flanagan, Morgan, 2001). The HEA study focused on progression not on completion, examining retention within institutions following the first year of undergraduate study, which was deemed to be critical to persistence. Year one formed the foundation for the 2010 report and subsequent research undertaken by the HEA on progression. The research focused on capturing students applying to HE through the CAO to degree L8 programmes, students who had applied for sub-degree programmes within Universities and colleges were not included though students who had applied for the same within the IoT's were included. The study examined pre-entry levels of educational attainment, LC results, as well as students' socio-economic background and gender, as factors impacting on progression within a field of study. Mooney et al. argued that a link existed between prior educational attainment and progression. Fleming (2010) noted that the HEA study mapped the link between LC mathematics, and English grades with success in HE but queried assumptions that would suggest this as causal and cautioned against the introduction of strategies or interventions built on such assumptions.

HEA reports (HEA 2010, 2013) on progression supported a review of aspects of year one full-time undergraduate HE, particularly in disciplines such as; technology, science, and engineering, where it was found that non-progression was highest. As a consequence of progression research, it was

proposed that the post-primary curricula in subjects related to STEM should be strengthened to contribute to students' preparedness. The importance of student completion of HE in such disciplines was deemed critical for economic growth and development.

In relation to adults, the authors acknowledged that there were higher levels of mature student participation and completion at the lower levels of the NFQ. Based on an analysis of the statistics, it was noted that 'adults engage more effectively with shorter duration courses'; however, the number and range of programmes at this level had reduced even though they had a function in widening access and advancing flexible learning (HEA 2010:62). It was observed that changes to funding mechanisms had contributed to this outcome. Whilst acknowledging increased adult participation at levels 6, 7, nevertheless, there was a lack of progression to degree level. The HEA study defined success in narrow terms of degree completion. There was no evidence presented to establish whether students had achieved their learning goals by completing a shorter programme. Persistence or the experience of persisting does not feature.

In studies of progression within Irish HEIs, students' social interactions do not feature as variables for measuring retention. There were some notable exceptions; Fleming and Finnegan examined non-traditional students, focusing on their experiences of the learning environment going beyond feedback forms to capture, 'their stories of struggle for success' (Fleming 2010:4). Recently Dwyer examined integration amongst first-year transitioning students within an IoT and considered the significance of active teaching methods and institutional practices as factors impacting persistence (2012). The cohort of students within the IoT included several non-traditional entrants. Separately Keane (2009) examined relational aspects of under-represented students' experiences in an Irish University. Using Tinto's theory as a guide, the author examined students' relationships internal and external to the institution. Though this study involved forty non-traditional mature students, the sample included eight part-time students who participated in interviews, and it was noted that they reported

feeling 'cut off from other students and everyday university activities' (Keane 2009:92).

HEA studies of progression and retention were based on analysis of statistics gathered from the following sources; CAO, SRS, CSO. The variables used in measuring progression included: gender, age, social class, LC points, the field of study, and sector. Generally, the collation of data on student progression occurs in January following the first semester. Recent research examined retention as it related to the early stages of the undergraduate cycle within Irish HE. Consequently, the transition into HE from school or equivalent, student preparedness, prior education achievement, and consideration of the appropriate supports required when making the transition in the early stages of undergraduate experience became a priority for policy and initiatives. The 2010 Report included a review of key research on the subject; however, the later report showed less evidence of the same. No evidence of students experiences of year one, or teaching and learning strategies to support new entrants in the early stages, featured within the HEA studies. Instead, student experience of learning and engagement once enrolled within HEIs was to be referenced through data collated separately from ISSE and institutional compacts. In that sense, HEA studies of progression do not employ interactionist theories, and levels of student interaction post entry were not examined. Instead, attention focused on structural elements of the HE system namely how students transitioned to FT and widening participation strategies within third level.

5.12 Access and Retention

Mooney et al (2010) treat the HE sector as a binary system, in general terms this is interpreted as, IoT's as locally based, regionally focused, therefore accessible to a diverse audience, with more vocational qualifications on offer, particularly at sub-degree level, with lower requirements to access courses, while Universities are focused on L8 degree programmes, with higher entry requirements, attracting fewer students on grants and a limited range of courses on offer. The 2010 study found that

non-progression was greater in the IoT sector and in particular technology-based disciplines, though it was acknowledged that there was greater diversity within the student population in IoT's. Attrition within the IoT's was linked to the implications of widening participation strategies, with weaker students enrolling in programmes for which they were inadequately prepared. Research indicates that drop out amongst non-traditional students is 'disproportionate' when compared to traditional students; however, it was also clear that there was complexity associated with diversity and drop out (Laing and Robinson, 2003, Jones 2008). Jones noted that methods of data collection in the UK had resulted in the 'unfounded belief that the consequence of widening participation is a decline in student retention' (Jones 2008:2) Additional research indicated that rather than social class as a key factor in student withdrawal in the UK entry qualifications presented a stronger indicator of continuation (op cit 9). Laing and Robinson (2003) used grounded theory methods to examine the importance of the teaching and learning environment as a factor that influenced withdrawal amongst non-traditional students. The causes of withdrawal and understanding the complexity associated with non-traditional students persistence requires further research. Similarly, the links between diversity and increased attrition in Irish HE needs investigation. Nonetheless, a study undertaken at NUIG showed that mature 'access' students persisted and proved as academically capable as younger full-time equivalents (Keane 2011).

The notion that students adapt or are required to fit into HE or where responsibility rests with students to make change has been questioned, particularly where non-traditional students were concerned (Roberts 2011). A small scale empirical study involving five non-traditional students transitioning to HE indicated that there was a mismatch in their expectations of how they would be taught also that students were ill-prepared for academic life and that teaching practices within HE needed to change.

5.13 Inclusion and Higher Education

Retention theory and practice have focused on establishing variables that contribute to departure, and this led to systems and institutional change as a means of addressing persistence. As a result, a range of strategies, some of which were elaborated on in this chapter has become embedded in practice in HE. Nevertheless, problems of retention and persistence recur. The limitations of integrationist theory for part-time have been highlighted; part-time students were viewed negatively as 'utilitarian' 'vocational' in their approach, as 'not belonging,' disengaged, participating in short courses, not progressing or taking too long to progress, their status marginal and peripheral. This could be interpreted as part-time students who were not good at 'integration.' The problem with existing theoretical frameworks is that they do not adequately capture the difference, or value and celebrate diversity. Alternative approaches as to how the problem was framed particularly where part-time students were concerned, remained underexplored. One possibility is to revisit theories of inclusion, as this multifaceted concept has the potential to frame the complexity of persistence and retention of part-time students in HE where existing theories of integration and assimilation have fallen short.

Promoting an inclusive agenda for Higher Education is not new and has been on the periphery of Irish HE policy for some time (Skillbeck, Connell, 2000). The concept of inclusion is most readily associated with the inclusion of students with a disability within mainstream education (Shevlin et al. 2008, Thomas 2013). Thomas (2013) provided a detailed review of thinking about inclusion, its antecedents in special education, key developments, and breakthroughs; also the author proposed significant changes as to how policymakers should think about and provide for inclusive education in the future. Inclusion is not just about 'valuing diversity' but should take account of other 'facets of school life such as community, social capital, equality and respect (Thomas 2013:474)'. Similarly, themes that feature within special education such as; inequality, marginal, low status, and exclusion, translate within part-time higher education. Though inclusion has strong roots within disability discourse, it

is a flexible concept that draws on equity issues to encompass non-traditional students such as adults and mature students. It is about the 'inclusion' of adult students that it is explored here.

Skillbeck and Connell argued in favour of 'broadening the concept of higher education to make it more inclusive (Skillbeck Connell 2000:50)'. International perspectives were employed to drive home the need for institutional change. However, recent public policy reports (HEA 2012) about flexible and part-time HE lacked the level of expansive thinking as well as the detail set out earlier by Skillbeck in tackling change in policy and practice. Notions of widening participation as a means of 'strengthening democracy' evident in the earlier document have not migrated into later policy initiatives (op cit:66).

There is potential in considering inclusion as a conceptual frame for examining the persistence of part-time students in higher education. Inclusion offers an opportunity to return to themes of social justice, diversity, and inequality, moving away from the narrow measures of success and completion or later 'Tintoesque,' style notions of belonging or engagement.

5.14 Conclusion

Multiple models and theories have been employed to examine and explain the complex problem of retention and persistence. Tinto's theory of social and academic integration continues to inform the landscape on retention, albeit with critical adjustments to take account of increased student diversity. In this study, interactionist theory was employed as a sensitizing concept along with belonging and engagement, in order to explore factors that supported and constrained persistence.

Whilst finance remains important to the discourse on retention, and it is not per se the main reason why students withdraw from HE. Research indicates that no one issue or factor presents as the reason for withdrawal; rather it is a complex problem taking place over time. Mooney et al. (2010) added to

the debate on retention in Ireland but missed an opportunity to broaden out the scope of retention research instead of focusing on a narrow definition that overlooked persistence and failed to reframe success to accommodate diverse cohorts and flexible provision.

ISSE represented an important contribution to Irish HE research; however, it was an instrument of measurement linked to quality assurance. The national survey tends toward mapping and gathering data on student engagement albeit based on a definition that is institutionally focused. A body of research has established that engagement is complex, dynamic, and multi-layered. Arguably understanding student experiences of engagement requires a range of research tools and methods particularly in light of increased diversity of the student population.

As HE has expanded in Ireland, so too has diversity as a consequence of widening participation strategies. However, retention research and data relating to minority cohorts in Irish HE remains in short supply. Persistence and retention are linked, and for part-time, flexible students, this is a subject requiring further empirical research. In particular, theories and concepts framing persistence and retention of part-time students' needs examination as policy aspire to enhance the flexibility of HE education. As funding for HE reduced and PTF students have limited access to support services and facilities, it is timely to query why minority cohorts persist. Understanding what motivates adults to engage with HE learning, their goals, intentions, supports and why they persist, would add to the discussion which has to date orientated to full-time students.

6 Chapter Six: Research Design

6.1 Introduction

This chapter critically discusses the research design and outlines the plan for the research project. The research purpose, primary questions, and key theoretical perspectives informing the research are examined. Also, relevant methods for data generation, analysis, and interpretation are considered. The strengths and limitations of case study as an approach are examined. I shall also discuss positionality, researcher stance, the complexity of representation, and ethics, which included the process involved in obtaining permission and gaining access to over one hundred participants and eight HEIs.

There are growing numbers of textbooks offering guidelines to early-stage researchers in social science and qualitative research. In particular, the work of the following authors; Thomas (2009) Blaikie (2010), Denscombe (2014), and Creswell (2013), informed the initial stages of the research design. These texts provided explanations of various theoretical perspectives, approaches, methods and planning relevant to constructing a research design. The intention was to provide a rigorous approach to research design, making transparent the decision-making process, ensuring that there was consistency between purpose, methods, and plan. Devising a research design that was robust, authentic and credible was important. However, undertaking qualitative research may not be straightforward. Qualitative research can be controversial. It involves multiple and competing theories; it is a place where boundaries are contested and shift, creating new and critical perspectives (Patai 2016, West, 2014, Pillow 2003, Carspecken, 1996, Lather 1986a, Lather 1986b). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) examined concepts of; credibility, transferability, and dependability as it pertained to on-going struggles to validate qualitative research within changing paradigmatic discourses. With these debates in mind, the research strategy was not set in stone or predetermined in a way that would prevent adjustments. Qualitative research tends to be iterative; it does not always

follow a linear process arguably flexible approaches are better suited to a research strategy than rigidity, as contingencies may be required, particularly as the research unfolds (Blaikie 2010). This is not intended as a get-out clause or a byword for sloppy research; however, it does recognise naturalistic inquiry as unpredictable.

6.2 Problem and Purpose

The purpose of the research was to examine a problem within a contemporary setting. The subject of the inquiry, part-time, flexible learning within higher education, involved examining experiences of policymakers, part-time students, and lecturers teaching part-time students. A case study approach across multiple sites involving fieldwork over three years was envisaged. The research was located within higher education institutions (HEIs), and involved organisations that fund, influence, and shape policy within HE. It was important to note that the case study was not focused on an investigation of individual HEIs or an in-depth examination of particular models of part-time, flexible provision. The selection of a single HEI or a model of PTF learning would have imposed limitations on the research; the study aimed to involve multiple perspectives across several sites inviting a range of experiences and interpretations. Arguably multiple sources of data would strengthen the validity of the case study. The intention was to include several aspects that characterised and shaped provision within a binary HE system, which included a diverse student population set within a context shaped by reform and change.

Part-time, flexible higher education provided the starting point for an examination of what was a complex and under-researched subject. The intention was to examine several aspects which were considered to be inter-related, namely; government policy, experiences of lecturers and students within HEIs. The relationship between these key elements had not been examined in an Irish context. The impact of government policy on institutional practices, the experience of lecturers teaching part-time students, and part-time students' experiences within HEIs was under-

researched. Further analysis of research and public policy documents particular to PTF HE exposed gaps, particularly in terms of a lack of data on retention, and persistence (see chapters: 2, 4); also there was limited evidence of an empirical nature.

Finding out what was the situation on the ground, what was happening, from the perspective of students and lecturers at a local level, such questions were at the cornerstone of the research. The role and implications of public policy cannot be ignored, and institutional practices were important, together they shaped the HE context. The research was not concentrating on the big picture or broad brushstrokes. Rather there was a level of descriptive detail required, akin to the sort found in a Van Eyck painting such as the Arnolfini Wedding (1434). Van Eyck's small masterpiece propels the viewer inward to discover minute details, specifically a reflection of the artist at the centre of the composition. Lather argued that there was 'no neutral research' and that values form part of the qualitative research landscape (Lather 1986b:257). In this case study I was an insider also at times outside of the frame. However, insider or outsider status is no longer straightforward; instead, it can be complex and fluid determined by positionality, inclusive of class, gender and culture (Merriam et al. 2001:405). Whilst 'reflexive monitoring' featured throughout each stage of the research, I recognised reflexivity as a complex, situated process (Adams 2006, Blaikie 2010:53). The inclusion of students' and teachers' voices aimed to provide details that were central to establishing an in-depth understanding of part-time, in terms of what was happening in higher education locally, in an academic and social setting, on a particular campus, at a particular time.

The pattern emerging from DES (2011) HEA (2012) policy reports was to use secondary sources rather than commission new research. Figures and statistics gathered from the CSO, and individual HEIs featured prominently. The policy document, Part-time and Flexible HE in Ireland (2012) indicated limited conceptualisation of the subject, though the report was produced following consultation with HEIs, the process was uneven and inconsistent.

Insights to part-time students' experiences of HE were uncommon, and little was known about lecturers' experiences of teaching and supporting PTF students.

Also, a review of research specific to part-time, flexible learning persistence and retention, helped shape the primary questions driving the research, these questions though broad, overlap and capture the key areas of inquiry;

- To what extent had HE policy been informed by lifelong learning policies? What was driving current interests in PTF learning across HE? What factors contributed to the marginalisation and delayed development of part-time flexible HE?
- To what extent were HEIs prepared and equipped for part-time, flexible learning and learners?
- What were the lecturer's experiences of teaching and supporting part-time students?
- What motivated PTF students, and how do students prepare for part-time learning in HE?
- To what extent were part-time student's experiences of learning in HE impacted by the range of programmes offered, costs incurred, access to campus supports, services, and pedagogical approaches to teaching encountered?

Yin (2014) proposed refining research questions for case study purposes so that the researcher establishes the focus of attention, inevitably further revision was required in this instance. Gaps had been identified in part-time, flexible HE research. Also, there was a need to establish what was happening and why, from the perspectives of; students, teachers, and policymakers. To address the questions underpinning the research the design needed to be deductive-inductive and descriptive. It was not the intention to test a particular hypothesis. Tinto's theory of retention was used as a sensitising concept informing the approach also as an aid to analysis (see chapter 5, sections 5.3,5.4,5.5). Bowen argued the use of sensitizing concepts in empirical research had proven effective in developing theory (Bowen 2006). The emergence of insights and explanations arising from the analysis and interpretation of the findings was anticipated.

6.3 Approaches and Perspectives

The dominant positivist and post-positivist paradigms have been challenged. Denzin and Lincoln proposed 'qualitative research as a site of interpretive practices (Denzin, Lincoln, 2013:11)'. The authors' definition of qualitative research states that the 'intention is to 'study things in their natural settings' in an attempt 'to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:3). Creswell looks to augment this definition and include the process of research, which the author argued follows from unpacking 'philosophical assumptions' associated with the researcher and the research plan which governs the 'procedures involved in studying social and human problems'(Creswell 2013:44).

My research project sits within an interpretivist paradigm. Notwithstanding links between interpretivism, sociology, and ethnography, this study was neither embedded within a research paradigm that espoused transformative goals, nor was it 'openly emancipatory' in intent (Lather 1986b:268). Whilst recognising conflicting epistemological perspectives that arise within social research, the concept of constructivism informed my viewpoint of adult learning. The case study included an examination of students and teachers; motivations, experiences of learning, integration and belonging within selected HEIs. The intention was to undertake once-off semi-structured individual and small group interviews involving participants engaged in part-time, flexible HE, namely; students, and lecturers. Policy-makers who shaped and informed relevant public policy in HE, as well as key bodies that influenced policy such as employers and trade unions, also formed part of the inquiry. The purpose was to provide for multiple perspectives and voices, thereby enhancing understanding of the case.

Case study was embedded within empirical traditions. It offered an opportunity to undertake detailed inquiry within specific sites, in close proximity to individuals, by examining 'the relationships and social processes within social settings,' (Denscombe, 2010:55). Denzin and Lincoln (2013) argued that there was no single or ultimate truth also that

there may be different perspectives of reality, the relativistic perspective presented by the authors contrasted with a realist viewpoint favoured by Yin, whereby the existence of a single reality independent of the observer was considered appropriate for the case study. However, in the 5th edition of 'Case Study Research' (2014), the author included relativist or 'interpretive' examples. Arguably the experiences of different participants, their knowledge of situations and interactions locally, captured at several sites, using similar questions, could generate data, and provide the basis for knowledge construction and foster explanation building, which was central to my inquiry (Yin 2014). Also, multiple perspectives of PTF and several sources of data could strengthen triangulation and address concerns of trustworthiness (Lather 1986a:86).

The use of a sensitising concept such as Tinto's model of integration and related ideas of belonging and theories of engagement influenced the methodology and shaped interviews (see appendix 6, 7). The theoretical frame and literature review influenced the design of the research tools. At the interviews, I focused on students' motivations and patterns of participation in programmes. Students' expectations about workload, sense of belonging and integration within HEIs, their interactions with other students, full-time and part-time, with teaching staff and student services, were explored during interviews. In the case of lecturers, I set out to explore the philosophies informing their teaching, investigate individual approaches to teaching, experiences of assessing and supporting part-time students, as well as the status of lecturing staff, teaching part-time students. Lecturer's observations, reflections of student integration and comparisons between teaching full and part-time cohorts were also explored. Similar questions were asked of students, lecturers, and policymakers. The intention was to draw on experiences and practices locally in an effort to understand what part-time, flexible means for those individuals directly involved.

For qualitative researchers, knowing what is happening is important, but capturing what is happening accurately and understanding the situation, can be challenging. Denzin and Lincoln state that 'qualitative research is

inherently multi-method in focus' (Denzin Lincoln 2013:9). Where qualitative researchers set out to explore relationships and experiences within natural settings, they may employ a range of methods and tools to select, gather and analyse data. The primary tools for research in my case study included; surveys, semi-structured interviews, small group interviews, as well as analysis of government reports and documents. Secondary sources, including statistical data and material held in published sources online and in print format, were included.

6.4 Using Interviews in empirical research

My case study set out to examine the phenomena of part-time, flexible learning across multiple sites, including the DES, HEA, employer bodies, relevant teacher unions, also selected HEIs, during a particular time-frame (2014-18). Student's and teacher's voices were absent from the current discourse. Policy reports and evaluations such as ISSE provided sound-bites, and statistics, that addressed performance criteria set for HEIs through funding agencies such as the HEA and DES. Interviews are a rich source of empirical material, they 'can reach areas of reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible' and provide for the inclusion of individual experiences of day to day situations, within local sites (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013:277). In attempting to understand what is happening in social settings, investigating and exploring the experiences of those directly involved, within their natural setting, is an appropriate source of evidence for conducting a social inquiry.

Multiple voices, diverse perspectives, and observations were recorded across several sites. Following an iterative process, a final set of interview questions was prepared. At each stage, the questions were reviewed, reflected on and considered in terms of; the types of questions, sequencing of questions, the relevance of the theoretical framework, the use of terminology, and duration of the questionnaire. Similar themes informed interviews for lecturers, and all students received the same questions irrespective of programme level (see appendix 4). The material was collated and analysed, coding applied, categories identified and themes established.

The range of activities and detailed nature of inquiry provided for methodological triangulation, the purpose of which was to address issues of trustworthiness and credibility as it applied to the research findings.

6.5 The Research Approach: Case Study

Blaikie states that 'case study has a long history' (Blaikie, 2010:187). A summary review of case study over the years indicated that in the past there were periods of high visibility and lows (1950's) where it disappeared from view. Whilst case study may be popular in some quarters, Flyvbjerg argued that often, it is 'ignored within large and dominant parts of the academy (Flyvbjerg 2013:195)'. Creswell describes case study as 'distinguished' and firmly places the methodology within 20th-century research traditions (2013:97). More recently, interest in case study has re-emerged as researchers return to using this approach, mindful of limitations associated with it. Traditionally case study was associated with; medicine, psychology, anthropology, law, it has crossed disciplines and can be found in social science, education, management, and business. Generally, case study is used to provide for in-depth, detailed examination and exploration of; an organisation, events, activities, individuals, groups, social situations, both contemporary and historical.

There are several definitions of case study, though Yin's assertion that it is 'an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon set within its real world context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident' captures the salient features (Yin 2014:16). Yin argued that this 'all-encompassing method,' has a lot to recommend it, as it 'relies on multiple sources of evidence (Yin,2014:17)'. Nevertheless, there were limitations associated with case study as a method of inquiry. These include being; descriptive, preliminary, non-generalizable, time consuming, singular, associated with student research, and qualitative enquiry (Blaikie,2010). Nevertheless, the view that a case study is wholly descriptive, preparatory or limited to qualitative research has been challenged (Yin, 2014; Flyvberg, 2013; Blaikie, 2010).

Traditionally case study was presented as the examination of a phenomenon in-depth, the study of a singular entity that provided for a detailed description of the particular. 'Case study refers to research that investigates a few cases, often just one in considerable depth.' (Gomm et al., 2000:3) The consensus emerging is that case study offers, explanations and rich description (Yin 2014) Stake proposed categorising case study, into three distinct types; intrinsic- the individual, or unique case, the instrumental case, that seeks to explore and better understand a situation and the collective case, that is, multiple cases that are instrumental and could be representative. Yin (2014) extended the definition of case study, providing for; holistic, that is singular, intrinsic cases and multiple cases. Multiple cases for Yin should be similar to experiments and provide for replication across several sites. Whether holistic or multiple in design, it was also possible to have embedded cases, that is cases that were made up of sub-units of investigation. My study of PTF higher education was an embedded case study, see figure 1 (Bliakie 2010:190).

| Context : Higher Education | | |
|--|---|--|
| Embedded Unit 1 Policy Makers Interviews (Participants 9) | Embedded Unit 2 Lecturers HEIs x 8 Interviews (Participants 30) | Embedded Unit 3 Students HEIs x 6 Interviews (Participants 63) |

Figure 1. Case Study with embedded units

6.6 Tensions and Limitations

Some authors view case study as limited, particularly where generalising was concerned furthermore there were varying views regarding its capacity

to generate theory or its usefulness in testing hypotheses. Since case study prioritises the unique, or particular, then it is argued that it has limited capacity to provide for generalizability. Typically the cornerstone of scientific research lies in its capacity for generalisation. Why study the particular when there could be the potential to make findings generalizable? Nevertheless, the concept of generalising has been tested and can be found to be temporal and context specific. Furthermore, problems of generalisation were not confined to qualitative research.

Stake favours 'naturalistic generalisation', which the author argued features in everyday lived experiences of individuals whereby they make generalisations 'from personal or vicarious experience,' (Stake 2005:454). Therefore through the thick description and detailed accounts faithful to the context and the experiences of individuals involved, it was possible to provide for generalisation in case study. Lincoln and Guba preferred the notion of a 'working hypotheses' in favour of the traditional unworkable positivist concept of generalisation (2000). The authors were sceptical of generalisation due to the particular associated with every situation, 'if there is a true generalisation, it is that there can be no generalisation (Lincoln Guba 2000:39)'. Arguing in favour of a 'working hypotheses' which should be expressed as tentative, Lincoln and Guba take the notion further and present a rationale for transferability from one context to another, this they argue is possible once there is 'fittingness' as judged by the researcher, who should have detailed knowledge of the both contexts. Accordingly, thick description and an accumulated 'base of information' are used to make a judgement of 'fit.' Therefore it is possible to argue for transferability from one context to another if there is a 'fit,' which is dependent on the researcher providing sufficient information and the receiver ensuring that they can perform the transfer.

It should be noted that Gomm et al. (2000) were not in agreement with Lincoln and Guba's dismissal of generalisation nor was the author convinced by arguments for transferability. Indeed Gomm identified a weakness with the idea whereby the user or receiver makes a judgement which the authors believed to be the responsibility of the researcher during the

research design phase. Gomm et al. argue for generalisation in case study, which is referred to as empirical generalisation. The difficulty with this approach is that it requires selecting cases where there are fewer variables to be controlled and where the sample group is more homogenous, with less heterogeneity present, which does not apply in my case study.

My research was an instrumental case study. The intention was to publish parts of the research in the future. Through a survey, interview, and analysis, it was possible to deduct and provide an explanation, which may add to developments of part-time, flexible learning in HE at a future date. However, given the scale of the inquiry (involving approximately 102 participants), it would be difficult to make claims for reform of educational policy or changes to institutional practice based on the findings. Whilst it is argued that 'all research findings have political implications,' change at a systems level is a slow process; furthermore, findings can be provisional in nature (Denzin and Lincoln 2013:11). Hammersley cautions about making grand claims about the impact of research to make a change and maintains that research has 'limitations' on what it can offer to policymaking, nevertheless in this instance, the intention was to add to the discourse on HE (Hammersley 2004: 136).

6.7 Selection of Sites

Across HEIs, there are similarities in terms of; admissions policies, student population, academic guidelines, programmatic formatting; however, it would be difficult to select institutions where there were matching or even similar identities, cultures, and histories. Denzin and Lincoln's observation that 'any given classroom is like all classrooms, but no classroom is the same' typifies the challenge of a similar but different argument (Denzin, Lincoln, 2013:47). In so far as IoT's shared similar characteristics, (coming within HEA remit following the 2006 Act), nevertheless they were not the same, this argument extends to Universities, Independent and smaller colleges. In Ireland HE is binary, with IoT's and Universities (there are a small number of educational colleges located in between) representing two types of provider, the first, emerging from a tradition of Regional Technical

Colleges (RTC's) with links to industry and VEC's (now ETB's), and second, the Universities associated with a federal body such as NUI or those established through royal charter such as TCD. Also, there were newer Universities such as UL and DCU arising from an RTC model as well as Independent colleges (such as NCI) not funded by the HEA but offering DES funded programmes. Whilst acknowledging differences at an institutional level, the value of the typical case, in terms of an IoT or University, is worth extending to this case study.

6.8 Research Plan

The table 7 sets out the research plan and the steps involved in gathering data, fieldwork stages.

Table 7. Field Work Research Plan 2014-18

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| <p>Stage 1 2014-15</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure ethical approval from TCD, • Identify relevant policy makers, establish access, make initial contact, • Draft criteria for HEI selection, • Establish selection criteria for selecting programmes and teaching staff, • Select HEIs, • Draft interview questions for policy makers, • Devise consent form for policy makers, • Draft research statement for circulation to each cohort, • Make site visits and approaches to HEIs, • Secure access to participating HEI, agree on code of conduct and ethics, • Consent form goes out to HEI, • Adapt or make contingency where HEI may not provide access, |
| <p>Stage 2 2015-17</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree an interview schedule with policy makers and confirm confidentiality, • Re-draft interview questions, forward to participants, • Undertake interviews, • Re-draft questions based on policy interviews, • Agree on access to HEI staff / students, programmes, • Consent form goes out to HEIs, • Preparatory trial of interview questions for students, |

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm time-frame and schedule, for lecturers –students • Commence fieldwork, on-site, campus-based, • Listen to recordings and make notes from interviews, • Investigate and select software, • Develop database, |
| Stage 3 2016-18 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen and review interviews, make notes, • Prepare transcripts, review, analyse, code, • Analyse data, interpret, establish themes, • Loopback, re-read, review transcripts, agree on categories, • Preliminary narrative, • Member check, contact participants, forward transcripts, |
| Stage 4 2016-18 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis, • Interpretation, • Discussion, |
| Stage 5 2018 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendations, Conclusions |

6.9 Positionality and Researcher Stance

The position of the researcher remains critical to the research process. This section examines ontological assumptions underpinning the research, and epistemological concerns regarding the stance of the researcher at different phases of the study (see Table 8). In particular, I explain my position at various stages and indicate through reference to the appendices the iterative process involved in formulating and refining questions for different groups of participants. When conducting a naturalistic inquiry that involves interviews, complex issues of bias and subjectivity require attention (Chavez 2008). Inevitably qualitative researchers conducting social research in a post-positivist era recognise research as laden with values (Lather 1986b). However, the degree to which observations are affected by values has been disputed, for instance, critical or constructivist perspectives remain at odds on this matter (Carspecken 1996). Nevertheless acknowledging researcher subjectivity can be important, as with this case study my position was not neutral (Blaikie 2010). Notwithstanding theoretical and methodological perspectives on positionality, the researcher may take on more than one position as insider/outsider when conducting research (Merriam et al 2001). Arguably researchers conducting qualitative

research should become 'vigorously self-aware' and adopt a reflexive role in relation to the research process and the researched over the duration of the study (Lather 1986:66). Reflexivity can assist in countering arguments of researcher bias, aid rigour and support validity within an interpretivist approach. Empowering traditions such as; feminist, neo-Marxist, and critical ethnographers favour self-reflexivity in the quest to address issues of credibility. The emphasis on reflexivity, and extended reflexivity in the wider discourse confirms its relevance to qualitative research, however it is a 'slippery' (Bryman 2012) and 'contested' (Finlay & Gough 2003) term. Reflexivity is not without its limitations arguably reflexivity could be viewed as a form of self-regulation, providing for continuing inequalities in the social sphere rather than transformation (Adams 2006). Nevertheless reflexivity is a critical process (Pillow 2003).

Table 8. Researcher position

| |
|--|
| <p>Research Purpose Explore and Explain a Phenomena in a Social Setting</p> |
| <p>Research Strategy Deductive - Inductive</p> |
| <p>Position Inside Learner Cautious Realist</p> |
| <p>Paradigm Interpretivist</p> |
| <p>Sensitizing Concept Tinto's model of Integration + Belonging</p> |
| <p>Data Sources Qualitative, Primary + Secondary Natural Settings</p> |

6.10 Methodological Reflexivity

The social sciences attach importance to the position of the researcher the perspectives and values they hold. Researchers do not come to research processes value free. Inevitably I needed to make visible how I had come to the research topic, what bias I bring and demonstrate an awareness of the politics inherent to research practice. Some background details that informed the choice of research topic and development of the proposal are outlined. I had worked in community and adult education settings for many years however in 2000 I returned to full-time employment in HE. As head of continuing education in a discipline specific HEI, I introduced new PTF programmes providing pathways and progression routes for students. I undertook research into continuing and adult education across HE interviewing academic staff within other HEIs. The intersection of public policy with teaching and learning within PT HE was of interest to me as I wanted to understand how structures and resources were deployed and to what extent FT-PT were similar or differed. Reflecting on developments in part-time HE I observed limited progress in policy since the Green and White Paper on Lifelong learning (DES 1999, 2000) and whilst new legislation had been implemented evidence on the ground indicated the situation had not changed significantly. Notwithstanding my experience of adult education, the research design was not underpinned by Frierian concepts of emancipation. Participation in the research was neither transformative nor was it collaborative in intent.

The role of teacher as reflective practitioner had informed my professional development. In this instance the perspectives of Schon (1983), Brookfield (1990) and Blaikie (2010) were relevant. Brookfield argued that reflexivity as it applies to teaching is a critical process, and the author provided teacher-researchers with tools to examine their practice (Brookfield 1990). Similarly, Blaikie was unequivocal in his view that reflexivity was not 'a matter of choice' for researchers in social science regardless of any positioning (Blaikie, 2010:54). Decisions in terms of theoretical choices, dynamics of power and construction of knowledge were subject to critical reflexive processes. The following sections highlight instances of reflexivity.

6.11 Reflexivity and Gathering Data

Milligan observed that 'researchers take on different positions dependent on the situation that we may be in, the people we are interacting with and familiarity of the linguistic and socio cultural norms' (Milligan 2016:240). The notion that the researcher may alter positions or shift identities whilst conducting research chimed with my experience of fieldwork (Chavez 2008). I held more than one position throughout the research process. I was a researcher, a part-time student paying fees but not a member of a class and a professional working within a HEI. Arguably I was in a position of privilege. I shared similar identities with some but was of different status to other participants. I was invested in part-time HE professionally and personally. Through my work and research I had an insider perspective of HE but was outside of a student community because of my position also I had formed perspectives about PT over a period of time. Arguably there were levels and variations of having insider-outsider status that required unpacking particularly as it applied in this case.

At the outset of the research my intention was to focus on gaining an understanding of part-time HE from a policy and practice perspective in a wider context. I was a member of professional networks and some participants who participated in the research were familiar with my professional identity within a HEI. My place of employment was not identified as a source for gathering data. The scope of the research was intended to go beyond the institutional perspective to step outside of my comfort zone, explore other models and not to focus on a single discipline. Also I was conscious of the power differential and the potential complications that might arise when choosing to involve colleagues or students from inside the institution. However as the research progressed, the argument to include staff and students from multiple disciplines particularly practice based such as art and design could widen and strengthen the research therefore a decision was taken to include a sample from my work context. The wider the range of institutions and disciplines arguably the research scope could reflect diversity within the sector. Four interviews were undertaken within my department within the HEI, which

included one to one interviews with two staff and one interview with one student and another with two students. In total two staff and three students volunteered to participate in the research or effectively 2/2.9 percentile of the overall sample. Interviews included staff with whom I worked however I was not teaching students who participated in the study. In this instance I was an insider, also a researcher conducting interviews but also a learner gaining insights.

Negotiating access to multiple HEIs, lecturers and students outside of my workplace necessitated identifying my position as a researcher but also as a professional working within HE (see appendix 1). Identity in such instances may be fluid. Milligan who undertook ethnographic research favoured the position of an in-between, neither insider nor outsider (Milligan 2016). Regardless undertaking research that involved conducting semi-structured interviews on a one to one basis or in groups necessitated a level of self-awareness and reflexivity. The summary research statement sent to lecturers in advance stated I was not concerned with evaluating individuals' teaching (see appendix 1). Though I had developed observational skills I was not trained to undertake observation of classroom practice within HE furthermore to do so could orientate the research toward quality assurance which was not featured within the design. The questions were clustered around themes which had emerged from a knowledge of the HE environment, a review of policy and sensitizing concepts employed. Lecturers approach to teaching, their experience of the learning environment, curriculum, understanding of the student profile, levels of integration, persistence, access to supports and context featured (see appendix 5). The interviews were conducted face to face and were interactive. Whilst I had professional experience of the field of part-time HE and worked as a lecturer, each situation and context differed. The research questions were exploratory and used as tools to clarify, to focus, to gain insights into part-time teaching and learning across multiple contexts, disciplines and levels. (Agee 2009:446).

6.12 Students

At the outset, a single sheet for students was envisaged which included questions seeking profile information (see appendix 7). Collating profile data could assist with triangulation. However, the format changed and profile details were placed onto a separate sheet as this task was to be undertaken individually providing for privacy.

Agee notes that 'theory is inextricably linked to research questions whether the theory is shaping them initially or suggesting new questions as the study unfolds' (Agee 2009:437). Sensitizing concepts of integration (Tinto 1993), theories of belonging (Thomas 2012) and engagement shaped the interviews and informed the structure of the final version of the interview questions (see appendix 7). Whilst interpretivists are indebted to anthropology and sociology, and share aspects associated with other traditions my study was not underpinned by a critical ethnographic approach (Anderson 1989). Concepts of habitus, social capital or identity theory though relevant to the wider discourse were not included in the theoretical focus. The choice of one-off interviews would not allow for an in-depth exploration of identity and identity formation which was better suited to a longitudinal or ethnographical approach (O'Reilly 2012). Themes of social capital, retention and non-traditional cohorts were examined elsewhere (Fleming & Finnegan 2011).

Arguably qualitative inquiry is a 'reflective process' where throughout the study the questions can change based on a reflective stance undertaken by the researcher (Agee 2009). Agee argued that 'generating and refining questions are critical' for qualitative study and that the researcher should wrestle with and reflect on their questions (Agee 2009:431). Developing questions for interviews in this case study was iterative. The sequencing of questions, the types of questions, leading, open, closed, a single question without sub-questions, also the use of phrases, or particular terms that may confuse, were the focus of several iterations and the outcome of a reflexive process (see appendices 4,5,6,7).

6.13 Ethics and the Researcher

When conducting qualitative research, the intentions and values of the researcher and the purposes of the research are reviewed from an ethical stance. Ethics and the position of the researcher are embedded within the research design (Denzin and Lincoln 2013:237). Decisions and choices I undertook as a researcher concerning the research design, methodologies and construction of knowledge was the subject of a reflexive process.

Increasingly many higher education institutions have ethics committees and an ethics policy. As a researcher I had an obligation to make visible to participants; what was the focus of the research, why I was conducting the research, who had access to the interview material and how it would be utilised. In this instance, the college policy was guiding the researcher. Researchers were required to be transparent regarding the motives and intentions of their research, to openly answer queries presented by participants and to ensure that where individuals were voluntarily participating in interviews, that the material arising was utilised in a way that adhered to established ethical guidelines.

My research project involved adults, including policy makers, part-time students and lecturers teaching part-time students. Individuals were asked to sign a consent form which provided a statement on the research and established; voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, use and storage of transcript material. Similarly, where policy makers were involved, agreement in the form of consent was obtained in advance (see appendix 1).

My ability to negotiate access to college staff and students depended on several factors; ethical approval, permission, access to helpful and supportive staff, as well as lecturers and students willingness to engage through interview. Trustworthiness and fairness featured strongly when conducting interviews, particularly if the researcher is gathering data that is sensitive, either because the respondent says something negative about a situation they were in or maybe critical of individuals within a context or of

an organisation that they are working within. Students or lecturers may have different experiences or express attitudes at odds with the researchers' own beliefs. Such scenarios raised issues, for instance, who might benefit, be damaged or offended, should such comments be brought to a wider audience? It was possible that individual participants could be recognised even though anonymous. Do I know the participants professionally or personally, or do I hold a position of influence within an organisation that could impact on why individuals would participate and how they might respond? During fieldwork, 'the researcher's power is negotiated, not given' (Merriam et al 2001:409). There was complexity attached to interviewing that required the researcher to be reflective, self-aware, respectful of others, as well as acknowledging power differentials that required negotiation during the research process.

Where students and lecturers were concerned, research questions I had generated were reviewed following preliminary sampling. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed also I took notes at the time but was primarily engaged in asking questions, listening, observing and responding during interviews. All interviews commenced with an explanation of the research its purpose and the interview process. Three different groups were involved in interviews. As a researcher, I identified as having insider knowledge whilst also recognising this may impact on participation. The preferred option was to hold one to one interviews but this was not always possible. Merriam et al (2001:409) noted that 'group interviews have a direct impact on translation and interpretation'. Group interviews present a different dynamic though I aimed to encourage participation, be authentic and manage responses, this approach did not always yield a productive interview. My experience of small groups differed two groups were interactive and discursive, as students were at an advanced stage of the programme and had bonded as a group. However, one group was less responsive though it emerged that this group had been formed only for a limited time and were not known to each other also the group included a diverse mix. Undoubtedly group interviews presented challenges when interpreting and representing participants' perspectives. I hoped to complete the interview questions within the timeframe, but was happy to

deviate, to clarify, to engage participants and respond to questions. Interviews were organised professionally and were relational in tone to encourage participation. Questions were tools for discovery also on occasions they were used to support dialogue.

Representing participants' voice within the context of research presents challenges from an interpretivist position. A variety of voices; students, lecturers, and policymakers informed the research, all participants were adults but of different ages, status, cultures, and social and economic groups. The intention was to capture how individuals talk about and reflect upon part-time learning, and part-time policy within the context in which they experienced it, using their language to describe the situation as they found it, bringing forward their understanding of the situation. I selected and presented sections of transcripts following a process of analysis and coding. Nevertheless representing 'other' voices can be problematic, the subject-object tensions remain present during the analysis phase (Dwyer & Buckle 2009). How I understood and described part-time learning within higher education which may be at odds with participants' perspectives. Furthermore, I was an insider employed within a HEI and had become familiar with issues that staff and students encounter but my perspective and 'other' perspectives required analysis and self-awareness if I was to represent the data accurately. There were strengths and weaknesses to researching HE. Alternative perspectives emerging from the analysis were included to address researcher bias.

Whilst triangulation encourages rigour, there may be areas of contention. What evidence was generated, by what methods and how it was utilised, may not be straightforward even when the intentions of the researcher were made explicit. Denzin and Lincoln argued that in qualitative research 'evidence is never morally or ethically neutral', (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013:521). With this in mind transcripts of interviews could be reviewed by participants and amendments made. This form of 'member checks' featured across each group of participants. I aimed to augment existing published research using voices and perspectives that were absent from the debate on

part-time flexible learning, to provide an explanation of a complex situation within HE.

6.14 Why use case study in this instance?

Case study can be useful for the detailed description and exploration of a single, linked or multiple cases. This case study was exploratory I wanted to gain insight into what was happening concerning part-time flexible learning and attempt to provide explanations as to why the situation had evolved in this way. The research questions could be addressed through an examination of; documents, data sources, policy papers, and through interviews with policy-makers, part-time students', and lecturers' by drawing on their direct experiences. The intention was to place a spotlight on key groups and individuals including; policy-makers, students, and lecturers, as their voices were central to the purposes of the research and were not visible in the discourse.

The phenomenon to be studied in this instance part-time flexible learning in higher education included an examination of experiences of lecturers and students across several HEIs. The HEIs that form part of the research was embedded within an instrumental case study. The context of the case was higher education, as shaped by public policy and funding practices, the voice of policymakers, and decision-makers inform the context and influenced provision. In so far as there were shared, and inherited structural features common across HE, also there were notable differences between Universities, Independent colleges and IoT's in terms of; scale, type of provision, funding, history, internal structures and organisational culture. Selected HEIs were examined in terms of; students' experience, and experiences of teachers teaching part-time students. The scale of this research project was bound by its purpose, as well as the time and resources available to the researcher.

6.15 Setting Boundaries: context and the case

Establishing the boundaries and defining the context of a case can be testing as it requires the researcher to be consistent and explicit in their decision making. The researcher has to establish where a case begins and ends, and what falls within and outside of the parameters of the research. Nevertheless, boundaries assist in defining the case. Similarly, the context and case should be separated. The time-frame for conducting the fieldwork aspects of research, including selecting HEIs, interviewing, and collecting the data, took place during 2014-18. The fieldwork phase involved multiple sites, with several locations across the country, urban and regional included.

The context for this research was higher education, particularly the policies and practices informing developments in part-time HE. Whilst the focus was on HE in an Irish context, there was scope to examine policy developments originating within the EU, and neighbouring countries such as the UK, as they were deemed influential to policy development. Policy and practice were limited to strategic initiatives such as lifelong learning, widening participation, teaching and learning, part-time, and flexible learning within higher education. The time-frame for investigating policy stretched from the 1970's -entry to EU- until 2018. This was a formative period of HE development particularly in Ireland and also represented a time of significant change. The wider economic, social and cultural context was not examined whilst it was referred to in general terms as influencing developments it was not included within the study.

Only HEIs with a part-time flexible provision were included therefore the following features of HE provision; flexible learning, distance education, access initiatives-for disadvantaged, mature, or disability groups, fell outside the scope of the case. Nevertheless, these elements were relevant to establishing contextual background information.

For my case study, part-time included; undergraduate, and post-graduate, namely students registered on part-time flexible award bearing courses.

Part-time programmes between levels 6 – 10, within the NFQ, fell within the parameters of the case study. Typically HE relates to programmes from level 7 upward, the grey area of level 6 and whether it falls into further education and outside of higher education, is a moot issue. However as the IoT sector had a tradition of providing Certificate programmes from level 6 upward, then they were included within the case study. Part-time programmes that were award bearing and modularised where students are registered for 'part' of ie a single module on a part-time programme were not featured.

6.16 Selecting Higher Education Institutions

The Irish HE sector is a 'binary model of tertiary education' (Clarke, Kenny, Loxley, 2015:34) that includes large, and smaller-scale HEIs. The HE system is diverse and as reported in chapter 7, the HEA encourage such diversity.

Factors shaping the selection of HEIs included choosing institutions from across the sector; (1) within the Universities, IoT's, and smaller colleges, (2) those funded directly by the state and those that were independently funded, (3) institutions with a tradition of adult education, part-time continuing education, (4) HEIs that have developed and expanded part-time in recent years, and or were linked to strategic initiatives such as Springboard, Skills-net (5) colleges with small and large scale part-time provision, (6) urban and rural locations.

The selection of HEIs included a mix of large and smaller-scale institutions, such as; Universities, IoT's, Independent and a discipline-based college. Amongst the HEIs selected there was; an Independent college not directly funded by the HEA, HEIs that offered Springboard programmes, three Universities, and three IoT's. Also included were older long-established Universities, as well as newer Universities. The scale of HEIs varied from larger Universities with a student population of 30,000, to IoT's and smaller colleges with approximately 1,200 students. In three HEIs staff were teaching both full time and part-time students, across programmes

scheduled day and evening, however, this experience was not consistent, in several HEIs part-time flexible programmes were staffed exclusively by contracted and CID staff.

Evidently, some HEIs had larger under-graduate provision whilst others had developed post-graduate options. Students who were registered on part-time flexible programmes from 2013/2014, 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18, were included in the research.

When selecting HEIs inevitably the issue of whether they are representative, typical or unique arises. It is arguable whether an individual IoT, College or University is representative, certainly whilst higher education institutions may share certain structural, quality assurance and funding systems, there were also differences, in terms of; status, culture, identity, student population, staff, range of programme options, scale and location. Similarly, each IoT or University though different and potentially distinguishable from another does not of itself qualify for uniqueness. This argument may be extended to smaller colleges where provision centres on a single discipline such as teacher education or art and design. In so far as a college is discipline-specific, it has a particular vision and ethos, it could be described as unique, nonetheless, it shares similar features with other small colleges within HE that are of a similar size and funded through the state.

Examining the student population within HEIs to establish 'representativeness' is equally complex, as student cohorts may be similar in terms of age range, they could differ in terms of social background, educational experience, programme choices, ethnicity and gender. There were challenges posed by attempting to establish representativeness of each embedded unit.

6.17 Access and Permission: Lecturers and Students

Several colleges were invited to participate, however it was difficult to provide for participation in every case. In a small number of cases there was no response either to the initial contact or where permission was

granted to contact lecturing staff there was no response locally to the request to participate in the interview process. It should be noted that all lecturers participated voluntarily, often outside of contracted work hours, indicative of a willingness to participate and an interest in the subject. Interviewees were assured of anonymity, confidentiality and completed a consent form.

Securing access to students was not always straightforward, the process required negotiating through various internal ethics committees, though time-consuming in several cases the process became laboured and was stalled. A smaller number of HEIs (6) participated in students interviews. In several cases the process was straightforward, whereby contact was made with programme staff, an approach was agreed and an ethical form submitted. In some instances, a staff member sent out an email to part-time students which contained; a research statement, an ethics statement, and a copy of the consent form. Where the email call was sent out via a third party to large student numbers often the response was poor. A more successful strategy was where a staff member identified class groups and student groups were approached at a time when they were attending a campus-based class.

6.18 Tools for generating and analysing data

The tools for generating data included: survey, semi-structured interviews, small to medium-sized group interviews. Whilst one to one interviews were desirable where students were concerned this was not possible in every case. There were difficulties encountered in accessing students for interview purposes therefore where one to one interviews were not practicable small group or focus groups were scheduled to facilitate flexible timetabling. Focus groups have a different dynamic to individual interviews, not all participants contribute or respond in equal measure, further responses may depend on how long a student group has been formed.

All interviews were voluntary, digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded. Software tools (MAXQD) were used as an aid to analysis, generating themes and identifying relationships within the data. Themes were identified through analysis and provided the basis for representing the case.

6.19 Interviews: Policy-Makers

A non-probability sampling approach was employed. The selection of interview participants was purposive and strategic, each individual was knowledgeable, experienced and had an input into the processes and strategies about policy formation. The sample included nine individuals who were directly involved in; authoring reports, decision making, influencing, formulating and or implementing relevant policies for part-time flexible learning and access initiatives. Participants included former and current employees within the; DES, HEA, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as well as individuals employed by organisations that lobby, advocate, and represent stakeholders; such as employers and teacher unions. The voice of educators, policymakers, policy analysts, union official and employers are present. Confidentiality and anonymity were agreed, nevertheless, individuals could be identifiable, where they held a defined or singular role within an organisation or held a particular brief. Each participant was identified by a code as set out in the table 9 below.

Table 9. Policy Makers Interviews

| Organisation | Number | Role | Code |
|--------------|--------|---|--------------------------------|
| DES | 3 | Principal Officers, Independent Consultant | PO,1, P0,2, Ind. Consultant |
| HEA | 2 | CEO, SPA | HEA, 1, HEA,2 |
| TUI | 1 | Education Officer | Union |
| IBEC | 1 | Head of Education Soc.Policy | Employer |
| HEI | 2 | Senior Academic | SA,1, SA,2 |

Each participant was asked specific questions about their role in order to understand how various bodies and stakeholders related to each other, also how they influenced or shaped policy. Interviews were semi-structured with questions and prompts used as guides. In an attempt to open up a conversation, the sequence moved from an initial informal question regarding role, interests, or experience, progressing to specific questions. Interviews took place face to face, were in-depth and lasted approximately an hour. Interviews were scheduled between December 2015 and August 2017. A total of nine interviews were undertaken, with five male and four female participants. Additional interviews were sought with individuals who had shaped policy however it was not possible to secure participation in every case as staff were not available, had moved jobs or had retired.

The interviews were not identical however several themes and topics recurred across all interviews. Interview questions were similar and included; What drives or informs part-time-flexible policy? What theories and ideas underpin policy? What was the purpose of part-time within higher education policy and wider? What factors assist in the growth of part-time HE, What factors inhibit the development of part-time? Also, questions explored specific government reports (DES: 2000, 2011, 2016, HEA; 2009, 2012, 2015) and strategic initiatives relative to widening participation and part-time. Participants were asked how reports had evolved, the impact on policy and how implementation had progressed. In some cases, individuals were encouraged to consider what distinguished full-time from part-time higher education, whether part-time and flexible were the same or different. Finally, all interviewees were asked to consider the issue of fees and funding of part-time, whether it was likely this issue would be addressed also the implications of the structural inequity underpinning part-time HE. The purpose of the labour activation strategic initiative Springboard and its significance for part-time became evident as the interview process progressed.

6.20 Analysis

Explanation building was at the heart of the data analysis process. The process of analysis was iterative multiple codes were identified to generate themes. Inductive methods alongside open and axial coding were employed. Each interview was guided by questions based on examination of the research literature, as well as policy reports and strategic initiatives in; lifelong learning, adult education, widening access participation, part-time flexible learning, funding and reform of HE (DES, 2000, 2011, 2016, HEA, 2009, 2012, 2015).

Initially, four themes were established from an analysis of the data; (1) Status; (2) Terms and Definition; (3) Funding, (4) Accountability. A fifth theme surfaced following analysis and interpretation of the data. This emergent theme 'Policy implementation' was implicit to interview discussions but was not identified in the preparation phase prior to interviews. During fieldwork, participants explained how systems and internal departmental structures operated. The discovery of how policy was operationalised, how objectives were identified, goals and targets were or were not progressed emerged when individuals explicated their role or described processes they had experience of which could involve; implementing a report, or ensuring a strategy was progressed and implemented from a policy perspective.

The themes were shaped by interview questions; (1) The emergent theme of Policy and Implementation; refers to the strategies and initiatives used to operationalise reports and attempts to reform or change policy. This theme was an overarching theme linked to other themes. (2) Status referred to the position of part-time within HE policy and HEI practice, past and present; (3) Terms and Definition focused on the role of PTF, what need it addressed in HE and wider and examining factors that were driving policy. Status and Terms overlapped in so far as establishing what defines and shapes part-time in practice, informs its status from a policy perspective. (4) Accountability addresses the requirement to establish how public resources were spent and the types of systems and indicators used to

measure objectives and provide transparency. Further, it highlighted factors constraining development. (5) The mechanisms for funding HE as well as the reduction of exchequer funding which had delayed development of PTF were examined within this theme. Also the complexity of reform of HE funding and the challenges in implementing policy changes around this.

6.21 Interviews with Lecturers

The interviews focused on lecturers' experiences of teaching part-time students, including how they approached teaching, what strategies were used to engage students, particular philosophies or theories that might inform teaching. The intention was to explore lecturers' perspectives of their interactions and engagement with part-time cohorts. I was curious to know more about the teaching and learning experience of part-time students as there was limited research undertaken in an Irish context, further, since the HE system treated part-time students differently in terms of access to grants, supports and free fees, I wanted to find out to what extent, if at all, such structural inequity translated to the teaching and learning context. Consequently a number of questions focused on whether students had access to college based supports, facilities, how students were integrated –socially and academically- within the HEI, whether part-time programmes had similar outcomes to full-time options, or adjustments in terms of curriculum design, workload, assessment were considered appropriate to the learning and teaching experience. Questions about levels of retention and factors contributing to persistence and engagement of part-time students also featured.

6.22 Selection of Lecturers

Non-probability sampling applied in the selection process of lecturers and HEIs. A combination of purposive and convenience approaches to selection was undertaken, resulting in a range of; HEIs, disciplines, subjects and age groups. Lecturers employed within; IoT's, Independent colleges, Universities, single-discipline colleges, were selected from a regional spread that included; Dublin city, its environs, the Leinster and the Southern

region. Lecturers from eight HEIs participated in interviews. Whilst a gender balance was desirable this could not be achieved and more women (23) than men (6) were interviewed. Interviews were conducted throughout 2016 and early 2017.

The primary selection criteria were; lecturers' experience of teaching and supporting part-time students within a HEI. Lecturers selected for interview included those teaching full time and part-time students and those who were teaching part-time students only. Lecturers with experience of teaching either undergraduate or postgraduate students and in some cases both groups participated in interviews. Participants were spread across a wide range of disciplines (see table 11). Participants included those working across multiple programmes and levels, and those associated with a single programme and level. Interviews included very experienced teachers, as well as lecturers in the early stages of their careers as academics. In some cases, lecturers were employed part-time within a HEI and were also working in industry or had worked in industry before transferring to higher education. Interviews included lecturers employed full time, part-time (temporary) and CID. Interviewees were not asked about their contractual status within the HEI. Lecturers discussed their role within the HEI and previous related positions in education, industry or similar. However, academics identity within HE was not explored. Interviews took place on-site within the HEI or at a nearby convenient location. Two interviews were conducted via skype.

6.23 Interviews; Approach to Analysis

The thirty interviews were transcribed verbatim, read thoroughly, re-read and initial themes established this manual process was followed up with the use of MAXQDA12 software where transcripts were coded, content highlighted, overlap and relationships between sets of data explored. This exercise provided a detailed data set for use in thematic discussion. Open and axial coding applied and inductive methods employed. All interviews were semi-structured and informed by the literature review (see chapter 3).

The following primary themes were identified; (1) Pedagogy and practice, (2) Responding to learners, Know your students, (3) Influences and Challenges (4) Retention and persistence.

Interviews questions followed a sequence, and prompts were used throughout. Lecturers were asked the same set of questions, in some cases the questions were less relevant or applicable to the participants particularly where the staff member had no experience of teaching full-time students or as an associate staff member was not familiar with how college administration and management operated.

The number of interviews per HEI varied based on response to the research call for participation, in some cases several academic staff responded in other instances there was a single response or none at all. Given the scale of the research with thirty participants in total each interviewee articulated their experiences of teaching and supporting learning within the HEI, their responses were not intended as representative of the University or IoT. Lecturers across eight HEIs participated in interviews and each HEI was designated by category as; IoT (IoT) University,(Uni) Independent College (Indep.) whereas College (Coll.) falls within HEA funded Colleges, further, each lecturer was then ascribed a number within the relevant category ie., IoT,L1, University L1, Independent L1, College, L1 and so forth (see table 11).

Several questions related to teaching and learning, including the initial opening interview question about approaches or philosophies informing teaching, this progressed to specific questions about strategies used when teaching part-time flexible students and where it applied, comparisons between teaching full and part-time students. Inevitably the subject and level impacted on approaches to teaching nevertheless aside from particular disciplinary concerns there was consistency across various fields. In the majority of cases the class size was small to medium, less than five interviewees experienced large group teaching, ie students groups of 200+. The remaining paragraphs deal with student interviews across various HEI's.

6.24 Students: Data generation and analysis

Research into student experience and engagement within HE has gathered pace in recent years. A wealth of survey dataset exists from national survey sources including Ireland where ISSE was introduced in 2013. Survey and questionnaire, remain dominant tools also quantitative methods are commonly used to gather data (ISSE, 2016, Yorke & Longden 2008, Eurostudent 2017). However, researchers examining non-traditional students accessing HE have shown an interest in biographical or narrative methods (Swain et al 2007, Merrill & West, 2009) as an alternative to traditional survey approaches. This trend toward biography offered interdisciplinary approaches and enabled researchers to capture the complexity of non-traditional students' experiences, motivations and identity (Thunborg et al. 2013). Fleming and Finnegan's study of retention amongst non-traditional full-time students in Irish Higher Education used a biographical approach for interviews, this research formed part of an EU Rahnle project (2011). Despite the strengths of biographical methods they were not employed in my case study.

6.25 Selection: HEIs' and Student interviews

HEIs were purposively selected to include a range of large, medium and small HEIs located in the capital and regionally. Using non-probability methods a sample of students were selected from different HEIs which included; IoT, Universities, an Independent and a smaller College. HEIs with established part-time flexible provision at undergraduate and or postgraduate levels were identified. Though HEIs within Leinster featured prominently, students (30) enrolled at a HEI in the southern region took part in group interviews. The table 10 sets out HEIs' and participants who participated in interviews. Additional details regarding HEI and student profile can be found in chapter 9.

Table 10. HEIs & Student Interviews

| University (3) | IoT (1) | Independent College (1) | College (1) |
|--|--|---|--|
| University A Dublin Small Group x 2 (group of 3 and group of 6 students) Individual interviews X 4 | IoT- Leinster Small-Group x 2 (4 students per group) Campus 1+2 Interviews | Independent – Dublin Individual Interviews | College Dublin Individual Interview x 1, Interview with 2 students, |
| Post-Graduates: 13 | Undergraduates:8 | Postgraduate: 4 | Undergraduate: 3 |
| University B Leinster Small-Group interview x 1 | | | |
| Undergraduates: 6 | | | |
| University C Munster Group Interviews x 2 (14 – 15 per group) | | | |
| Undergraduates: 29 | | | |
| 48 | 8 | 4 | 3 |

6.26 Students: Semi-structured Interviews

At the outset, students were asked to complete a basic questionnaire providing profile information outlining prior educational attainment and employment status. The majority of interviews took place on campus or at a site convenient to students. Interviews were approximately forty minutes duration however with larger numbers this timeframe was extended. On occasions, the sequencing of questions changed in response to students also prompts and clarifications featured. Students anonymity and confidentiality was agreed. Where names occur they have been replaced by a pseudo name.

More women than men were interviewed as in several cases disciplines reflected a higher female cohort. A larger number of undergraduate students participated. Undergraduate students consisted of individuals taking part-time; Certificate, Diploma, BA Ordinary and Honours Degrees, whereas post-graduate students included Masters, MSc, and Phd students. Flexible part-time programmes of; one, two and four years duration featured.

6.27 Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, underpinned by themes arising from the literature. Interview questions were clustered around themes of; decision-making, motivation, integration, belonging, inclusion, access to college supports, managing workload, persistence, teaching and learning. Interviews were face to face, and included; individual, a small group of; two, and three and one group of six students. Also, two medium sized group interviews were organised for students enrolled in flexible programmes.

6.28 Conclusion

This qualitative inquiry set out to explore the relationship between; education policy, institutional practices, and student and lecturers experience of learning within part-time Irish HE. The complex phenomenon

was part-time flexible learning, and through the use of case study the purpose was to explore key questions and issues to construct explanations. The intention was to gain insight into, part-time flexible learning at a policy and practice level and contribute to the wider discourse. The case study was instrumental. The research design employed was neither experimental nor transformative in its approach. Case study is favoured in some quarters, as it provides for in-depth examination, detailed description, it can assist in theory building, yet, its capacity for generalising has been questioned. Similarly, the 'limits' to generalizability or its place within the canon of positivist research traditions are a matter of dispute.

Traditional manifestations of qualitative and quantitative paradigms persist within research, nevertheless within qualitative enquiry criteria of; credibility, dependability, trustworthiness, transferability and confirmability are a source of on-going examination and discourse. Social research is not value-free. Within a post-positivist era, qualitative researchers acknowledge bias and subjectivity but attempt to address issues of credibility through the use of 'self-corrective techniques' (Lather a 1986:65). In this case study, a range of tools and multiple methods were employed across several sites to select, gather, analyse and interpret data. Established methods of triangulation and member checks were employed to provide for credibility and trustworthiness.

Qualitative research can be an iterative, critical, reflective process, which places the researcher and the researched at the centre of a social inquiry. There was complexity attached to positionality in this inquiry. My perspective was informed from working within a HEI and examining developments across HE. However insider status can be fluid and subject to change during fieldwork. I interviewed policy-makers, lecturers and students which meant power was negotiated during fieldwork which had implications for knowledge construction and representation. While researcher subjectivity features in interpretivist enquiry the use of reflexivity throughout the research process added a layer of self-scrutiny and self-awareness.

A review of research literature on part-time higher education revealed gaps, determining that the research design should be experientially based and empirical in nature. Stake reminds researchers that the case report should 'not represent the world, but represent the case' further he maintains that the 'utility of case research to practitioners and policymakers is in its extension of experience (Stake 2005:60)'.

7 Chapter Seven 'It hasn't changed at all' Analysis and Findings of policy interviews

7.1 Introduction

According to Blaikie (2010:60), providing 'a good description of what is going on' addresses gaps where research is limited further; it 'is a vital part of social research.' This chapter describes key developments in part-time, flexible policy in Irish HE based on findings from interviews. The intention was to move beyond description to construct explanations as to why part-time, flexible learning became an important feature of HE policy. Empirical research focused on a small number of interviews (n=9) involving key actors who had; authored reports, policy papers, as well as those who influenced policy and or were involved in policy implementation (see chapter 6, section 6.19). The changing landscape of HE, such as cuts in HE funding, combined with increased pressure for reform (DES, 2011, 2016) provided the background for interviews where policymakers addressed priorities and developments in part-time, flexible policy.

As the research commenced, it was possible to speculate that neoliberal ideas had impacted public policy (Grummell & Ryan 2017). In the unfolding context of austerity with reduced state funding for Irish HE, part-time was increasingly led by demand and market forces. Further, it was noted that supply was inadequate, progression limited and access was curtailed (DES 2011). In such a scenario part-time could continue as a source of revenue for some HEIs and remain self-financing. Nonetheless, such speculation does not explain as to why over a twenty-year period, during a time of prosperity and austerity, with different Ministers for Education, the number of part-time HE students had not grown significantly (2016). One participant, a retired PO of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) who had an active role in developing the Green and White Paper on Adult Education (DES,1998,2000) observed,

'I was appalled when I looked up stats for part-timers across the higher education system, and it hasn't changed at all.' PO,2

Though small scale, this empirical research identified factors and conditions that had contributed to the current situation. This chapter draws on a range of perspectives and proposes to explain why 'it hasn't changed at all,' and considers what could change.

7.2 Background to Policy Findings

During the fieldwork phase, the complexity of policy development, formation and implementation began to be comprehended; it became clearer why policy was slow to be amended or to change. As interviews progressed, it seemed that all roads led to funding; therefore, it appeared that everything and nothing might happen based on additional state resources being leveraged. However, whilst increased public funding for HE may appear to be the panacea for addressing the complexity of part-time, flexible HE, it also offered a simplistic explanation for continued inaction on part-time. Nevertheless, it posed a reflexive question, should this study focus on establishing causal links between PTF, its status, current policy initiatives and the lack of state funding? Consequently, an additional interview that focused exclusively on funding reforms of HE was scheduled. In addition, the research questions were revisited and revised to consider to what extent policy had changed and why policymakers and those that influenced policy had renewed interest in PFT higher education.

7.3 Discussion and Analysis

The main themes identified from the analysis of the findings are outlined in figure 2 below. Themes were sub-divided to include sub-themes linked to the main theme, these are highlighted in a diagram at the beginning of each section.

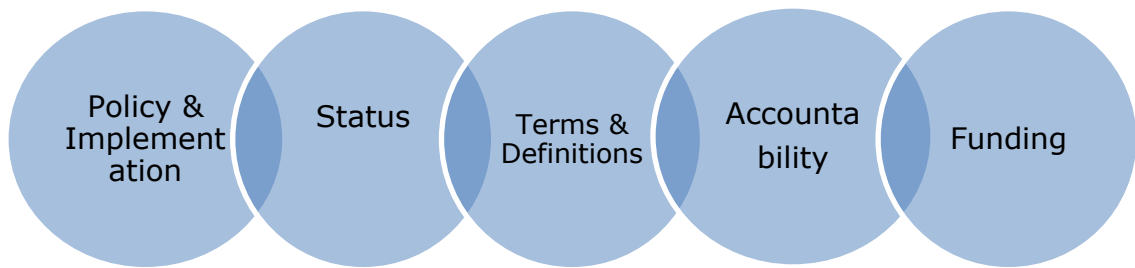


Figure 2. Policy themes

7.4 Policy and Implementation

This theme emerged from the analysis of findings where participants explicated the process of changes in direction to strategy or policy. Furthermore, it highlighted factors that had inhibited the progress of several aspects of PTF higher education. Findings indicated that reform of policy could be complicated and very slow to achieve. An examination of the data showed that while part-time, flexible learning was increasingly relevant within HE policy this did not equate with having parity with the mainstream in terms of funding. Initiating change to the funding of HE was more complex and seemingly unachievable.

There were several reports which had identified the need to address the inequities associated with part-time, as well as reform of funding and HE. In particular, the National Strategy for HE (2011) acted as a framework that shaped; institutional compacts and national targets for HE including part-time. The national strategy informed the agenda between the DES-HEA and HEIs in terms of planning and achieving national targets. The 2012 'Flexible and Part-time higher education' Report was produced in response to a recommendation contained within the Hunt report, and consequently, there was a need for the HEA to up-date the DES on progress, which was explained as;

'The Hunt Report had a recommendation around part-time and flexible learning and a need to look at this area again and policy and provision around that.' HEA 2

Nevertheless, the policy analyst noted that the HEA report acknowledged a shift in;

'the policy thinking around the importance, value, and place of part-time education in a broader second level education system.' HEA, 2

However, an earlier policy document Open and Flexible Learning, which was a precursor to the Hunt report, had aimed to influence the forthcoming strategy document. Though this 2009 document was 'adopted in its entirety' by the HEA, and influenced the strategy report (2011), implementation of the recommendations it contained proved more complex. The challenge of bringing a report to fruition and trying to implement changes to policy was outlined by one of the authors;

'I mean the meeting at which it was presented, I presented it to the HEA, and we were very pleased about that because the HEA adopted it, in its entirety because it had a series of recommendations and then as it happens so often. I suppose what you have to remember is that the people change. That's this is always not a problem; it's a reality. That it's great if an individual or a group of civil servants or public servants can push something through to fruition. But when they leave, if it hasn't gone into the system, there will always be a gap again. And I think that is all we've seen; I was so sure it was going to run in 2009. Because it had been accepted'.SA,1

Further, the author confirmed that the Open and Flexible learning (2009) document had influenced the strategy report;

'There are a couple of sections in the Hunt Report where if you read them you can see that it's taken for granted that this is policy. That in other words, it is policy, that there should be no distinction in funding pro-rata between full time and part-time. But it just doesn't happen'. SA, 1

The senior academic who authored the 2009 document acknowledged that changing the funding system was very challenging and difficult to achieve.

'The system is very, a system, especially financing of education, is so embedded in a certain way. Like if you happen to be the lucky initiative that is embedded in the annual estimates, you could go on forever as we know....But to get a new approach in is so much more difficult'.SA,1

Several policymakers noted the intractable problems associated with reform of the system, also the complex nature of changing policy and institutional practices. The following extract from one participant who had examined the funding issue and HE reform in depth;

'In the Hunt review we didn't really get down to these fundamental questions of how the system was going to change, to open it up so that the way in which things happen that I could enter at any stage, I could exit, I could come back again, I could leave you and go here. I could discover that the best programme in this was over there and I'm near to here, even part-time work, I want to go over there. Or I could say right, I'll do it in modules'.... 'the place is coming down in reports recommending all of this but the actual system well first of all its not looked on as a system so I mean you need to reform the funding system but you also need reform of, significant reform of, I hate using the word delivery because it likens it to a service, but you know what I mean, that the way in which it happens right needs to be fundamentally' ..'altered'? 'yeah', Indep.Consultant

The PO in the DES acknowledged that there were several reports and plans with recommendations and actions around part-time specifically to increase the numbers and address inequity.

'In the national access plan we have a commitment to look at the funding issue for part-time students, and that's just a recognition that there is an inequity there that something if money was available, something could be done'. ... 'There's also like a Cassels report, the expert group on future funding they have a similar recommendation in it as well that this issue needs to be looked at.' PO,1

In making changes or prioritising the funding problem, the PO indicated that lobby and pressure groups could effect change;

'Policymakers often have to respond to the constituency that shouts the loudest, and there are as I said there is a number of groups out there, you know, mature students, post-grads, lone parents, Wake Up SUSI who are all clamouring for addressing some perceived inequity in the system.' PO1

The difficulty is that part-time students are not a homogenous group. Furthermore, they were dispersed within and across HEIs. Additional constraints on policy making or policy change were further outlined,

'So the Minister makes priorities we inform those priorities as best we can, but ultimately it is a function of the minister to set overall strategic direction for the department.'PO,1

7.5 Status

The status of part-time flexible in public policy and its importance to the strategic development of HE has changed. This theme explored the importance of part-time flexible for policy makers as an examination of policy indicated attention focused on mainstream HE for years. In that sense, this theme considered the extent to which PTF learning was peripheral to full-time HE. Also, this category included sub-themes related to; counting part-time, which highlighted the lack of data surrounding part-time student's enrolment and retention within HE. The absence of data highlighted the poor visibility and status of PTF within policy.

As I argued in chapters 2, 3, and 4, part-time featured in higher education provision for several decades, but it was not embedded in mainstream policy. Irrespective of its form or content part-time was peripheral to full-time HE, and it was stated by one participant that there was little enthusiasm for it amongst policy makers. The marginal position of part-time was acknowledged from a review of the data also, in particular, a senior

staff member at the HEA noted that until recently part-time education was not a priority and though widening participation was established as a key feature of HEA policy the tendency was to focus on targeting access for;

'Young people, I would say the focus of policy was upon school leavers and still is to a great extent but maybe to a somewhat lesser extent.' HEA, 1

Similarly, the DES confirmed that

'all of our efforts, a lot of our efforts are focused on full-time students, and we haven't been as active in relation to part-time students.' PO,1

The findings indicated that attention focused on full-time students coming from school into HE and state policy was orientated to meet the needs of full-time students. However, it was acknowledged that HE was increasingly diverse also that part-time had featured within HE for years. For example, one senior academic and former Vice President of Teaching and Learning within a university (whose entire academic experience and qualifications were obtained as a part-time student) acknowledged that part-time featured within HE for many years.

'What I miss is the experience of being a full-time student. But I don't see anything wrong with that. So it's, I suppose I'm very conscious that part-time learning is not a new phenomenon'. SA,1

Participant responses confirmed that the status and visibility of part-time from a policy perspective was poor. In addition, HE lacked the required flexibility to accommodate part-time. Drawing on personal experience, this participant explained that in the past being a part-time student had negative connotations, as there was a stigma attached to being part-time within the University system.

'Even though we did exactly the same course, programme, same lectures as the full-time students, we could not get an honours degree we could only get a pass degree in the NUI system. And there was always a stigma about being a part-time student,' because even still among our colleagues there is a perception that if you were

a part-time student, somehow you aren't intellectually as able as full-time students... 'Now that's gone now. There's nothing like that now; there's no stigma any more attached to having achieved your degree via the part time route'.SA,1

Part-time existed on the margins of HE for a long period; it was neglected in policy and practice. Noting that part-time was a feature of HE the HEA policy analyst reflected on the lack of development in this area,

'It has never gone away as an issue part-time and the ongoing, I suppose wish that there would be more of it in Ireland because we are not at the same level as other countries in terms of the balance of the number of students we have in part-time.' HEA,2

The former senior academic understood that while part-time had been elevated and its position had improved in policy terms, there was still a way to go before part-time had equal status with full time,

'They're coming closer to having equal status from a policy point of view now. There's no doubt about that but not as you say from a financing point of view yet'. SA, 1

7.6 Counting Part-time

The low status and lack of visibility of part-time were confirmed by the failure to record students in official data. This was due largely to how funding was allocated to HEIs. The HEA allocated the annual grant for full-time students; however, part-time students were not counted. As this senior academic noted:

'The statistics show Ireland as having had the lowest number of part-time students going way back. That doesn't mean we didn't have part-time students; we simply didn't return them. We didn't; either the government didn't count them, or when we returned them, we accumulated them into a statistical figure that was equivalent of a part-time figure'. SA,1

The peripheral position of part-time was noticeable specifically from a funding perspective, here again the HEA noted that

'After I joined, for instance, part-time students were not included in our funding model demonstrating from a funding and policy point of view part-time was not seen, as I suppose not seen as mainstream if I could put it like that'. HEA,1

Elaborating on this point further it was noted that regarding lifelong learning,

'I mean the phrase was there but, the lifelong learning, but there was less sense of its importance. We now have a much better sense of I think of lifelong learning and the effect that people need to change their skills, to upskill at various times throughout their lives and the need for education and training to accommodate that.' HEA,1

By 2011 the situation had changed, part-time, flexible learning was closer to having equal status with full time from a planning and policy perspective. However, it was acknowledged that funding had not caught up with an evolving policy. This shift in policy focus was described by a senior academic;

'If you look at the policy documents going back ten years, five years, the Hunt Report, there is a general acceptance now that there, that the flexibility that is required to enable learners to come in and out of the system if you like and to come in at their own pace and to be part-time learners and to have recognition of prior learning, all of it. All of that as policy has been accepted, but the practice has not caught up if you like, with the policy. Nor indeed has the funding.' SA,1

7.7 Retention

Another sub-theme related to status was the subject of retention. The issue of retention was explored with policy-makers, and in particular, six participants indicated that there was a gap in data where part-time, flexible learning was concerned. Progression amongst part-time, flexible cohorts

had not been captured, and there was no data available to track retention. Within the HEA the response to retention questions was to acknowledge the failure to act on this matter,

'No, we just haven't done so. I know I think it wouldn't take a great deal of effort on our part to do so, but our focus, as a focus so much policy, has been on full-time students. HEA 1

When asked about counting and tracking part-time students in terms of retention it was noted that;

'It's harder to do. So but I think we could do it currently we don't'.
HEA, 1

The DES recognised the absence of data as a systems failure and that there should be some change in practice.

'I mean as we're supposed to be doing evidence-based policy making, we do need to have that data because if it were to show that part-time students are more committed, let's say to their studies in terms of completion rates and progression rates than full-time students I think that would be an important signal in terms of funding mechanisms....so if the information was to show that part-time students were actually more successful in completing their studies significantly successful that may signal the need for a policy change...'
PO,1

However, doubts were raised about the quality of the data available and whether the HEA would have been in a position to conduct an analysis based on limited and inadequate data. Accordingly, the policy analyst noted;

'To do a retention study they had to be sure they had the best quality data possible it may have been to do with the quality of the data,'
HEA,2

The lack of robust data was also raised by the senior academic at one University who noted the failure to count part-time students for annual returns to the HEA. Accordingly, it was argued that since part-time

students were not included in the funding allocation model, this raised questions about the statistics in this area, which were considered to be unreliable.

'They're not being registered as part-time. I would be looking very cautiously at any of the Irish research over the past ten years or twenty years. Simply because we didn't distinguish between full-time and part-time'.SA,1

7.8 Terms & Definitions

This theme discusses changes that resulted from the prioritisation of the term flexible over part-time. Sub-themes include an examination of the drivers shaping part-time, flexible learning, its role within HE and the utilitarian aspects associated with lifelong learning.

Interviews with participants confirmed a shift in policy discourse away from the long-standing established term part-time toward flexible as the preferred overarching label encompassing a range of different modes of learning. Terms and labels previously employed to denote modes of learning, and types of learners across HE were subject to change. As the HEA noted, 'policy isn't static.' The term part-time has been superseded by flexible which is used increasingly within policy reports (HEA 2009, 2012) furthermore it is the preferred term. Participants described flexible learning as an umbrella term capturing; part-time, open and distance or remote learners and was used in a series of public reports and policy documents in Irish HE. At the HEA flexible learning was described as;

'I would see flexible learning as incorporating part-time but also incorporating distance learning. Part-time to me is very much a similar education and experience to fulltime but done on a part-time basis if you know what I mean, taking less credit. Whereas flexible learning has elements of I suppose any time any place anywhere in that, students learning I mean at its ultimate, in a completely flexible way whether it's 2 am in the morning or 2 pm in the afternoon.'
HEA,1

Similarly, the view expressed at the DES indicated that the term part-time had become a subset of flexible learning,

'As I say, in our most recent policy document, we have part-time as a subset of flexible. So flexible from the policy perspective does include – it encompasses part-time, it encompasses online and the modular as well.' PO,1

Whilst it was acknowledged that flexible was the overarching term in circulation, in reports and policy documents, there was an element of uncertainty when it came to definitions and employing labels. The PO within the DES described the position in this way;

'So the terminology, we use the words with considerable profligacy in terms of – but I'm not sure we're exactly clear sometimes on what we're talking about- as to whether we are talking about flexible learning including part-time learning or whether part-time learning is something different'.

The PO acknowledged the difficulty in separating the terms,

'When we talk about them we kind of know that we want something opposed to full-time, but the extent to which we have interrogated the accuracy of these terms in our heads for what we actually mean, I'm not sure that we have done that, purely because I don't think we've had the time to really to reflect on it'. PO,1

In contrast, the following definition was employed at the HEA,

'Flexible is open, and distance and E-learning and all of this and part-time is your more traditional, you come in at night and sit in a lecture hall.' HEA, 2

It was also evident that when participants were invited to consider part-time and flexible, it was recognised that whilst these terms overlapped, differences existed between various modes, including full-time and part-time.

'I'd say part-time is probably a longer version of full-time, that's putting it too simply though. What are the main differences between

full and part-time higher education? I mean, yes, part-time is full-time education done over a longer period of time. It also can be for many people I think it is a way to access education while still holding on to a job, supporting a family, getting on with other aspects of your life rather than being in education 24/7....of course part-time students tend to be older, tend to be more mature, I think that's probably true'. HEA, 1

The more evolved definition arose where a senior academic, defined part-time within a post-Bologna context.

'I suppose in my mind it's not so much, you know part-time isn't half time, part-time is part-time. And that's why to me at this point before 1999 I might have felt differently but because there's such a clear mathematical measure that determines what a one year programme is. In other words, learning that merits sixty ECTS credits, then I'm not sure there's such a huge difference any more between part-time and flexible. .. I feel how you actually accumulate your credits isn't a big issue any more', ' So I do think that I wouldn't make a big issue now as I might have in the past between part-time and flexible and online, you know? To some extent, certainly part-time and flexible are interchangeable in my view. I mean online is simply to do with the method by which it's delivered — the delivery method. Online, on-campus, they're methods of delivery but flexible and part-time, I don't think there's a huge because part-time as long as you don't think of part-time as half time. 'SA,1

7.9 Economic and social drivers of policy

The purpose of part-time higher education and what was driving policy and developments in this area were critical questions posed to policy makers. Though the questions were separate, the intention was to offer opportunities to facilitate responses from different perspectives, whether; pragmatic, theoretical, or strategic. Generally, the drivers were identified as specific policy documents such as the NAP, National Strategy 2030, National Skills Strategy, Action Plan for Education, or strategies such as

Springboard. These documents and initiatives provided the framework or goals in the form of targets that were to be achieved through established accountable mechanisms such as; institutional compacts and the Systems Performance Framework (SPF), which had become the mechanism by which the DES monitored outputs in conjunction with the HEA.

In response to questions regarding the drivers of part-time higher education, the following areas were identified: addressing the skills agenda, widening participation, providing access to HE for targeted groups, supporting the economy, and encouraging competitiveness to provide for increased employment. Through this approach, issues of social cohesion and inclusion would be addressed. It was forecast that a demographic bulge was due to impact HE in ten years and as the existing infrastructure could not accommodate all those seeking access to alternative part-time options would need to be in place. In this context the role of part-time, flexible learning was to: provide flexible learning in response to labour market needs, in particular up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities, offer access to HE for diverse and targeted groups, address lifelong learning, and accommodate the increasing numbers of students who would want access to higher education other than through traditional full-time modes.

The nine participants indicated that part-time, flexible higher education had become an increasingly important strand within HE strategy. The DES position was confirmed, as stated,

‘It is a conscious policy objective to grow the number of part-time students.’ PO, 1

Summing up the primary reasons why part-time was important the PO identified three key drivers,

‘I think it’s the economy, its demographics and its equity as well’,
‘however it was argued that societal changes meant ‘that the traditional student entrant to full-time education at 17 or 18 is no longer the norm’.PO,1

According to the HEA;

'Well from a policy point of view, I suppose there is a national strategy. Currently, there is the third national access plan, which also provides a specific target for part-time learning. I think it's for the order to 22% or 23%. And then, of course, a very valuable contribution in this space has been the success of Springboard programmes which and I think a very significant proportion of those programmes indeed the majority of them are part-time programmes'.
HEA,1

The economic and social factors associated with part-time, flexible learning were consistently acknowledged. For example:

'I think from the policy-makers point of view, their interest in part-time learning opportunities has probably been driven more from an economic perspective. In other words, first of all, to get people off the unemployment register, that would be one motivation. Secondly to have a better educated workforce or a better educated available workforce and then of course there's the issue of getting the mothers, the single mothers in particular back in to the workforce and we've seen social welfare policies focusing in that direction and all of this you know, reminds policymakers of the need to have various routes of access into higher education. Now I would argue of course, it should be much wider than that. There should also be, it shouldn't be just an economic incentive'.SA,1

Nevertheless, the economic imperative was consistent across interviews and confirmed as government policy.

'Like, I know there's various kind of EU and international commitments or nods in this direction but primarily I think it's more domestic, in terms of it is economic drivers in terms of we need more graduates, more highly skilled graduates in certain areas and then also we have more people coming down the tracks who are going to enter higher ed. The system can't cope with them all going into full-time. So we need to build up the part-time components as well',
PO,1

In relation to any theoretical underpinning of policy, these were described by the policy analyst as,

'I suppose the wider theory is I suppose the ongoing social and economic development for Ireland, like the bigger canvas there. I think part time, now I don't know if this is a theory or not, but it certainly had a new impetus during, we are still in a state of austerity but during the severe periods of austerity from 2009/10 onwards. We had 14% unemployment a lot of the employment were actually unemployed were people who already had qualifications but let's say architects or people who worked in construction, engineers, who needed to develop their skills in order to get back into the labour market. And there was a lot of people looking at it from the access perspective. A lot of people who never went to higher ed, possibly didn't even finish second level education who also needed, they were no longer able to access jobs in the same way, they needed to up skill to access jobs.' HEA,2

7.10 Lifelong learning; utilitarian focus

Increased interest in part-time, flexible learning related to its potential responsiveness to the needs of industry, the labour market and society. The CEO at the HEA summed up why part-time was relevant;

'What drives an interest in part-time education is, and I think this is going to increase you see, is an increasing sense about the need for people to be able to access education at different times of their lives,'
'I keep coming back to the point that people are going to need to upskill and reskill many times during their lives'.HEA,1

The employer body maintained that part-time, flexible learning had clear links to employment;

'The National Training Fund, whereby employers contribute to that 0.7% of payroll costs, it typically generates 300+ million most of which is actually used at the moment for labour market activation stuff. We would like to see that re-profiled now towards in-employment training, which by extension is also part-time. I've got

to work on assumption here, which isn't necessarily, but when you're talking about part-time learning you're, we're primarily talking about learning related to the work place. It obviously isn't all. Education has its own intrinsic value.' Employer

The economic-instrumental perspective associated with part-time should not be underestimated as it provided a mechanism for reskilling and upskilling especially during the downturn where it was associated with labour activation schemes such as Springboard. In addition part-time addressed access to Higher Education in particular through the IoT's where there were greater diversity and regional spread.

7.11 Accountability

Over the course of the interviews it became increasingly clear that for policy makers policy was driven by strategies and targets such as those articulated for example within: the national access plan (NAP), service level agreements (SLA's), system performance frameworks (SPF), institutional compacts and to a much lesser extent by theories, ideas, or detailed empirical research. Though policy makers were able to state that consultation with stakeholders featured in the formation of policy initiatives and reports, in practice, the emphasis was to achieve; goals, targets, and indicators set out in various government reports. The HEA and DES were accountable through these structures and mechanisms for policy implementation.

At the HEA the details of how policy and reports were actioned to ensure targets were achieved were outlined by the policy analyst,

'I suppose at the moment how policy is being driven in higher education is that there is an overall system performance framework for higher education that has been developed by the department of education and skills that is very much flowing from the Hunt report we are still in a national strategy for higher education for 2030 so if you like that is the over-arching framework, and then within that system performance framework you will have different key objectives

and key performance indicators and one of them, for example, let's say in Hunt, would be the need for further development of policy and funding for part time and flexible higher education.' HEA,2

'The system performance framework is the over-arching objectives of the department in this area where they set what they would like to see and then the HEA will report to the department. We have a service level agreement with the department and we will quarterly, the senior management team in here will, more often, depending on individual issues they will be meeting more often than quarterly but let's say the overall system performance, service level agreement that ties into the system performance framework, they meet at least quarterly, the two sets of senior managers and review, report, update where things are at,' HEA,2

7.12 Funding

Funding remains a central theme for part-time flexible higher education. In terms of the data generated funding continues to be a complex subject and included several sub-themes. Nevertheless, there was consistency in participants responses, funding was acknowledged as critical for the expansion and development of part-time flexible learning.

'Everything, I suppose pivots in one form or another to funding'.
Union

Funding is not straightforward nor is it a singular issue as it included multiple strands that were linked and overlapped. These are explored through several sub themes: 1) Fees, student support and inequity, 2) Incentives and constraints 3) Expanding PTF, 4) Reform of HE Funding, and 5) Springboard. The findings suggest that proposed developments involving expansion of flexible part-time HE were not aligned with funding strategies. While it was desirable to grow part-time flexible learning, there was a lack of clarity as to how this could be achieved in the absence of changes to the recurrent grant model, or without targeted initiatives or reform of HE

funding. It was unanimous amongst interviewees that without additional financial incentives, any future growth, and development of flexible part-time HE would remain ad hoc. The significance of the funding factor was key to change, as highlighted by the DES.

'Obviously the part-time learners are one of the groups that we would like to target under our National Access Plan, but the real difficulty in the area of part-time students, and you'd be familiar with this from you work anyway, is really just the funding issue.....but really the funding issue is the nub. If you scratch away all of the other things that's essentially what it comes down to', PO,1

Similarly, senior staff at the HEA confirmed early on in the interview,

'But underlying all of our difficulties is the F word, is funding.' HEA,1

Likewise, the importance of financial matters was underlined by the Union, 'So I suppose in one form or another, it does boil down to money. Directly or indirectly and in terms of how to address that I suppose it's how I was saying earlier. In terms of having the data available in terms of impact, doing the lobbying making the submissions, being involved in the consultation processes'. Union

Also, the VP noted the lack of equity inherent to existing funding models,

'The funding models are still not such that they equally reward part-time and full time learning'.SA,1

7.13 Fees; supports and structural Inequities

It was acknowledged by this group of participants that funding and access to resources was a source of inequity where part-time students were concerned. It was impossible to discuss funding without taking account of the implications arising from the failure to; extend the free fee scheme, provide grants or offer part-time students access to support services and resources such as the Student Assistance Fund (SAF).

The significance of funding and fees was confirmed by this senior academic,

'It is a hugely important issue. Hugely important. I mean that is the key. To be honest, that is the key. I mean if our policies genuinely regard part-time and full time as interchangeable, equally respected etcetera, etcetera of course all the grants, all the fees, whatever financial supports are available for full-time students should be proportionally available for part-time students. I say proportionally because obviously, I wouldn't expect that they would be available on an equal basis extended over a longer period'.SA,1

The HEA recognised the inequity where part-time students were concerned;
'But they're not supported, they're not able to access grants, they're not able to access the student support systems, the grant for students with disabilities.'HEA,1

Similarly, the employer body echoed the disparity;

'The HEA 2012 Report and that had all those recommendations around you know, discrimination in terms of HE fees, modes of delivery, guidance. I mean, there was nothing in that report that we wouldn't fully endorse.' Employer

There was an acknowledgement that fees were a source of inequity nevertheless there were divergent views as to whether changes to student funding should apply to all part-time students or those targeted under the access initiative. There was an element of shoring up part-time so that support in the form of free fees and access to facilities would be available to some but not all. This perspective is captured below;

'If there were changes in funding, it would be changes in student funding. Nobody is resisting that, changes in funding in particular for the most vulnerable most disadvantaged part-time students, just at the moment the funding just isn't there'. HEA,2

Elaborating further on this subject;

'We don't go so far in this as to say free fees for all, there are no free fees for all students now anyhow, but that there would be complete

parity between full time and part-time in terms of the fees structures, I don't think that's the drift of policy at the moment'.HEA,2

Similarly, the PO in the DES maintained that establishing who would be supported and targeted were the funding situation to change in terms of supports was complex,

'One of the difficulties though with the part-time students, because we have been crunching this over, even in terms of just aggregating who amongst the part-time students you would be targeting...so, for example, it's not the case no more than full-time students, that everybody needs assistance, no not every part-time student requires support from the state to engage in education. For many people, it is a choice; it just suits them from a lifestyle perspective and their resources to actually engage in that.'

However, there were challenges associated with providing supports for targeted groups;

'But when you actually try to find a measure that will target the cohort, well, first of all, you've got to agree the cohort you should be targeting and then to actually identify the measures that will actually service that cohort.' PO,1

7.14 Incentives and Constraints

Funding for HE provision is allocated by the HEA to state-funded HEIs through the annual recurring grant. There are several independent and private providers operating across the state so whilst not all HEIs are funded by the state those that are, are required to meet targets set out in consultation through institutional compacts which are linked to the national strategy for HE. The HEA does not track how HEIs spend the annual grant, it is a block grant, and until recently, the grant allocated to HEIs was not inclusive of part-time student numbers.

'As I say it's a principle of the funding model, it's a block grant; the university decides how to do it. What we are increasingly seeking to

do is to monitor outcomes by reference to agreed targets hence the institutional compacts.' HEA,1

In addition, the focus of the current funding model toward full-time mainstream was acknowledged,

'Okay, our funding model, our annual, the recurrent grant application model does include part-time students but has only done so for the last couple of years, which is progress. But the overall funding of the system, both capital and recurrent, is very much focused upon school leavers because of course, we have the, we have the advantage, and we have the challenge of a growing population.' HEA,1

The failure to include part-time student numbers in the recurrent grant had significant implications for part-time in terms of sustaining or growing provision and making it valued within HE. The consequences were recognised by one senior academic who explained the situation;

'But it's a huge issue because apart from anything else the universities have no incentive. The Universities themselves apart from the individual students, I mean if they're not going to be paid, as they weren't, I mean if the block grant or the capitation or whatever, if the financial package is not recognizing part-time students, it makes no sense at all. And that was what was happening'.....The university wasn't allowed to count those students. We weren't allowed to count them as part of our returns and that's why if you look back at annual returns and how many part-time students were part of the annual returns, of course, there were none'.SA,1

Participants were asked to consider factors that would assist growth also what would inhibit growth in this area. The issue of funding in the form of the recurrent grant or capital spend was central to the growth and expansion of flexible part-time HE. In addition, there was a lack of coherent policy to support initiatives at ground level. IoT's were identified as having a stronger role in terms of widening participation due to their mission and regional focus nonetheless growth of part-time was linked to generating income for HEIs'. Diversity in enrolment amongst IoT's was

acknowledged by the Union many of whose members were also employed within such HEIs;

'The IoT's have a very good history in access for students from traditionally under-represented groups, and the statistics show that you're much more likely in an IoT to have a student from a disadvantaged group or from, or be in receipt of a SUSI grant than in the Universities' Union

Nevertheless, the HEA acknowledged the development of PTF was ad hoc and lacked organisation;

'So that part-time education is being done by the institutions in a sense in a kind of an ad hoc way whenever they can, in a sense squeeze them in, evenings and so on. And that's not really, you know, it isn't an ideal, it's far from an ideal way to run a higher education system which should look at the totality of the kind of provision whether it's part-time flexible or full-time and have a much more I suppose for want of a better word, holistic approach to both it's organisation and funding'.HEA1

7.15 Part-time as a Source of Revenue

There was also an acknowledgement that part-time HE provided resources to HEIs and had become a valuable source of much-needed income. The CEO at the HEA confirmed that funding was a factor in the development of PTF;

'But you see it comes back to funding again, the resources. For many institutions, part time students are an important revenue source and absent that revenue source they would be in an even greater difficulty than they are', HEA 1

'They have very little difficulty in filling their lecture halls and consuming the staff resources they have with full-time students. To the extent that there is so much part-time education in the sector at all is I suppose credit to the institutions that say, look this is part of the offering we want to make to the broader community. And while

there may be some financial benefits to it, I think the more likely driver is that sense of its part of their mission. And that would be very strongly in the IoT sector but also in the university sector’.

‘Part-timers are a source of funding. I’d also say that certainly say the Institutes of Technology I’m speculating here a bit now; I would say that part-time education was part of their philosophy if you like...would have had a long record of people coming in in the evenings doing evening courses and so that tradition was there.’
HEA,1

Similarly, whilst IoTs were acknowledged as having an important role in supporting and growing PTF the role of funding as a means of income generation was noted by the senior policy analyst:

‘Some institutions are very strong in this space, particularly some of the Institutes of Technology. A very large proportion of their provision is part-time, but it is fee-paying part-time’ however it was also noted that much of this activity was driven by the need to generate revenue;

‘Fee-paying students but its income, in very straightened financial circumstances it's proved to be a source of income’ HEA, 2,

The lack of incentive to support the growth of part-time was acknowledged within the DES,

‘Well I think a lot of it is going back to financial, but I mean financial is undoubtedly, there’s a capitation payment obviously per student that’s paid to the recurrent grant model at the moment, but there’s no incentive for a HEI to take on additional part-time students at the moment, no financial incentive’. PO,1

When asked to identify what challenges faced HEI in expanding part-time, flexible learning, funding was the primary constraint ...

‘Well the funding one is the clear one, I don’t think there’s a need to go over that again, but you can’t do anything in this area meaningful

unless you address the underlying structural issue and that is going to cost significant money.' PO,1

Similarly, a senior academic believed that without an incentive, the situation would remain unchanged.

'To be honest, its money. Without the slightest doubt, finance. That's what I keep saying okay. If you ever look at the evidence over the last forty, fifty years, all it requires is one carrot, and they all jump for it. So, financial incentive works unbelievably quickly in education. Education is ever so slow to change, but you put a financial incentive in place for almost anything across the secto. So to be honest, there's no mystery'. SA,1

Although the absence of funding and the financial incentive was viewed as key to bringing about significant change, there were strong views that HE could ill afford to disregard on-going changes within society and to employment. Changing work patterns meant that there would be a growing demand for up-skilling and re-skilling over an individual life-span. Here a senior staff member in the HEA summed up the situation and argued for HE to be responsive to a changing labour market;

'How essential it is in the future for people to be able to access education and training at various points in their lives that universities that don't provide that kind of service are universities that certainly will not grow.' HEA,1

Arguably there was an inadequate supply of part-time, flexible learning opportunities across HE. When asked if there was an adequate supply of part-time options the response from the employer body was emphatic;

'No. No, there isn't. Absolutely not', Employer

Expanding on why there was inadequate supply the employer representative stated that the issue of funding had been fudged in the Hunt report (2011)

'It's the bit the Hunt Report didn't address about student funding and all that kind of stuff.' Employer

Expanding on this subject, the participant noted that the expert group examining future funding of higher education was picking up,

'The bit that Hunt fudged on and they explore this part-time thing and they conclude A) that there's been bottom-up initiatives in terms of how education's delivered. You know whether it's blended online type of offerings. But by and large, it hasn't been approached, this, systematically in institutions or across the system.' Employer

While inadequate supply was a factor limiting the development of PTF there was a lack of clarity as to how to grow provision in the absence of funding. Furthermore, neither the HEA nor DES indicated that all HEIs were required to provide part-time, flexible learning rather the sector was made up of variety and diversity. Institutional compacts provided a mechanism for dialogue around national priorities, but difference across HE was encouraged. Indeed diversity across HE was desirable, not uniformity.

'We want diversity'...we don't expect every institution to do everything if I could put it like that. So it may well be that some institutions would be much stronger in the area of part-time and flexible learning now and that isn't necessarily wrong'. 'So the government has set out a framework with seven broad objectives for the sector, but we don't expect all institutions to be able to address each of those seven objectives. What we do expect is institutions to say given where we're at, and given what our mission is these are the ones that we would propose to focus on'. HEA,1

This view is echoed by another staff member at the HEA,

'But the way it worked at the moment was if there were the six areas and let's say, for some institutions, access, and life-long learning was a secondary priority, but they justified that. Our priority is research, and they came out category one. They came out, so you know as long as it's justified..' HEA,2

The theme of diversity across HEIs was also noted by the PO,

'So I think as a department, and with the HEA, we are keen to encourage that differentiation, but I mean if everybody goes down the same route well then you're not differentiating anymore.'PO,1

In the absence of increased central funding and as policymakers supported institutional diversity across HE then the future development of a coherent response to part-time flexible was tied to reform of HE funding. Findings indicated the funding situation was altogether more complex and politically unpredictable and hinged for better or for worse on the implementation of the 'Strategy for future funding of Higher Education '(DES 2016). The so called 'Cassells Report' appears to be the cavalry riding to the rescue though when it will arrive and in what shape remains unclear.

7.16 Springboard: Labour Activation and Flexible learning

Interviewees were asked about Springboard as both a government funded labour activation initiative that addressed part-time higher education but also about the implications of such strategies and their impact on HEIs. Within the DES and HEA, it was clear that Springboard was viewed as a very successful model and strategy, in terms of its responsiveness to labour market requirements and providing access to upskilling and reskilling in a targeted way. Furthermore, there was evidence to suggest that whilst the specific initiative was targeted and short term it represented a model that could be recast for up-skilling and labour market needs in the long term. Below the HEA set out why Springboard was an appropriate model for PTF HE;

'Springboard per say may well disappear because some of its, and we would all hope that some of its reason, that much of its reason for existence would disappear, that's to say unemployment, that nevertheless, all the elements of Springboard that I mentioned there as positive would lead to a situation where a Springboard type funding programme would be part of the suite of funding available to the higher education sector.

'So Springboard can morph away from a situation of very high unemployment because we're getting out of that space but keep the elements of Springboard that are very specifically skills focused, that have strong engagement from enterprise and that, you know are quite flexible in terms of students accessing them.'

'I mean we have a good model there and I think we should preserve it as part of, as I say as a suite of models of provision in higher education. And I think it's to repeat myself; it's particularly relevant and useful in the context of part-time and flexible learning'.HEA,1

Springboard was identified as a mechanism for increasing the numbers of flexible learners.

'One of the benefits of it is it's flexible in terms of it can respond to the emerging needs of the labour market and so on but those issues are very helpful and beneficial, but really the structural issue underneath it is that part-time students don't have access to the free fees initiative and don't have access to the student support scheme'.
PO, 1

The policy analyst was positive about Springboard and noted that IoT's were leading in this area,

'Target initiatives like Springboard help. Some institutions are strong in this space, particularly the institutes of technology. HEA,2

From the HEA and DES, perspective Springboard proved successful providing for up-skilling or re-skilling for students; however, the temporary nature of the initiative made it a cause of concern for one participant in terms of planning and strategic development. The benefits and limitations of a targeted short term initiative such as Springboard for HEIs and students were observed from a strategic position.

'Springboard is slightly different because Springboard is more short term, it's more immediate, and it's more targeted. And it has had a positive effect I've no doubt about that. 'Springboard could be gone next year, and it's very, those once-off. I mean I understand why

they're necessary, but they're very unsatisfactory from an institutional point of view. The uncertainty around them is very unsatisfactory. And they're contradictory because as I say on the one hand you're supposed to have a clear three or five-year strategic plan and you're going to be rewarded for it, and on the other hand you don't know whether or not your funding is going to come or not. They're necessary. I'm not saying they're not necessary, but I do think we could be, there could be less of an ad hoc approach to these kinds of labour activation initiatives'.SA,1

7.17 Reform of Funding and HE

The strategy document from the expert group on reform of HE funding had been initiated in 2014 by the then Minister of Education and Skills Ruairi Quinn. The report was undertaken to address the complex subject of how to fund HE in the future and to convince the wider DES and other government departments of the urgency of this matter. The earlier strategy document (DES 2011) had not addressed funding and in the meantime, severe financial cuts together with increased pressure in terms of projected growth in demographics had exacerbated the situation.

From the outset, the chairperson of the report indicated the intention was to reframe the topic of system funding to make a case for why as a society, there was a need to fund high quality HE. In addition, the formation of the report involved a process of consultation involving focus groups and position papers to move away from stakeholders positioning or lobbying for sectoral interests. The chairperson outlines the situation here;

'And that's why the title of the report is quite deliberate on I think it's all around funding our national ambition right. So the argument in the report was essentially that of two things, one, that we are coming out of a very deep crisis, not just an economic crisis but societal crisis. And therefore we need to rebuild the capabilities, not just for the economy but for people generally and ourselves as a society to be able to deal with all of the issues that are going to be facing us for

the future and that higher education was a key enabler of all of that and higher education and further education. So that was the approach so it was, in other words, trying to get away from it being just the institutions, the HEA and the Department to why as a society should we fund higher education. Indep. Consultant

It was argued that society or, more specifically, the state was the primary beneficiary of participation within HE, and therefore, it should be the main funder of HE. However, several options were examined in terms of different funding models. A holistic approach to reform of funding was undertaken rather than singling out special treatment for one cohort. Nevertheless, there was a note of caution where 'free at the point of access' was concerned as to whether this would provide for increased participation given the substantial cost of maintenance for students when in higher education.

There was a note of optimism expressed that the funding situation would change and that issues underpinning structural inequity relating to part-time would be addressed as the recommendations from the expert group on the future funding of HE was accepted. However, it was also acknowledged that for a long period very little had changed concerning PTF policy;

'I mean I think they have to, they will have to address it, you know, whereas before it was only peripheral, you know. Like I would have taken a deep interest in it because my whole background was working in the trade unions, so you know we would have been continuously in that upskilling, access to further education space and would have been very involved in the White Paper and Tom Collins and all of that. But we never, you were just sort of knocking away at it and chipping at it, but it was never, you never got any sense that there was any enthusiasm for it'.Indep.consultant

7.18 Summary Findings

Findings indicated that (1) there was a lack of a holistic or systematic approach to part-time flexible policy and this impacted provision (2) funding was a key determinant defining growth and development of part-time,

flexible learning (3) PTF HE was increasingly tied to labour market needs and addressing competitiveness. (4) The HE system needed to change, to adapt to be inclusive of flexible learners. Barriers to growth and increased participation in part-time, flexible learning were structural and systemic.

7.19 Conclusion

Findings indicated that whilst the numbers of part-time students had not increased significantly in the last twenty years, changes had occurred to policy. HE policy focused on full-time school leavers for several decades, and there was a lack of interest in part-time, it was peripheral to the mainstream. However, the situation changed in recent years. Targeted initiatives and strategies were introduced to widen access and increase diversity within mainstream HE. Coinciding with the National Strategy Report, the HEA changed how it counted student numbers to include part-time, flexible students in annual returns. There was no change to how part-time and flexible learning was funded, and structural inequities continued to separate full and part-time HE students. A fragmented short term approach shaped policy where part-time flexible HE was concerned.

Findings indicated that despite initiatives and targets which proposed to increase part-time flexible numbers, the continued absence of grants and fees for students inhibited growth in this area. It was recognised that part-time, flexible students and programmes provided HEIs with a source of income and that revenue was valuable, particularly as state funding reduced during the downturn. Further, within a binary HE system, IoT's were viewed as having made a significant contribution to meeting targets in relation to part-time and flexible learning.

The state-supported labour activation initiative Springboard was a pragmatic instrumental short-term targeted scheme that enhanced part-time participation in HE and had the potential to be reconfigured in future years as a flexible learning strategy to address up-skilling opportunities linked to labour market needs. Several policymakers indicated the importance of lifelong learning as a means to address widening participation

as well as providing opportunities for re-skilling and up-skilling. However, findings indicated economic factors acted as main drivers in shaping policy.

Reform of HE remains contentious, particularly in the context of reduced state funding. Researchers argue that neo-liberal influences have impacted negatively on how HE is managed; nevertheless, it was also evident that HE needs to be inclusive of part-time, flexible students. Increased state funding alone is not the solution to providing for an inclusive HE system; besides, policies, practices, and structures needed to change within HEIs and across the sector.

8 Chapter Eight: Lecturers' perspectives on teaching part-time flexible students in Irish HE

8.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the findings arising from interviews with thirty lecturers from eight HEIs. As discussed in previous chapters the research commenced in the context of an economic downturn, when fiscal constraints resulted in spending cuts across HE (DES, 2016), which coincided with increased student numbers, a decrease in staffing, prompting deteriorating working conditions amongst academics (Clarke et al., 2015).

This small scale research project included thirty lecturers ($n = 30$) from eight HEIs; therefore, findings are tentative though arguably they are relevant at a sectoral level (Blaikie 2010). Notwithstanding methodological arguments regarding generalisability (see chapter 6 for discussion on generalizing) this, case study aimed to generate empirically-based findings that could offer insights into; pedagogy, curriculum, and lecturers experiences of teaching part-time older students. In particular, the research explored approaches to teaching and examined the extent to which, if any difference existed between teaching and supporting full time and part-time students. An examination of policy and literature on part-time flexible HE provided a framework for interviews. The following overarching concepts were informing interviews; firstly, pedagogies for practice, and inclusion in HE, and secondly; retention, social, and academic integration.

Regarding terminology, throughout this chapter, the term lecturer and teacher are used interchangeably; lecturing is synonymous with teaching and research (Fleming et al., 2017, Clarke et al. 2015, Boyer, 1990) the academic role assumes in principle that teaching should be research-led and informed within HE.

8.2 Findings and Analysis

The following five themes (figure 3) and sub-themes provided the framework for representing findings from lecturer interviews.

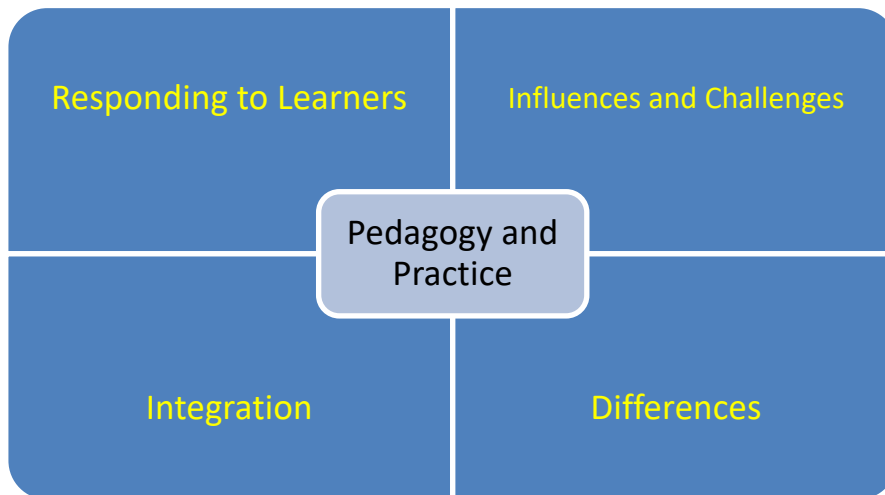


Figure 3. Lecturer themes

1. **Pedagogy and Practice**
2. **Responding to Learners;**
3. **Influences and Challenges**
4. **Differences; full-time and part-time students,**
5. **Integration,**

The themes emerging from the findings; all relate to three overarching concepts; firstly, pedagogy, secondly, inclusion and thirdly, retention.

Themes overlapped, for instance, there were a number of aspects to 'know your students' which requires understanding their; expectations, skills, and needs, however getting to know students, or attending to the relational aspect of teaching takes time which in turn overlaps with; student profile, diversity and time constraints associated with part-time flexible learning, which also overlaps with challenges to teaching. Similarly, support is a cross-cutting theme linked with; differences, influences, and retention.

Table 11 below indicates the lecturer, their discipline domain, and the HEIs' they were situated within.

Table 11. HEIs, Lecturers & Disciplines

| HEI | Code | Location | Lecturer | Field - Disciplines |
|--------------------------------|--------------|---|-----------------|--|
| Independent College X 1 | Indep. Coll. | Dublin city | 10 | CS, Data Analytics, Web Design, Human Resource Management, Learning, and Teaching, Early Childhood Education |
| University X 3 | Uni. 1/2/3 | Dublin, (D) Leinster Region, (L) Munster,(M) | 12 | Arts, Youth and Community Studies, CS, Business, Management, Corporate Management, Teacher Education |
| IoT's X 3 | IoT 1/2/3 | Dublin city, (D) Greater Dublin (GD) & Leinster Region, (L) | 6 | Early Childhood Education, Law, Business Management, CS, Art and Design |
| College x 1 | Coll. | Dublin | 2 | Art and Design |
| Total | 8 | | 30 | |

8.3 Pedagogies and Practice

At the outset of the interview, lecturers were asked about their educational philosophy or approaches to teaching, the intention was to encourage participants to consider whether they had evolved guiding principles, or where their teaching was informed by theories or ideas, to expand on these in relation to practice (see Table 12). Lecturers identified a range of approaches to teaching, in several cases theorists such as; Friere, Bell Hooks, Vygotsky or philosophies informing adult education such as;

andragogy, constructivism, critical pedagogy were acknowledged as influential to teaching practice.

Table 12. Pedagogy and Practice

| Lecturers' philosophy and approaches to teaching across eight HEIs. | | |
|---|--|---|
| HEI | Philosophy – Approaches | Strategies used when teaching part-time flexible students |
| University | <p>Experiential, dialogical, small group teaching, peer to peer, Friere, Knowles, Roger, Hooks, Mezirow, Adult Education, Critical pedagogy, Constructivism, Student-Centred, students first, students as independent, students as graduates, learning from students, Learning that is relevant to work, to professional practice, Learning that can be applied to the workplace, Learning that is instrumental Flipped classroom, No surprises, Manage students expectations from the outset, No specific philosophy,</p> | <p>Students bring experience, Facilitation of learning, Discussions, Peer Learning, Peer presentations, Small group teaching and group work, Managing diversity, Students lack confidence, Evening time impacts on learning, Utilise practical examples and case studies, Recognise that students are working and juggling responsibilities, 4 respondents indicated no difference in approach to teaching part-time, students were treated the same as full-time taking into account their external commitments, Older students get stressed about assessment and exams,</p> |
| IoT | <p>Adult education theories Rogers, Friere, Knowles,</p> | <p>Praxis model, teaching through discussion,</p> |

| | | |
|--------|--|---|
| | <p>Experiential Humanistic approach, Constructivism, Student-centred, 'Affirm the ability of the student to engage in making meaning with the educator,'</p> | <p>PT students are easier to motivate, more willing to participate, Students bring knowledge, PTF have fewer contact hours, Students need support, More diversity in part-time includes BTEI Very committed as they are paying for themselves, Use of practical examples</p> |
| Indep. | <p>Andragogy, treated as adults, peer learning, based on equality, Behaviourism, Constructivism, Vygotskian, Student-centred, Experiential, Learning by doing, scaffolding and learning step by step, Pedagogies that maximise student engagement, Students are invested in their learning, Importance of managing expectations, Achieve the learning outcomes, Flipped classroom, Different approach depending on the students,</p> | <p>Discussion, small group teaching, lots of interaction, group discussion, discourse, active learning, more inclusive, PT students more experienced, they want a challenge, motivated, self-directed, students decided to return to learning, Students are paying for themselves, Use of case studies, peer learning, PBL, PT students are more challenging, demanding, Respond to students adopt a flexible approach, Flipped classroom provide online supports, No specific strategy for part-time, treat each group differently, (2) PT students ask more and</p> |

| | | |
|---------|---|--|
| | | deeper questions. They are more advanced, Active learning, |
| College | Small group teaching and learning, individual tutorials, use of project briefs to drive learning, | Peer learning, Students are focused on using the time effectively to support self-directed learning outside of class, |

The following extracts indicated a range of theoretical perspectives informing the lecturer's approach.

'I believe learning is social. So I have a big emphasis on peer learning and that it's constructive' Indep. L1

'I'm very much student-centred, constructive. That's very much the approach I take. I don't like didactic teaching where you just impart information and don't get anything back from the class'.IoT L3,

'There's a whole set of theories; Frierian theories in particular but even Parker, Rogers all those people who talk about caring for the learner, putting the learner at the centre of their world and building your learning and your teaching around your learner rather than around the subject' Uni. (L) L3

'So the philosophy, the overall philosophy has been that they're adults, they want to be there. They're very participative; they like participation that they can learn a lot from each other. And, yeah, they can often teach me things as well.' Indep.L5

'I would be in a philosophical sense, inherently constructivist. Which means, I would affirm the ability of the student to engage in meaning-making with the educator. However, recently, I've become a little bit concerned about that particular philosophy and the way that that educational philosophy engages or lines up with neo-liberal philosophies'.IoT, (D) L5

However, in several instances, no particular theory or philosophy was proposed; rather, the lecturer had evolved their teaching practice through experience and in response to learners and context. A senior lecturer described setting out on a lecturing career;

'I suppose the notion of you know getting some lectures on how to teach, wouldn't have even been thought about, so I kind of made it up as I went along. And you know in my own philosophy of teaching, I suppose, no surprises, so from day one the students know exactly what is required of them' Uni. (D)L5

In another University a lecturer described his early experiences as a lecturer;

'And you know it's a cliché but its true none the less that I think I learned a lot more than my students did in the first couple of years. And part of that learning was just how poorly equipped I was to think critically about knowledge and pedagogy'...Uni. (L) L4

Some interviewees were reluctant to name a specific theory as there was no 'set strategy'; rather, the lecturer aimed to meet the needs of the learners and to make the learning experience student-centred.

'I do tend to teach every cohort differently, but I don't go in with a set strategy,' Indep. L7

In many cases, lecturers had learned from 'doing,' nevertheless, they had over time evolved from practice and experience considerable pedagogical knowledge of what worked when teaching. This approach is outlined by a female lecturer;

'I myself learn by doing and talking and would draw on research that says that students learn best by doing that as well. So I always think about what is it that I want the students to think about or know or understand and try and design the best way of achieving that. Where possible, I do the least amount of talking if possible'. Indep.L8

Through a combination of intuition, the knowledge gained through experience, dialogue with colleagues, feedback from students, lecturers established what worked, and where appropriate adjusted their approach to engagement with learners.

Here a male lecturer reflects on his initial experiences as a teacher, educator;

'I mean like anybody when you start teaching I was in a sort of sweaty panic half the time. I don't know if it was all you know, wonderful critical reflection, but I do know in between things, between cycling or between centre and centre or desperately trying to find something that might work. Which is really how it goes. I've realised just how strange and structured and overdetermined what we call education is'. Uni. (L) L4

A deep knowledge of the subject and in many cases, the application of learning to practice provided the basis for an approach to teaching and learning. What appeared central to making the teaching and learning experience successful was, knowing what worked and often this was established by; assessing the learning context, getting to know students, also, content knowledge, materials, methods, were trailed and tested, much like a problem to be solved. Further, lecturers demonstrated tacit knowledge and understanding of what was effective when engaging students indicative of reflective and evaluative strategies being employed when teaching.

A lecturer described a critically reflective, self-assessment approach to teaching.

'How useful is this to them? What do I change? And trying to understand what works in the classroom' Uni. (L) L4

Lecturers proposed many approaches and strategies, but there was no generic approach, no formula for teaching part-time, flexible students. Nonetheless, lecturers were unanimous in their view that part-time, flexible students were; more vocal, more engaging, asked more questions, and were challenging as well as demanding of lecturers. Furthermore, as part-

time, flexible students were older, often employed, lecturers needed to manage their expectations, therefore being clear from the outset about what type of commitment the programme or module involved was important. In many cases, lecturers noted that learning needed to be relevant and applicable as courses were linked to industry or employment. In addition, as the cohort was older, then students brought experience and knowledge which was valued and harnessed within the learning context.

8.3.1 Learning that is relevant, work-based and practical

In many cases, lecturers spoke about making learning relevant to learners, often as the programme was either a professional qualification linked to employment or because participants expected to enhance their employment prospects. Teaching strategies the lecturers employed included; dialogue, discussion, forward feed using readings to provide for class-based discussion, newspaper material to prompt discussion, examples of cases, making the subject more topical, as well as the use of problem-solving and problem-based learning strategies. Through explication of their teaching, it was evident that lecturers recognised what was relevant to the learner, and how best to engage students. Furthermore, approaches to teaching were not static but were constantly reviewed, reflected upon and updated.

The following extract relates how a female lecturer described approaches to teaching students working within the health sector;

'So my philosophies would be about taking the learning and looking at how it can be scenario-based and how it can apply in the workplace. Making it as practical and accessible as possible', Uni. (M) L9

A senior lecturer described the materials and resources she used when teaching on an executive programme;

'My materials contain a huge number of examples, illustrations from the real world, mainly for example from newspapers or from any reports, so I like to kind of, I like the students to feel this is actually relevant to what I'm doing so it's kind of very practical' Uni. (D) L5

The prevalence of instrumentalist approaches was observed across a range of disciplines. For several lecturers finding 'what works' to engage students was central to teaching and learning. A male lecturer outlined his thinking regarding lecturing part-time, flexible students and why it was necessary to make it relevant;

'Well, I think for part-time students the thing is to keep it relevant. Keep focused, but keep it interesting. They've got busy lives, they've, they're coming from work very often. They're sitting in class on a winters' night for three, four hours. They've got assignments. They've got multiple modules, and they've all got assignments, exams they're working towards. They're just starting back into it. If you keep it relevant and keep it real and keep it interesting, you engage them; you bring them along you can relate the information easier. If you just go through theory, you lose them on the first night'. Uni. (M) L7

The following perspectives indicated teaching and learning that can be applied to work-based situations or where work practices encouraged student engagement. A female lecturer describes sourcing various materials for use when engaging students;

'I work very hard to find real-world applications of the theory. I also look for not only academic literature but possibly soft literature that will make the work come to life for people. I want them to be able to apply the theories in practice when they go back to the front line because this is not a philosophical exercise'. Uni. (M) L6

Another female lecturer indicated how students use their knowledge and experience to inform the learning situation;

'There is plenty of scope there to allow the mature students to bring in what's happening in their workplace and use them as case studies and talk about sort of wider economic finance matters in a broader sense and allow for some really rich interactions'. Indep.L4

8.3.2 Active, Experiential & Peer-Learning

Peer-based learning and experiential learning featured prominently for many lecturers teaching part-time students. Dwyer (2015) noted the importance of active teaching and learning as influential factors in student engagement and persistence, particularly where there was increased diversity within the classroom. A lecturer explained the importance of peer learning within teaching;

'So a lot of peer learning happens in that situation, and I will try to base it then as much as possible on people's experience and as much on creative methods and all that as I possibly can,' Uni. (L) L3

Similarly, a female lecturer draws on students' experiences to encourage engagement,

'Now I also try and carve out time in class for people to give their experiences because the health sector is very broad and our students are coming from acute and non-acute, NGO's and private hospitals and so there's an experiential learning that they can share between each other' Uni. (M) L6

In this instance, the lecturer was describing a post-graduate executive business programme where students come with knowledge and experience. The approach then is reflected in knowing how to manage and engage such a group;

'They're in their 40's '50s, and 60's so these are a highly experienced group of students and so peer-to-peer learning is much more a feature in that class, and so I try to approach it not as the kind of 'Sage on the stage' strut your stuff but more as a kind of facilitated discussion'. ... 'I won't stand up in front of them, I sit down, so I'm one of them, and we are having a debate and a discussion of the issues and of course because they're mature students they jump into that debate without prompting whatsoever' Uni. (D) L5

In the following case the lecturer recognised the value of class discussion so plans ahead using on-line methods to forward feed technical material which can later be discussed in class time;

'I teach computer programming; it's a very practical subject. So there's very little sort of preaching from the front of the room. I flipped my classroom whereby I prerecord any of my lectures I'm going to do, introduce new topics via video and students watch them at home before they come to class because I believe then you sort of free up the class time to do more interesting things'. Indep.L6

Lecturers were asked to describe the students they were teaching and consider whether the cohort included flexible, distant, and non-traditional learners. The intention was to encourage reflection on student profile and mode of learning as a factor influencing teaching and support for learners. Findings indicated lecturers were responsive to student needs as outlined in the next section.

8.4 Responding to learners: Know who you are teaching

While subject knowledge and content were central to teaching being familiar with learners, their experience, knowledge, and expectations were equally factors in shaping the teaching and learning experience. What emerged clearly from the analysis of the data was the importance of the relational aspect of teaching, which was evident either explicitly or implicitly across interviews. A male lecturer stated his view on the relational aspect;

'Teaching is a social activity, but what I mean is sort of okay, how are we? Check-in'. Uni. (L) L4

Building relationships with students have been identified as important to student engagement and persistence (Dwyer, 2015). Findings in my case study indicated, that lecturers spend time getting to know students, checking in with students, finding out where they were at in terms of their experience, what fears, concerns they had, how they were feeling, levels of energy and being responsive to the time of day and year, where students might be tired or struggling to concentrate, so they were better able to respond and make learning relevant and engaging for students. However, part-time, flexible learning was bound by time and curricular constraints; it

was difficult to build relations between lecturer and students due to episodic or irregular interactions. A female lecturer acknowledged the situation and explained;

'I'm particularly conscious that they are attempting to study and hold down a full time job and family life at the same time' Uni. (M) L6

Another female lecturer describes the process as;

'So every group asks me to be different. Sometimes it takes me a little while to work out what they need fully. Once that awareness kind of happens, we're off then'.Indep.L1

Similarly, a male lecturer outlined his approach to getting to know a student group;

'I would always take about three weeks with a group before I feel that I know about how I'm going to handle them. You know, based on a variety of factors. I think it's a little bit more episodic, so I probably have to spend a little bit more time doing the sort of framing a social and making it social'.Uni. (L) L4

However, time imposes constraints on how lecturers get to know their students as a female lecturer indicated;

'There an awful lot going on in a person's life and you sometimes don't get to build up as much of a rapport because they come in, they study, and they leave' Indep.L8

8.5 Influences and Challenges

There were many factors identified by participants as influential to shaping the teaching and learning experience, such as; student profile, diversity, access to supports and time constraints, which I will discuss below.

8.5.1 The Student Profile

The profile of students unexpectedly demonstrated a heterogeneous mix of; age groups, abilities, and motivations amongst the part-time cohorts. Lecturers described students as; older, mature, committed, motivated,

focused, and experienced. Such factors were influential in shaping approaches to teaching and learning as acknowledged by a female lecturer;

'They're all very, very knowledgeable' IoT, L3

A male lecturer who had experience of teaching full-time and part-time students recognised that;

'The part-timers are better. They're far superior. They have more life experience'. Indep.L3

Lecturers acknowledged part-time student motivation;

'Part-timers are more interested. And in general, they're more interested in the class and also in completing their assignments on time and to a higher level'. Uni. (M) L8

'They're the most diligent, the most hard-working, they ask the best questions, they're the most...And all of that sort of stuff you really want?' Indep.L3

Another lecturer described why he preferred teaching part-time students;

'From my own point of view, you know if you offered me two, 'Which class do you want to teach? Do you want to teach the part-time class, or do you want to teach the day time class? I will plump for the part-time people every single time...it's much more satisfying from my point of view. I'm in a class of 50 people who want to be there instead of being in a class of 18 people who have to be there' Indep.L10

Teaching within an IoT, this female lecturer noted;

'I find my students contextualise their studies pretty quickly based on their life experience or their work experience' IoT. (L) L3

Also, for many students', juggling a number of responsibilities was challenging; however, this factor was taken into account in the learning context. Lecturers teaching part-time students enrolled in degree

programme recognised the challenges for students. Lecturers in IoT's acknowledged the situation when they noted;

'All of them are in full-time employment, okay? All of them. A lot of them have their own business, or they have, or and even they'd have families' IoT. (L) L1

This view was confirmed by another lecturer;

'Most of them are juggling work, family, and study, so there's a huge juggling act going on there' IoT (L) L2

In many cases, lecturers responded to student's situations providing greater flexibility where possible in the submission times for assignments. A female lecturer describes what happens within a typical academic year and how to respond to student requests;

'If and it happens all the time, they're trying to juggle work, study and family life. All the way through the year there'll be someone who's getting married, having a baby, going to weddings, being a bridesmaid, all of those things, we will reschedule assessment for them and things like that because that's part of their lives' Indep.L5

8.5.2 Diversity

Similar to full-time HE, the profile of part-time is inclusive of diverse cohorts. A recent study of the changing work environment in HE (Clarke et al. 2015:9) three-quarter of academic staff, 'indicated that student diversity had increased' however, the supports available within mainstream HE do not extend in the majority of cases to part-time. Part-time flexible HE included undergraduate as well as post-graduate students; in some cases, students were returning to HE having completed undergraduate programmes others have opted for Springboard programmes. Often students had been outside of formal education for many years or would be identified as non-traditional entrants coming through a range of 'access' initiatives such as PLC, VTOS or BTEI. Also, students coming from designated disadvantaged target groups such as travellers featured within part-time. In some instances, lecturers found students either to be fearful;

of academic writing processes, being assessed, or of failure. Several lecturers identified literacy as an issue among part-time students. Again the implications of increased diversity and concerns with academic requirements are not new earlier research identified these same issues (Fleming, Murphy 1999, Merrill, 2001). There was increased demand for pastoral care, encouragement, and ways to enable students to become more self-directed. Such findings concur with research undertaken by Clarke et al. (2015:9) whereby it was 'noted that students presented with a greater variety of needs, which in turn increased the pastoral aspect of academics work.' Nevertheless, despite the diversity evident amongst part-time students, often access to appropriate supports was not available but was limited and patchy.

The level of diversity within part-time undergraduate HE and the implications for teaching and support have been overlooked (HEA 2012). Here a lecturer described a typical part-time undergraduate cohort;

'It's a standard adult education classroom. I don't think it's a standard higher education classroom'. Uni. (L) L4

Lecturers within the IoT indicated that the student population was diverse and this meant in some cases that students required encouragement and access to supports, and particularly with academic writing and research. The two extracts below were from lecturers teaching in an IoT within Leinster which catered to students on the main campus and at an outreach campus;

'Sometimes I suppose, some adult learners and mature students and that, there is a, because maybe they've left academic studies earlier, so sometimes the whole academic side of studying, for some can be a challenge'. IoT (L) L2

'There are definitely challenges with literacy, I find. The academic style or writing doesn't always come easy to students, and there's a fear of returning to education, particularly in the defence force groups

where they haven't been in education for maybe thirty-odd years. So there's a big fear of failure with adult education'.IoT (L) L3

A male lecturer teaching undergraduate students on a flexible degree programme within an IoT acknowledged;

'Almost all of my students have literacy problems. They all have some inbuilt fear of education from prior experience, and they don't really have a fear of art or art language, but the big issue without a doubt is literacy, and it is absolutely terrifying for lots of different reasons.' 'So the art is used to teach literacy is used to teach art'. IoT (D) L5

Similarly, lecturers within University programmes found students had difficulties with assessment and academic writing as explained below;

'Yeah, and also maybe experience in writing academically. Haven't done so in many years' Uni. (M) L8

'..And this stems from fear, that almost the first night, people want to know what the assessment is' Uni. (L) L 2

'I've found that several of them have concerns about the calibre of their academic work'. Uni. (M) L.6

8.5.3 Time

Lecturers recognised time as a factor influencing the teaching and learning experiences of part-time students. There were several aspects to this sub-theme, including; lecturers found they had less contact time with part-time students, which reduced interactions with students, or curtailed the learning experience. Also, their time with students could be fragmented, episodic, making it difficult to form or build relations with students.

Female lecturers recognised the challenges of time when they stated;

'Yeah. I mean I think at part-time that you're a lot more aware of the time constraints' Indep.L. 4

A lecturer teaching law in the evening acknowledged the challenges where there was a limited time in class to engage with students;

'The biggest problem or challenge I have is time; just getting through the entire syllabus with twenty-six weeks, is a big stress. And there just is not enough time,..' there's no opportunity for tutorials or just..taking one's time doing things in class or class groups', IoT. (L) L4

'Their time is precious, and so I find you probably try to demand a little less of them outside of class as you're, you know, and make more of their time in class you know because they have a lot going on' Indep.L6

Besides, often part-time courses were scheduled in the evening, this impacted on how lecturers engaged with students to keep them motivated.

A female lecturer describes teaching in the evening time and why active approaches were necessary;

'A lot of discussion, a lot of group work, a lot of active learning. You're fighting against the fact that they've been working from nine to six and are coming in. And a lecture, that sort of didactic lecture style just doesn't work particularly if you have the slot, so we deliver six to eight or eight to ten, and for the eight to ten slot, you really have to keep it as active as possible'. Indep.L8

Another senior lecturer argued that the later time frame impacted significantly on learning;

'Under no circumstances am I going to take the 7.30 to 9.30 slot, I take the 5.30 to 7.30 slot and its nothing to do with me not working late or anything like that, it has to do with the fact that by 7.30 they are absolutely just, you're getting nothing out of them...so the timing of the class at night does make a difference'.Uni. (D) L5

This lecturer observed that time pressure meant that students were reluctant to engage in new or innovative approaches to teaching,

'Their time is precious. They want to get to the point, they want to get straight down to education' Indep.L6

In another case, the limitations of time meant that assessment was tailored toward individual assignments as noted by this female lecturer,

'And we don't emphasise an awful lot of group assessment because we know on top of everything else that it's difficult for part-time students to actually make time to meet in order. So we do have one or two but that's it'. Indep.L1

Lecturers noted that students were 'time poor' they did not have 'time to waste' and often were under pressure due to work and other responsibilities. Hence they juggled and needed support to manage time and achieve the module and programme outcomes. A female lecturer within a university describes the situation;

'I think the difference really for the part-time students is also, I think, trying to support them to participate given the multiple balances that they are trying to do in their lives. They are trying to balance work and work commitments; they need to make a living, trying to balance usually people come back they're that bit older. So they have this whole set of sort of life commitments that they have to balance as well as then their demands of college'. Uni. (L) L1

Within another university programme it was observed by a female lecturer;

'They have, I've noticed they have problems with time management, and it's about scheduling the work that they do outside of the class very carefully. Or else carving out time within class so that they have a clear understanding of the expectations'. Uni. (M) L6

Finally, it was observed by lecturers that students with time constraints tended not to socialise within the HEI; rather their time was structured and focused on course-based activities though not wholly academically focused; nonetheless, there would be less time for social activities. The lack of time for campus-based social engagement was acknowledged by this lecturer;

'..but the part-time students really don't have a lot of time. They might be here two or three nights a week, so coming in a third or fourth night is really very onerous. So there are a few opportunities provided by the students and the student clubs and societies'.Uni. (L)
L2

The constraints imposed by time were acknowledged by Merrill (2001) in an earlier UK study and, more recently, by Thomas et al. (2012). This theme remains relevant to the discourse surrounding flexible provision, adult learners, and persistence.

8.6 Differences: teaching part-time and full-time students

A variety of perspectives on the theme of the difference between teaching and supporting full and part-time emerged amongst lecturers. Firstly; several lecturers stated that there was no difference, that students were treated equally regardless of mode; secondly, where difference was acknowledged this was associated with the profile of students, scheduling of courses and gaining access to supports, thirdly, a recurring issue separating full and part-time students was the complex subject of fees.

Several lecturers were keen to declare that full and part-time students were treated the same, and their approach was grounded on equity and quality. A senior lecturer highlighted her experience;

'...In my own mind, I'm not all the time thinking, 'oh, these are part-time students,' these are just students that I'm teaching, and I'm trying to teach in the best possible way.' 'I don't in my mind have that distinction, part-time, full time. You know students are students. I mean it used to be, we used to have a night degree, and I used to teach in it, but my department was very good, I wouldn't say all other departments were as good, but my department had a philosophy that the night students should get the same quality of experience as the day students'. Uni. (D) L5

In another university male lecturers commented on their experience of teaching full and part-time students;

'I don't draw a distinction at all between them, but I am very conscious that within the institution, the predominant method within the institution is to go by traditional lectures, and I know that this is at variance with what most of my colleagues would do' Uni. (L) L3

Here another lecturer explained how students were treated equally;

'...But that isn't fundamentally different to how I approach any other student group' Uni. (L) L4

Secondly, differences noted by several lecturers related to the student profile, where part-time students were older, returning to education after a gap, also their motivations differed from full-time students. In addition, part-time courses were scheduled at different times of the day to full-time students placing constraints on levels of interaction with staff and other students. Students returning to education often required; support, reassurance, clarity about assessment, equally part-time students were acknowledged as experienced, challenging, and engaged. Research into adult learners in HE has found similar outcomes (Merrill 2001). Lecturers identified a range of factors as influential in determining an approach to teaching. Here a male lecturer highlights the social dimension;

' I think it's a little bit more episodic, so I probably have to spend a little bit more time doing the sort of framing a social and making it social,'. Uni. (L) L4

Another lecturer recognised mature student experience as a factor;

'So with the postgrad classes it's not with the part-time or full time, but it's with the more mature classes you've got more active learning and particularly with the Exec. Ed. programme you've got the more active learning because you're particularly in that class trying to draw out the peer to peer learning where they're learning from each other and not, some of those students would know more about certain things than the lecturers would know'. Uni. (D) L5

Alternatively, a female lecturer observed the need to be responsive to students;

'Not intrinsically. Obviously, I respond. So that is, if somebody's after working really hard all day, I really try and not to be too boring' Uni. (L) L2

A lecturer noticed that students often required reassurance;

'The part-timers are more motivated, the mature learners are more motivated, but they are more nervous. They have a lot more, actually because I have the qualifications in coaching as well, I actually find I spend a percentage of my time dealing with them either in class or offline and easing the concerns and the limiting beliefs they may have about their abilities and stuff. Whereas the younger students, the full-time students tend not to be as worried about that'. Uni. (M) L7

Whereas the following extracts recognised part-time student's engagement and motivation;

'Again, the only difference I really see is not from a teaching perspective; it's the assignments coming in. The quality of them and I suppose the part-time students tend to have higher quality assignments'. Indep.L7

'So the engagement is higher, their engagement with our systems, like Moodle and being in the library is higher, being around the college is higher and participating in class is higher and of course you now I do see the results and the performance and assessments, the performance in exams their performance overall, not just in my module, tends to be much, much higher with the part-time students' Indep.L10

'Absolutely, they're more engaged, and they want, they've the willingness to be there. The willingness to participate is very different' IoT. (L) L2

In several cases, the issue of limited supports and the need for direction and encouragement were identified as important to the part-time student learning experience. The following comment from a female lecturer in an IoT provided insights into student interactions with staff;

'Well the part-time students have less contact hours, so I suppose in a way the support that they get is crucial to them. So if I was to differentiate I would say they probably are less self-directed and more dependent on support,'. IoTL2

Alternatively, a male lecturer addressed limited access to facilities when he stated;

'The university would say it is very open to and very welcome of part-time, flexible learning, and non-traditional students and relative to a number of other institutions they are. But they still have, the establishment is set up to support the needs of the full-time student'. Uni. (L) L3

Thirdly, in terms of a difference, there was the issue of fees. The majority of part-time students pay fees; however, lecturers' perspectives varied, fees were interpreted as; a factor shaping student engagement, it necessitated a customer-focused response, or determined the need to deliver high-quality service. Moreover, fees were viewed as the basis of inequity comparable to full-time students; part-time students were required to pay fees. Also, they had limited access to supports and services within the HEI.

In the context of reduced central funding for HE, with increasing evidence of managerialism, fee-paying students generate a resource for HEIs. Customer service and high-quality service was in evidence in several cases. This lecturer outlined a post-graduate programme which required a 'Rolls Royce' response, nevertheless; the lecturer was clear that the intention was to offer a quality learning experience consistently across all programmes.

'Well if I could just say to you, my diploma in Corporate Governance, students pay €14,000 to do that programme, it's extremely expensive so I'm conscious that they're paying a lot and so myself and I have an administrator who supports me on that programme and I mean we

absolutely devote ourselves to be as unbelievably professional as possibly we can appropriate to the size of the fee that the students are paying to do the programme so a huge emphasis on professionalism in a different league of what would be, what would be the norm, '...they get, and they really are given you know a Rolls Royce service, which they should get because of the fees that they're paying. Now I mean, I would consider myself to give my second years a Rolls Royce service, but it's a different level'. Uni. (D) L5

The majority of lecturers were conscious of part-time students as fee-paying; this manifested in a range of observations including; recognition of the current situation as unequal or adopting a customer-driven approach; or recognition that students were more invested and motivated. There follows a selection of comments from different lecturers across HEIs which acknowledges the situation;

'I think you know the difference is probably, usually they're paying for it themselves, number one' IoT (L) L2

'Yeah, they're all paying for themselves or funded by their employer'.
Indep.L5

'And they're paying for it a lot of the time whereas day time and full-time students aren't. And therefore I suppose that in itself, that financial aspect of it, makes a difference to the way they engage with what's going on'. IndepL2.

'..Most of our students have to pay for themselves, so they're highly motivated. It makes a huge difference when somebody really chooses and sacrifices in order to come on a programme or a course'.Uni. (L) L2

Alternatively, two lecturers noted of their experience, that some part-time students took a customer approach to interactions with staff;

'An interesting discourse that can emerge with part-timers and I hear it every now and again, it's to do with money and the money they're paying and expectations around that...every now and again, you hear this interesting discussion, somewhat worrying discussion linking

back to money and that money should somehow entitle part-time students to certain things when I wouldn't treat them any differently'.
Indep.L8

'The students themselves can be a little demanding in that they're paying for their programme and they're very clear on that fact, you know? To a certain extent, some of them can feel as though you're here to deliver a service and we are in a way. They want to be taught sometimes rather than they want to learn, you know?'
Indep.L6

An additional perspective was the inadequacy of the University to respond flexibly to students experiencing difficulty with fees. In this case, the female lecturer outlined the problem facing part-time students who pay fees and the lengths required to tackle barriers to supports.

'But I think overall the big issues for part-time students is 1) that they have to pay fees full stop. I mean you could argue that the whole registration thing is a fee by another name anyway, but they have to pay fees, and there is no doubt that if they cannot find all the fees in the way that the university would like them to, i.e. in two tranches, they can find themselves cut off from services including moodle, etc, So, we try and plug the gaps in the system but it gets a bit wearing after a while to do that, and I suppose the other bit of it is that part-time students, now we did fight at faculty, and then I think at the executive level to try and ensure that as many of the services that were available and subsidised by the government for full-time students would also be available to part-time students'.Uni.
(L) L1

8.6.1 Challenges and Constraints

Several challenges both positive and negative were associated with teaching part-time students. Factors identified included; access to supports for students, academic workload, also the 'episodic' nature of part-time teaching. Further lecturers suggested that part-time students identify themselves differently within the HEI. While in a small number of HEIs,

lecturers believed sufficient supports were in place for students that were accessible; nevertheless, findings indicated there was divergence across the sector, indicating inconsistency. The following selection from male and female lecturers suggests that due to the very nature of part-time, there were challenges building relationships with students.

'It's more fragmented. It's just I spend less time with them really, 'Challenges, building up sufficient knowledge of people and their own sense of purpose and the things that excite them and the things that irritate them and pull them back. As I said there's the episodic thing', Uni. (L) L4

' I think the hardest thing is helping them because they're part-time, they're evening students. So seeing, giving them an appointment when you're, you know, I don't want to be here at eight o'clock at night to see a student'. Indep. L3

'But I suppose if you have a heavy teaching load you get tired it's one of the kind of real challenges that you actually get tired. And your students are tired too'. Indep. L1

A lecturer at another university noted how the part-time, flexible students were a distinct group,

'It does create a specific identity. The part-time students think about themselves differently. I think they're orientated to each other and the institution differently because they don't come in during the day, and they're not there with a predominantly young student body. They're not in the library as much at the same times as the core students'. Uni. (L) L4

The following perspectives indicated that part-time students were notably different in terms of motivation and engagement. This female lecturer noted that students' make their own decisions and were committed;

'I find teaching the part-time, flexible student more rewarding because I get a sense that they have made this decision for themselves. I find them a more demanding group'. Indep.L.1

The issue of student motivation was recognised by a lecturer who had experience of teaching fee-paying and non-fee paying students.

Why are they there? Why do they want to be there? So, why I mention motivation is because we mix paying customers and Springboard funded students on the courses I teach. So the motivation between the two groups would be quite different'. IoT (L) L3

Whereas a male lecturer found part-time students challenging, engaging;

'I much rather the part-time students because I learn a lot from part-time students and that's my challenge'. Uni. (M) L.7

8.6.2 Supports,

Currently, part-time students do not have access to a range of supports, including; reading writing supports, counselling services, disability services; such services are based around full-time day-time cohorts. Research undertaken in the UK, (Frith, Wilson, 2014:2) identified part-time mature students as a minority that required targeted supports 'to meet their specific needs' to assist in their integration and retention within HE. In this case study, local arrangements were evident in three HEIs offering access to some supports. In two HEIs the office for lifelong learning catering to part-time flexible learners, and student support services were accessible day-time and evening, providing students with administrative and other learning supports. Library facilities and college-based email were available to all part-time flexible students. Often it was found that the campus winds down and many of the facilities and supports available day-time were not available outside of typical day-time working hours.

A lecturer at a university within the Leinster region acknowledged accessibility to services and facilities;

'They're here when many things have closed down or are not available at full tilt'. Uni.(L) L3

These lecturers at an Independent HEI with large numbers of part-time flexible students observed;

...' But in terms of student support services, I don't think there's enough being done. I think there could be a little bit more done' Indep.L9

'They don't have the facility to drop in for feedback or for a chat outside of class time so it can be difficult to, because sometimes you learn an awful lot from those discussions'. Indep.L8

'Time constraints' 'time commitment would be the first thing'....' they're part-time they don't necessarily have a dedicated part-time support person'. Indep.L4

'They, I suppose, they do need a little bit more shepherding. They need to know what their assignments are from day one'. Indep. L7

Though the part-time student population was heterogeneous and diverse, access to college supports was patchy. Clarke et al. (2015:30) confirm the link between increased diversity, student heterogeneity, and the implications for teaching also the need for support for lecturers as well as students.

8.7 Integration

The following sections consider experiences of; integration, retention, and persistence, which featured in interviews. Lecturers' experiences and observations of part-time flexible students' interactions within and outside of the classroom were relevant to understanding approaches to integration and levels of persistence.

Several interview questions focused on how part-time students were integrated within the school-college also levels of cross over or interaction between full-time and part-time cohorts either formally or informally. In the majority of cases, there was little or no cross over between full-time

and part-time cohorts either socially or academically. Part-time, flexible students, were academically integrated within the school or programme but did not spend additional time on campus unless it was related to course work. Students identified with the school and or programme primarily. Due to time constraints, students tended to be less active in terms of social events, student union, etc. However, according to lecturers, this did not translate to impacting negatively on belonging or failure to complete.

A female lecturer within a University had some insights into flexible student's social integration;

'They're quite very much a group on their own. It's not that they would be unwilling or unable to do so, but you have to bear in mind they're here on a one day release, so that's quite an intensive programme, there's a lot of work they have to get through in that short space of time'.... 'I mean they're using the facilities of the building. They're using the library. They're eating in the restaurant associated with the business school, so to that extent they're not, I suppose really the difference is they're not socialising as students. They're functioning academically as students but not socialising as students. And that's not unsurprising'. Uni. (M) L6

At another university a senior female lecturer observed the following limitations to integration;

'So the campus is orientated towards the traditional cohort. So that is hard, there's absolutely no doubt at all about that'. Uni. (L) L2

Lecturers' perspectives on whether full and part-time cohorts mixed suggested there was no interaction between the groups;

'They never see each other to be honest. And they never kind of do any activities together, which is a shame because there is a big divide there at the moment'. Indep.L9

'Part-timers and full-timers are separate. Any of the colleges I've been involved in or seen, part-timers and full-timers don't meet.

They might meet each other around campus, but it's not a structured meeting of the same programme meeting up, no'. Uni. (M) L7

A lecturer in an IoT explains how students interact as a group but not within the wider college;

'They would study together and meet on Saturday mornings. And maybe meet in each other's houses, if they were doing a group project, of their own accord, they have to do this themselves. But I think there is no...there's a complete disconnect with the day time students'. IoT (L) L4

The findings do not suggest that part-timers were isolated and therefore more likely to 'drop-out' rather than whilst the structures and systems within the HEI were often less accessible outside of office hours nevertheless local practices prevailed ensuring part-time flexible students were catered for within the programme, department or school through administrative and other supports.

8.7.1 Retention

As argued in previous chapters there is no data available on the numbers of part-time flexible students who progress, withdraw, 'drop-out' from Irish HE. Unlike full-time students, the HEA has not tracked part-time flexible students in terms of progression (HEA 2010, 2014).

Despite the lack of data, lecturers reported high retention amongst part-time flexible students. This assertion was based on observations of students who successfully completed the programme or course of study over an academic year rather than statistical data. According to lecturers, it was more likely for a student to defer, take time out, rather than withdraw fully from a programme. Lecturers based their response on observation as many staff did not have access to data, nevertheless accordingly, very few, part-time students withdrew from programmes. When prompted to explore this further lecturers' experience of part-time students indicated that they were more likely to complete the programme of study due to personal and or professional commitments. In several cases, part-time courses were

undertaken for professional reasons as the programme was directly linked to industry, employment, or where students were committed to achieving the award in the expectation of enhanced employment prospects. In many instances, lecturers outlined strategies used to encourage and support students to complete or highlighted the lengths to which students would extend themselves to ensure completion.

The majority of lecturers indicated high retention; the following comments were indicative of typical responses to this question;

'I'd say retention is high. But that's, I don't have data for that. And I think that's due to two things. It's due to staff support, and it's due to peer support, I think'. Uni. (L) L4

'I find the Springboards are more willing to defer or withdraw than the people who have invested in'. IoT (L) L3

'Most, I think, I don't quite know the percentage but they complete their programme'. IoT (L) L2

Differing views emerged as to whether persistence was the result of engagement, teaching, and support or whether a combination of factors contributed to students' persistence. Lecturers noted that students should be challenged to extend their learning also quality teaching was important to retention. Several factors were identified as relevant these included; inputs provided at the institutional and or departmental level. Also, relational aspects were important to persistence, as was engagement through active teaching and access to external supports. Nevertheless, students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to succeed featured consistently.

In summary, the following factors were commonly identified by lecturers as contributing to retention and indicative of why students persisted:

- Securing a qualification and successfully completing it for personal (intrinsic) and professional (extrinsic) reasons,

- The relational aspect of teaching and learning where students felt they were listened to, and had access to lecturers that were encouraging,
- That the learning environment was supportive; there was good pastoral care; in the shape of a dedicated support officer plus the lecturing and administrative staff,
- Fears around assessment were addressed, and students felt they could succeed,
- Expectations were established clearly at the outset,
- That the learning was challenging and relevant,
- That the structure of the programme was flexible and responsive to their needs,

8.7.2 Persistence

Student persistence remains a complex issue that has been extensively researched. Where part-time students were concerned, lecturers' suggested a range of factors contributed to persistence; student commitment, motivation as well as an interest in career opportunities. The following selection of responses from lecturers teaching in different HEIs was typical of the perspectives found at interview;

'Yeah, I think the relationship part of it can't be underestimated. I think that when students encounter a team that are very authentic in terms of their wishes for their students and the supports that they offer their students, you know, it really kind of helps the students settle'. Indep. L1

'Well particularly this type of course people are genuinely motivated by advancing their careers....the vast majority if not all of them are interested in promotion. I've found that a very significant number of them are concerned about service quality in the best possible tradition of the public service....they are the factors that are motivating them to stay the course'. Uni. (M) L6

Equally the role of pastoral care and support from lecturers was a factor contributing to persistence as noted by the following extracts;

'So I suppose the thing is like we provide quite a lot of personal support and every student has a, you know there is a core member of staff responsible for each group'. Uni. (L) L1

'Well, I think it's to do with more than teaching. I think that's the main thing that obviously its, on a human level, we really do try to connect with students, but we have just amazing, like for the BA, we have a student support person who does, say study skills and helps with writing, and so on. So it's not just teaching'. Uni. (L) L2

'They like to think that you as their lecturer or their programme director care about them being here and succeeding, and if they can see that you're doing everything within your power to make their journey here a successful one, that keeps them quite engaged, you know?' Indep.L6

8.8 Summary Findings

Key findings emerging from the data analysis included;

- The student population was not homogeneous; there was evidence of increased diversity,
- Part-time students were very committed, motivated, experienced,
- Many part-time students pay their fees,
- Part-time students were more vocal and demanding of lecturers,
- The majority of part-time, flexible students remain separate from full-time students, academically and socially,

Nevertheless, lecturers were very positive about their experiences of teaching part-time, flexible students. Further, based on observation, it appears that part-time, flexible students were likely to complete their studies. The teaching and learning experience was characterised as; interactive, student-centred, experiential, and relational. Pedagogies that maximised engagement, active learning and participation were employed. An instrumental approach to teaching and learning was encountered across multiple disciplines; also critical theories and practices were evident.

Constraints that shaped the teaching and learning experience included; managing students' expectations, managing course workload, time restrictions, students' juggled multiple responsibilities and access to college-based student supports were found to be inadequate.

Findings indicated that whilst lecturers and programme staff aimed to engage, respond, and be inclusive in their teaching and in supporting students, often, the wider campus was not flexible or inclusive for part-time students. Such findings resonate with the outcomes of recent research (Merrill, 1999, Darmody and Fleming, 2009, Fleming Finnegan, 2011, Frith and Wilson, 2014, Clarke et al. 2015) and tally with the implications of increasing student numbers, decreased state support for HE, and the delay in implementing the Cassells report (2016). Also, the findings echoed Dwyer's (2017) assertion that active teaching and student-faculty interactions within the classroom were undervalued and under-researched in particular the contribution towards student integration and persistence.

8.9 Conclusion

In drawing together the findings from the lecturer interviews, several commonalities are evident. Firstly there was consistency in the approaches to teaching part-time, flexible students. A student-centred approach and responsiveness to learner needs were consistent in the findings. Active learning methods were used to engage students, such methods combined with pastoral care assisted in persistence. No formula for teaching part-time emerged; no one size strategy that might fit all 'part-time flexible students' could be detected, the variety of methodologies was indicative of the heterogeneity of the student profile. Diversity and inclusion featured prominently in how teaching and learning were approached and supported as lecturers had arrived at this understanding through experience and engagement with students.

Secondly, part-time, flexible students are not homogenous; similar to full-time HE cohorts, there was evidence of diversity. Access to academic and administrative supports were key themes emerging for part-time HE.

Access to supports was locally negotiated whereas full-time students freely utilise supports such resources were unavailable or inaccessible to part-time students. Several HEIs provided administrative supports to staff and students, but findings suggested there was no consistent approach across all HEIs. Findings indicated that inclusive campuses catering for part-time, flexible students in a manner comparable to full time had not been achieved.

Thirdly empirical evidence emerging from my study indicated high levels of motivation and retention amongst part-time, flexible students. Policymakers have focused attention on retention and progression of full-time undergraduates and lately turned attention to WAP retention rates within mainstream HE. Nevertheless, the absence of data regarding retention and progression of part-time flexible students, together with the continued lack of access to supports where increased diversity exists, suggests policies have failed to keep up with changes in practice. Evidence indicated a reliance on localised or ad hoc arrangements where lecturers and programme staff fill gaps in teaching and learning experiences where student supports were not accessible.

9 Chapter Nine: Part-time Flexible students experiences of Irish HE

9.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on part-time students' experiences as learners within Irish HE. In Ireland, little was known about part-time students, what motivates them to enrol, why they persist, how they manage study, juggle responsibilities, and cope, or how they integrate within a HE system that caters primarily to school leavers (Clancy 2015; Fleming & Finnegan 2011; HEA 2012, Darmody & Fleming 2009). Also, how HEIs cater to part-time, flexible students were poorly documented. Whilst it has been reported that part-time students were more likely to drop out, the lack of data capturing the progression of part-time, flexible cohorts within Irish HE presented problems (Tinto 1993, Woodfield 2014). Theories of integration and belonging do not transfer straightforwardly to part-time, flexible cohorts within HE. Evidence indicated part-time students have complex lives with multiple responsibilities (Kahu et al., 2014; Swain et al., 2007).

This small scale study of students' experiences (n=63) offers insights into part-time, flexible learning. The motivation for enrolling, the relevance of belonging and inclusion was examined amongst undergraduate and postgraduate students across multiple disciplines within six HEIs. This segment of the study aimed to examine factors that supported and constrained integration and to provide insight into persistence amongst part-time, flexible students within Irish HEIs.

The remainder of the chapter includes; an analysis of the findings, interpretation of themes, sub-themes, with a summary of findings and concluding remarks.

9.2 Student Profile and Programme of Study HEIs'

This study of part-time, flexible students across HEIs recognises a heterogeneous population, inclusive of wide-ranging ages (20s-60s), different social, educational, ethnic backgrounds, male, female enrolled at various levels across the NFQ. Table 13 below sets out students who participated in an interview and the programmes they were registered on, whereas Table 14 shows the range of HEIs' where students were enrolled. For additional detail on interviews see chapter 6, sections, 24, 25, Table 10.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in programmes from Level 6 through to Level 10, participated in interviews. Part-time, flexible students, were the primary focus in particular students enrolled in programmes of a minimum 30ECTs. The range of programmes included; arts, art and design, nursing, midwifery, education/teacher training, human resources, marketing, business, data analytics, law, and social care. It was important to include a range of disciplines and levels, as well as part-time and flexible programmes. Several programmes were orientated toward employment or were vocational in focus other programmes were more general arts and humanities. Students interviewed included those in their first year of study as well as those in their final year of a degree or post-graduate study. Students are identified as an undergraduate (UG) or postgraduate (PG) male (M) or female (F). Interviews were numbered, group interviews can be identified as G1 or G2 per institution (see Ch.6 Table 10).

Table 13. NFQ LEVEL Student-Participants

| NFQ Level | L6 | L7 | L8 | L9 | L10 |
|--------------------|-------------|----------------|--------|---------|-------|
| No. of Students | 14 | 18 | 14 | 11 | 6 |
| Type of Programme | Certificate | Cert. /Diploma | BA | Masters | Phd |
| Programme Duration | 1 Yr | 1 Yr | 4+ Yrs | 2 Yrs | 4 Yrs |
| Male | 3 | 13 | 7 | - | 1 |
| Female | 11 | 5 | 7 | 11 | 5 |

Table 14. HEI Full-Time and Part-Time enrolments 2016-17

| HEI 2016-17* enrolments | Inter views | Total FT+PT UG+P G | Total Part- Time | Enrolment PT - UG | Enrolment PT-PG | Public Transport Links Bus/Train/ Light Rail |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--|
| University A | Group x 2 Individual 4x 1 | 16,47 9 | 1,764 | 87 | 1677 | B/T/LR |
| University B | Group x 1 | 11,92 1 | 1,912 *** | 996 | 886 | B/T/ |
| University C | Group x 2 | 13,47 2 | 1,056 | 536 | 520 | B/T |
| IoT | Group x 2 | 7,098 | 2,808 | 2529 | 155 | B/T |
| Independent | Individual 4x1 | 5,078 | 2,828 ** | | | B/T/LR |
| College | Individual 1, 2 | 1,152 | 168 | 146 | 22 | B/T |

*HEA Statistics for 2016-17/**CSO/** figure includes foundation

University A - Located in the Capital city, this University had a student population of 16,479 (FT). The total number of part-time students enrolled amounts to 1,764, and the majority were post-graduate (HEA 2017). The university is centrally located and can be accessed through a range of public transport links, including light rail.

University B- Located in the greater Leinster area, this University has a student population of approximately 11,900, of which 10,009 were full time, and 1,912 were part-time. This university offers flexible part-time programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level and has a tradition of mature student provision. The University is linked to mainline train and bus transport systems as well as being close to main road arteries in the region.

University C – Located in a city in the southern region, this is a newer University. The university has a student population of 13,472, of which 12,416 are full-time, and 1,056 were part-time. This university provides full and part-time flexible programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This university is linked to mainline trains, motorways, local and national bus networks.

Independent College - Located in the Capital city, the college has a student population of 5,078, of which 2,828 were part-time. The college is not in receipt of a recurrent grant from the HEA, though it offered programmes funded by Springboard. This college is linked to light rail, bus, and train networks,

IoT – Located in the Leinster region, this IoT had a student population of 7,098, of which 2, 808, were part-time. This IoT was spread across three separate campuses and students were interviewed in two different locations. This IoT was linked to mainline trains, bus routes, and motorways.

College - This was a small HEI with a student population of 1,152, of which 168 were part-time enrolments on accredited programmes. Several hundred 'occasional' students participated in non-accredited programmes. The college offered undergraduate and post-graduate programmes. This college was located in the capital and was discipline-specific. The college was linked to bus and train services.

9.3 Analysis and Findings

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis of the data included the use of grounded theory, open and axial coding. The findings were split into two overarching categories: (1) Return to Learning, and (2) Integration. Each category was sub-divided into themes, which draw on student's pre-entry and post-entry experiences of getting into and staying within HE. These two categories were divided into the following themes with associated clusters, see figure 4.

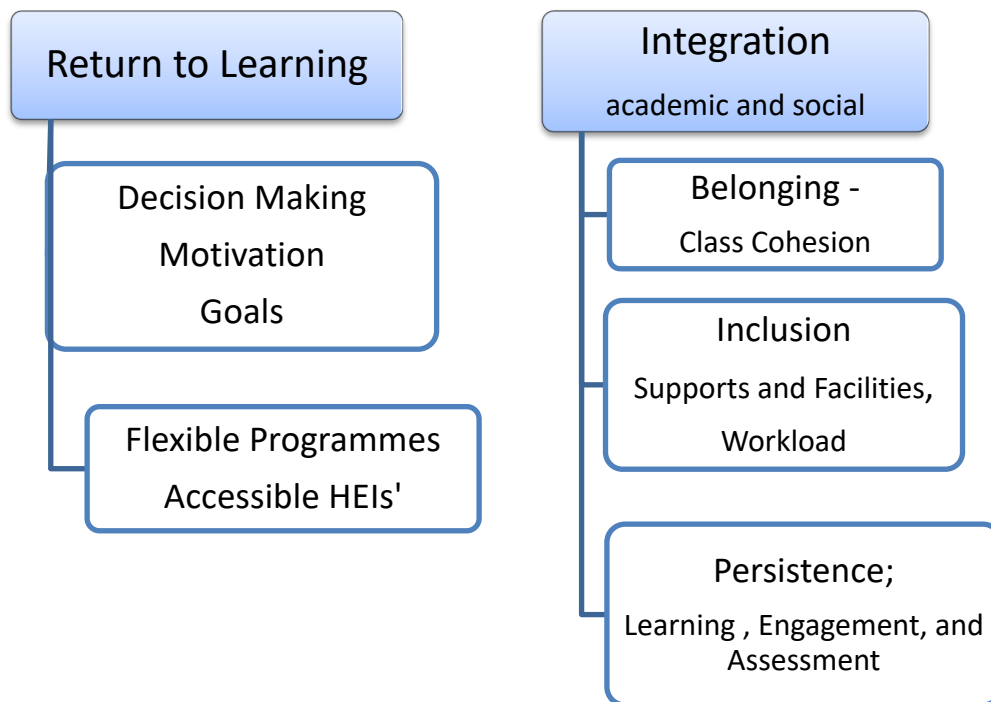


Figure 4. Themes students

9.4 Return to Learning

This overarching category included a range of factors and processes informing the enrolment of students. The themes within the category included: decision making, motivation, up-skilling, personal development, goals, flexible programmes, and HEIs' that were accessible. In some cases, the programme was a stepping stone into HE and was linked to a progression route, other programmes provided up-skilling opportunities for individuals who had a qualification and wanted to change direction in their career or add to their skills and knowledge.

9.4.1 Decision Making

Students interviewed were mature; however, this group was not homogeneous and included a mix of ages and sub-groups. My findings indicated that part-time students took the time to weigh up and assess the pros and cons of the situation before committing to enrolment. The student

profile was mixed inclusive of individuals without qualification and those with undergraduate and or post-graduate qualifications. Students who had completed qualifications in HE had acquired skills and knowledge of how the system worked and had an experience of being a student, in contrast, first time entrants had to form an identity, adjust to HE and navigate the academic environment (Osborne et al. 2004, Merrill 2001, Fleming & Murphy 1999).

Student course choice involved a process of decision making. The decision to enrol was taken after deliberation whereby students considered the programme, its suitability to their needs, interests, and the likely implications of taking on a programme of study for some time. This female student outlined her reasons for selecting a post-graduate programme;

'So I had been thinking about doing a Masters course, but the right one hadn't come along.' So I didn't want to compartmentalise myself into just one corner, I felt that the course would offer me a bit more opportunity in terms of developing career if and when opportunities arise'. Uni. A,1.PG: F

The majority of students indicated the decision to enrol was neither arbitrary nor ad hoc, but measured, informed, and weighed up over time. This post-graduate student summed up the situation as;

'I mean I didn't take on the course lightly, it was a considered decision'. Uni.A1.PG: F

In some cases, students visited open days, recruitment events, internet sites, or were advised by a friend or work colleague. Findings indicated that students considered the plus and minus of choosing a course, in terms of what it would mean; financially, on a personal and professional level, also they explored how they could balance studies with other commitments. If the conditions were right in terms of timing, commute, life circumstances, then students decided to enrol. This male student outlined how he came to choose the programme;

'I actually looked at this course for a couple of years, and I think that was just the motivator when I actually worked in the area a little bit

and realised I think I'd like to go ahead and do the course finally. And the fact that it's part-time was good, and it was close to home' IoT: G1. UG/M.

A post-graduate student explains the process of decision making and selecting a programme that suited her needs as a learner;

'So I looked into all the different postgrads, like Open University and everything and same thing, I need the structure of coming to a class, having a specific thing and times that I have to do, assignments that have certain time, the actual bricks and mortar structure is something I need to have in order to help me learn'. Uni.A. G. PG/F5

9.4.2 Motivation

In their study of part-time students at Birkbeck College, Swain and Hammond (2007:21) found student motivations to be 'complex and multiple.' Similarly, Ho et al. (2012:326) examined students' motivations for enrolling in post-graduate programmes and found students had 'multiple reasons'. Such research outcomes remain relevant to my case study of part-time, flexible students within Irish HE.

Part-time, flexible students across the different Irish HEIs' identified a combination of personal and or professional factors that informed their motivations. The range of student motivations that informed enrolment onto a part-time, flexible programme within an Irish HEI is outlined in the table below.

Table 15. Student Motivation

| Motivation | Extract |
|---|---|
| A desire to acquire a recognised qualification, | 'to complete the four years and obtain an LLB' IoT.G 1.UG M |

| | |
|---|--|
| For personal satisfaction, enrichment, | 'I always had the passion to return to education, yes' Uni. B.G. UG M |
| An interest in the subject | 'well I just adored art; I didn't apply for back when I did my leaving cert so I went into Accountancy and Taxation, and I just love art.' Coll.2UG.F 'I chose the course because I like data.' Indep. PG.F |
| To contribute to the field of knowledge | 'I wanted to know more and maybe publish something' Uni.A.G.6. PG/M |
| To undertake a challenge, a personal challenge, not to stagnate | 'A personal challenge, something to do that challenged me because I wanted to get back into reading I suppose more than just policy documents from the department' Uni.A.G4.PG. F |
| The need to up-skill, re-skill, | 'I'm working kind of in supply chain where I'm working, and I just wanted to step up the ladder, to be honest with you, financial I suppose', Uni.C.G2.UG. M |
| To invest in on-going professional development, | 'For continuous professional development. I work in early childhood education in care. So I felt that it was time to upskill', IoT.G1.UG/F |
| To apply skills and knowledge to practice | 'And I saw this and thought it would be interesting and linked it back to my own teaching, so teaching within my own classroom, so a challenge for myself but link it back to my practice,' Uni.A.4.G.PG/F |
| An essential requirement in a changing professional context, | 'In this profession especially you need to do further education or you need to have this, you know, kind of further education, professional development to advance', Uni.A.2.PG.F |

| | |
|--|--|
| Enhance career prospects | 'Then the course, I felt would open doors for me and if I wanted to invest money in education I didn't want to do it in something that wouldn't give me opportunities in the future', Uni.A.PG/F |
| A flexible part-time programme option existed, | 'The subject, the fact that it's a part-time course I didn't find any like this anywhere else', Uni.B.UG/F 'It was because that college was offering the course,' Indep.2PG/F |
| Full-filling a personal goal to gain a qualification that was not available to the student at a younger age. (Older students described the motivation to undertake a programme as something to do and achieve for themselves,) | 'It was for my own learning, I did it for me. I didn't do it for money; it was my own motivation,' IoT.G2.UG/F 'For myself, it was from personal achievement too because when I left school, unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity for third level education, something I always wanted to do as a personal goal,' IoT.G1.UG |

In several cases, students were supported by their employer or were linked to government based schemes such as Skills-net, which offered support for fees. An interest in the subject and a desire to complete the programme were strong motivating factors tied with the advancement in career and potential job opportunities.

The following selection of extracts indicated a combination of factors that influenced decision making, namely; subject, programme structure, personal and professional development. These post-graduate students outlined the factors informing their decision and motivation;

'I chose the course because I like data, my course is data analytics, and I like data' Indep.PG.F1

'I chose the particular course because it was inter-disciplinary, it was community-focused'. Uni. A.PG.1/F

9.4.3 Up-Skilling and Professional Development

Students identified up-skilling and professional development as factors informing their motivation to enrol in a programme also, and several programmes were orientated toward professions or industry. The potential to acquire skills and a qualification that was orientated to employment opportunities was noted by many students.

'For continuous professional development. I work in early childhood education in care. So I felt that it was time to upskill'. IoT.G1.UG/F

'It was relevant to my work' Uni C.2.UG/M

'I was very conscious that I would be entering the jobs market again and wanted to make sure I could compete well with I suppose the competition for those jobs'.....' so there was an element of personal challenge and personal satisfaction' Indep.3: PGF

A group of students enrolled in a flexible programme had set up small businesses and were now seeking accreditation for skills and experience in the industry; also, they wanted to enhance their knowledge of the subject area.

'The qualification, if you know what I'm saying, we're all managers in our own rights, but we don't have the credibility, that's why the qualification, the accreditation'. Uni. C.UG.M.G1

9.4.4 Personal Development

Several students had embarked on degree programmes at a later stage in life. Older students decided to return to education at a time that suited their needs and level of commitment. Frequently intrinsic reasons motivated students to enrol in undergraduate degree programmes. The

following extracts indicate what motivated adult learners to return to education;

'Something I always wanted to do' Uni. B.UG.F.G

'I always had the passion to return to education yes' Uni. B.G.UG.F

'You're here because you want to, you know, when you were in school years ago you didn't want to be there you wanted to be out of it you know'. Uni. B.UG.M.G

'I knew that I'd probably walk into a job in social care without any degree or background, but I just, it was for my own learning, I did it for me, I didn't do it for money, it was my own motivation. My own intrinsic motivation'. IoT.G2.UG.F

Evidence from multiple student interviews indicated that students presented; strong motivation, a commitment to learning and the programme they had enrolled onto.

9.4.5 Goals

Part-time students were questioned about their goals at the outset and whether these had changed over time. For many students, achieving the qualification was the main goal, in addition, students wanted to acquire skills, to learn how to navigate an academic environment, to be tested and challenged, to succeed, to be first in a family to acquire a degree, to deepen their knowledge of a subject, or to publish. An undergraduate student details her journey toward a qualification;

'I think for me, I've always worked in the care field and children and elderly and with people with disabilities and autism. And as well, I think it was like I wanted to achieve something for myself, and no one in my family has ever studied, gone into further education or anything like that'. IoT.G2.UGF

For postgraduate students, the programme choice was linked to vocational interests in the expectation that achieving the qualification could enhance career opportunities. Evidence showed students expressed a strong commitment to their goal and achieving that for personal as well as professional reasons. A post-graduate female student who wanted to return to work full-time indicated the importance of having options;

'Really to upskill and I suppose my background as I said was IT and programming and management and I really, you know, love to talk about data analytics... 'I wanted to use it as an opportunity really to re-enter the normal employment market on a part-time basis'.
Indep.2. PGF

Another post-graduate student highlighted several goals personal and professional;

'I guess the qualification was good and like Helen said if you want to progress, you kind of need to have a Masters. But I was also at the stage where I am out of college a few years, and I kind of felt like I was getting a bit stale. And I just wanted to open my horizons, see things from a different perspective, change it up, learn again and feel like I was actually using my brain'. Uni.A: G5.PG.F

Students were also asked if their goals had changed over time and whether they intended to progress. Whilst some students indicated a desire to progress for many achieving the qualification remained the central goal throughout. Students were pragmatic and realistic in their goals, and the following selection of quotes indicated their intention;

'My goal hasn't changed. It's to complete the degree' IoT.G1.UG

'I just wanted to complete a degree' Uni.B.UG. G

'I'm the same, Uni.B.UG. G

'Same here,' Uni.B. UG. G

'To complete this.' Uni.C.1.UG

'I'm happy to complete this' Uni.C.G1.UG

'Me too,' Uni.C.G1.UG

'Just to complete this' Uni.C.G1.UG

Students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, indicated making sacrifices to achieve the goal and succeed in obtaining the qualification. Students' strong determination to succeed resonates with research findings emerging from an examination of retention amongst non-traditional students (Fleming & Finnegan 2011).

9.5 Flexible Programmes

An earlier survey of students in the UK indicated that they opted for part-time study 'because of being able to study alongside other commitments' (Yorke and Longden 2008:12). In my case study, the option of flexible part-time programmes featured as a factor informing students' decision to enrol. Furthermore, the availability or supply of flexible and part-time programmes was a factor acknowledged by several students in Irish HEIs. This post-graduate student highlighted scheduling as well as other factors informing the choice of the programme;

'I chose it because it was part-time and evening. It was a particular area of data analytics, first of all, which I was interested in which, my background is in IT, so I wanted to up-skill. And the timing of this course was suitable for my lifestyle at the time'. Indep.2PGF

Combining study with work regularly featured across interviews as these post-graduate students explain;

'Part-time purely because I couldn't afford to go full-time and sure like who doesn't like a challenge'. Uni.A.G5.PG.F

'I'm the same in that, well it never occurred to me not to do part-time and work at the same time, and then I'm in middle management at the moment, and I need a new challenge, I love my job, but I'm ready to move up the ladder, and the reality is you need that qualification to move up'. Uni. A.G5.PG/F

Recent developments in the UK point to the importance of access to part-time study for women in particular 'who have family responsibilities' and those who try to combine full-time jobs with 'domestic commitments' (Callender 2018:3).

9.5.1 Accessible HEIs

Whilst several factors were identified as influencing course choice; it was found that at an undergraduate level, the location of the institution and accessibility of a flexible programme featured strongly particularly where the student had additional caring, family responsibilities, and or employment. Examining flexible learning in the context of changes to lifelong learning policy, Flannery and McGarr, noted that two discourses had emerged on 'flexible learning within educational settings,' namely 'logistical flexibility and pedagogical flexibility' (2014:4). Echoes of this discourse resonated with the findings emerging from interviews in this case study. The following perspectives highlighted the importance of access for students;

'It's proximity, yes its close. Location, location' IoT.G1.UG

'Close links to my workplace, employer' Uni.C: UG.G2.M

'The fact that it's part-time was good, and it was close to home'
IoT.G2.UG

'XYZ was really the only one that allowed me to do marketing in a Masters at night' Indep.3PG.F

Equally, at the postgraduate level, students weighed up the implications of; location, convenience, ease of access, proximity to a mode of transport, combined with the suitability of the programme in terms of; content, duration, and mode, relevant to their individual needs. These post-graduate students noted the importance of access to transport as a factor;

'X was handy for me because it was on the Luas line, I live on the Luas line, so that was fine and also because it was face to face' Uni.A.G5.PGF

'I suppose I chose X for practical reasons in that I work in the city centre and I live in the city centre. So for me, I felt I could get into X just from a practical point of view it would make being a student part-time much easier'. Uni.A.6.PGF

Having prior knowledge of the HEI having completed an undergraduate or another course there featured some times, or as in a small number of cases, students indicated their children had studied at the HEI and had a positive experience. Also, as there were limited part-time options in particular subject areas, the choices were focused on specific HEIs. An older student recounted searching for a programme to suit her needs;

'It would be the subject, the fact that it's a part-time course, I didn't find anything like this anywhere else'. Uni. B. G.UGF

Frequently at postgraduate level vocational and continuing professional development aspects of the programme were noted as central to course choice. Though many students were keenly interested in the subject area, they also acknowledged the importance of programme completion, which potentially provided for career advancement as well as personal development.

For many students, it was not possible to give up employment or caring responsibilities; a part-time, flexible programme was the only option taking into account individual circumstances. These female post-graduate students summarised the situation informing the choice of HEI when they stated;

'As it turned out, college x was the only suitable one for me both financially and logistically'. Indep:3.PGF

'Okay part-time because I couldn't afford to not work at the same time, so I had to go part-time'. Uni.A.G5.PG.F

9.6 Integration

This overarching category provided the basis for examining a range of academic and social factors shaping integration and student engagement within HE. From out this category, several themes and related clusters were identified which are unpacked within the following paragraphs;

- Social integration,
 - Belonging,
 - Class cohesion,
- Inclusion,
 - Supports and facilities,
- Persistence,
 - Learning and engagement
 - Assessment

9.6.1 Social Integration

In the majority of cases, part-time students did not socialise at the HEI, students attended academic classes and related course-based learning activities. The focus was on academic activities and all that surrounded the same. Students indicated being time poor, having other responsibilities or commitments and being of an age group that was less likely to take part in social events. A range of perspectives are captured below though the consensus emerging was that part-time students were not socialising on campus;

'No socialising here at all and I think that's probably true of everybody in my class. There's 13 of us, and we come here twice a week for class and occasionally extra classes on a third night or weekend, and that's it. I think it's time pressure, personal commitments, all of that, most of us have a commute, very few of us work in the city centre, so it becomes more difficult to make that time available'. Indep.3.PG/F

'We don't socialise here' Uni.C: G1.UG

'Come here to do the course' Coll.2.UGF

'The college is where I would come to learn, yeah, yeah' Uni.A.2.PGF

' I would say I don't really socialise here, except on the days that I have my actual lectures which are about twice a month and then I would mainly do my course work here, yeah, I find that the environment is conducive to coming in, sitting down, working and getting stuff done productively'. Uni.A.6.UGF

9.6.2 Belonging

Belonging remains important to researchers as an indicator of student success; also, it is linked to retention, theories of integration, cultural and social capital (Thomas 2012). However, belonging does not translate seamlessly to part-time students, particularly as they are; older, have varied motivations and multiple commitments. Several questions examined students' sense of belonging and experiences of inclusion within the HEI. The word belonging was not defined; therefore, it required unpacking during the interview; with the use of prompts such as having a sense of being 'part of' and 'fitting within' the HEI, these explanations were used to clarify the term. Belonging and inclusion overlap; however, findings suggest for part-time students in Irish HE, the former was relational in focus whereas the latter was associated with access to facilities and institutional flexibility.

Students considered the types of activities and interactions they engaged in social and or academic. Findings indicated that for students, belonging was relational, associated primarily with their peers and the class group. Students did not identify 'belonging' with the institution instead they described being part of a peer group, or network within the class, or wider programme. Lecturing and departmental staff or occasionally the school featured. Here a post-graduate student distinguishes between class and departmental 'belonging' and being part of the institution;

'Well I feel personally like I belong in the department.....so I feel like I belong in this group, that we work together, the lecturers are very approachable, the ladies in the office are fab but that's where I belong, I don't belong as I'm a X student, I'm not buying a hoodie anytime soon like'. Uni.A: G5.PGF

Irish part-time, flexible students located belonging within the classroom and for them it was linked to their peers, for instance, these post-graduate students explained their sense of belonging as;

'So we definitely do feel like we belong and I look forward to coming in and like that the lecturers the office all very approachable' Uni. A: G5.PGF

'It's not like I feel I don't belong or that I'm not welcome here, but I also wouldn't say that I feel like I am necessarily a part of X if you know what I mean'. Uni. A.G5.PGF

Similarly, students identified with the departmental staff they came into contact with;

'The people in the office as well give you a great sense of belonging as well because I think when they meet you for the first time they always recognise you and stop to talk to you which gives a great sense of belonging as well'. IoT.G1.UGM

However, findings indicated that whilst students were committed, time was a constraint on their level of interaction within the HEI. Consequently, students made choices about how they invested time for HE, and again a utilitarian note crept into how this post-graduate student observed belonging;

'We have chosen where we are going to invest our time; we haven't given up work, we still have family life, we still have our friends, our home life, we've chosen to invest in those things' Uni.A.G5.PGF

My findings resonated with earlier research conducted by Kember et al. (2001:326), who investigated students' sense of belonging within HK University and found 'that a sense of belonging was more likely to develop if enrolment was through departments and part-time students had access to resources and facilities'.

9.6.3 Class Cohesion

The significance of peer supports and class cohesion has been identified by researchers as contributory factors aiding integration and supporting belonging (Thomas 2012). Part-time Irish students who participated in interviews acknowledged that their class had bonded, further that there were strong communication links with other students within the group therefore even where there was no sense of belonging at an institutional level, the class had formed a cohesive group and this acted as a support and peer network. One post-graduate student outlined how the class worked collaboratively as well as providing support;

'I think our class bonded really well as a group and that's facilitated by group assignments and you know a class WhatsApp and things like that, so as a group we're fairly tight-knit'....I don't think there's a huge sense of being part of (this HEI) specifically, having said that, the staff are great, whenever there is a query or an issue, the support staff for the part-time students for the evening students is super', ' but there isn't a strong sense of an 'institutional' identity I would say'. Indep.PG3F

Similarly, with the following extract, the student indicated the importance of cohesion and recognised the class had bonded; however, he was blunt about the shortage of supports at an outreach facility.

'I think we were lucky just in my group, I don't know, but we just bonded as a group. But I think in the college, I don't really feel like we're part of the whole HEI, I think the library isn't great down here, I think we don't get all the benefits of the full-time college. The canteen here is terrible; it's just old and grotty, I'll just be honest.

The toilets are never cleaned and stuff like that, so I don't feel that we were looked after as well as we could have been'. IoT.G2. UGM

Also, students used 'WhatsApp' and similar social media platforms to communicate within class groups also as a support for assignment and assessment.

'If somebody had a question, they would send it out on the WhatsApp. So it is a social community in that you can access them at any time for information'. Indep.4.PG.F

Another group of university students recognised the value of a peer network and the support provided through a social network;

'We have a WhatsApp group going between us as well' Uni.C.G1.UG

In a number of cases, students noted the use of texts and social media as a means of communicating with peers effectively added to class cohesion.

9.7 Inclusion

Empirical findings in my study indicated a variation in students' experiences of inclusion across the different HEIs. Students' associated inclusion with access to services, and the quality or range of services available, also implicitly inclusion was comparable, something to be measured against full-time options. In several HEIs students experienced limited access to a range of facilities; this placed a constraint on levels of academic interaction. Students were forthcoming about the lack of or limitations of inclusion as they experienced it, here an undergraduate student explains;

'The inclusion part for me is non-existent' Uni.C: G1

Also, a post-graduate student noted;

'I think an acknowledgement that we exist is really absent'
Uni.A.G4.PG.M

This student called on prior experience to elaborate on inclusion;

'So I did my, I've never been a full-time student, always part-time. So this is my third college, and it's the same with all of them, you're just not part of the college, you never feel part of it' Uni. A.G4.PGM

However, this perspective was not consistent across all HEIs. According to this older student, there was a sense of inclusion mostly as facilities were accessible.

'We don't feel excluded in any way; we don't feel any different to any other student' Uni. B. G.UGF

However, the scale of the provision or the location of the facility were factors impacting on inclusion as with the situation at an outreach campus where there was limited access to backup and supports;

'I have a half-hour commute, so people don't linger. And then college is locked up at night, so there's nowhere to congregate and chat and have meals together. Because its night time and people are working, most of us have busy lives, and we're working full-time'. IoT.G2.UGF

Another student in the same group noted;

'I feel it's all about just coming in, do your studies and you go home, do your assignments may be from home or local library or stuff like that'. IoT.G2. UGM

However, this student acknowledged the complexity inherent to including part-time, flexible students;

'I think that the college does attempt to integrate the life-long learning students but that being said, we rock into the college at 7 o'clock in the evening, and we're gone by ten, maybe two days a week, so I suppose in the true sense of like you know we're not actually included, we're all very purposely here to achieve'. IoT.G1.UG M

When describing how they were included, undergraduate students noted the ease of access to facilities such as; library, IT support, canteen, academic support, and lecturing staff.

'There's other supports that are there for the full-time students we have access to them as well,'. Uni.B. G. UG F

HEIs' used email to communicate with and provide information to students about various institutional activities, which was acknowledged; however, for many part-time students, the level of interactions was curtailed by the amount of time available. Students acknowledged receiving regular emails, invitations, and notices about events or services; however, this did not translate to engagement. This female post-graduate student outlined the constraints that curtailed inclusion,

'With regards to socialising I know I see all of these emails about various turning on Christmas lights etcetera but I wouldn't be coming in, maybe if I was younger but..' 'Maybe if I was younger or living in Dublin but to be honest between work I'm trying to get work done I really don't have physical time to be involved even if I wanted to be' Uni. A.1.PGF

'Well we get emails,' Uni.C.G1

'We haven't got the time to attend, to be honest,' Uni.C: G1

'We get the emails I suppose everything is open to you but whether you take them or not is, I suppose you're working full time, with kids, and whatever else as well'. Uni.C.G2.UG

Students who indicated that they did not feel included or belonged were neither socialising nor accessing supports or facilities; rather they attended college for academic purposes. Students who responded positively indicated that they were included through regular communication such as email and had an affinity to the school within which they were studying. A

post-graduate student highlighted the link to the school where she studied and the wider institution;

'Well, I suppose at a fairly local level to the course, as within the post-graduate group in the school of ABC because I suppose it's a distinct entity over there. It doesn't feel like when you're over here like it's such a huge place and you're only aware of little sections that you're in would be quite difficult I imagine to feel included over here. But over in the school of ABC, I think so yes'. Uni.A.1.PGF

It was possible for students to indicate they were not included at the HEI but at the same time acknowledge there was a sense of belonging particularly where belonging was associated with peer groups and a class network. Findings in my case study indicated that students did not identify belonging at an institutional level but this was not essential to persistence. Some students demonstrated strong links to a peer network while others operated independently. Several constraints shaped students sense of belonging and inclusion; insufficient time, employment, family, travel distance, also access to supports, services, and quality of facilities were factors impacting on inclusion.

9.7.1 Supports and Facilities

According to the findings, in this case, the importance of access to supports and facilities was critical for all students. Since 2012 part-time, flexible students have been included in the annual returns to the HEA notwithstanding these developments, the same students 'do not have full access to the range of support services that full-time students can avail of' (Flannery McGarr, 2014:8). Such limitations and inequities impact integration (Darmody and Fleming 2009).

During interviews with part-time, flexible students in Irish HEIs', students indicated the services and facilities which they accessed regularly.

- Library
- IT support
- Academic Support and writing
- Gym.

The most frequently used facility was the library; this was consistent across all programmes and HEIs. In some cases the accessibility of the library services was notable either because it could be accessed remotely or was available late evening and at the weekend as highlighted by an undergraduate student;

'The library hours are great here; it's open until midnight' Uni.B.G.
UG.F

However, this was not consistent across all HEIs in one case, the library was open during the week but not at weekends. There were some cases where access to library-based training was organised during the day time making it difficult for students to attend. Several groups across different HEIs noted that they were unable to access library based training workshops. Earlier research in the UK similarly found that 'institutional services were not available at the times when the part-time students attended' (Yorke & Longden 2008:3)

A post-graduate student who worked full-time outlined the difficulties experienced in trying to access services;

'I kind of just come in here for my lectures and that's just the way it is but as we said as well like the whole stuff of like a lot of those library sessions and everything that were at the start of the year, they were all during teaching time, so I can't just take a day off work to go in for an hour but like the counselling services, those are during school times, those are things I'd love to access but like they're not even in the evenings that I can come in some weekday evening, they're just not available like' Uni.A.G5.PGF

The second most used service was IT support, followed by academic writing services. Students were positive about administrative support and access to staff at the departmental level. One student noted that she had attended a careers event and obtained support from career guidance, though recognised that this was not regularly accessible for part-time students.

Another student mentioned counselling services as valuable support that she was unable to access as it was not available in the evenings. All students acknowledged the importance of access to facilities and services as a factor that supported learning.

Across the HEIs, there was a significant variation in the accessibility of services and facilities. In two HEIs services (academic support, IT) opened outside of day-time office hours to facilitate part-time students. For many students, there was minimal additional contact with the various academic structures, supports, informal clubs or societies within the institution. In many cases, the scheduling of activities such as; academic and learning support, library training was provided at a time that was of limited use. A post-graduate student explained;

'They're there for the taking if you want, so they do include you but not so much, I think because I think we're coming in in the evening and a lot of activities are on during the day' Indep.4.PGF

The temporal aspect featured in student responses in so far as scheduling of activities clashed with part-time student's ability to access the facility or because the constraints on their time were multiple and curtailed interactions.

'Yes the time is a factor,' just don't have it,' Uni.C.G1.UG

In some instances, students came into college early to go to the library or meet informally with their peers. Older students had limited time; consequently, while on campus, the focus was on the use of library facilities and attending to class contact time. An undergraduate student at a HEI where access to facilities was limited detailed the pressure of fitting things within a short timeframe;

'No to me now it's just the course focussed on the course. You know, I mean if you get here as Mary said, a few minutes, a half an hour even 15 minutes early you might run-up to the library and grab a book', College.2.UGF

9.7.2 Workload

This theme examined students' expectations of workload and how they managed their workload throughout the programme.

Across interviews, students' expectations of the course workload varied. Some were informed in advance, while others had limited understanding and did not know what to expect. The early stages of an undergraduate programme were daunting particularly for first-time students, and in many instances, students were ill-prepared. In response to questions, it was evident that first-time students did not know what to expect and required time and support to make the transition within the HEI. The following comments are from students taking a one-year flexible programme none of the students had experience of HE,

'We had no idea', Uni.C: G1.UG

'We didn't know what it was going to entail' Uni.C: G1.UG

Similarly, an undergraduate student indicated that their prior knowledge and expectation was limited'

'I had no idea of workload' IoT.G2.UGF

Coupled with limited awareness of workload, students had to adjust to academic requirements and the culture of Higher Education, all of which were new, and at times frightening (Collins & Fleming 1999). Here two students outline what their sense was of entering HE and getting to grips with an academic programme for the first time;

'Overwhelming,' Uni.C: G1.UG

'Initially, I'd say I was intimidated by may be going into a learning environment that I had never experienced before. I did FETAC five, but I had a perception, this would be a lot harder, and it was a kind of a block at the time. But as time went on, I found that all my fears were unfounded'. IoT.G2.UG.M

Students' prior experience as a part-time student informed their expectations of course workload and how to; manage, study, work, and family. Students with prior experience indicated few surprises or unrealistic expectations of the demands when trying to juggle workload and other commitments. Nonetheless, aspects of academic workload were challenging and at times, daunting. Here a post-graduate student explains her understanding of what was expected;

'Well, I knew myself it would be very demanding. I mean, I've done quite a number of courses in the past, and I've always done things as part-time.' 'So the thing is that I have a very good idea that it was going to be fairly intense and I suppose really it met what I expected,' Uni.A.1.PGF

However, another female post-graduate student went on to acknowledge;

'So I'm not as daunted anymore, but is it more work than I was probably expecting, yeah' Uni.A.6.PGF

While students indicated the workload was heavy, they found ways to manage, at times several admitted to being stressed, having to make sacrifices, or not being able to devote adequate time to study. Also, the workload varied from year to year; nevertheless, students established a way to manage and overcome fears and concerns. A post-graduate student highlighted how she coped with the workload over two years;

'So last year I found it more challenging to, you know, not to commit, I wanted to commit, but I found it more challenging to manage my time, but, this year it's better' Uni.A.2.PGF

Students at the undergraduate level had mixed experiences those who managed a flexible modular programme, but could not meet the workload, reduced the number of modules, and spread the workload over a longer time frame.

'I did think I would be able to manage it, do the four modules and then last semester we did it for the first time, it was an awful lot of

work because I work full-time and I also have a family, so I decided then I'd only be doing about two every semester' Uni.B. G.UGF

Students felt pressured when assignments were bunched together, leaving limited time to research and submit course work on time. Equally, students who returned to education after a gap found the adjustment to academic life challenging. Several described having to learn, basic research or computer skills, and the difficulties associated with these challenges.

'I think we all thought it wouldn't be quite as demanding on us, with assignments and things like that, you know there's quite a lot of work to do, when most of us are working as well, we didn't take into account the amount of extra work we'd be doing' Uni.C.G1.UG

Aside from student's expectations of the programme workload, they were also questions about how they managed. Part-time students have busy lives, finding time to attend, undertake course work and study required effort, planning, and organising.

Some students approached their study in an organised way, for instance, this student on a Level 7 programme indicated;

'For me it's simple. I just got a calendar and colour code it where I was going to be, and when it came time for study in the evenings and you know of Sunday, I needed to allocate time for it' Uni.C.G2.UG/M

Similarly, this student developed an organised approach to the programme and study;

'I find it's making me become more organised, I'm making a routine for myself, it's making me become more organised' Uni.B. G.UG.F

However few students found managing the course and workload straightforward and the tendency to approach study sporadically featured strongly;

'So if I do something it's about 10 o'clock, and you're exhausted, so I wouldn't, no it would be very erratic' Uni.A.G4.PG.F

'So no, I wouldn't be terribly organised with my study, and it would be very fluid in terms of when I would study at home or when I would get organised to do assignments, it's more about available time, energy levels, work pressures things like that' Indep:3.PG.F

In this instance, a post-graduate student corralled a working week into four full days so that she could focus the remainder of the time on the course work,

'Yes, I mean anything that I'm doing to this course is Friday, Saturday, Sunday, they're my days off. But I mean during my working life my days are way, way, too long'. Uni.A.1.PG.F

All students recognised the need to manage time but found it challenging particularly if they were working full-time and had additional caring responsibilities,

'Time management and you know your days off, that you set them aside for college work. You actually put the rest of your life on suspension or on hold for the four years' IoT.G2.UG

The responses from a group of flexible learners in one university highlighted the challenges and difficulties when attempting to juggle work with study and family life;

'Very hard' Uni.C: G1

'Extremely hard.'

'Very challenging, very hard.'

'You know family life,'

'Kids, it's very difficult.'

Students enrolled in an undergraduate degree programme highlighted the challenges of juggling responsibilities and course commitments;

'So I found it tough again this year, even though I thought it would be easier. But it's worked anyway, I've made it work. Again you just have to top up your work, and just, if you have spare time, you just

have to use it, you've to get up early in the morning and study if you have to' IoT.G2.UG

'In my case now I have three in the family and I suppose only without the support of my family it would be very difficult, so any time I do spend with my family I have to make sure that it's quality time and without their support, it would be near impossible to do it' IoT.G2.UG

'We attend the lectures a couple of nights a week for a few hours, so there's four separate lectures per week and then the actual study, the homework we call it, it happens in the evening time and on weekends' IoT.G1.UG

Other students were practical and recognised the constraints that they were working within as explained by these post-graduate students

'But I suppose to be realistic in the big scheme of things, it will always come last in my choices because family and work are the priority and then this is an addendum, an extra and I can fit it in where I can' Uni.A.G4.PG.F

'I think you just do it, is the short answer, because you know, you have your priorities, for example, you have your work which you have to do to, you have your thesis to write and you know you only have a limited amount of time to do that' Uni.A.2.PGF

Several students recognised that they were unable to devote the time to study and course work that they would like to and that this impacted on the quality of outcomes. Here a female student explains;

'So I would say that it would definitely working full time has an impact on the level of commitment I can give it' Uni.A.6.PGF

Finding time to commit to course work and study, and adjusting to the academic environment featured prominently for many students. While some students organised study around weekends, others used evening

time; nevertheless all students found it difficult to manage study with other responsibilities.

9.8 Persistence

Examining student persistence, and programme completion was central to interview questions. Persistence and completion are complex issues; however, findings indicated that part-time students were committed to the completion of the programme. During interviews, students were encouraged to identify whether they had met challenges that had placed uncertainty over their continuation within a programme. Inevitably examining persistence amongst students who continue recognises that such students intended to complete. Nonetheless, this part of the interview offered opportunities for students to open up on difficulties and pressures that had caused them to consider disrupting their studies or departure from a programme. An undergraduate student spoke frankly about the challenges he experienced in the early stages of the programme;

'I think I got very stressed a couple of times and got really, really, down. I wouldn't say I was depressed, but I had just gotten; just everything got on top of me, and I had to give up work in first year and just have a bit of time for everything. Then a couple of months later, I was working again but just was able to manage it better. It's just, you learn how to manage everything, and you know college is important, and you just have to keep those couple of evenings free'.

IoT.G.2.UG.M

While a small number of students identified challenges to course completion, only three students indicated that they had considered withdrawing or taking time out. In these instances, circumstances outside of the programme -employment or health-related- had prompted the indecision. The majority of students intended continuing and completing, whilst a small number recognised challenges to their persistence; these were overcome; the student had a strategy or an approach that assisted in managing and helped them to cope. The following extract explains how a

post-graduate student chose a programme with the hope of securing a promotion and the implications when it did not materialise;

'After I didn't get the promotion, I did feel a bit discouraged for sure because I suppose I had put so much work into this course with the aspiration that it would be helpful in getting the promotion. That said, yeah, there was definitely a week where I was like I think I'm sick of this now. But I knew that I was never going to pack it in. I mean I think the fact that financially you've paid for it as well is always an incentive, you know' Uni.A.6.PG.F

According to part-time students, their persistence was linked to support, commitment and enjoyment associated with engagement within the environment of the college. Also, students had invested in the course they wanted a challenge, to acquire skills and knowledge. Post-graduate students noted investment in the programme that was financial as well as personal.

'So actually I'm really enjoying that and a little part of it I guess to be fair has to be that, I'm paying my own college fees, and that's a motivation in itself knowing that I spent so much money on it, that is a bit of motivation I guess' Uni.A.G5.PG.F

Besides the incentive to complete the programme for personal and professional reasons, students identified friendships, peer support within the class that had contributed to their persistence.

'My own sense of determination, I suppose. The fact that I really want to have a masters, the fact that I do find it interesting. I do like it; it's a challenge; it's another aspect of my life. So it kind of gives another social and intellectual facet to my being I suppose' Uni.A.6.PGF

This undergraduate student explains how peer support assisted in his continuation with the programme.

'I posted on WhatsApp, I'm leaving, during the summer. And I got support off the class. So it helped me' IoT.G.2.UG.M

Another group of students indicated the importance of peer and group support as a factor in persistence;

'It's because of the group' Uni.C.G1.UG

However, they noted additional factors such as; course content and the desire to achieve the qualification;

'It's the achievement as well,' Uni.C.G1UG

'We're doing this not because we're made do it, not because our employers are paying us to do it, it's because we want to do it,'
Uni.C.G1UG

Also despite the difficulties encountered there was a clear determination to continue as with this undergraduate student;

'I won't give in to it, I want the degree, I want the challenge'
Uni.B.G.UG

9.8.1 Learning and Engagement

Increasing emphasis has been placed on active learning and student-centred learning as factors contributing to engagement and retention (Dwyer, 2013; Thomas 2012; Ranhle, 2011; Jones 2008; Tinto 1993). Part-time, flexible learning presented a range of challenges for lecturers and students, precisely as learning was part-time, or flexible, then class contact time can be intensive. Equally, findings from my interviews with lecturers indicated that part-time courses are regularly scheduled in the evening or at weekends. Therefore, the timing of programmes can impact student engagement.

Tinto argued that pedagogies of engagement, as well as learning communities, assist in student involvement and aid retention (Tinto 2006). Findings indicated that students were positive about their learning experiences, albeit at times questioning inadequate supports. In most cases, part-time students were a distinct community in terms of the time at which they attended or the profile of the group. Students acknowledged

the importance of peer learning and shared experience as a valuable resource. In many instances, class sizes were not large, and students believed that they benefitted from small group teaching. Several students recognised that shared learning was support for assignments and was valued as a resource for professional networking.

Students encountered various challenges in their learning, which included; adjusting to new technology, academic writing, exams, didactic teaching methods, lecturers moving at too fast a pace, and overuse of power-point.

This female student highlighted difficulty with technology

'The biggest challenge was learning stuff on the computer, as I had nobody at home or near me that could help' IoT.G2.UG

Equally, students commented on a range of teaching and learning methods that were; creative, engaging, and challenging; field-trips, case studies, drama, group presentations, and webinars.

'It was a power-point presentation, and it was just standing in front of the class, and I found it you know exciting, interesting, but I know others found it very challenging you know' IoT.G.1, UG.F

There were differing views on the strengths and challenges of collaborative projects. This male student found collaborative group projects unsatisfactory as not all members contributed equally.

'The group based things were tricky. You never know who you might be flung in with,' IoT.G.2.UG.M

For some, shared learning experiences were positive. Where a group had not functioned co-operatively the learning experience was problematic. In addition, group projects could be practically and logistically difficult for students who had to travel or manage other responsibilities. As explained by this female student,

'So the group work has been challenging more so from a logistical perspective than anything else' Indep.3PGF

Part-time, flexible students, were a distinct group; arguably, they could constitute a learning community, particularly where programme leaders or heads of departments have constructed a mechanism to link dispersed cohorts. Part-time, flexible students, attended programmes either in the evening, weekends, or in blocks. Also, the majority were older and often working. The range of age groups across the programmes varied significantly. Within a class, there could be students from the mid-'20s to '50s in age, whereas the shorter programmes included ages from mid-'20s to '40s, particularly if the programme had a focus on upskilling. Humanities programmes included a wider age range from mid, twenties and included students who had retired. In all cases, the mix of age groups was viewed as a positive factor informing the learning experience. Accordingly, older students brought life experience and experience from work into the classroom. While younger students had less experience to draw on, their knowledge of technology and social media was evident to older students. Besides, older students believed they offered a more discursive or dialogic approach to learning showing a willingness to engage in debate and discussion.

'I find the younger people tend to be more IT literate and that's an advantage because you can learn from the younger ones, the older ones tend to be a bit more worldly-wise, I suppose there can be a kind of symbiotic relationship between young and old in lifelong learning' IoT.G1.UG

9.8.2 Assessment

Across undergraduate and post-graduate programmes, students identified scheduling of assignments as a factor that caused stress and impacted their ability to manage and persist. The timing, and the number of assignments, and scheduling of exams were topics of concern. In one HEI, the scheduling of exams was organised to coincide with the day school timetable inevitably part-time students had to take annual leave to attend for college exams. Though it was also possible for students to accumulate marks through a continuous assessment which was seen as beneficial to learning as this student explained,

'So there's 40% of the mark goes on continuous assessment, so it certainly focuses the mind and motivates the mind right throughout the year, in other words, it's not a case of just cramming everything right into the end of the year.' IoT.G1.UGM

However, students could negotiate changes to reschedule when assignments were due. Here an undergraduate student explains how the class group managed to have assignments rescheduled.

'If a person is having difficulty getting an assignment in on time, they can avail of an extension of time through lifelong learning, which is fairly good because I mean when you're studying part-time there's other commitments, as you said, there's family commitments, there's work commitments and it's sometimes not always possible to allocate the time at the right time, so it sometimes does need an extension of time on essays and assignments and that is available' IoT.G.1.UG

Similarly, this post-graduate student explains how challenges in her employment resulted in the late submission of an assignment which was made possible and avoided more serious consequences;

'Yes there was one assignment, sorry there were two assignments for one module, where I was late submitting them, I missed the deadline by about two weeks, I had to speak with the lecturer about that and that was because the deadlines coincided with a particularly challenging period at work and unforeseen I suppose issues with my boss and a certain amount of concern I would have had about whether my contract was going to be continued and things like that and so I approached the lecturer at the time and she was super, she was really understanding,' 'and that was probably the only time I felt the pressure became insurmountable for me'. Indep:3.PG.F

Where possible students negotiated changes and were able to reschedule assignments to facilitate getting the work completed. In this case, the student outlined how the class set about managing the schedule of assignments to make it manageable.

'We've done a lot of talking with the manager and the teachers and they were very supportive, when you got assignments shifted around, so there was bigger gaps between, because there was a lot happening together. So we were supported'. IoTG.2.UG.F

In addition to scheduling of assignments, several students raised the subject of assessment and feedback as factors that acted as an incentive or a disincentive.

'The grades as well. When you kind of get your paper back, having had it corrected, and if you see a fairly decent grade on it, it gives that added incentive to continue'. IoT.G1.UG

'The feedback is important, yes.' And because it's so important when it's continuous professional development, you need to know promptly where you're coming from, yes, because the assignments run into each other so quickly'. IoT.G1.UG

Another factor students identified as challenging was academic writing and adjusting within the HE, particularly where individuals were older and had been outside of formal or HE for many years. A post-graduate student explained the challenge of academic writing;

'Yeah, the academic writing was huge and just trying to master that, but I went from 42 to 73. So I did get it in the end, but that was through huge support from my colleagues, from my classmates because they would have given me their projects even before they handed them in'. Indep.4.PGF

Findings indicated that several factors contributed to persistence. Also, students demonstrated a strong commitment to a goal, namely completing a qualification in a subject that was of interest. The goal was often associated with potential career opportunities; however, students indicated they valued and were invested in the subject. This post-graduate female student explained;

'Yeah and I actually love it, I love the learning and I love the – even though you're learning there's an element because of my age, that

you're getting time to yourself, and it's your personal achievement and your, you know, it's not, its nobody else is gaining from it only me, you know, so I have to say I really enjoy that end of it' Indep.4.PG/F

9.9 Summary Findings

The findings indicated several factors motivated students to enrol such as; an interest in the subject, a desire to complete a degree for personal and professional reasons, the need for additional qualifications for career advancement, and interest in contributing to advancing professional practice in a subject domain. The availability of suitable part-time, flexible options combined with a location were factors influencing course choice. Students demonstrated a strong commitment to their study and achieving the goal, which was to complete the qualification. Across interviews, students indicated high levels of 'personal resilience,' in their desire to succeed and achieve a qualification (Fleming Finnegan 2011:5). The notion of 'belonging' required unpacking or recasting for part-time students, mostly they described being part of a peer group and class, fitting within a programme, or in some instances, a department or school. Part-time students were not socialising within HEIs; rather, the institution was a place to study and engage in academic activities. These findings resonate with research undertaken elsewhere (Jones 2008, Kember et al. 2001).

In terms of institutional supports and access to facilities, findings indicated that a parred back, or a leaner option was provided in several HEIs. Whilst programmes were offered on a part-time, flexible basis, not all the supports and services available to full-time students were available or accessible to part-time students. Furthermore, findings indicated that the range of supports and facilities that were available or accessible to students differed significantly across HEIs. Students stressed the need for academic and administrative support, as well as access to facilities and services as key to aiding persistence, fitting in, and managing workload. There were mixed responses from students whereby some expressed satisfaction with levels of institutional support and ease of access to facilities, and services, while others indicated they were met with bureaucracy or difficulty.

A utilitarian approach was evident across all levels as part-time students identified several constraints shaping their interactions within HE, including; time, course workload, jobs, family, and friends. Findings indicated students had limited time to socialise within institutions or avail of college-based facilities and services. However, often services and supports were provided day-time at a time that was unsuitable or made access problematic to those who were working. In response, part-time students worked around the system and managed a reduced level of integration. Often students formed friendships and used social media to communicate with their class and peers. The form of integration part-time students experienced though limited did not detract from or reduce students' academic experience or desire to succeed. These findings align with research, which indicates that part-time, flexible students have 'full and complex lives,' (Kahu et al. 2014), which places pressure on the time devoted to study and engagement within HE. Nevertheless, providing for inclusion of flexible part-time students within HEIs continues to challenge the prevailing paradigm of mainstream HE (Flannery & McGarr 2014, Darmody & Fleming 2009).

9.10 Conclusion

Tinto's theory of integration and ideas of belonging provided a framework for interviews. Findings indicated that students' sense of being part of or belonging within institutions was relational in focus and was associated with the class group, a peer network, and in some cases the department or school. No student indicated belonging to the institution. College was where students came to study, to engage in academic activities, to learn, whereas campus-based social activities did not feature within part-time students' HE experience.

Students' sense of inclusion was linked to accessing support services and facilities, which was found to be uneven or limited at several HEIs. Barriers and constraints shaped part-time students' engagement and interactions. Students have complex busy lives, which required juggling and managing

multiple responsibilities. Nevertheless, institutional inflexibility remains relevant as evidence emerging from interviews indicated students' sense of inclusion was compromised by limited access to services. Arguably the inequities underpinning the existing funding model for Irish HE has shaped part-time, flexible students' experience of integration and engagement.

10 Chapter Ten: Discussion

10.1 Introduction

The discussion is divided into two sections, and the first part focuses on key themes arising from the findings. Within this context, I will also consider the research questions, methodological and conceptual choices. In summary, the findings indicated that part-time flexible HE is complex, poorly defined and inadequately funded in Ireland. The sensitising concepts of retention and belonging which had informed the findings and aided analysis namely, Tinto's interactionist model, did not translate straightforwardly to part-time, flexible learning. The second part of the chapter focuses on the extent to which 'fitting in' and integration remain relevant to the persistence of minority cohorts within institutions and problematizes retention as it intersects with; HE reform, PTF programmes and student experience within HEIs.

10.2 Context

Misleading and mixed messages have shaped the discourse around part-time flexible, which was poorly conceptualised. PTF was presented by policy makers as a flexible mode of 'delivery' simply a longer version of full-time, a provision that was market-driven, orientated toward employability and marked by poor completion rates, a form of vocational, up-skilling for older students, or working adults who were funded by employers (HEA 2012, DES 2011, Woodfield 2014). Alternative narratives such as recognising the wider benefits of participation, managing part-time study with other responsibilities, were less visible; however, as the context changed, critical perspectives emerged (Flannery & McGarr, 2014, Callender, 2011). There was limited data or published research about part-time, flexible HE, which resulted in an underexplored aspect of HE provision (Darmody & Fleming 2009, McMahon 2000). Part-time was not treated separately by policy makers but parcelled within existing WP strategies and linked to lifelong learning policies (HEA 2012, HEA 2008).

In the aftermath of the economic downturn of 2008, there was reduced funding for HE. Public policy aimed to increase PTF learning opportunities across a reformed HE system. However, there was no reform of funding; in addition, the lack of data on progression amongst minority cohorts suggested differences between the margins and mainstream persisted. Notwithstanding increased diversity within full-time HE, public policy was formulated toward traditional students and programmes. The limited research on retention, completion, and success amongst PTF cohorts indicated the subject required attention. Despite the continued popularity of Tinto's theory of 'integration' and the idea of 'belonging' within policy, a review of the literature led me to query the extent to which these ideas could translate straightforwardly to a minority cohort who were a sub-group of WP target groups. Part-time flexible (PTF) students were heterogeneous; they were older, often working, paying their fees, enrolled on programmes of varying duration, and required access to institutional supports. The HEA was not recording retention amongst widening participation cohorts, or part-time students and completion were aligned with full-time L8 programmes. Successful completion over shorter durations or lower levels was not recognised.

Retention remains an institutional problem. Arguably institutional responses should take account of minority cohorts such as PTF students who form a subculture within HEIs. However, social integration for PTF cohorts was overlooked and under-resourced by HEIs leading to speculation that it was not relevant for persistence. Integration is not an unproblematic concept; however, the extent to which governmental and institutional policy or lack of policy influenced the persistence of non-traditional students is examined from multiple perspectives in the sections set out below.

10.3 Interpretation of the Findings

I set out to explore why part-time had increased in importance within public policy and how policy had been informed by concepts of lifelong learning and inclusion these questions were refined and linked to additional questions examining part-time, flexible learning within HEIs. The case study

though exploratory proposed to construct explanations in response to questions using empirical methods. Over a hundred participants took part in interviews, and from the findings, it was possible to deduce a number of critical issues:

1. Lifelong learning was a slippery concept, combining divergent strands. In Ireland Widening Participation policy focused on 'access' to full-time HE. PTF was presented as unproblematic by policy makers and bundled with WP. PTF provided up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities linked to employability. Students continued to pay fees and were excluded from grants.
2. There was a lack of data capturing PTF student progression or retention at a national level, which had a knock-on effect on policy development and institutional practices
3. Part-time, flexible students, are a heterogeneous population with diverse needs that require access to services and facilities. Lack of access to supports has implications for persistence
4. HE campuses were not often inclusive of part-time, flexible cohorts,
5. Both lecturers and students indicated high levels of persistence amongst PTF cohorts
6. Lecturers employed a range of pedagogies to engage PTF students, which contributed to the persistence
7. A myriad of factors constrained students' integration within HEIs
8. Belonging and integration influenced the persistence of PTF students
9. The extent to which a link exists between; pedagogies of engagement, curricular flexibility, and completion amongst PTF cohorts was under-researched

These issues form the core of the discussion and are considered in greater detail in the remainder of the chapter. Extracts from interviews are used to illustrate and underline key points.

10.4 Policy

The one-to-one interviews focused on investigating the extent of changes to part-time, flexible policy, specifically, the intention was to assess what if anything had changed in the context of the economic downturn since 2008. My interpretation of the evidence indicated increased interest in PTF HE from policy-makers, but this had not translated to reform of funding mechanisms. The questions examined the current situation nationally, and within a wider policy context, Why part-time had increased in importance within HE policy? To what extent was part-time higher education policy informed by concepts of lifelong learning and inclusion? What factors supported or inhibited the growth of PTF across HEIs? Also, the extent to which part-time differed from terms such as flexible learning?

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, an examination of research and policy documents revealed that part-time HE was marginalised and of limited interest to policy makers for several decades. Part-time was neglected whereas, and attention focused on increasing the numbers of school leavers in full-time HE (Thornhill 1999). My interpretation of the findings showed that the focus of attention was on mainstream HE. Reflecting on previous attempts to address part-time, flexible learning policy over the year's one prominent trade unionist noted;

'We would have been continuously in that upskilling access to further education space and would have been very involved in the White Paper and Tom Collins and all of that. But we never, you were just sort of knocking away at it and chipping at it, but it was never, you never got any sense that there was any enthusiasm for it'. Indep. Consultant

The Irish situation was not unique; analysis of research revealed a similar situation in the UK (Callender 2011, Schuller, 1999). Nonetheless, whilst comparisons could be drawn, there was a greater body of research and an established tradition of part-time, flexible HE within the UK (Swain and Hammond, 2009; Jamieson et al. 2009; Kember 2010). In Ireland, the

introduction of access and participation policies led to the arrival of strategies and reporting mechanisms in areas focused on disability, disadvantage, mature age, and ethnic minorities within full-time HE (HEA 2004). Attempts to increase participation of part-time students through inclusion in WP strategies yielded limited outcomes, part-time HE was primarily self-funding, the student's paid fees and could not access supports, whilst the numbers remained 'stable,' unsurprisingly there was no growth (Byrne & Murray 2017). The statistics reflected what little had changed concerning PTF student's numbers over several years (this was detailed in chapter 3).

10.5 Changing Times: 2008 -2016

My findings confirmed that part-time was marginalised within policy, and experienced policy makers indicated that the focus of policy generally was upon school leavers. There was a consensus amongst participants that increasing the numbers of full-time students and greater diversity within full-time mainstream HE absorbed the attention of policy makers and providers for years. Furthermore, the funding of HE, including access to student grants and supports, was targeted toward full-time (Byrne & Murray 2017). The HEA confirmed that;

'Part-time students were not included in our funding model demonstrating from a funding and policy point of view that part-time was not seen as I suppose not seen as mainstream'. HEA 1

Over a period of time, small measures indicated changes to 'mainstream' policy, including more diverse access routes into HE, recognition of prior learning and the introduction of modularisation (DES 1999).

A shift toward increased flexibility and part-time was discernible coinciding with the economic downturn from 2008 onwards (DES 2011, HEA 2012). The impact of the banking crisis resulted in reduced funding for HE, down by 38% by 2016, and signalled a period of renewed interest in reform across the sector (HEA 2018). The Hunt Report indicated the agenda for HE reform inclusive of increased flexible and part-time learning. The intention

was to expand part-time, flexible numbers, and this strategy was confirmed by the DES.

There were two distinct features informing policy developments at this time, firstly the introduction of labour activation schemes such as Springboard to target unemployed onto 'free' places on part-time HE programmes and secondly a recognition that the labour market required a labour force that was cyclically invested in upskilling and reskilling (HEA 2012). Sustaining employability was a priority nationally, and at EU level furthermore, policy had shifted in this direction (Rasmussen 2014). Where lifelong learning policy was evident, it was orientated toward employment, investment in skills and the knowledge economy, which is 'learning for earning' (Biesta 2006:176). Findings indicated that the changing needs of the national economy were the drivers of policy and strategies concerning PTF HE.

The DES confirmed the focus of policy;

'Like I know there's various kind of EU and international commitments or nods in this direction, but primarily I think its domestic in terms of it is economic drivers, we need more graduates, more highly skilled graduates in certain areas'. PO.1

There was also a realisation by policy makers that existing HE policy had not provided alternatives to full-time undergraduate education, and in light of increased demand and the forecast of a demographic bulge, it was argued that additional places on flexible programmes were needed. The HE 'system' required options other than full-time to accommodate increased demand. Despite the implications of Bologna and advances in technology, there was a lack of flexible programmes and flexible pathways into and within HEIs. One participant representing an employer body maintained there was an inadequate supply of flexible programmes across HE. The argument for increased supply and increased flexibility of programmes was aligned to labour market requirements.

10.6 Part-time and Flexible

From 2011 onwards part-time, and flexible became 'an item' in policy documents; that is, increasingly, the two were coupled together (HEA 2012). Within the HEA and DES, part-time was viewed as a subset of flexible, or as a longer version of full-time, whilst flexible was associated with technology. Senior policy-makers loosely defined part-time and flexible as access to flexible programmes for adults and working adults in particular. Definitions of part-time flexible or how the terms differed had not received much attention. One former senior academic who had formulated several policy documents was clear that the two terms were 'interchangeable'; nevertheless, it was noted that part-time wasn't half time; it had a distinct identity and focus. Therefore part-time was interpreted as different, and that difference was not a matter of duration; rather, it was shaped by programme flexibility and the students who participated.

However, the consensus amongst participants was that part-time flexible as a means to an end, providing adults who had busy lives and needed to reskill or upskill with opportunities to access HE. According to the HEA, the purpose of part-time was summed up as being orientated towards adults who required access to flexible programmes whilst working and managing other responsibilities.

As the impact of the financial crisis deepened, the DES-HEA worked toward delivery of agreed outputs following a systems performance framework (SPF), which in turn formed the basis of delivering on 'reform' of HE through institutional compacts (DES 2012; HEA 2013). Coinciding with the increased oversight of spending linked to the performance framework within HE was the arrival of a number of policy documents that specifically addressed part-time such as Part-Time Flexible Higher Education in Ireland (2012) as well as being embedded within the National Strategy for Higher Education (2011) document and as a feature of the Cassells report (2016).

All of this activity indicated a level of urgency as momentum gathered in the wider debate concerning reform and funding of HE (DES 2012).

Notwithstanding the developments in policy, there was no reform of funding nor any indicator of additional resources becoming available to support or incentivise increased flexibility of HE (HEA 2009). Whilst PTF policy was more visible and its status was enhanced it failed to achieve parity with full-time from a funding perspective.

10.7 Funding and links with Reform

Fleming et al. observed that HE policy was 'very preoccupied' with funding and fees, which aligned with findings in this case (2017:34). The policy makers I interviewed acknowledged that without changes to funding or additional resources to incentivise HEIs to grow part-time, flexible numbers, then the situation would remain static. Simply there was no financial incentive to grow part-time.

The reform of funding was central to change; it was seen as hugely important, and without changes to the RGAM, there was little likelihood that practices across the sector would alter. Further, there was an acknowledgement that part-time, flexible students were not treated in an equitable manner; they had limited access to supports and facilities within HEIs'. The DES and HEA were aware of the inequity and recognised that PTF students were unable to access grants or support systems.

Despite the HEA having changed how it recorded part-time students and the inclusion of part-timers in the annual recurring grant to HEIs, it was argued that the lack of additional public resources hindered the growth of part-time, flexible provision. Nevertheless, interviews revealed that in the absence of additional government resources targeting part-time or reform of HE funding, the practice of expanding part-time as a way of generating income for HEIs would continue. In that sense, part-time, flexible provision was recognised as a revenue stream for cash depleted HEIs and IoT's in particular (HEA 2016). The reality was acknowledged by the (eg) HEA,

'But you see it comes back to funding again, the resources. For many institutions, part-time students are an important revenue

source and absent that revenue they would be in an even greater difficulty than they are'. HEA 1

The Springboard labour activation scheme was identified as successful in addressing part-time participation in HE. Whilst it was clear that the lack of increased public resources hindered the growth of part-time flexible learning, there was plenty of evidence to indicate that there was a demand for part-time HE that was free (HEA 2016). Springboard offered a targeted response to labour market needs and was viewed by the HEA-DES as a highly successful albeit temporary labour market activation scheme. Participants' views on Springboard differed some recognised it as a temporary strategic response to the downturn as well as providing resources to HEIs, whereas the HEA indicated a scheme of this type should and would live on in some form after the economic crisis. The Springboard model was a strategy to supply targeted flexible skills-based programmes in response to labour market needs and should be included within a suite of models that featured in part-time, flexible provision across HE.

The alignment of part-time, flexible HE to instrumental and labour market initiatives was pronounced during the downturn (Flannery & McGarr 2014). Findings indicated LLL policy was orientated toward serving economic interests shedding earlier democratic, participatory dimensions (Fleming 2010, Biesta 2006). In that sense, PTF fulfilled a narrow version of lifelong learning policy orientated toward delivering on employability and addressing competitiveness, which resonated with wider EU policy directives (Rasmussen 2014, Boeren, 2014).

Whilst policy makers within the DES, HEA were preoccupied with increasing part-time programmes linked to the labour market, another perspective on HE reform was presented. In particular, providing for programme flexibility and accessible pathways within and across HEIs was necessary to stimulate the growth of PTF participation as argued by one key actor involved in policy development, who noted that,

'In the Hunt review, we didn't really get down to these fundamental questions of how the system was going to change, to open it up. You

need to reform the funding system but you also need reform of, significant reform of, I hate using the word delivery because it likens it to a service, but you know what I mean, the way in which it happens'. Indep. Consultant

The argument for structural and pedagogical reforms to facilitate the enhanced flexibility of the HE system was not altogether new (HEA 2009). However, there was a lack of empirical data offering insights into teaching and learning experiences amongst PTF cohorts in Irish HE. Therefore using the findings from interviews, the following paragraphs attempt to shed light on 'the way in which' flexible teaching and learning happens within HEIs.

10.8 Lecturers and PTF

Surprisingly little was known about pedagogical practices, particularly involving older students outside of full-time HE in Ireland (Darmody & Fleming, 2009). Exploring academic and social aspects of teacher-student interactions could offer insights into retention and persistence. The 30 lecturers interviewed were drawn from across a range of disciplines, and programmes at various levels discussed their philosophy and strategies when teaching part-time students, also how they supported students, the extent to which students were integrated, and what factors contributed to persistence.

During the fieldwork phase, it became apparent that across the HEIs, a range of practices and approaches had been adopted to cater to part-time, flexible students. Whilst a small number of HEIs had developed an extensive range of part-time, flexible programmes at an undergraduate level, in other cases the range of programmes and progression routes available was limited. Alternatively, several HEIs had expanded post-graduate part-time, flexible options. The pattern of provision though variable indicated that HEIs focused either on undergraduate or post-graduate (Byrne & Murray 2017). Two HEIs offered Springboard programmes and other HEIs' programmes were linked to Skills-net. The orientation of part-time programmes toward instrumentalism was evident

as several programmes related to professional and vocational career pathways (Loxley et al. 2014, Fleming et al. 2017). Nevertheless, flexible programmes that were accessible to students emerged as a key factor in driving participation at a regional and national level. For PTF students, the ability to access PTF programmes that were local or within commutable distance was important in deciding to enrol.

In several HEIs, the teaching staff was contracted on a part-time basis. Though the precarious nature of employment within HE tallies with research undertaken by Clarke et al. (2015) however, this was not exclusively the case across all institutions. Data also showed that in several HEIs part-time was integrated with staff teaching full and part-time students and students having access to services similar to full-time students. However, there was a lack of consistency and considerable variation at an institutional level in terms of the range of; programmes available, levels of student integration, progression routes and access to supports.

10.9 Perspectives on Teaching Part-time Students

In recent years Irish HE policy has emphasized teaching and learning and student engagement with a range of strategic initiatives to enhance and support academic development within HEIs (HEA 2013, DES 2012, DES 2011). With an emphasis on professional development and the need for quality teaching and learning to be manifest within HEIs, concerns were raised as to the underlying 'centralisation' and 'bureaucratisation' of efforts both nationally and locally (Fleming et al. 2017:242). Notwithstanding the trend toward professionalism across the sector, the tone of various reports supposes that teaching and learning across HE requires attention and that the quality was uneven or possibly poor (HEA 2013, IBEC 2011). Yet evidence to support suggestions of poor quality teaching remains in short supply (ISSE; 2016). Furthermore, the assumption that teaching, learning, and engagement are underpinned by narrowly defined behaviours that can and should be measured by institutions has been challenged (Kahu 2013). Empirical findings in this case study indicated that lecturers employed a variety of philosophies and strategies to engage part-time students further

they were responsive to students' needs. Lecturers acknowledged that PTF students were committed to learning, enthusiastic and willing to participate in discussion and dialogue within a class.

Critical and constructivist pedagogies, theories embedded in Frierean ideals, as well as being student centred featured in teaching approaches. Equally, there were many examples where lecturers highlighted that students were engaged in the acquisition of skills and knowledge required for the workplace. The application of learning to the workplace aligned with policy makers' perspectives, adults needed to access flexible programmes to grow and sustain employment.

The lecturers recognised that part-time students were diverse, also that they brought; experience, knowledge, and were motivated. Teaching strategies employed were responsive to student diversity and harnessed the experiences of students. Findings supported research undertaken into changing academic roles (Clarke et al. 2015) and acknowledged that lecturing staff had 'contributed hugely to dealing with a fast-changing student cohort' often with access to limited resources or supports (Fleming et al., 2017:249).

10.10 Active Teaching

Active teaching methods and student-centred learning are key to engagement and completion (Dwyer, 2017). Braxton et al. (2000) acknowledged that active learning, though different from academic integration, could contribute to student involvement. Findings, in this case, confirmed that lecturers employed strategies to engage and support students further; they placed a value on their interactions and believed their efforts contributed to retention and persistence. However, lecturers recognised that part-time, flexible students could be demanding, vocal and committed, which resonates with findings elsewhere (Merrill 2001). Findings indicated that PTF students were willing to engage and asked more of their lecturers, which indicated high levels of academic interaction. Data

suggested a range of active and experientially based methods were used in the classroom. A lecturer describes the situation in the following way;

'Well, I think for part-time students the thing is to keep it relevant. Keep focused, but keep it interesting. They've got busy lives'. Uni.
M: L7

Where possible class time was constructed to facilitate discussion, dialogue, and engagement to foster and build a relationship with student groups. Whilst VLEs were used, it was not found to be ubiquitous. Rather a range of methods was employed to prepare students and cover content in advance, freeing up class time for discussion. Some lecturers maintained a 'flipped classroom' approach was an effective strategy to encourage engagement. The use of active and engaging pedagogies was reflective of the need to build and construct relationships between teacher and older students and amongst students, peer to peer. Also, it was a response to the timing of programmes as students may be tired or lacking energy. The importance of embedding relational aspects within teaching as an approach to enhance learning emerged across; programmes, disciplines, and HEIs. A lecturer expressed this perspective succinctly;

'Yeah, I think the relationship part of it can't be underestimated.'
Indep. L1

However, time, space, and resources were identified as constraining the level of teacher-student interactions, such findings aligned with research arising elsewhere in Irish HE (Fleming et al., 2017).

10.11 Diversity and Managing Expectations

Whilst class sizes were not large; they were scheduled predominantly in the evenings and at weekends. Lecturers recognised that part-time, flexible students were carrying multiple responsibilities, they juggled and struggled with course requirements, workload, and managing their time (Fleming & Finnegan 2011; Darmody & Fleming, 2009; Keane, 2009; Merrill 2001).

Findings indicated that the structure of programmes and content of modules facilitated increased engagement and management of workload.

Managing students' expectations were highlighted as important in so far as students needed to know from the outset what was expected academically, in terms of engagement and assessment. Students set out to plan and manage their workload, which aided their ability to cope with the programme workload and other responsibilities. In addition, lecturers indicated that older students expressed fears and concerns around assessment and academic writing in general. Lecturers indicated they engaged in supporting students as they adjusted to the academic environment and prepared for assessment. In several cases, the diversity and age profile of part-time students meant that access to literacy supports and academic writing was critical for students' transitioning into HE. Across HEIs' and in particular IoTs', lecturers indicated students presented with literacy problems. However, access to supports was uneven; some HEIs provided a service others did not.

Lecturers did not approach teaching part-time students differently compared to full-time, regardless of mode, students were treated similarly. Notwithstanding lecturer's intention to treat students similarly there was significant variation in programmes and student economic and social profiles. Fees emerged as an issue distinguishing full and part-time cohorts. In some cases, students interpreted paying fees as linked to the provision of high-quality services or being customer-focused. In one instance a lecturer provided what she described as;

'You know a Rolls Royce service' to students because of the fees that they're paying'. Uni. D. L5

Clarke et al. (2015) noted that HEIs have become more market-driven in their approaches to income generation. Nevertheless, in most cases, lecturers recognised the majority of students were paying fees, therefore their capacity to self-finance was noted as was the limitations of the

institution to respond adequately to flexible part-time students in terms of access to supports and facilities.

10.12 Integration, Supports, and Persistence

Lecturers confirmed that part-time and full-time students co-existed independently. There were no organised activities or informal occasions when the two groups interacted. The part-time and full time students remained separate. Part-time students were on campus at different times to full-time students, and the two cohorts were distinct. Part-time students were not socialising on campus and tended to orientate toward class-based interactions. One lecturer described how integration was impacted by the programme structure,

'They're very much a group on their own. It's not that they would be unwilling or unable to do so, but you have to bear in mind that they're here on a one day release so that's quite an intensive programme. I mean they're using the facilities of the building. They're using the library. I suppose, really, the difference is they're not socialising as students. They're functioning academically as students but not socialising as students'. Uni.M.L6

The findings indicated a lack of time imposed constraints on lecturers and students and impacted on teaching and learning. Nevertheless, across the various programmes lecturers observed high completion and good attendance, part-time students were noted for their commitment, willingness to engage and contribute to their studies. Though in one instance where Springboard students were accessing programmes, there was a level of withdrawal or deferral, which contrasted with fee-paying students who tended to continue. Peer and staff support were identified as factors contributing to continuation and completion. They also remarked on the effect of additional factors aiding completion, which included student motivation, financial investment in learning, and efforts shown by administrative and academic staff to interact and connect with students. Limited access to supports or facilities for part-time, flexible students was

an indicator of low levels of inclusion and highlighted inequity. According to a lecturer in one University;

'They're here when many things have closed down or are not available at full tilt'. Uni.L3

Several of the HEIs were not providing access to supports and services outside of the working day; nevertheless, small measures such as access to; canteen, IT training, technical support, academic writing, and academic staff can make a difference. Skillbeck maintained that 'the pattern of life that the student experiences at the institution can make the difference between success and failure' (Skillbeck, 2000:52). For part-time students 'the pattern' centred on the classroom, their peers and academic activities.

10.13 Students' Motivation and Learning

Sixty-three students drawn from a range of HEIs, enrolled on programmes of varying duration, and at different NFQ levels took part in individual or group interviews. Sensitizing concepts of integration and belonging informed the design of the interviews. In particular, questions such as; why students decided to study part-time, what motivated them and what was their experience of being a part-time student and to what extent did they belong or were included within the HEI, featured at interviews.

Motivations for enrolling in HE were varied and multiple, reflective of a heterogeneous mix of adult students and programme types. Similarly, Kearns found that mature students espoused a 'complexity of intentions' (Kearns 2017:194). As students were older and had responsibilities such as jobs, family, their responses indicated the decision to return to learning was measured and considered overtime. Students weighed up committing in terms of what they considered to be valuable resources, namely time and money. The course costs, combined with programme flexibility, the proximity, and accessibility of the HEI informed decision making. Older students demonstrated clear motivations. Yorke noted that older students

on average, make 'more thoughtful choices and have weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of entering higher education' (Yorke 2004:26). The author argued such factors were linked to student persistence. Students enrolled in a part-time programme to obtain a qualification this was linked to personal and or professional interests, that is to up-skill, re-skill, or the desire to study a subject in greater depth or for the first time.

Part-time programmes enabled students to continue working while studying, therefore a flexible programme was a key determinant. The importance of flexible programmes was central to decision making; students noted the importance of part-time evening or flexible courses as critical in making a choice, as it provided options to manage and juggle other responsibilities. This finding aligned with earlier research into part-time student's experiences in Higher Education in the UK as the students indicated they chose part-time 'because of being able to study alongside other commitments' (Yorke, Longden, 2008:12).

Undoubtedly for many students who took part in the study, the possibility of a career change, or 'greater employability' was a factor contributing to their choice of programme (HEA 2017:34). Here an older student indicates why she was returning to education;

'I was very conscious that I would be entering the jobs market again and wanted to make sure I could compete well with I suppose the competition for those jobs'. Indep.PGF3

Again these findings resonate with research outcomes elsewhere (Yorke, Longden, 2008). In addition, many students articulated that their choice of programme was informed partly by vocational interest also because they were deeply interested in the subject and in many instances, committed to a professional pathway.

10.14 Persistence and Part-time

Students' commitment to their goal was striking, there was a consistent response across all levels, students intended to stay the course and achieve the qualification. A student at one University confirmed what several others had articulated;

'I just wanted to complete a degree'. Uni.B

Whether students had enrolled on a one year or four-year programme they intended to complete and reach the goal. For many students, a qualification offered recognition and the fulfilment of a personal goal. Also, the majority of students indicated having committed to the programme there was a determination to stay the course. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) examined retention amongst non-traditional students and here too, there was evidence of commitment to a goal. The authors chose Axel Honneth's research into theories of recognition as a frame with which to examine non-traditional students' motivation and resilience. Fleming and Finnegan argued that the schema based on individual self-esteem, self-worth, self-respect, or the absence of these qualities at a personal or societal level, offered a framework for analysing non-traditional students' narratives. This concept has relevancy for part-time in so far as findings in my case study suggested students placed a value on and attached meaning to a qualification. Furthermore, that meaning was linked to personal achievement and self-esteem; in addition, value was placed on qualifications in wider societal terms including potential gains in employment terms or enhancement of career opportunities. However, the link between increased credentials and enhanced employment remains the subject of debate (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011; Kearns 2017; Biesta, 2006). Notwithstanding Fleming and Finnegan's research findings into the non-traditional student, the concept of recognition could not adequately explain persistence where part-time students were concerned.

Why students persist continues to elude researchers as they attempt to grapple with the complexity of student resilience (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden 2013). My findings indicated that students continued to persist even where

there was evidence arising from the research of limited integration and poor experience of inclusion from an institutional perspective. In my research, the interpretation of findings focused on factors that constrained and supported students' interactions and a sense of belonging within HEIs, which are explored in the following paragraphs.

10.15 Temporal Constraints

Part-time students were constrained by time, which impacted their ability to integrate within HEIs. Student's interactions were focused on class-based academic activities. As part-time, flexible programmes were scheduled in the evening, at weekends or day-time, monthly, the level of interaction was constrained within a class-based time-frame. Part-time students have busy lives; their ability to interact with college-based activities outside of the programme required planning and making arrangements, which were not always possible. Where the activity was linked to academic activities such as; library training, academic writing, an assignment, or IT, then students acknowledged this as a priority and tried to access the relevant supports. However, in several cases, students who worked were unable to access facilities or supports which were scheduled during the day-time. A post-graduate student highlighted difficulties encountered

'A lot of those library sessions and everything that were at the start of the year they were all during teaching time, so I can't just take a day off work to go in for an hour, but like the counselling services, those are during school times, those are things I'd love to access but like they're not even in the evenings'. Uni.A:5PGF

Repeatedly students identified organisational inflexibility as a factor hampering academic integration. The data indicated that two HEIs were good at providing access to services and supports, whilst in other cases, options were limited, patchy, or unavailable. Whilst findings indicated some HEIs were proactive and integrated part-time, flexible students; however, this was not consistently found to be the case. Often in practice, it fell to the department or school administrative or academic staff to provide the

point of contact, to interact and build relationships and encourage the integration of students.

10.16 Belonging and Inclusion

Part-time students did not socialise on campus. Instead, the focus of their interactions informal and formal revolved around the programme and regularly included their peers. Accordingly, students associated college interactions with academic activities. Students utilised social media to communicate with their peers to informally discuss and organise meetings around course work and assessment. Findings indicated meetings amongst students took place on-site and off-campus. Peer support networks and informal communities of practice were in evidence across a variety of programmes. In several instances, students formed networks, bonded as a class and indicated their peers provided support and encouragement when a challenge was encountered. Students identified these activities as factors contributing to persistence.

Whilst student's college-based social interactions were limited, many confirmed a sense of belonging, which they attributed to being part of a class, programme and in several cases a department. Belonging was often relational, whereby students related to their peers and academic staff. A post-graduate student explains her sense of belonging;

‘Well, I feel personally like I belong in the department. So I feel like I belong in this group that we work together, the lecturers are very approachable, the ladies in the office are fab, but that’s where I belong’. Uni.A5:PGF

Rarely did students indicate a sense of belonging at an institutional level. This was not part of their experience. There were mixed views of the significance of being part of or having a sense of belonging; clearly, for some, it was relevant and significant, but for others, it held less importance. No student mentioned spaces or locations where they would congregate or meet on campus; rather there was a strong orientation to engage with

academic classroom related activities whilst on campus. The scheduling of programmes evening or week-end was a factor in limited social interactions further as many students were working or had additional responsibilities; they were constrained in how they used their time. One university post-graduate student explained the choice involved in 'belonging' which acknowledged the constraint imposed by external responsibilities.

'I think if you want to belong you have to make an effort to be part of it you have to make an effort to engage, you have to put yourself forward like. We do get the emails with the information you know what I mean after that it's up to you. I guess I've chosen not to; I don't really feel like I have time or the energy'. Uni.A5.PG

Many students expressed a poor experience of inclusion, which they interpreted as a lack of access to supports and facilities. All students recognised that their time was limited and this was a factor impacting on inclusion. Students received emails and notices from student services and administration. Findings indicated there were regular communications, including invitations to campus-based activities; however, the communication was generic sent to a wide student cohort. PTF students did not like this a sense of inclusion. For many students, a lack of inclusion was regrettable; also, it was interpreted as an indicator of the low status associated with part-time within an institution, whereas for others, it was a sign of busy lives and multiple responsibilities.

What emerged from empirical findings, in this case, is whilst part-time students experienced poor levels of 'inclusion' within the institution, this did not appear to deter or disrupt their study. A review of the thinking informing inclusion policies led Thomas to argue that connections exist between 'motivation, identity, and learning', this perspective has relevancy for part-time, flexible students in HE (Thomas 2013:483). Arguably whilst there was limited evidence of social integration at an institutional level, nevertheless, it appears that through academic activities, active learning, class cohesion, bonding, membership of informal social networks, part-time students identified as a sub-culture, and were learning.

10.17 Retention and Integration: Theory, practice, and policy

As set out in chapter 5, theories of interaction, assimilation, and ideas of belonging are prevalent in debates on retention. In Ireland, public policy is institutionally focused with an emphasis on an examination of full-time first-year under-graduate levels of progression and, more recently, success within L8 programmes. There are gaps in retention data where minority categories of WP are concerned which has implications for policy. Findings from this study indicated PTF students are heterogeneous though arguably as mainstream has diversified full-time cohorts may be described similarly. Whilst meeting the needs of full-time under-graduate students dominated the HE landscape over time, the situation evolved, and the boundaries separating full-time from part-time have been blurred. Nevertheless, PTF students remain a minority category amongst other minorities within HE. Structural inequities persist; barriers to participation remain in place; however, the situation is not without complexity as PTF provision provides a revenue stream for HEIs. As public policy moves toward the examination of retention amongst minority and WP cohorts, then it is appropriate to draw on findings emerging from this case study and revisit Tinto's model of retention as it intersects with questions around students' interactions, sense of belonging and why they persisted in their studies. The discussion turns to institutional deficits in the form of barriers to and inadequacy of supports, lack of flexibility in accessing facilities, and speculates as to the importance of social integration as a measure of student retention or contributor to persistence. The discussion concludes with a review of reflexivity as a methodological tool in qualitative studies.

10.18 Social and Academic Integration

This case study did not examine student departure; rather, the intention was to explore factors that encouraged and constrained retention and persistence of part-time students. For Tinto departure was an institutional problem. Tinto examined students' social and academic involvement and argued the quality and level of interaction was central to retention even

where students were part-time or commuting (1993). Tinto used a variety of terms interchangeably when considering the complex issue of retention, including; interaction, involvement, and engagement, each of these activities were human-centred, either social or academic, in focus and informed integration. The theory of interaction hinges on membership of cultures or sub-cultures and involvement in communities. Arguably findings emerging from this case study suggest that PTF students were a sub-culture; students were members of a community even though they may not be recognised as such at an institutional level.

Part-time flexible students' levels of engagement emerged from empirical findings as key determinants for persistence. However, it was possible to identify many constraints to student interaction which included:

- Institutional
 - A lack of institutional support,
 - Transitioning to HE for the first-time PTF matures
 - Limited physical spaces or informal opportunities where meaningful social interactions could be supported within HEIs.
- Academic
 - Structural and programmatic inflexibility,
 - Managing expectations,
 - Time pressures impact on teacher-student interactions,
- Personal
 - Students have busy lives,

Across all the programmes included in this study, part-time students indicated they were not participating in social activities on campus. Students stated that structured or formal opportunities for social interaction were minimal or non-existent; therefore, indicators for part-time students' forms of involvement revolved around academic activities in class, with peers and departmental staff. The orientation was toward academic activities, which could include a social dimension but were predominantly academic in focus. Students' lack of time, coupled with external responsibilities, hindered participation in social activities as currently configured within HEIs. For PTF students, social interaction was not the

main priority; instead, their interactions were orientated toward academic activities. Notwithstanding external factors that constrained involvement in social interaction students acknowledged a sense of belonging and fitting in, which was associated with the class, programme, and department.

Research in the UK into retention noted that part-time students lack social engagement; it was concluded that this was indicative of an instrumental approach and according to Thomas, represented a devaluing of 'social aspects of a HE experience' (Thomas 2012:18). The findings, in this case, did not align with students devaluing social engagement rather a realisation that often for older part-time students, it was not feasible to be involved in college-based social activities unless they were linked to class-based or academic work. There is diversity amongst part-time, flexible students, and in this case, data indicated that they enrol on programmes for a myriad of reasons; also, they were committed to their studies and wanted to complete. Also, the types of social activities organised by institutions may not be relevant to older students. Arguably experiencing difficulty with participation in social interactions may have little to do with motivation or the adoption of instrumental approaches.

The significance of social interaction for part-time students was questioned by one senior academic and policy maker who observed;

'Start off by asking to be totally honest; how much real learning goes on socially in universities with full-time students? It's a bit of a myth that because you're a full-time student, there's a great community of learning going on all around you'. SA, 1

Thomas acknowledged that there were 'levels of engagement' and wanted to avoid the pitfalls of conformity or promoting a 'uniform approach' to student engagement, which was associated with assimilationist models of retention (2012:19). Adopting a one size fits all approach to a heterogeneous student population is inappropriate, minority cohorts such as part-time students require a model of retention and integration that is; institutionally based, is responsive to the student profile and situation on the ground within a department or school. Yorke noted 'the patterns of

students engagement in higher education was changing' and that this applied to both full and part-time cohorts (2004:22). Notwithstanding developments in how students engage with HE, there are distinguishing factors. Also though the University may be a 'transitional' space where identities are formed there are differences between full-time, part-time, younger and older. PTF students are older, often working, they are embedded in a community, and are likely to commute to college and have multiple external responsibilities. In contrast, full-time first-year undergraduates are predominantly a younger student profile, transitioning to HE from school; also they may relocate or reside on campus. Enrolment at a HEI represents a formative experience influencing individual development and identity as a student and adult.

The crux of the interactionist model is a reliance on constructing student involvement as a means of promoting integration, thereby resulting in success in the form of degree completion. A substantial body of evidence indicates that for first-year full-time undergraduate students, institution led strategies promoting engagement can prove effective (Thomas 2012). However, where part-time, flexible students are concerned, models of integration should acknowledge a range of variables that take account of the student profile and the complexity of adult lives. Furthermore, integration should be characterised as; negotiable, active not fixed, a point on a continuum that changes. In such a model, students choose levels of interaction and integration ranging from a minimum light touch through to increased levels of membership of formal and informal networks. Furthermore, where persistence and part-time students are concerned, it would be worthwhile for institutions to review the range of supports, facilities, and services, academic and non-academic that where accessible could offer opportunities for social and academic interaction of varying levels.

10.19 Integration and Institutional Supports

Findings from this study involving part-time, flexible students in Irish HEIs indicated that integration was best supported through academic activities;

however, there was limited evidence of structured or formal interventions that were institutionally led or co-ordinated. Empirical findings suggest that too often the 'baton' was passed to front line teaching and coordinating staff to develop relationships with students and encourage involvement in activities academic or social, this ad hoc approach was not found to be reliable or consistent particularly at a time of reform and reduced funding across HE.

At an institutional level, a proactive approach to the integration of minorities was difficult to discern, a small number of HEIs had evolved strategies and supports, and were better equipped to respond to the needs of flexible part-time students, others were remedial others still lacked efficacy. Notwithstanding the obvious need for continued access to flexible programmes, once in the system, part-time flexible students' required access to supports and facilities. HEIs needed to demonstrate a 'culture that supports learning' and create a learning environment that was responsive to flexible part-time students (Zepke Leach 2010:172).

A senior academic outlined the limitations of reduced administrative supports available to part-time students;

'The fees office, the registry, the exams office all of these people have to recognise, and the library of course, that once you have a significant number of part-time students, you have to be much more flexible in your administration. And you have to have various supports like counselling and just general support. The nine to five doesn't operate when you have part-time students and nor should it'.

SA1

The lack of services and difficulties in accessing student supports remains a black spot where part-time, flexible students are concerned. As part-time, flexible cohorts include a wide range of ages and backgrounds, the need for support has featured in several reports (HEA 2012, Frith Wilson, 2014). Tinto argued that ultimately supports were an institutional matter, 'the institution has to find a way of making it possible for students to obtain the services they need while on campus' (Tinto, 1993:196)

My research findings suggested that despite the difficulties encountered the majority of students persisted. A combination of institutional factors linked with extrinsic aspects informed persistence. The factors emerging as key to institutional persistence from a student perspective included; student motivation, a strong commitment to a goal, desire to complete the programme successfully and acquire a qualification, investment in learning linked to potential employment opportunities, interaction with peers, class cohesion, being a member of a student community, desire to learn, combined with active and student-centred learning and teaching methods.

10.20 Persistence and Active learning

There is a body of research examining the pivotal role of lecturers and learning and teaching as factors contributing to student engagement and persistence (Thomas 2012; Dwyer 2013; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Tinto's assertion that what institutions do matters, could be extended to include teachers in terms of what they do and do not do impacts on retention and persistence. Similarly, Fleming noted that 'better teaching is good for retention' (2010).

This study explored the following; policy, teaching and learning, teacher-student interactions, and the implications for integration and persistence within HEIs. The research aim was to move beyond tools such as ISSE, which tend to 'homogenise and normalise student experience' (Fleming et al. 2017:243). The intention was to build on earlier research in particular Merrill, who reflected on the changing diversity and expansion of HE some years ago and acknowledged that 'little is known about the interaction of adult students and lecturers in the learning situation of a University' (2001:7).

Findings emerging from interviews with students and lecturers indicated that aspects of teaching and learning continued to focus on younger students; however this was no longer exclusively the case. The majority of

lecturers who participated in the study employed a range of pedagogical approaches relevant and responsive to older part-time students. Findings indicated engagement was orientated toward academic activities and was characterised as; the use of active and experiential teaching methodologies, being relational, being accessible to students, managing expectations around workload, providing reassurance where an assessment was concerned and offering feedback on an assessment that was timely. Notably, the majority of lecturers indicated they had access to teaching and learning supports within the institution or indirect support from the head of the unit or department. Nevertheless, there were instances of dissatisfaction, six students articulated an experience of teaching and learning that fell short of their expectation either because the lecturer used; didactic approaches failed to acknowledge students as experienced, presented material that was deemed irrelevant, out of date or provided feedback on an assessment that was inadequate. Also where students were 'new' to higher education, they required time to comprehend complex ideas and theories yet where lectures were curtailed, or there were few opportunities for discussion confusion followed.

Merrill noted that adult students were 'eager to learn and expand their knowledge base' (2001:11). In this case, lecturers, experiences of part-time, flexible students were positive; students were acknowledged as vocal, challenging, and committed. The types of pedagogies evident in teaching varied but were inclusive of; critical, experiential, dialogic, adult education, and constructivism. The types of teaching strategies identified included; small group teaching, lectures, project and problem-based learning, peer learning, presentations, workshops, case studies, and field trips. 'Lecturing only gets you so far' was an acknowledgement by one lecturer that when teaching adult students' often in the evening time, a variety of approaches was required. As part-time students brought experience and knowledge, their expectations of academic challenge and being challenged were high; lecturers acknowledged that many students wanted to engage in discussion, debate and to share experience within class. Tinto noted that where students experience high levels of academic challenge, this can drive

motivation, build confidence, support success and contribute to persistence (Tinto 1993).

Several lecturers recognised the relational aspect of teaching and learning as a factor that contributed to engagement. Time was set aside where students might 'check-in' or voice concerns, queries or pose questions. However, Finnegan et al. (2017:250) state that 'the relational and contextual aspect of pedagogy are undervalued.' In the case of part-time students often the tight scheduling of class time and pressures to 'deliver' meant it was not possible in every situation to provide for informal interactions, further still, class time was devoted to covering content, as in some instances there were no seminars or tutorials for questions or discussion. It is worth noting that teaching and learning within HEIs is constrained and that levels of autonomy remain 'variable, contingent and highly contextualised' (Fleming et al. 2017:248). Also, Clarke et al. (2015) found that workload had increased in recent years, placing increased pressures on academic staff.

As part-time flexible students are heterogeneous, lecturers identified that for many students returning to HE was daunting, and they expressed fears and concerns about meeting academic requirements and assessment. A lecturer in an IoT summed up the situation as;

'The academic style of writing doesn't always come easy to students, and there's a fear of returning to education... So there's a big fear of failure with adult education'. IoT.3

Such anxieties are not new and feature elsewhere (Kearns 2017, Fleming Finnegan, 2011; Yorke Longden 2008, Merril, 2001). Findings indicated that student's concerns could be addressed within class contact time; also, several lecturers provided support outside of contracted hours. Embedding study skills within programmes and access to academic writing support at the early stages may address challenges around workload and academic writing particularly where there is increased diversity (Keane 2011).

Getting to know your students and the need to clarify expectations from the outset was identified by lecturers as important for engagement and supported integration. Thomas (2012) and Tinto (1993) highlighted the importance of managing expectations for incoming year one full-time students, but this translated to part-time and flexible students as well. Similarly, Kahus' research into distance education found students' expectations about workload before entry varied from the actual work-load and that there was a mismatch between institutional information and the reality experienced by students. The findings from part-time, flexible higher education students indicated students, and often first-timers had not fully comprehended the workload requirement. Also whilst post-graduate students were better prepared, they too re-adjusted their expectations and learnt how to manage.

Fleming (2017) argued that for teaching and learning to provide for transformation and possible emancipation, then recognition and respect should be at the heart of the educational experience. This aspiration is built upon reviving humanistic ideas underpinning the concept of lifelong learning, which has receded from policies informing HE. Further, it supposes that democracy and social justice are embedded within HE and teaching and learning experiences within institutions. During the economic downturn, the funding climate constrained curricular developments within HE; also, PTF was orientated toward employability and provided revenue within institutions (Donnelly & Harding 2015). Despite such developments, it would be incorrect to conclude that instrumentalism and neoliberalism have overtaken PTF HE. Findings do not support such a perspective; instead, lecturers and students who participated in this study indicated a range of motivations and values other than dominant market-driven ideals. Notwithstanding the threads of democratic perspectives evident, there were also fundamental contradictions emerging; findings indicated that across many PTF programmes resources were limited; however, there were exceptional cases of 'bespoke' post-graduate programmes offering a 'Rolls Royce' service to students who could afford it. The tensions inherent to PTF learning as it develops cannot be overlooked particularly as funding of HE remains unreformed.

10.21 Policy, Institutions, and Integration

During the economic crisis, government strategies to reform HE and provide for enhanced flexibility led to an aspect of PTF, namely, programme flexibility and in particular programmes linked to employment being prioritised. However, the ambition set out in the DES (2011), and HEA (2012) reports to make Irish HE; flexible, equitable and address access to services and supports for PTF students was not achieved.

Loxley et al. (2017) provided a reminder of definitions informing the Irish HE access policy when the authors revisited the HEA report Access and Equity in Higher Education (Skillbeck 2000). Skillbecks' definition described as 'vertiginous and panoramic' though nothing new focused not just on barriers to access but on equity within HEIs (Fleming et al., 2017:49). Accordingly, this included 'full participation in its benefits; attentiveness to the factors that might or do affect performance and progress of all students (2000:7)'. Skillbecks' definition was a reminder that barriers to accessing HE may not stop at the point of entry, that challenges and inequities can continue post entry in the form of institutional practices and policy.

In a similar vein one policy maker and academic reflecting on experiences as a part-time student noted;

'I suppose I'm very conscious that part-time learning is not a new phenomenon. People have managed it in spite of the system, not because of the system. You get around, and you sort of fit yourself into the system, and you become then a part-time learner. But why the system, it doesn't facilitate it. There's no doubt in my mind about that at all. It doesn't really facilitate it. There are a whole range of extra obstacles to overcome if you want to be a part-time learner, and ironically, while it is seen as a, as you say, as an access possibility, in fact, part-time learning is actually much less accessible than full-time learning'. SA1

Whilst public policy aspired to provide a HE system that was flexible, the experience of students and lecturers across multiple PTF programmes

indicated institutional flexibility had not been achieved. Several factors have been discussed in the preceding sections as contributing to the failure to progress flexibility across HEIs. One way of measuring the inclusion of minority cohorts is to consider student retention, success, and persistence. Tinto's model of departure focuses on institutional policies and practices rather than on individual deficits. In the sociological model devised by Tinto, the environment and context take priority. Tinto argued, where systems, structures, and policies do not support individual integration and progression, then departure is likely. Whilst Pascerella and Terenzini (1980) validated Tinto's model and found that integration leads to persistence; nevertheless, there were limitations that were highlighted in chapter 5. In particular, the model Tinto devised was problematic from the perspective of non-traditional students.

Many disciplines have informed perspectives on retention, including but not limited to; psychology, sociology, and organisational behaviour. Following on from Tinto's model, Bean and Metzner devised a model of attrition (1985), which foregrounded student intention with particular reference to non-traditional students. Subsequently, Cabrera et al. (1993) fused the two models to produce an integrated model. Sandler (1998) adapted the integrated model adding variables notably career decision making and self-efficacy (CDMSE) and financial difficulty with particular reference to the persistence of non-traditional adult students. A host of variables and factors such as; intention, motivation, attitudes, behaviours, goals, competency, supports, external commitments, etcetera have informed models used to examine retention. Notwithstanding the extensive literature in this subject, evidence indicates that whilst retention is complex and difficult to explain, the importance of interaction, belonging, being a member of an academic, and to a lesser extent, a social community influences persistence amongst PTF cohorts.

Older part-time students demonstrated a commitment to a goal, and they expressed clear intentions, strong motivations to complete and acquire a qualification further they relied on informal social networks involving their peers to communicate and support their continuation. Findings confirmed

that being part of an academic community was important to PTF students. Within institutions, part-time, flexible student's sense of belonging was fastened to interactions that occurred within the; class group, programme, department, it was based on involvement at a local level within the institution. Students related to their peers and were interacting with lecturers, and administrative supports locally within a school or department. PTF students were constrained by other commitments and were not able to engage with societies and related social activities on campus, though it was also acknowledged that generic institutionally based social activities may be of limited interest for older students. With these outcomes in mind, Yorke noted 'it becomes important for institutions to think about how the academic experiences they provide might have a social dimension' (Yorke 2004:26)

10.22 Conclusion

For many years PTF HE was of marginal interest to policy makers. Though the situation changed during the economic downturn institutional practices were slow to respond to PTF cohorts. For PTF students, findings indicated they faced challenges as institutions were orientated toward full-time day-time provision. While retention was important for policy makers and institutions, for students, persistence remains the priority. Undoubtedly the social, economic and personal background of students as well as their self-belief influences decisions on entry and throughout enrolment. Older PTF students showed clear intentions and strong motivations in their selection of HEI and programme. Access to institutional supports and supportive networks contribute to completion. However, Irish HE failed to achieve equity where PTF cohorts are concerned. Changes in policy orientation were not coupled with the reform of HE funding or structures.

Student's experiences of college, in particular, their social and academic interactions, influenced persistence. Whilst interactionist models have dominated the discourse on retention, alternative models, and theories have emerged. The integration of minority cohorts remains relevant but should be relative to students' experience and negotiable. A one size to fit

all cohorts does not translate to minorities. Findings indicated that integration of PTF cohorts within mainstream does not work not because full-time is homogenous; this is no longer the case rather because institutional practices were neither sufficiently flexible nor adequately resourced in their response to increased diversity.

11 Chapter Eleven: Conclusion

11.1 Introduction

I set out to explore perspectives on part-time flexible learning amongst policy makers, lecturers and students in HE in Ireland. A qualitative approach was adopted and case study methods were employed to examine what was happening and understand why the situation had evolved in a particular way. The research commenced in the aftermath of the 2008 banking crisis which triggered a downturn in the national economy. A reduction in funding for HEIs coupled with a national strategy document (2011) set out a reform agenda for HE. Part-time flexible learning was a feature of HE policy for decades however it was marginalised instead the focus was on mainstream or full-time school leavers transitioning to HE. Part-time flexible students were a minority amongst other minorities and featured within widening participation policies. The adoption of the national strategy document signalled a renewed interest in the expansion of part-time flexible opportunities across HE. Coinciding with these developments HEIs came under pressure to reform and meet targets set within institutional compacts linked to a systems performance framework agreed within the HEA and DES.

The questions foregrounded at the outset set about establishing why policy makers had renewed interest in part-time flexible learning and to what extent policy was informed by concepts of lifelong learning. Also I wanted to examine the extent to which there was a link between policy and practices within HEIs, in particular to explore lecturers and students experiences of teaching and learning as policy orientated toward increasing the number of PTF programmes without reform of HE funding.

11.2 Research Limitations

As research into part-time flexible HE in Ireland was limited the approach was to focus on several aspects and dimensions of policy and practices within HEIs. To address the questions at the centre of the case study it was

necessary to engage with a range of actors. The perspectives and experiences of individuals directly involved; policy makers, lecturers and students, were central to the inquiry.

The participants included; policy-makers, employed in organisations that influenced policy; such as trade unions, employer bodies, academic staff, as well as civil servants who had devised and or implemented strategies. The purpose was to capture experiences of key individuals who had formulated or shaped policy and those who had knowledge of processes involved in implementing part-time flexible and lifelong learning policy.

At the centre of the case study, were the learning and teaching experiences of students and lecturers within HEIs. Part-time flexible learning within HEIs was under-researched and data on retention was non-existent. In contrast to research undertaken elsewhere my research was not focused, upon a single; IoT, College or University. Multiple models of PTF existed which were considered in chapter three however an in-depth examination of a single model or institution was not undertaken.

A variety of HEIs were included such as; large, small and independent institutions. HEIs with an established or expanded provision and those with limited flexible options were identified. Lecturers teaching part-time flexible students were selected from a range of disciplines and HEIs. Where possible lecturers who taught full-time and part-time students were selected however in some instances temporary or part-time lecturing staff taught part-time flexible students only, therefore comparisons could not be drawn on a consistent basis.

Semi-structured interviews with lecturers and policy makers were undertaken 1:1. Classroom observation of teaching practice was not included instead I relied on individual's interpretation of their approach to teaching their experience of supporting and assessing students. I had not intended to evaluate teaching practice neither was I interested in any potential overlap with institutionally based quality assurance processes. Classroom observation can be powerful in terms of offering insight into

teaching practices and curriculum particularly if undertaken over a period of time however this level of granularity would be suited to a detailed study of pedagogy and part-time flexible HE which may be undertaken at a later stage.

Part-time flexible students were a key group selected from a range of HEIs. It proved challenging to gain access to students across multiple sites. Furthermore, whilst 1:1 interviews with students were preferable this was not possible in every instance therefore small group and two medium sized interviews were undertaken. Group interviews have a different dynamic in terms of individual participation and present challenges when representing participants' perspectives at the time of writing up. In some cases the environmental conditions were not ideal for interviewing, time constraints applied though they were manageable.

Fleming & Finnegan (2011) examined retention amongst full-time non-traditional students' and used life history or biographical narratives as an approach to consider transformational aspects of learners' experiences. However in my case study empirical findings were based on one off individual or small group interviews. Also the focus was with students and lecturers within institutions not on what happened externally. This limitation was inevitable due to the scale of the research and the resources available. Student interviews focused on key themes linked to the sensitizing concepts of; integration, belonging and engagement. Several aspects of participant's experiences were explored in an attempt to find out what motivated students, how they managed workload and what factors encouraged and challenged integration and retention.

11.3 Research Findings

Irish HE has expanded and diversified, the student population has become increasingly heterogeneous. There are multiple minorities and sub-groups within an expanded HE system. However terms such as non-traditional and traditional continue to operate within policy despite the limitations such terminology imposes and implies particularly as there is increased diversity

across the student population. Binary divides have shaped the structure and continue to inform the culture of Irish HE.

In the aftermath of the economic downturn policy makers had intended to increase the range of part-time flexible options across HE this was achieved and aided by the Springboard labour activation scheme. There are now a larger number of part-time flexible programmes albeit linked to the labour market. However making the HE system flexible and equitable by providing flexible pathways and access to supports and services for PTF students, was not delivered. In the period following the banking crisis, the alignment of PTF programmes with labour market requirements as well as a means of providing revenue for HEIs was advanced. PTF as a feature of lifelong learning policy drifted further toward learning for earning. Part-time students remain marginal within mainstream HE and evidence indicates not enough has been done at institutional or policy level to address inclusion of this mode of provision.

Though part-time flexible students were one of the equity groups included within WP policy findings indicated this cohort experienced difficulty in accessing supports and services available to full-time students. In addition, findings from the case study suggested PTF students have high completion rates. Paradoxically whilst policy aimed to widen access to HE at the same time PTF students were excluded from supports once enrolled within institutions. Evidence indicates the problem of inclusion was poorly understood and inadequately resourced. The challenge for HEIs and policy makers is to begin to address inclusion of part-time flexible students who were neither mainstream nor full-time nevertheless they were committed to achieving their goal.

Findings showed lecturers used a range of methods when teaching PTF students and were responsive to their needs. Active engagement was encouraged as lecturers acknowledged time constraints, scheduling, as well as the prior experience and knowledge of students. There was no evidence of a divide or change in approach between teaching full-time and part-time students however lecturers noted that PTF students were more; engaged,

committed, enthusiastic, and mostly paid their own fees though they were also noted to be time poor and often lacked confidence in their academic ability.

Of the factors that constrained integration and persistence amongst part-time students a lack of inclusion and access to supports featured strongly. Lecturers described a part-time student profile that was diverse, students required access to college services inclusive of administrative, academic writing and literacy supports. There was a lack of consistency across institutions in terms of providing supports and access to facilities for students. Whether this was the result of scale or institutional inflexibility was unclear. For part-time flexible students in Irish HEIs there was no guarantee or indeed a requirement on HEIs to extend services to part-time students. Engagement and persistence can be a challenge where students' academic needs may not be supported. Irish PTF students showed resilience where challenges were encountered.

Findings showed part-time flexible students were older, motivated, they took time to weigh up the pros and cons of selecting a HEI and programme, they were committed to a goal, had invested resources, and their intentions were clear from the outset. PTF students wanted to successfully complete a qualification. Such individual characteristics demonstrated by PTF students in Irish HE chimed with integrationist factors as outlined by Tinto (1993).

Findings emerging from interviews with lecturers and part-time students indicated that social interactions within institutions were limited. Furthermore for part-time flexible student's social integration was curtailed due to temporal constraints which reduced their levels of engagement to academic activities. Part-time students orientated to the school or department and interacted with their peers through class based academic activities. However this is not to state that social integration is irrelevant where minority cohorts are concerned. PTF students do want; to belong, to interact with peers, academic and administrative staff within institutions all of which forms part of the learning experience and supports individual

persistence. For PTF students social integration needs to be relevant, where possible related to academic activities and negotiable.

Whilst there were limitations with assimilationist theory which underpinned interactionist models, ideas of belonging and engagement were also employed in this study. The use of a sensitizing concept as a framing device facilitated my research which aimed to understand and interpret a problem on the ground. The advantage of employing sensitizing concepts is that they can be refined also they aid in the analysis of data (Bowen 2006). Tinto's model of social and academic integration did not translate straightforwardly to non-traditional cohorts within Irish HE. Evidence indicated retention and persistence cannot easily be resolved. The various modifications to established models particularly where minorities were involved testified to the complexity of the problem.

What emerges is that retention and persistence of minority groups within HE is important and should be included in terms of data collection for policy purposes but also in terms of the wider agenda of making HE flexible and inclusive. HE has become increasingly diverse however the complexity of diversity and the implications of inclusion of multiple minority cohorts requires further research and exploration particularly where retention and persistence is concerned.

11.4 Reflexivity and Research process

At the outset of my research I had assumed policy making and policy implementation was a linear research informed process, interviews revealed this assumption to be erroneous. Stoker and Evans observed that 'the policy process is not characterised by temporal neatness' (Stoker & Evans 2016:15).

As the study progressed questions were refined, a number of issues emerged which required attention and were subject to on-going reflexivity. Firstly there were strengths and limitations associated with a theoretical model that focused on institutions in addressing the 'problem' of retention

and persistence of minorities, secondly, though belonging resonated with student experience, it was a nebulous concept, thirdly increased heterogeneity of the student profile presented challenges in theory and practice, fourthly, it was possible that a HE system that lacked flexibility but embraced expansion of particular types PTF programmes may be ill equipped to support integration of diverse cohorts, and finally, the link between, the curriculum, student experience and persistence was important to success but was under explored.

Discourse indicates positionality is complex and researchers' position can change during fieldwork. Merriam argued 'other positionalities are possible when focusing on insider/outsider variations' and identified multiple positions beyond the binary frame of insider-outsider (Merriam et al 2001:421). Furthermore the dynamics of power and negotiating power relations throughout the fieldwork phase required attention. I negotiated with gate keepers to gain access to HEIs, students and lecturers, also, as a researcher I approached policy makers who were influential in decision-making within HE. As a head of department, a lecturer and researcher my position was not static but varied. Negotiating power continued into interviews and on into subsequent stages of representing participant perspectives.

There were limitations inherent to conducting research within HE where I was employed, my research reflected partiality in choices and decision making at various stages, irrespective of attempts to present multiple or alternative perspectives, subjectivity was present. Whilst reflexivity as self-awareness and self-analysis featured as part of the research process, this is not to claim that the outcomes have been legitimised by the use of a methodological tool. Rather it draws attention to my attempts to produce accurate research using qualitative methods (Pillow 2003).

11.5 Further Research

During the course of my research I contributed to publications with Palgrave (Loxley et al 2017) and presented papers at conferences nationally (ESAI 2017) and internationally (ECER 2018, 2019).

However the limited research available on part-time flexible HE in Ireland indicated researchers and policy makers should attend to examining the subject in greater depth. In particular as research moves to consider the benefits and outcomes of participation for non-traditional students within HE then a number of potential areas for future research are scoped out below:

1. A detailed mapping of the supply of part-time flexible programmes (including government funded LA programmes) across disciplines, levels and HEIs over a five year period,
2. Monitoring the links between supply and reform of funding across HE,
3. Examination of resources and supports provided by employers to part-time flexible students across HE,
4. DES-HEA should audit the supports and facilities accessible and available to part-time flexible students within HEIs and consider the implications for widening participation strategies,
5. Examine the intersection between curricular flexibility, pedagogies of engagement and persistence of PTF cohorts,
6. Mapping rates of retention, success and persistence of minority cohorts in Irish Higher Education and consider implications for policy,

There is scope for additional research with students and with lecturers on a range of topics including:

7. Agency and transformative learning experiences amongst PTF students in Irish HE; An exploration of key theories and concepts informing retention and persistence of PTF students in HE,
8. Identify the issues and implications of limited access to services and supports for minority cohorts across HEIs in the context of reform and increased flexibility of HE system,
9. Exploring the relationship between pedagogy, engagement and curriculum flexibility. What are the implications for retention and persistence of minority cohorts?

The link between pedagogies of engagement, curricular flexibility and retention amongst part-time students is under researched. In an Irish context Dwyer has examined active teaching with non-traditional full-time

students within an IoT setting. Notwithstanding these developments, it would be useful to explore the extent to which curricular flexibility, active teaching were factors in retention and persistence of minority cohorts.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Part-time flexible continues to feature within the NAPs (HEA 2018) with recommendations and targets aimed at increasing participation. The NAP review (2018) acknowledged that targets set for PTF have not been achieved. PTF continues to be bundled with widening participation and access policy where barriers to entry and accessing higher education remain a priority. Changes to; the RGAM to include PTF students, access to the student assistance fund, and additional funding allocated to LLL in 2017 in tandem with PATH, were remedial tweaks to established policy rather than indicative of policy reform.

Research findings emerging from this study show that PTF student cohorts within HE are not homogenous in addition students tend to complete and attain their qualifications. However, policy and institutional practices do not reflect the diversity, and complexity of PTF HE. The redefinition and re-conceptualising of PTF within a diversified HE sector are over-due particularly as access and equity policy shifts toward outcomes. Changes to policy are necessarily linked to fundamental structural reform of HE specifically reform of; funding, inclusion and flexibility of HEIs. Major reform of policy appears unlikely nevertheless in the short term aspects of policy could be amended for functional reasons. The NAP strategies which aim to capture non-traditional student success could be extended to include PTF cohorts, in addition the HEA could audit support services available to and accessed by PTF cohorts across HEIs. Finally, Field et al noted that student integration is critical to understanding retention (Field, Merrill, West, 2012) arguably an initial step toward policy development and institutional change would be to gather data on persistence and retention of PTF students.

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Appendix 1: Sample Cover Letter

A case study of part-time learning in higher education in Ireland An exploration of government policy, institutional practices and student experiences

As a lecturer, academic staff member and or policy maker you are invited to take part in a research project exploring part-time learning in higher education in Ireland. Please read this information sheet carefully and contact Nuala Hunt at huntnu@tcd.ie or phone 01 xxx if you have any questions before during or after the research.

About the research

This research is being conducted by Nuala Hunt as part of her studies for a Phd at Trinity College Dublin. The purpose of this research project is to explore student's perspectives and lecturers experiences of part-time learning in higher education. I also examine government policy relevant to part-time flexible learning in higher education and how it has informed higher education institutional practices. It would not be possible to understand lecturers and students experiences without situating it within the changing context of Higher Education. Each of these three elements; government policy, institutional practice, student and teachers experience, forms the basis of the research questions.

This case study involves a select number of; policy makers, educationalists, senior academic staff, lecturers, students and administrative staff within particular higher education institutions. The primary research tools employed include; survey and individual interviews. Interviews will be semi-structured, where a series of key themes, specific to part-time higher education will be discussed. In the interest of being able to facilitate the discussion interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed at a later stage. Some interviews could take place in a location convenient to the interviewee; at their place of work, on campus, face to face, the interviews should last no longer than fifty minutes. Alternatively in some instances interviews may be conducted via skype or on the phone. Prior to interviews

commencing, I will talk through the research questions, how the interview will be conducted and answer queries about the interview process. Interviews will focus on; policy makers experiences of, devising strategies to shape and influence government policy, contributions to government reports, as well as individuals' experience of curriculum planning or development particular to part-time, within Higher Education Institutions. Where policy makers have been involved in research which has examined flexible, or part-time further and or higher education and or the development of; institutional practices/policies, particular to part-time flexible higher education, the interview will focus on these areas.

The researcher is not involved in assessing individuals' performance or quality assurance, rather the research focuses on policy, practice, in particular; pedagogy and equity as it relates to part-time in the context of an expanding higher education.

How will identity be protected?

No personally identifying information will be used in the analysis or presentation of data and findings. All information collected by the researcher will be anonymised and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act at Trinity College Dublin. In the unlikely event that information about illegal activities should emerge during the study the researcher will be obliged to inform the relevant authorities.

Anticipated risks or benefits to participants

It is not anticipated that there will be any risks involved in participation and it is not anticipated that participants will benefit from the opportunity of participation other than to critically reflect on their experience, practice and contribute to the research project.

What are the implications of non-participation?

There are no implications, while participation is valued, it is voluntary.

What does participation involve?

Where individuals agree to participate in interviews, the researcher will provide an outline of the subjects to be covered in advance. The discussion is based on individuals' experience of; policy, teaching, supporting learners', it is not an evaluation of performance. Individual reflections on your experience when teaching and assessing part-time students, approaches or methods adopted when working as a lecturer teaching part-time students, issues pertaining to curriculum design and part-time, student workload etc. will be considered within the interview. Interviews are recorded and should take no longer than forty five minutes.

How will academic staffs', information be used?

Information gathered during the research will be analysed, coded, manually and subsequently a software package maybe used to assist in analysis and pattern building. The material will form the basis of data findings chapters in the thesis which will be submitted for approval for examination by the Supervisor and external supervisors. At a later stage it is possible that aspects of the research will be published either in Journal articles and or presented as part of a paper at conferences. Approval will be sought for use of information at this stage.

Are there areas of conflict of interest involved?

As a researcher I am interested in finding out about developments in; government policy, particular initiatives targeting part-time learning, part-time student's experiences of higher education, as well as policy informing part-time HE, lecturer's experience of teaching and supporting part-time students, issues pertaining to part-time curricula design, student workload, retention etc. There are so many reforms underway in higher education yet little is known about lecturers approach to teaching and supporting learning for this cohort of learners. Issues pertaining to policy and teaching practice including; access, lifelong learning, the expansion of higher education and the implications for students and teachers providing flexible modes of learning could feature in the interview.

I am not interested in observing, evaluating or assessing an individual approach to teaching and assessment. No information from the interview will be disclosed to another staff member or students within HEI's.

I have worked as a teacher within higher education and am interested in understanding part-time student's experiences of higher education and lecturer's experience of teaching and supporting part-time students, particularly as it relates to pedagogy and curriculum.

I will be destroying any data collected on completion and submission of the Phd thesis.

I hope to publish papers in Journals on successful completion of the research.

Nuala Hunt

Appendix 2: Field Work Schedule of Interviews 2015-16-17

| Name | Institution- | Contact details | Dates of contact | Outcomes | Total |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------|----------|
| Policy Makers | | | 2015-2017 | | 9 |
| Former Minister | DES | | 2015-16 | no | no |
| PO | Former DES PO | | | yes | |
| PO | Current DES PO | | | yes | |
| Assist Sec. | DES | | | no | no |
| CEO | HEA | | | yes | |
| Former HEA | HEA Dept of health | Tried HEA+ DoH | Aug/Nov | no | no |
| | | | May 16 | | |
| Former VP | UCC /HEA | | Oct. 2015 | yes | |
| Former HEA | Solas - Springboard, | | Aug.2016 | no | no |
| HEA Access Office | HEA Access office | SPA OC | | yes | |
| TUI | Education officer | | | yes | |
| Funding Report | Independent consul | | 2017 | yes | |
| IBEC | Education and social policy | | oct | yes | |
| Academic | Ex UCD Access-equity HE | | Sept-Oct | tbc | no |
| Equity Expert | NUIM | | Nov | yes | |

| HEI | Teachers-Lecturers | | 2016 | Numbers | Total 29 |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Independent College | | Business, HR, ICT | UG PG | | |
| | X 10 | Education | | 10 | 10 |
| Art College | X 2 | Art and Design | UG | 2 | 2 |
| IT Carlow | LLL X 5 | J Collins | UG | 4+ | 4 |
| Campus Carlow | | Soc.sc, childcare | UG | x | |
| Campus Wicklow | | Law, | | x | |
| IT B | X 1 | ? | Try again | 1+ | 1 |
| Uni. City Centre | | | Try again | tbc | No |
| IoT Midlands | | | Try again | tbc | No |
| IoT SE | | | Try again | Tbc x 3 | No |
| Uni. Maynooth | X 4 | BA, Applied Soc. | | 4 | 4 |
| | | Education, | | | |
| Uni. South | UL | Business, management | UG PG | 4 | 5 |
| Uni. South City | Computer / Business schools | | UG PG | X3 | 2 |
| Uni. West | | No response | tbc | | No |
| DIT | Art+Design | Yes | UG | 2? | 1 |
| ITT | Across College | No response to call out | | | No |

Student Schedule of Interviews 2016-18 LEVEL 6-10

| HEI | Group / Individual | Dept | Programme UG / PG | Yes - No |
|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| UL | 16 | reschedule | L7 UG | Yes |
| | 14 | Business School | L6 UG | Yes |
| ITTralee | tbc | Across College | | no |
| WIT | tbc | Dec. ethics x 2 | PG L8-9 | no |
| Indept. coll. | X4 | | PG - UG L9 | Yes |
| TCD Sch of Ed | X 6 | Education | PG L10 | Yes |
| | X4 | Education | PGL9 | Yes |
| Sch of Nursing | X 3 | Nursing –mid wif’y | PG 9 | Yes Nov.Dec. |
| Art College | 1 | Art Design | UG L7 | Yes |
| | 2 | | | Yes |
| | | | | |
| NUIM PG | X1 | Sociology | PG | Yes |
| NUIM UG | X 6 | Arts, Education | UGL8 | Yes |
| IT C | X 8 | Soc. Sc. Law | UG PG 8-9 | Yes, 2016 |
| Total | 64-5 | | PG= UG= | |

Appendix 3: Policy Maker Interview 1

- *What is your current role within HE?*

Section 1

Concepts, theories, policies relating to part-time HE in Ireland

- *You have worked in HE for many years and contributed to government reports, conferences, and journal papers. You have also played an important role in shaping and informing government policy in; education, access, lifelong learning, teaching and learning in HE.*
- *Reflecting on this work, can you talk about those aspects that have engaged you most and those that have proved most influential on the educational system?*
- *In your view are there major changes or minor changes that you have witnessed?*
- *I wanted to talk with you specifically about part-time higher education and learning. Are you familiar with developments in government policy to do with part-time higher education?*
- *With this in mind, in your view what are the main challenges in the implementation of national policy on widening participation, access and more specifically part-time and flexible higher education?*
- *In light of developments in HE what purpose does part-time serve within national policy?*
- *Does full-time and part-time higher education provision have equal status within government policy? (What are the implications of differential status for part-time HE?)*
- *In your view, have there been any advances in government policy in part-time HE in recent years?*
- *Do you draw distinctions between full-time and part-time HE? If yes, can you expand on this a little, are these structural, institutional, pedagogical, or other?*
- *Generally part-time students have not had access to free fees, is this an important factor in the development and expansion of part-time HE?*
- *Due to the economic downturn in recent years there have been a number of labour activation schemes introduced by the*

government aimed at providing unemployed people with opportunities to re-skill or up-skill through free places on HE courses,

- *Springboard is an example. Do you see a difference between this type of initiative and HEIs providing part-time higher education on an on-going basis?*

Section 2. Structures, pedagogies, learning and support

- *Government policy encourages HEIs to widen participation, what factors might encourage HEIs to grow and expand part-time provision?*
- *Are there factors that could inhibit expansion and change?*
- *Based on your knowledge of HE, have particular HEI's developed successful approaches to part-time?*
- *Have some HEI's been less successful or failed to respond?*
- *Are there particular structural or other challenges for HEIs when expanding part-time higher education?*
- *In your experience do departments or schools (disciplines) within HEI's face particular challenges in developing or providing part-time programmes?*
- *Are you aware of particular methodologies or approaches used to support part-time learning and teaching in HE?*
- *In your view, are particular supports required at an institutional or school level to sustain part-time students in their learning within HE?*

Policy Maker 2: Interview Questions

- *You have worked for many years as a researcher and teacher within HE, over that time the number of mature and part-time students have increased, there is greater diversity within HE.*
- *Can you describe any changes that have occurred as a result of increased numbers of mature and part-time students at University A and the Department where you were teaching?*
- *When describing part-time and flexible learning in HE, do you distinguish between these terms or are they the same?*
- *What purpose does part-time and flexible learning serve within Irish HE policy?*
- *What advances if any have there been in HE policy in recent years?*
- *Are these major or minor developments in the higher education policy landscape?*
- *What, if anything has changed in government policy in widening participation (part-time) HE in recent years?*
- *In your experience does full-time and part-time higher education provision have equal status within government policy?*
- *Do you draw distinctions between full-time and part-time HE?*
- *If yes, can you expand on this a little, are these structural, pedagogical, or other?*
- *Can you describe the type of part-time programmes within the Department of Adult and Community education at NUIM, are they dedicated part-time programmes or full-time programmes with part-time pathways incorporated?*
- *Have programmes within the Department become flexible in recent years?*
- *In the past you have stated that the University needs to become 'adult educated', in your experience has the University become more adult educated, more centred on the needs of part-timers over the years?*
- *What has been the response of the University (NUIM) and the department to the learning needs of part-time mature students?*
- *How have part-time students been integrated within the Department where you worked?*
- *What particular learning needs and supports (if any) are associated with mature part-time students?*

- *Can you describe how this differs from full-time students' learning needs?*
- *If part-time students are considered to have different learning needs, what implications are there for teachers who manage part-time programmes and teach part-time students?*
- *What if anything has changed in how part-time students are supported in accessing and persisting within NUIM, Department of Adult and Community Education?*
- *What encourages part-time students to persist within HE?*

thank you

Policy Maker 3: INTERVIEW Employer Representative Body

The semi-structured interview should take approximately forty-five minutes, whilst I hope to follow the set of questions printed below, at times to follow the flow of conversation and respond to interviewees' responses, I may deviate from the sequence but I will keep to the themes.

In recent years a number of changes have taken place in government education policy in FET (setting up of Solas etc) and HE (Hunt Report 2011). Also the structures that provide education and support learners have changed. IBEC has taken a position on developments in FET and HE, also it has made submissions to government bodies, policy makers at different stages.

- When you reflect on the developments that have occurred and the contributions you have made to policy, can you say which aspects have engaged you most?*
- In your view do these changes (in FET and HE) represent major or minor developments in the national educational landscape?*
- What strategies does IBEC employ to influence key stakeholders (such as DES-HEA), and education providers in the FET and HE sectors?*
- The economic downturn has been difficult for the Irish economy and for employers. Given the changing economic circumstances what is the purpose of part-time learning in society and in the economy?*
- What can or should be done to increase participation in part-time learning?*
- Is there an adequate supply of part-time learning opportunities in FET? HE?*
- What is the role of employers in the expansion and development of part-time flexible learning in FET and HE?*
- Has that developed or changed over the last 10 years?*
- In your experience what do employers do to support employees to participate in part-time learning in FET-HE?*
- How might employers support employees to pursue continuing professional development?*

- *Are you aware of the Springboard labour activation scheme?*
- *How important is a short term government initiative like Springboard in the expansion of part-time learning in HE?*
- *Do you think such targeted initiatives like Springboard assist in the long term development of flexible and part time learning in FE and HE?*
- *Are you aware that part-time students in HE are not funded in the same way as full-time students in Ireland?*
- *Is this important for the future development of part-time learning in HE?*

- *What are the challenges for education and training providers who intend to expand part-time or flexible learning provision?*
- *What are the benefits to providers who expand flexible and part-time provision?*

- *What role does IBEC have in bringing about curriculum reform or change within HE and FE?*
- *What can HE providers do to respond to changes in the labour market and employers needs?*

Policy Maker 4

This interview focuses on the drivers for the development of the Green and White Paper in Lifelong learning and considers what impact they have had-particularly as it relates to HE. The questions act as a guideline for the interview, some may not be wholly relevant and can be skipped.

Interview Former Principal Officer DES

- 1. You worked in DES for many years and retired in 2012. You played an important role in shaping the development of government policy in; lifelong learning and adult education. Reflecting on your work as Principal Officer within the adult education unit, can you talk about the policies or initiatives that engaged you most over the years?*
- 2. Of the policy initiatives you were directly involved in, which of these do you believe had a significant impact on Irish education?*
- 3. What was your interpretation of adult education and lifelong learning? Did you draw a distinction between the two?*
- 4. How did the adult education unit go about devising national policies? Was it possible for adult education to take a holistic approach to the development of life-long policy? or did the different units within the Department work separately on policy at that time , ie did primary-post-primary form their own contribution to the Papers?*
- 5. Where did the impetus come from to develop the Green and White Paper, in adult education and lifelong learning?*
- 6. What was the purpose of commissioning a policy document on lifelong learning at that time?*
- 7. Were the Department/Government Ministers committed to developing a Green and White Paper from the outset?*
- 8. Can you describe the process involved in commissioning and progressing the policy documents? For instance, was there much discussion within the department about the scope and parameters of the policy document in advance of commissioning the paper?*

9. *When the Green paper was published and launched, what was the response from Government-Ministers? What was the response within the department?*
10. *Were you aware of particular responses from stakeholders in the adult education/higher education sector to the policy documents?*
11. *What aspects of the Green paper did you find most interesting?*
12. *Can you recall if there were omissions from the Papers? Can you elaborate, were any omissions intentional?*
13. *What challenges -if any- did the White Paper present in terms of its implementation?*
14. *Did the White Paper provide a blue print in planning for adult education and lifelong learning in subsequent years?*
15. *What contributions have the Green and White papers made to adult education and higher education?*

Policy Maker 5 HEA

Once again I wanted to say how grateful I am to have this opportunity to discuss HE policy and practices particularly as it pertains to part—time flexible learning. You have had a distinguished career within education and wider, with a very successful tenure at the HEA driving policy and change across the HE sector during challenging times.

1. Can you recall what your priorities were for the HEA and widening participation strategy nationally when you stepped into the role as CEO?
2. *Do you distinguish between part-time and flexible, or do these terms mean the same thing from a policy perspective?*
3. *What are the main differences between full and part-time HE, are they structural, institutional, pedagogical ...or other?*
4. *Why did the HEA undertake to produce two policy documents reports on part-time and flexible learning between 2009 and 2012? Was there a shift in policy direction over the time-frame?*
5. *What drives and informs policy for part-time flexible learning in HE going forward?*
6. *HEA now count part-time students in overall numbers of students' participating within HE but part-time students are not funded in the annual grant, What changes –if any- are necessary in funding part-time HE?*
7. *What factors encourage HEI's to grow and expand part-time flexible provision?*
8. *What factors inhibit expansion, and limit the growth of flexible learning opportunities within HEI's?*
9. *What are the primary challenges facing HEI's in becoming more flexible and responsive to part-time learning?*
10. *What are the implications – if any- for HEI's that do not provide more part-time flexible routes?*
11. *Is there a need for all HEI's to increase part-time options, or are some HEI's better able to respond and provide flexible options?*
12. *Why does the HEA not track retention amongst part-time students in HE (at least they do not appear in the published reports on retention) ?*

13. *How does the HEA track resources supporting part-time students within HEI's?*
14. *What are the benefits of a temporary targeted initiative like Springboard for part-time learning in HE?*
15. *What are the disadvantages-if any- for providers of part-time learning in the long-term as a result of a labour activation scheme such as Springboard?*

If time permits

16. *How useful are institutional compacts in achieving HEA-Government policy across HE ?*

Policy Maker 6: Interview, DES

This interview focuses on developments in widening participation strategy, particularly policy and strategies concerned with part-time and flexible learning in higher education. The questions act as a guideline for the interview, some may not be wholly relevant and can be skipped.

- 1. What is your role within the DES and how long have you been in that position?*
- 2. Reflecting on your work as Principal Officer, can you discuss initiatives in the area of widening participation, and part-time in particular that you have worked on or led?*
- 3. Which part-time flexible HE strategies have proven most successful?*
- 4. What are the DES priorities for part-time flexible learning in HE?*
- 5. What are the main drivers informing DES policy in the area of part-time and flexible HE?*
- 6. How does the DES implement strategies and recommendations contained in the 2030 Hunt report?*
- 7. Does the DES have an input into HEA strategies in access and part-time flexible learning, how does this happen?*
- 8. Do you distinguish between the terms part-time and flexible learning, if yes can you explain what these differences are?*
- 9. Why has part-time and flexible learning become increasingly important within HE policy and strategies in recent years?*
- 10. Why have levels of participation in part-time HE education remained static for several years?*
- 11. What inequities –if any- are facing part-time students in HEI's?*
- 12. What factors inhibit expansion and limit the growth of flexible part-time learning opportunities within HEI's?*
- 13. What are the primary challenges facing HEI's in becoming more flexible and responsive to part-time learning?*
- 14. What are the implications – if any- for HEI's that do not provide more part-time flexible routes?*

15. *Is there a need for all HEI's to increase part-time options, or are some HEI's better able to respond and provide flexible options?*
16. *What challenges have you encountered in implementing policies in part-time flexible learning in HE?*
17. *From a policy perspective, is it important for the HEA to track retention or progression of part-time students in HE? thank you*

Policy Maker 7: Education Officer Union

1. *Can you describe the role and duties of the education and research officer within TUI?*
2. *What strategies does TUI employ to inform and shape Higher Education policy?*
3. *What are the key issues facing IoT'-HEIs at this time?*
4. *Coming through a period of austerity and government cutbacks in your experience what were the key issues that TUI membership (employed within higher education institutions) raised over recent years?*
5. *How has the expansion and reform of HE impacted on HE TUI membership?*
6. *What issues (not mentioned above) do members within HEI raise with TUI?*
7. *Are there particular strategies employed by TUI to address or highlight issues arising within IoT's-HE?*
8. *What is the position of TUI regarding expansion and widening of participation of part-time within HE?*
9. *What evidence – if any- has emerged in relation to growth in part-time and temporary teaching staff within HE?*

10. Have TUI undertaken research into growth of part-time staffing arrangements within HE? If yes can you elaborate on the practices – patterns that have emerged across the sector? For instance is there any evidence that part-time staff are employed to teach growing numbers of part-time students?

11. Would you be aware of supports or professional development opportunities available to part-time teachers in HE?

Policy Maker 8: HEA

1. *I'm unfamiliar with the work of a policy analyst I wondered if you would describe the focus of your work in the access office?*
2. *How does the HEA Access office formulate widening participation-part-time strategies?*
3. *What is the role of the DES in shaping policy and strategy in WP?*
4. *What perspectives (theoretical or other) inform policy for part-time flexible learning in HE going forward?*
5. *Do you distinguish between part-time and flexible, or do these terms mean the same thing from a policy perspective?*
6. *Why did the HEA undertake to produce two policy documents/reports on part-time and flexible learning between 2009 and 2012?*
7. *HEA now count part-time students in overall numbers of students' participating within HE, to what extent are part-time students funded in the annual recurring grant to HEI's?*
8. *How does the HEA track resources supporting part-time students within HEI's?*
9. *What changes –if any- are necessary in funding part-time HE?*
10. *What factors encourage HEI's to grow and expand part-time flexible provision?*
11. *What factors inhibit expansion, and limit the growth of flexible learning opportunities within HEI's?*
12. *What are the implications – if any- for HEI's that do not provide more part-time flexible routes?*
13. *Why does the HEA not track retention amongst part-time students in HE?*
14. *The 2009 HEA paper on flexible learning proposed that students might be tracked in terms of the credits they were registered for within a HEI, enabling ease of transfer across institutions, is this possible and how might it work?*
15. *Has the Access office considered examining persistence amongst part-time students across HE or establishing factors supporting or challenging persistence of part-time students?*
16. *What information –if any- does the access office collate about part-time students' experiences of learning within HEI's?*

17. *What are the benefits of a temporary targeted initiative like Springboard for part-time learning in HE?*
18. *What are the disadvantages-if any- for providers of part-time learning in the long-term as a result of a labour activation scheme such as Springboard?*

Policy Maker 9: Funding and HE Expert Group Report

- 1. This is an excellent and timely report, can you talk a little about the process of how the call for the report came about, also your role and the role of the expert group in to the formation of the report?(ie terms of ref., timeframe and process of consultation)*
- 2. There was representation from HEA and DES on the expert group, in your view what level of urgency, if any is attached to addressing the funding issue and HE?*
- 3. How did stakeholders inform the report?*
- 4. Part-timers and the issue of inequity feature in the report, I wondered if there was representation made on behalf of this group of students to the expert group?*
- 5. Has the Minister - DES-HEA- accepted the reports' recommendations?*
- 6. What mechanism or steps have been put in place by the DES to action the recommendations of the report?*
- 7. Is there a timeframe attached to implementation of this report?*
- 8. The report highlights a number of problems facing HE; reduced state funding, increased student numbers, reduction in staffing, sustaining a quality HE system, supporting equity of access, What will happen if the recommendations of the report are not acted on?*
- 9. Part-time students have been left outside of the free fees scheme, do not have access to grants or the student assistance funds, how realistic is it to think that this will change particularly in light of the demographic bulge that is forecast and the demands this will place on HE ?*
- 10. Inclusion of part-time students into a reformed funding system represents a significant shift in policy within the DES, how realistic is it to think that such a significant change will come about?*
- 11. Previous policy initiatives favoured targeted strategies to promote access of under-represented groups in HE, is it likely that the DES would favour free HE for all at the point of access?*
- 12. Part-time students are a source of income for HEI's, do you think this is relevant to future developments in relation to the possible introduction of ICL's or similar?*
- 13. In your view will reform of existing funding systems prove detrimental to participation rates amongst part time students in HE?*
- 14. How important are employers and their representative bodies in resolving the issues of funding for HE?*
- 15. Finally there is no data on progression rates or retention for part-time students- is it likely that a reformed funding system would include this kind of data?*

Appendix 4: Lecturer Interview Draft Version 1

Experiences of teaching and supporting part-time students in higher education

Academic staff interviews

SHORT

1. Can you describe your role within the HEI you are working in?
2. *Can you say how long you have worked in that role? What programmes do you teach on? What students you are teaching, are they full time part time, undergraduate and or post-graduate?*
3. *Can you describe the profile of the part-time students you are teaching?*
4. *In your experience do part-time students come with different needs that require a particular response?*
5. *What approaches, philosophies influence and inform the way you teach?*
6. *Do you have different approaches and methods for teaching different groups of students? Can you provide examples or explain the differences.*
7. *How does your experience of teaching part-time students compare with teaching full-time? Do you notice particular differences or changes in how you approach full and part-time teaching?*
8. *What strategies do you use when teaching part-time students?*
9. *What challenges are facing lecturers teaching part-time students in HEI?*
10. *What supports are available to lecturers teaching part-time students in your school-college?*
11. *What differences (if any) are there between part-time and full-time programmes, particularly how they are structured and how they operate locally?*
12. *How has the school-college you are teaching in, responded to part-time students' needs?*
13. *How have part-time students been integrated within the school and college?,*
14. *What status and visibility do part-time students have within your HEI?*
15. *Are part-time students treated similarly as full-time students, in terms of access to supports, facilities, student support services, academic staff?*
16. *How have the needs of part-time students been catered for in terms of assessment, workload within programmes you are teaching?*
17. *Do most part-time students successfully complete programmes?*

18. How many part-time students withdraw or defer from programmes? In your experience why do part-time students withdraw?
19. What factors in your experience assist in engaging part-time students and help to retain them within programmes in your college over time?
20. How often are the part-time students you teach on campus during the semester-academic year?
21. Do part-time students share modules with full-time students taking programmes within the school? Are there formal or informal opportunities where full and part-time students come together during the academic year?

Draft Version 1 - Longer version

- Are you employed on a Full-Time, Part-Time, contracted, or sessional basis within the HEI?
- What is your title; Professor; assistant/associate professor, senior lecturer, Programme co-ordinator/ Programme leader; module co-ordinator -leader, lecturer, tutor,
- How long have you been teaching within this HEI?
- What programmes do you teach on?
- Do you teach both full time and part-time students?
- What NFQ level are the programmes you are teaching on?
- Can you state the title(s) of the part-time programmes you are teaching?
- How long have you been teaching part-time students within HE?
- *Can you indicate generally the number of hours teaching and or supervising part-time students you might typically undertake in an academic year (for instance more than 50, more than 100hrs)?*
- Can you describe the part-time (undergraduate and post-graduate) students that you teach? *You might indicate their age profile, educational background, the types of commitments they have outside of college?*
- What are the implications –if any- for teaching and assessing a mature part-time student cohort?
- What philosophy or approach informs your teaching in HE generally? Do you use particular approaches or methodologies when teaching part-time students?
- How would you describe these?
- If you are teaching both full-time – part-time students, how do these experiences compare?
- If teaching part-time undergraduate and post-graduate, students how do the experiences compare?

- Can you describe how a part-time programme is structured within your school?, *how many ects credits/modules would part-time students complete in an academic year?*
- *How does a part-time programme compare with a full-time, is it longer or structured in a particular format for part-time students?*
- How many assignments are part-time students set per module and academic year?
- *How does the spread of workload compare with full-time students workload?*
- *What approaches to assessment apply within part-time programmes you are teaching?,*
- *What difference –if any- is there with the full-time programme?*
- Do part-time students withdraw or defer from programmes you are teaching on? How many students might withdraw from a programme?
- What factors are useful in encouraging and supporting part-time students to persist?
- How do you contribute to programme/module planning development within your HEI?
- Are there ways in which the needs of part-time learners are brought to the attention of senior academic staff and managers? Can you describe this?
- How does the structure of part-time programmes respond to part-time students' needs?
- What distinction (difference) if any exists between full and part-time students' status within the HE institution you are teaching in?
- How is this manifested / characterised?
- How visible are part-time students within the academic community in your college/faculty-school?
- In your view are part-time students integrated within the University/college community?
- Are part-time programmes integrated within the academic structures of the university?
- *How often do you meet with part-time students for; lectures, tutorials in a, semester, in an academic year?*
- *Do you use on-line learning for teaching purposes with part-time students?*
- *What types of informal meetings-conversations are there with part-time students within an academic year;*
- Can you describe the typical ways in which you engage with part-time students for instance; tutorials, lectures, seminars, workshops, practice placement, emails, supervision, exams, is this face to face or do you use other technology enhanced strategies?
- Are there planned meetings/seminars/lectures between part-time students and full-time student groups as part of the academic experience in the school-college? If yes how often?

- Can you describe the types of supports –academic and informal– available within your institution for lecturers teaching part-time students?
- What are your observations on teaching and supporting part-time students over the years? Are there particular challenges facing lecturers teaching part-time students? What might they be?

Appendix 5: Interviews Lecturers (FINAL VERSION)

Questions are clustered under two themes:

(1) Pedagogy; Approaches to teaching part-time learners, and curriculum design for part-time, flexible learning,

(2) Supports; Supports for students, their engagement and persistence within part-time flexible higher education.

The interview questions act as a guide, some questions may be passed over if not considered relevant or applicable. Additional comments or reflections on teaching part-time students are welcomed.

Experiences of teaching and supporting part-time students in higher education

Academic Staff interviews –

- *What approaches or educational philosophies inform your teaching in higher education?*
- *Can you describe your role within the HEI you are working in?*
- *Could you describe previous roles you have held in education?*

- *What programmes do you teach in this College (University)?*
- *What subjects do you teach?*

- *What students do you teach? Are they; full time, part time, blended, distant, undergraduate and or post-graduate?*
- *Can you describe the part-time, flexible students you are teaching, are they; non-traditional students, mature students, school leavers?*
- *Do you have different approaches for teaching different groups of students?*
- *What strategies do you use when teaching part-time, blended or on line students?*
- *Do you use a VLE to teach and support learners? If yes can you elaborate and indicate how this works?*
- *How does your **experience** of teaching part-time, flexible students, compare with teaching full-time students?*
- *What key differences (if any) are there between teaching full-time and part-time students in higher education?*

- *What are the challenges for lecturers teaching part-time, blended and flexible students in a HEI (higher education institution)?*

- *What supports (technical, administrative, educational) are available for lecturers teaching part-time flexible and blended students in your school-college?*
- *What differences (if any) are there between part-time and full-time **programmes**, particularly how they are structured and how they operate within the HEI? For instance how many modules/credits are part-time flexible students you are teaching required to take annually?*
- *Do part-time and full-time students share modules on programmes?*
- *Do full and part-time students take the same modules as one cohort or separately as distinct groups?*
- *Are there formal or informal opportunities where full and part-time students come together during the academic year?*
- *Do you contribute to the design of modules or devising the curriculum on the programme(s) you are teaching? Can you expand on your response please?*
- *How often are the part-time flexible students you are teaching on campus during the semester-academic year?*
- *How have part-time students been integrated within the school and college?*
- *Are you aware of any differences in how part-time and flexible students have been responded to by the school and college, compared with full-time?*
- *Are part-time flexible students treated similarly to full-time students, in terms of access to; supports, facilities, student support services, academic staff, other technical services, within the college?*
- *How have part-time flexible students been catered for in terms of; assessment, workload, within programmes you are teaching?*
- *Do you know if most of the part-time and flexible students successfully complete programmes?*
- *How many part-time students withdraw or defer from programmes you are teaching on? In your experience why do part-time students withdraw?*
- *What factors assist in engaging part-time students and help to retain them within programmes in your college-school?*

Appendix 6: Draft Questions for Students Version 1

*A case study of part-time learning in higher education in Ireland
An exploration of government policy, institutional practices and student
experiences*

Research Information sheet

This research is being conducted by Nuala Hunt as part of her studies for a Phd at Trinity College Dublin. The purpose of this research is to explore student's perspectives and experiences of part-time, flexible learning in Irish higher education. The research is not discipline specific and includes approximately six Higher Education Institutions; IoT's, Colleges and Universities.

Small group and individual interviews are the primary research tools. Interviews will be semi-structured, where a series of key themes specific to part-time higher education will be discussed. In the interest of being able to facilitate the discussion interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed at a later stage. Student interviews could take place in a suitable location on campus and should last about forty minutes. Details will be agreed in advance with participants. Prior to interviews commencing, I will talk through the research questions, how the interview will be conducted and answer students queries about the interview process. Students will be asked to provide background information relating to their; age group; travel distance relative to the college, and details of the programme, duration, ects, level, (this information can be gathered on a hand out sheet which will be distributed to those attending)

Interviews will focus on:

Why did you chose this course and this college,

Is this your first HE qualification or do you have other qualifications? (if yes ask levels)

What were your goals when you enrolled on this course?

Have your goals changed since coming onto this course? if yes elaborate...

What were your expectations of the course workload at the beginning?

Having spent time on the course were those expectations realistic (accurate)?

Do you describe yourself as a mature and or part-time student?

What in your how do part-time students differ from full-time students?

How often do you attend campus for this course?

Roughly how much time you spend on campus on a weekly-semester basis,

Is the college a place where you mostly do course work and come to learn, or do you socialise here as well?

How have part-time students been included within the college?

Do you spend time outside of class to meet other students informally?

Do you meet with teaching staff to discuss course work outside of class?

Does this interaction with staff and or others students contribute to a sense of fitting into college life?

What helps you feel like you fit in here?

Do you feel you are part of the college, school-department and or course?

Is it important for you as a part-time flexible student to feel like you belong (fit in) within the school-college? If so why if not why

What college facilities do you access?

Are college facilities, supports, accessible to you as a part-time student?

Is this important or not in making the learning experience and workload manageable,

Do you work full or part-time outside of college

How do you manage (what helps you manage) course work with other commitments such as employment of responsibilities in the home?

What challenges-if any- have you encountered during the course that have impacted on your learning; including managing course workload, preparing assignments managing other responsibilities you might have at work and or at home,

Have you found staff are available to discuss course work or problems you might be having on the course?

Have you considered taking time out or leaving the course, if so why?

Did you discuss this with college staff?

What encourages you to continue (persist) in your studies,

What range of age groups are there in your class?

What do part-time mature students bring to the teaching and learning experience at college?

What approaches to teaching and learning have you found exciting and or challenging as part of this course? Can you say why?

Draft Questions for Students Version 3

*A case study of part-time learning in higher education in Ireland
An exploration of government policy, institutional practices and student
experiences*

Student Research Information Sheet

This research is being conducted by Nuala Hunt as part of her studies for a Phd at Trinity College Dublin. The purpose of this research is to explore student's perspectives and experiences of part-time, flexible learning in Irish higher education. The research is not discipline specific and includes approximately seven Higher Education Institutions including; IoT's, Colleges and Universities across the country.

Small group and individual interviews are the primary research tools. Students small group interviews will be semi-structured, where key themes specific to part-time higher education will be discussed such as; motivations for taking a course, fitting in at college, managing course work and other commitments, access to supports, teaching and learning experience in HE .

In the interest of being able to facilitate the discussion interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed at a later stage. Student interviews could take place in a suitable location on campus and should last about forty minutes. Participation is voluntary and students can opt out of the interview. Prior to interviews commencing, I will talk through the research questions, how the interview will be conducted and answer students queries about the interview process. Students will be asked to sign a consent form, provide background information relating to their; age group; travel distance relative to the college, and details of the programme, duration, ects, level, (this information can be gathered on a hand out sheet which

will be distributed to those attending, it will take less than five minutes to complete)

Interviews will focus on:

*Why did you **choose** this course and why did you choose this college,*

Is this your first HE qualification or do you have other qualifications? (if yes ask levels)

Do you receive financial support toward course fees or are you paying for the course yourself?

What were your goals when you enrolled on this course?

Have your goals changed since coming onto this course? if yes elaborate...

Do you intend to progress to another course having completed this one?

What were your expectations of the course workload at the beginning?

How have you managed the course workload over time?

Roughly how much time do you spend on campus on a weekly-semester basis?,

How are part-time students included within the school-college?

Is the college a place where you mostly do course work and come to learn, or do you socialise here as well?

*What helps you feel comfortable here at x, and makes you feel you are included within the school and college? **Put in some examples, such as events as a prompt,***

*Is it important to feel like you are part of and included within the school-college? If so why if not why, ? **The question is leading, change tone***

*Are you aware of the college facilities you can access? **Change question to 'what' to find out what facilities are accessible.***

Are college facilities, supports, accessible to you as a part-time student?

Is this important or not in making the learning experience and workload manageable?(does this refer to facilities?).

Do you work full or part-time outside of college? How do you manage (what helps you manage) course work load with other commitments you have? Reconsider where this is placed in sequence and when to obtain this information

What challenges-if any- have you encountered during the course that have impacted on your learning; including managing course workload, preparing assignments managing other responsibilities you might have at work and or at home,

Have you found staff are available to discuss course work or difficulties you might be having with the course? Question is leading change tone

Have you considered taking time out or leaving the course, if so why?

Did you discuss this with college staff, friends or family?

What encourages you to continue (persist) in your studies?

Is there a mixture of age groups in your class?

Is it important to have a range of age groups in the class and how does this effect learning and teaching? Question is leading change the tone.

What do part-time mature students bring to the teaching and learning experience at college?

What approaches to teaching and learning have you found exciting and or challenging as part of this course? Can you say why?

May leave these questions out?

How often do you attend campus for this course?

Do you meet with other students outside of class-time to discuss course work?

Do you meet with teaching staff to discuss course work outside of class?

Appendix 7: Questions for Students (Final)

Motivation

- *Why did you choose this course?*
- *Why did you choose this college?*
- *What were your goals when you enrolled on this course?*
- *Have your goals changed since coming onto this course? if yes please elaborate...*
- *Do you intend to progress to another course having completed this one?*
- *What were your expectations of the course workload at the beginning?*
- *Has this changed over time?*

Being Included

- *Is the college a place where you mostly do course work and come to learn, or do you socialise here as well?*
- *What types of informal, social activities, clubs (events) do you take part in that relate to your studies at this school -college?*
- *Does the college include part-time students in academic and non-academic activities?*
- *How are part-time students included within the school-college?*
- *Do you have a sense of fitting in and belonging within this dept. or college?*

Access to Supports

- *What college facilities-supports are available to you as part-time-flexible students?*
- *Which facilities or supports do you access?*
- *Is access to college facilities-supports helpful in managing your learning experience and workload?*
- *How do you manage your weekly routine in terms of work-home-life and study during the semester?*

Persistence

- *What challenges-if any- have you encountered during the course, that have impacted on your learning?*
- *Have you considered taking time out or leaving the course, if so why and what changed your mind?*
- *Did you discuss this with college staff, friends or family?*
- *What encourages you to continue (persist) in your studies,*

Learning

- *Is there a range of age groups in the class?*
- *How does this effect learning and teaching?*
- *What do part-time mature students bring to the teaching and learning experience at college?*
- *What types of learning activities have you found exciting or challenging as part of this course? Can you say why?*
- *What types of teaching approaches have you found challenging? Can you say why?*

Students Separate Sheet

Please complete the following questions; and where appropriate tick the relevant text, where a question does not apply write NA.

- i. Are you employed full-time? Yes No
- ii. Are you employed part-time? Yes No
- iii. Do you receive financial support toward course fees from your
Employer or
Government
- iv. What other commitments do you have, are you a parent and or carer? Yes No
- v. Are you studying a part-time course? Yes No
- vi. Is the programme you are studying an
Undergraduate **or** Postgraduate
- vii. What level is the programme you are currently studying?

6 7 8 9

Do you have other Higher Education Qualifications?

Yes No

If yes please tick:

Certificate

Diploma

BA

MA

Professional Qualifications

Other (please state the qualification)