Exploring the Causes of Attrition among Further Education Students in Ireland

By

Mary Kenny

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Supervisor: Professor Michael Grenfell
Former Chair
School of Education
TCD
Dublin
Author’s Declaration

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List of Acronyms

AQAs  All Qualified Applicants
AnCO  An Comhairle Oiliúna
BTEI  Back To Education Initiative
CAO   Central Applications Office
CERT  The Council for Education, Recruitment and Training
CDU   Curriculum Development Unit
CDVEC City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee
CPD   Continuous Professional Development
DES   Department of Education and Skills
DIT   Dublin Institute of Technology
EEC   European Economic Community
ESF   European Social Fund
ESRI  Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB   Education and Training Board
ETBI  Education Training Boards Ireland
FÁS   An Foras Áiseanna Saothair
FE    Further Education
FEDA  Further Education Development Agency
FETAC The Further Education and Training Awards Council
HE    Higher Education
HEA   Higher Education Authority
HEI   Higher Education Institute
HETAC Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IOTs  Institutes of Technology
LCA   Leaving Certificate Applied
NCVA  National Council for Vocational Awards
NFQ   National Framework Qualifications
NQAI  National Qualification Framework of Ireland
OECD  Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PLC   Post Leaving Certificate Course
PLSS  Programme Learner Support System
QQI       Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SEN       Special Education Needs
SLA       Service Level Agreement
SOLAS     Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
SUSI      Student Universal Support Ireland
UCAS      University and College Admission Service
VEC       Vocational Education Committee
VET       Vocational Education and Training
VPT       Vocational Preparation and Training
VTOS      Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
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Exploring the Causes of Attrition among Further Education (FE) Students in Ireland

Abstract
The study seeks to develop a critical understanding of the causes of attrition among Further Education (FE) students in Ireland. The causes of non-persistence, which are outside of the control of FE Colleges and the areas of influence that reside within the remit of the College are explored. The issues of both academic and social integration, which is expounded by the leading theorists on student attrition, are considered. Recommendations and strategies, which could be implemented at institutional level to raise levels of persistence, are explored.

The Irish Further Education (FE) sector has expanded and diversified to provide a broad range of programmes supporting industry, community and healthcare needs. An estimated 31,000 entrants, comprising of post Leaving Certificate students and adults wishing to return to formal education, enrol annually. However, completion rates of 50% or less, across a number of courses, represent a sub optimal use of educational resources and unsatisfactory outcomes for a large proportion of FE students.

Student drop-out rates at second and higher education (HE) levels have been subjected to rigorous examination and scrutiny. There is a rich seam of data and debate available on the causes and consequences of early school leaving. The rates of withdrawal from the HE sector have attracted considerable public and academic attention. By contrast, the availability of data or documentation on
the completion rates in FE in Ireland is remarkably scant, thus necessitating the reliance on research from the HE sector. This study aims to make a contribution to research on FE in Ireland.

The key research questions which this study attempts to answer are: What are the causes of students’ withdrawal from FETAC courses prior to completion? What causes are within and beyond the control of the FE colleges? and what interventions and strategies could be implemented at College level to raise levels of retention?.

The theoretical framework, which underpins the study, was informed by a range of theories, which were expounded in the available literature and were devised to explore the issues of attrition and persistence in HE. Persistence in post-secondary education can be linked to pre-enrolment attributes, appropriate course placement, student integration, academic progress, quality of student experience and the College’s response to students’ needs.

Case study methodology comprising of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with withdrawn FE students, College Directors and FE tutors were conducted to explore the causes of attrition among FE students. The research is qualitative in nature and rooted in a constructivist perspective which was influenced by the need to capture the understandings the participants have of their world. The data was subjected to a thematic analysis approach. A software computer package entitled NVIVO, was used to assist with the coding and categorising of the themes which produced three major themes, namely The Individual, The Educational Institute and The State and Society, which in this study are referred to as:
Superordinate themes. These themes were used to form the basis of a theoretical framework: *Attrition in Further Education*, to understand the causes of attrition. Each of the themes were analysed using Bourdieu’s conceptual concepts. The causes of attrition among FE students, which emerged in this study resulted from: state policies relating to finances, and the academic value of FE credentials, the Institutional policies and practices with regard to the quality of educational provision and the extent to which it facilitated both academic and social integration. At an individual level persistence was contingent on personal attributes, pre-entry attainment, family support, economic resources and motivation often linked to the use of FE as a progression pathway to HE.

Using Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital and habitus to analyse the FE field, internally and externally with the field of power revealed that FE was in a weak position in the overall education field in relation to the second level sector and the HE sector. Both the second level and the HE sectors possessed greater volumes of the valued currency or capital, in the education field which enabled them to occupy more favourable positions in the field thus enabling them to structure the field. The FE on the other hand had to operate in a field that was structured by the dominant agencies such as the state, the employer groups, the HEIs and the second level sector. The FE student was further constrained by an educational institute that was structured by the habitus of the FE College personnel who imposed, for the most part, a secondary school ethos on the adult learners, which failed to take account of their need for a more independent oriented learning environment and thus vitiated the evolution of a College identity. Operating in an educational institute, that is
mandated by government policy to pursue skills based programmes, with limited scope for the development of agency, attenuated a sense of belonging and predisposes the student to early departure especially if combined with other pressures and sources of dissatisfaction with the course.
Chapter 1

Rationale for the Study

1.1 Experience as a Principal
In this chapter, the rationale for the study will be explained and the motivation for undertaking the research will be set out. The author is a former Principal of a Community College that offered both second level and FE programmes. Occasionally the more traditional acronym PLC meaning Post Leaving Certificate Course is still utilised in some colleges. FE or FETAC course is the up to date term and will be used throughout the study.

Every year, in September enrolments for the FE programmes always exceeded the number of places available. However, as the year progressed the rate of attrition in the FE programmes was very high, in some cases less than half of the initially enrolled group completed the programme to certification one year later. The national picture is somewhat similar with completion levels in many FE courses as low as fifty percent.

Student withdrawal is an important issue. At the individual level, failure to complete the chosen programme of study may limit a student’s employment opportunities. At a societal level there is the loss of potential skills and knowledge. For the institution, non-completion represents a sub-optimal use of resources and can lead to reputational damage. The retention of students and the enhancement of their educational experience is one of the core principles of any institution that purports to provide educational programmes. Student retention is also a key performance indicator in college quality assurance processes and in many countries, completion rates and state funding are intertwined.

The FE class groups comprised students who had just completed their Leaving Cert and a sizeable cohort of adults in the 21 plus age group, some of whom had low level
initial education. The latter group embarked on a FE programme primarily as a re-
entry route to formal education and to up-skill with a view to gaining or improving
employment prospects.

The decision for an adult, particularly those with low level initial education to re-enter
formal education is a major one. The outcome for almost half is failure to complete
the course or to attain certification. There are many reasons why individuals withdraw
from courses. In the course of this study, a range of theories of attrition and
persistence that purport to explain why students depart from post second level courses
prior to completion were accessed.

There are a number of ways to define student attrition. For the purposes of the study
attrition will refer to students who enrol on a FETAC Level 5 or Level 6 course in an
FE College and withdraw prior to qualification. Students who depart prior to
completion in order to transfer to another FE or HE course, are not viewed in this
study as students who drop out.
1.2 The Learning Environment

The tutors, who were trained second level teachers were assigned to both mainstream and FE classes. The FE tutors for the most part conducted the teaching of the adult groups and the second level classes in a similar mode. The prescribed curriculum coupled with the public examinations combine to create two of the key drivers in the work of a second level teacher. The approaches adapted by the FE tutors mirrored the emphasis of their second level teaching by focussing heavily on completion of modules and preparation for formal assessment procedures.

The author observed that FE programmes were delivered in a traditional teacher led style. The teacher determined the content, structure and pace of the class. The learning environment was constructed and controlled by the teacher. There appeared to be a need to create a learning environment that was conducive to deepening the engagement of the students and that the issues of attrition and persistence warranted serious investigation.

The FE section of the school was operated by a director and a team of teachers, none of whom had any formal pre-service training or professional qualifications in adult education. There was not a clearly developed set of policies at local or national level that guided the work of the FE tutor. This scenario was replicated in many other FE Institutes of Education throughout the country. Yet, the underperformance of the sector, as evidenced by the high drop-out rates, was stark.

The author was becoming increasingly convinced that adults needed to be facilitated towards taking control of their own learning rather than being treated as passive recipients of pre-determined courses and the contents thereof. It was apparent that the tutors required training in moving from the teacher led form of instruction to the facilitator of learning model. The courses were constructed and delivered in a way that failed to affirm or integrate the rich and diverse prior learning experiences of the adult cohort. There was an obvious need for greater flexibility so that adults could attend to the other demands of their lives without feeling pressurised to exit prematurely from the courses. The author also believed that adult learners needed emotionally supportive structures in the learning environment in order to sustain them through any challenges that beset them during the course. Returning to formal
education may be serving some deep subconscious need to transmute negative educational experiences from their childhood to positive learning outcomes as an adult. Adults who struggled with schooling as a child may become discouraged by a learning environment that contains similarities to an education system where they experienced failure. The FE tutor needs to develop the confidence and competence to build respectful relationships with the adult learners, enabling them to explore their past educational experiences with a view to understanding how they can impact in a positive or a negative way on their course progression.
1.3 Literacy and Numeracy Difficulties and the Needs of the Adult Learner

FE tutors commented frequently on the low levels of literacy among some of the intake of adults at the beginning of the year. Not surprisingly, those presenting with low levels of literacy were more likely to drop out of the course prior to completion. The literacy deficits among the Irish adult population, particularly those with low level initial education has been confirmed repeatedly in various studies carried out by the OECD. Frustration was felt by the FE tutors as they were unable to tackle the real education needs of the adults with low levels of literacy while they had to proceed with the curricular content of the course. In this scenario the tutors need to be highly skilled in building literacy through the medium of the course material.

The author was motivated to undertake this study because there is a need to explore why so many FE students drop-out of courses prior to completion. The absence of a national data base on non-completion rates is a hindrance to compiling a complete picture of the patterns of attrition in FE throughout the country. While the sector continues to grow steadily and the demand for places exceeds the supply in many courses, it behoves the providers of FE education to ensure that the learners have access to high quality tuition and appropriate supportive learning environments.

The FE sector is a distinct strand of the Irish Education system. Its development and growth over the past twenty five years has been influenced by European and Irish education policy initiatives particularly in relation to widening participation of adults with low level initial education, who have not attained any formal educational qualifications. The FE sector has become an important re-entry route for older adults wishing to return to the formal education system. The enrolment for 2000/01 comprised 40% of learners who were over 21 years of age. The DES currently funds Colleges to provide 31,000 FE places annually. The FE programme continues to support certain industries and services by pioneering education in a range of areas such as childcare, community care, tele-communications, e-commerce, equestrian studies, multi-media, sports, and the tourism industry. The FE courses provide an important progression route to higher education through the Institutes of Technology.
The study will comprise a review of the relevant literature on student attrition in post-secondary education. Accessing a body of literature that specifically related to the FE sector was a challenge that emerged early on in the study. It became evident that the Irish sector has not attracted a body of research that would generate a volume of reading leading to great enlightenment regarding persistence or attrition among the students. The UK FE sector has been the subject of a number of reports and major research initiatives that provide material germane to this study.

However, the UK publications while highly useful offered limited scholarship on the specific issue of attrition in the FE sector. Therefore, it was necessary to examine the concept of attrition in the wider context of post-secondary education. The leading theories relating to attrition at this level have originated from research carried out in university settings. The theories chosen for close examination lend themselves to a high level of transferability between the Higher Education and the FE sector. The theoretical models are built on a number of prepositions that aim to contribute to an understanding of the causes of student departure. These prepositions could be applied to the FE sector and contribute to an elucidation of the dynamics that lead to student drop-out. Cognisance must also be taken of the differences in the socio-economic status and the academic orientation of the student bodies in both HE and FE.

Despite the proliferation of theories on the issue of attrition, they appeared to contain the inherent assumption that the student body was made up of traditional college attendance group. Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is useful when examining college integration among underrepresented groups and first generation entrants. Bean and Metzer’s (1985), theory that examines attrition among the non-traditional student will be examined in the study. The theoretical propositions of Bean and Tinto, which are explored in depth, influenced the research questions as follows:

- *What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?*
- *What causes of withdrawal are due to factors that are within the control or influence of colleges?*
- *What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to colleges?*
• What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?
• Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?

Other relevant theories are also examined particularly in relation to what colleges can do to raise the retention rates among the FE students. There is a voluminous amount of material available setting forth strategies that colleges could implement that would support persistence. How the learning environment, the curricular structures and assessment procedures are managed, and to what extent students are supported to experience real social and academic integration in the college receive extended treatment in the literature in relation to combating early departure among students.

FE in Ireland as in the UK has proven to be resilient and innovative. It continues to respond to the educational needs of over 30,000 students per year and also meet the skill sets required in a range of services and industries. In 2005, Sir Andrew Foster, MP, British House of Parliament, described FE as the ‘neglected middle child’ of the education system. This study will focus on the most neglected group in that system namely those who drop-out prior to completion. A case study will be utilised as the main research approach. The data collection techniques and research methods will include questionnaires with students who have withdrawn from their FE course and interviews with Directors and tutors in FE Colleges.

It is hoped that the analysis of the data combined with the insights gained from the literature review will lead to a deeper understanding of the causes of attrition in post-secondary education but specifically in the Irish FE sector, and what colleges can do to increase persistence among students.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, a review of the available literature that seeks to explore the underlying causes of attrition by students in the Further Education (FE) sector will be presented. The retention and success of students in their studies in post compulsory education is a concern across the world. Policies which are aimed at the widening of participation for under-represented groups and recognising the increasing diversity among the student population, coupled with educational quality assurances and accountability processes, have added an urgency to the debate on student retention in Further and in Higher education. In the past decade issues concerned with the retention of students in post-compulsory education have assumed importance in overall government education and economic strategies in Ireland and across the European Union (EU). Public pronouncements of concern regarding unacceptably high drop-out rates in second and higher level education appears to have prompted a prolific spate of reports on the issue of student retention in all sectors in the UK. In Ireland there has been a body of comment on the issue of student drop-out. The main focus appears to have been on second level with a number of research initiatives undertaken in Higher Education (HE).

Completion and drop-out rates in the FE sector in Ireland, have so far failed, to attract public comment. The drop-out rates in the sector have not yet been subjected to the intense research activity that would generate a volume of reading which would expand understanding of the issues of non-completion of FE students in Ireland.

The available literature prior to the 1990s, reflects the view that drop-out was largely due to factors external to the college. This view prevailed largely unchallenged particularly in research reports from the UK until the end of the last century. A discernible shift can be seen in the research on student retention which has emerged over the past two decades. The main thrust of the more recent scholarship on the
topic has been to explore the causes of withdrawal from an institutional perspective with a particular focus on the influences that are within the remit of the college.

The literature accessed in this study will be drawn upon to build theoretical frameworks to explore the factors that impact on FE students to withdraw from their courses prior to completion. The literature review will comprise four main sections as follows:

- **Section 2.2**: The policy context of Further Education in Ireland since the nineteen sixties will be outlined.

- **Section 2.3**: The focus in this section will be on the links between socio-economic factors and attrition. The causes of withdrawal that are heavily influenced by the internal domain of the college will be explored at length in this section. A range of theoretical models by the leading scholars on this topic, that seek to understand student drop-out among college students will be examined. A model which was specifically devised to take account of attrition and the non-traditional student, which would resonate strongly with the student body enrolled in FE in Ireland will also feature in this section.

- **Section 2.4**: The discourse on student non-completion in post-secondary education has generated considerable debate and attracted an appreciable amount of scholarship in the UK. A range of publications resulting from research undertaken in the UK and in Australia on the issue of student departure in post-secondary education settings will be accessed for the purpose of deriving insights from educational systems which exhibit similarities to Ireland.

- **Section 2.5**: To gain a deeper understanding of the conditions that prevail both within the FE sector and how the sector relates to the wider education field the sociological concepts of Bourdieu will be explored.
• **Section 2.6:** Where FE Colleges could direct their efforts with a view to improving persistence will be explored. Theories raising the issue of leading learning and the associated concepts of what adult learning or andragogy will be expounded. The notion of learning cultures and how it might guide improvements of learning will be presented. Colleges have considerable scope to influence the student experience. The organisational structures relating to assessment of course work and the mediation of student faculty contact and how these strategies might be used to support the notion of student engagement will be dealt with in this section.
Section 2.2
Historical Development Further Education in Ireland

2.2.1 Policy Context for Further Education in Ireland
This section attempts to map out the policy developments that guided adult, continuing or second chance education in Ireland over the past five decades. From the mid nineteen sixties the Department of Education shared the responsibility for initial and continuing vocational training with the Department of Labour and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment which was known as the Department of Industry and Commerce until 1992. The government departments worked with their associated agencies such as the VECs and AnCO which was later renamed as FÁS, to provide what was generally referred to as adult education. Training and adult education in the agricultural sector was provided by an agency entitled Teagasc. CERT provided training for the hospitality sector. Vocational, Community and Comprehensive Schools provided a range of adult education programmes on a local basis. Provision of general adult education programmes, was built organically on the post-primary sector, and was contingent on the availability of resources. Adult and continuing education in Ireland has traditionally lacked cohesive policy development and has tended to develop in an unstructured and haphazard fashion. (Heraty, Morley, McCarthy, 2006). ‘There was an absence of coordinated strategic direction’. (SOLAS, 2014, p.18).

A Commission on Adult Education under the remit of the Department of Education produced a report on Lifelong Learning in 1983. In the report Adult Education is described as:

All systematic learning by adults which contributes to their development as individuals and as members of the community and of society apart from full time instruction received by persons as part of their uninterrupted initial education and training. (Report of Commission on Adult Education, 1983, p. 9).

In 1984 the restructuring of the existing pre-employment courses, which were delivered in second level schools at senior cycle level led to the introduction of two
programmes entitled: Vocational Preparation 1 (VPT1) and Vocational Preparation 2 (VPT2). VPT1 was further developed into the Leaving Certificate Applied and VPT2 evolved into Post Leaving Certificate Courses, (PLCs). Funding for these programmes was provided by the European Social Fund as part of a strategy to address the high levels of youth unemployment across the EEC. The courses were designed around three main components, technical studies, general studies and work experience modules.

The European Social Fund (ESF) was also used to support the Youthreach Programme. This programme, launched in 1988, which was aimed at early school leavers was jointly coordinated by the Department of Education and FÁS. The ‘European Economic Community was very influential in shaping VET in Ireland’. (ERSI/SOLAS, 2018, p. 4).

Increased participation rates in the Adult and Further Education sector led to the establishment in 1989 of the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) to oversee certification. The National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA), coordinated the accreditation for VPT and PLC programmes until the late 1990s.

The Green Paper: Education for a Changing World was published in 1992. In a chapter entitled: Adult and Second Chance Education, data on existing provision of adult education services was included along with commitments to improved access to second chance education for mature students. The Green Paper focussed on the following three areas for developments:

- Adult Literacy and Community Education Schemes,
- The expansion of the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS),
- The continued close collaboration by the Department of Education with FÁS to provide training for young adults in Community Training Workshops.

(Green Paper: Education for a changing world, 1992, pp. 205 to 211).

A review of the various forms of adult and second chance education provision in Ireland by the National Education Convention highlighted the lack of a coherent policy framework.
It is clear that a policy framework for adult education is essential. Adult Community and Continuing Education will be further disadvantaged unless it is brought into the mainstream. (Coolahan, 1994, p. 101).

The Convention strongly recommended the establishment of a structured accreditation policy and a comprehensive national budget. Building on the work of the National Education Convention the *White Paper: Charting our Education Future* was published in May 1995. Drawing on national and international research the White Paper linked access to recurrent education and training to enhanced economic performance. The White Paper announced the establishment of a Further Education Authority to provide a coherent ‘approach to policy’ for the further education and for the adult education sector. The functions of the new authority were:

- Advising the Minister in relation to general policy development for the sector
- The national co-ordination of all vocational education and training and adult and continuing education
- The allocation of budgets to each education board for vocational education and training and for adult and continuing education provision
- To ensure a balance of level, type and variety of programmes to meet student and community needs, including the appropriate location of courses. (Coolahan, 1994, p.109).

The White Paper led to the establishment of *Teastas*, -The Irish National Certification Authority under the aegis of the Department of Education.

Teastas had a wide ranging remit which included responsibility for:

- The development, implementation, regulation and supervision of the certification of all non-university third level programmes, and all further and continuation, education and training programmes
- The establishment, direction and supervision and regulation of the national qualifications framework
- Ensuring international recognition for all of the qualifications under its remit (Department of Education and Science, 1995, p. 29).
The European Commission published a *White Paper: Teaching and Learning-towards the Learning Society* in 1995. The following year, 1996 was designated by the European Commission as the Year of Lifelong Learning.

*The Green Paper: Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* was launched in November 1998. Similar to the Convention’s Report the Green Paper presented a compilation of findings from surveys on the existing provision of adult education which was accompanied by a range of recommendations to address weaknesses. The key findings were:

- 25% of Irish adults were at literacy level 1 in the OECD literacy survey
- Only 30% of Irish adults participated in education compared to a 40% OECD average.
- Irish mature student participation at third level was low compared to other OECD countries.
- Irish people aged between 25 and 64 had low levels of education compared to populations in OECD countries. (Department of Education, 1992, p. 34).

An action plan in the Green Paper set out key priorities for attention, which included:

A National Adult Literacy and Numeracy programme, increased access to programmes such as Back to Education (BTEI), Youthreach, Post Leaving Cert Courses and to Vocational Training Options (VTOS). The establishment of a National Qualifications Framework and a working group on the recognition of staff qualifications were strongly recommended in the Green Paper. The formation of a National Adult Learning Council and Local Adult Educational Boards were also prescribed.

The momentum for policy development on adult education was strengthened by the publication of a White Paper two years later, in July 2000, entitled: *Learning for Life*. The concept of lifelong learning as the underpinning governing principle for adult education policy was fully embraced in the White Paper. Furthermore, the policy document set out a range of multifaceted sectoral developments, which included
programmes in adult education. Coolahan (2017), identifies a range of actions which flowed from the White Paper including:

- Major increase in resources for Adult Literacy
- Expansion of access and increased funding for BTEI, VTOS, and Youthreach programmes
- Flexible education and training programmes to be funded by the Department of Trade and Enterprise
- Funding grants to be made available for mature students in higher education
- The establishment of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) to oversee assessment, accreditation and certification.
- The National Adult Learning Council was to be established by the Minister for Education and Science
- Thirty three Local Adult Education Boards were to be established to coordinate the provision of adult education throughout the country.

The National Development Plan, published in November 1999, contained a number of government commitments to lifelong learning as a priority area. The Qualifications (Education and Training Act), 1999 led to the establishment of the NQAI for non-university education and training certification at further and higher education level. Under the NQAI, two separate agencies which absorbed the work of NCVA and the NCEA, were set up:

- The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)
- The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)

These agencies were tasked to provide a transparent ladder of progression for qualifications that enabled learners move through a certified learning route involving a variety of providers from foundation level to a degree award.

The awards of the institutes of technologies including DIT came within the remit of NQAI, although DIT was allowed to make its own awards from 1997-98. The universities successfully resisted the inclusion of their awards with NQAI but
accepted the requirement that their awards model aligned with the NQAI’s National Qualifications Framework (NFQ) which was rolled out in October 2003.

The PLC sector was growing in importance in terms of providing access to continuing and technical education. The sector had not been subjected to any systematic policy analysis or empirical research. An ESRI report in 1998, highlighted the fragmentation and rigidity of the system of vocational education in Ireland and put forward a cogent argument in favour of strategic concentration of PLC expansion and a mechanism for addressing the regional variations in the provision of short cycle third level provision. (Hannan, McCabe and McCoy, 1998, p.135).

To address the information gap surrounding PLC provision, the Department of Education and Science commissioned McIvor Consultancy to undertake a review of the sector. The McIver Report, 2003, which focussed on the institutional elements, highlighted the difficulties for PLC provision within the second level system in terms of securing recognition, status and adequate funding. A stand-alone policy for FET Colleges which was recommended in the McIver Report, was not implemented. Government policy on adult and further education began to pivot towards streamlining the qualifications processes.

2.2.2 The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), was launched by the Irish Government in 2003 and is informed by the Bologna Process 1999. The framework is a system of 10 levels that is used to describe the Irish qualifications system. It is the single structure mechanism for recognising all education and training in Ireland. All framework awards now have an NFQ Level that ranges from Level 1 to Level 10 and reflects the standard of learning for each level. The NFQ Award type indicates the purpose, the volume and progression opportunities associated with a particular award. Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence setting out what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do following successful completion of a process of learning.
The National Qualifications Framework is constructed to some extent on the basis that it facilitates progression towards higher level awards. Quality and Qualifications Ireland, (QQI), was established in 2012, by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, as the state agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services. QQI is responsible for all certified awards and qualifications in the non-university sector. QQI took over previous responsibilities of FETAC and HETAC as well as the role previously performed by NQAI. It is expected that a high level of collaboration would exist between the QQI and the university authorities regarding access and certification equivalencies for the purposes of facilitating progression pathways for learners.

2.2.3 Public Sector Reform and Further Education and Training (FET)

The White Paper on Lifelong Learning (2000), provided the impetus for the growth and development of wide range of providers of Adult Education programmes. However, adult education provision was fragmented, lacked coherence and was poorly integrated with other educational providers.

The financial cutbacks necessitated by the onset of the economic recession from 2008 onwards proved an opportune time for reforming lifelong education provision in Ireland. The overhaul of the FE sector was part of the wider public sector reform policy. The Further Education and Training Strategy -2014-2019, captures the expansive nature of the FET reforms which includes, structural, planning, prioritising, funding and diverse provision (see below page 18 -19).

Meeting the needs of the increased numbers of people who had lost their jobs during the economic downturn presented a major challenge for the VECs and for FÁS, who were operating in the context of diminished resources. The Government responded by streamlining the 33 VECs into 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The training function of FÁS was brought under the remit of ETBs. The overall aim of these two key policy decisions was to bring local and regional coherence to FET.

2.2.4 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the Further Education Sector (FET)
On July 1st, 2013 a new Education and Training Boards (ETBs) Act was passed. The thirty three vocational educational committees which had operated under the Vocational Education Act, 1930 were replaced by 16 ETBs. Each ETB is a statutory body with a corporate status. ETBs have responsibility for education and training, and youth work. ETBs manage and operate second level schools, further education colleges, community national schools, and adult and community education provision. The overarching advisory body for the ETBs is the Education Training Boards Ireland (ETBI).

The Further Education and Training Act 2013, which was commenced in October 2013, provided for the dissolution of FÁS and the establishment of SOLAS (Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna), the National Further Education and Training Authority. SOLAS was brought under the aegis of the DES, and has the responsibility to oversee the delivery of an integrated FET service by the ETBs.

The Further Education and Training Act 2013, under Section, (7) explicitly mandates SOLAS to:

Prepare and submit to the Minister a strategy in respect of the provision of further education and training. (The Further Education and Training Act 2013).

The publication of the Further Education and Training Strategy by SOLAS represented the first national strategic plan for what is now known as the FET sector.

This is the first time in the history of the State that a Five –Year Strategy (2014-2019) for the further education and training sector has been published. (p. 18).

The Strategy, which is ambitious in scope, aimed to give direction, guide the transformation of FET and build integrated provision across the sector, ultimately combining to create a world class FET system.
The FET sector has undergone significant reform in recent years. It was widely acknowledged that the FET Strategy, for the first time set the direction of travel for the sector in Ireland. It was recognised that the nature of the FET sector is itself complex and wide-ranging and must cater for a diverse range of social, economic and demographic learner cohorts. (DES, 2018, p. 4).

Taken together, the ETB Act, 2013, and the Further Education and Training Act, 2013, give full recognition to the status of a distinct Further Education sector, in the national education system. The ETBs are accountable to SOLAS in respect of further education provision. A Service Level Agreement (SLA) was signed by the 16 ETBs with SOLAS which sets out FET targets, resource commitments, which must be aligned to the Further Education and Training Strategy, 2014-2019. Addressing the lack of any systematic data collection process became a priority area for both the ETBs and SOLAS.

2.2.5 Programme Learner Support System (PLSS)

A Programme Learner Support System (PLSS), has been developed jointly by SOLAS and the Education Training Boards of Ireland (ETBI). PLSS comprises a suite of software applications designed specifically to collect data on FET programmes in relation to enrolment, certification and completion rates. The implementation of the PLSS system was intended to address a serious deficiency in the data infrastructure pertaining to the FET sector and furthermore will provide a mechanism for the sharing of information for planning and review purposes. The DES highlighted the:

‘importance of having a robust, singular, system-wide, “fit for purpose” infrastructure in place given the fact that data infrastructure around FET is not as strong as it needs to be.’ (DES, 2018, p. 6).

The FET sector has now gained recognition as the fourth pillar in the Irish education system alongside primary, post primary, and higher education. The sector was assigned an important place on the Irish education landscape in the National Skills Strategy 2025 (DES, 2015), and in the Further Education and Skills Strategy 2014-20 (SOLAS, 2014). In the Action Plan for Education, 2016 to 2019, the DES gives an unequivocal commitment under Objective 3.4 to ‘promoting high quality learning
Section 2.3

Socio-economic Factors and Student Withdrawal from Post–compulsory Education

2.3.1 Socio-economic Factors and Student Withdrawal from Post–compulsory Education

Owing to the scant availability of research on the issue of drop-out in FE, there will be frequent forays into the richer pastures of publications on student withdrawal in the HE sector. Being mindful of the differences in the make-up of FE and HE student bodies, particularly in relation to academic orientation, the relevant propositions expounded in the literature assists with the formation of a theoretical framework to examine the issue of persistence in post-compulsory education, specifically regarding demographic and socio-economic factors and causes that lie within the sphere of influence by the college. Exploring the causes of student attrition in post compulsory education from the socio-economic perspective featured prominently in the literature.

Research on non-completion rates in Higher or Further Education in Ireland has only recently begun to emerge. Published research on retention rates in the FE sector is notable for its paucity. However, the available research on non-completion rates in Higher Education in Ireland may provide some helpful insights regarding the challenges of transferring successfully to post compulsory education, and there may be similar barriers to completion among HE and FE students. A report entitled: Non – completion in higher education: a study of first years in three institutions of technology’ found that:

There appears to be no single factor which explains non completion in the IT sector. A combination of social, personal and institutional factors seem to contribute to early leaving and or failure (Healy et al. 1999)

By contrast the UK FE sector has been examining the issue of non-completion rates of students since the 1950s. Two government inspired reports concluded that demographic factors such as home background, social class and poverty had the greatest impact on drop-out rates. (CACE 1954 &1959, DES/CLEA 1980). The
Publication of the HMI Report *Student Completion Rates* (DES 1991) reiterated the view that drop-out rates were largely due to factors external to colleges. The findings in the report attributed around 80% of student withdrawals to personal reasons, including financial problems, changed family or work circumstances or to progression to employment. Financial exigency as a major determinant of withdrawal emerged in Callender’s (1999) survey of 1,000 FE students. Confirmation that external factors, mainly financial, were the paramount reason for withdrawal among students in Higher Education was stressed in the findings of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment, (2001). The Committee’s report was unequivocal in its conclusion that students from poorer backgrounds were at a greater risk of dropping out of Higher Education and that

*The extent of non-completion…..is most marked in those institutions that admit the highest proportions of ‘non-traditional’ students* (p. 2).

The report also indicated that, students from the lowest social classes were more likely to engage in paid work during term. Callender (1999), endorsing this view, believes that part-time paid employment has become an important source of funding but that it increasingly interferes with a student’s academic work.

The view that socio-economic factors were the primary cause of student attrition was challenged in an Australian study by Duball and Baker, (1990), and signalled different causal directions which related to the quality of student experience and to the quality of teaching. The somewhat complacent notion that external influences, mainly financial were the leading cause of student drop-out in Higher Education which prevailed in UK Government reports up to the early years of the current century was beginning to be contested. Meanwhile, empirical evidence was beginning to emerge claiming that drop-out respondents recorded significantly lower levels of satisfaction than those who persisted in two areas of institutional influence: student/lectures relations and curriculum relevance. The research from this decade shifts towards focussing on the interaction between the student’s attributes and the internal dynamics of the college. The next sub-section will examine in detail the theories that seek to understand the interplay between the students’ pre-enrolment characteristics and the interaction with the internal world of the college and how the quality of that interaction impacts on attrition or persistence.
2.3.2 Causes of Withdrawal Within the Influence of Colleges.

In this sub-section, the case will be addressed that the quality of the students’ experience particularly in relation to their interactions with the college staff and their peers, has a considerable impact on levels of persistence. Several hypotheses have been advanced to explain attrition and persistence in post compulsory education and the relevance of these propositions will be examined in light of the purpose of this study.

Tinto’s Student Integration Model and Bean’s Model of Student Attrition

Tinto’s Student Integration Model and Bean’s Model of Student Attrition are the most widely known and comprehensively studied theories in the area of student departure. Contributions from scholars such as Spady, Astin, Martinez, Mundy and Davies will also be explored as they have also advanced the understanding of student attrition by formulating theories that demonstrate either remarkable similarities to the core elements of Tinto’s and Bean’s propositions or by challenging some of the assumptions of both of these models.

Spady (1970), attempted to offer an analytical-explanatory approach to the study of attrition. He aimed to extend beyond the descriptive models of attrition that tended to be institution specific and focus on the traditional aged student in post compulsory education. He is credited with proposing the first conceptual model of the attrition process that provides a:

More interdisciplinary-based, theoretical synthesis of the most methodological satisfactory findings and conceptually fruitful approaches to this problem. (p. 64).

Normative Congruence and Institutional Commitment

In Spady’s attrition model normative congruence or the way student’s goals, interests, and personality interact with the subsystems of the college, impacts on other independent variables, grade performance, intellectual development and friendships. The interaction between all of these variables influence the degree to which an individual either succeeds or fails to socially integrate into the college. Spady claims that there is a direct positive relationship between the level of a student’s social
integration and the level of satisfaction the student experiences with the college. He linked this level of satisfaction to the development of a commitment to the institution. This model viewed the level of institutional commitment as a determining factor in a student’s decision to drop-out or to persist. Furthermore, institutional commitment is associated with the normative congruence felt by the students. This proposition, which hinges on the two pivotal concepts of student’s social integration and institutional commitment opened up possible theoretical frontiers for FE colleges to investigate the determinants of student attrition.

As a progression of Spady’s work, Tinto (1975), published a model of the attrition process. Tinto’s ‘Attrition Model’ has attracted intense scrutiny and has been affirmed by many researchers but equally challenged or questioned and in some cases debunked by others. Boyle (1989), declared:

that the model had withstood careful scrutiny from the profession and has become accepted as the most useful for explaining the causes of student departure from higher education (p. 290).

Theorists frequently allude to the complexity of the issues relating to student attrition and persistence. No one theory captures the intricate interplay of the myriad factors that conspire to cause attrition among students in post-compulsory education. Tinto, who has immersed himself in the undergrowth of student attrition and persistence for the past four decades, continues to exercise a gravitational pull on scholars who seek to gain a comprehensive understanding of non-completion at this level.

Tinto believes that persistence is influenced by:

- the individual’s motivation and
- the individual’s academic ability.
- the institution’s academic and social characteristics

He posits that college integration or the extent to which students engage in the academic and social domains of the institution is the main mediating variable between student’s background and persistence. The alignment between the individual’s characteristics and those of the institution shape two fundamental underlying driving
forces which are: goal commitment which is a commitment to completing college and institutional commitment which is a commitment to the institution. Tinto calculates that the probability of persistence increases in relation to the strength of the goal of college completion and the greater the level of the individual’s institutional commitment.

**Rites of Passage and College Transfer**

The ability of the individual to negotiate the transition to the role of college student forms a critical part of Tinto’s model. Metz (2002), argues that Tinto was deeply influenced by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep and his seminal work on the concept of rites of passage. Reflecting Van Gennep’s theory about the rites of passage that accompany landmarks in a person’s life, the model is built on the concepts of separation, transition and incorporation. Van Gennep (1960), posited that ‘physiological puberty and social puberty are essentially different’ (p.65). Tinto viewed the transition from school to college as a form of social puberty and essentially a sociologically maturation process that is marked by: ‘three distinct phases or stages, each with its own specialized ceremonies and rituals’ (Tinto, 1993, p. 92). Becoming a college student, an individual must separate from past familiar life patterns, and transition to the norms of a new institution and incorporate into this new society. The phase between transition and incorporation in the new community exposes the individual to the possibility of experiencing a state of temporary ‘normlessness’. The consequences of normlessness according to Tinto (1987, p.93) and the related absence of guiding norms and beliefs, is to increase the likelihood of departure from the new community prior to incorporation. Van Gennep’s theory of incorporation appears to have been borrowed by Tinto and reconfigured in the conceptual moulds of social and academic integration. Tinto (1975), believed that the student’s ability to integrate socially and academically was a good indicator of their persistence. Withdrawal or persistence resulted from the interaction between the individual’s antecedent attributes and college experiences following enrolment. Integration in this context relates to the day-to-day interactions with peers and college personnel and the intellectual sharing of values echoing to some degree Spady’s notion of normative congruence.
A student’s pre-enrolment attributes may pre-dispose them to either persist or withdraw. These attributes influence the student’s interaction with both the academic and social systems of the college. Academic integration, takes place according to Tinto (1975), if the student experiences intellectual development and satisfactory or better grade performance. Realising the attainability of their goals, the student’s commitment to the goal deepens.

Building on Spady’s concept of institutional commitment, Tinto adds a further dimension which relates to the student’s goals. Tinto (1975), contends that it is the interplay between the commitment to both college completion and to the institution which impacts on the student regarding persistence and attrition. Patterns of incongruency which reflect a lack of institutional or intellectual fit or social isolation indicating an absence of meaningful connectedness to others, impact on a student’s commitment to both the institution and to college completion and are strong determinants of persistence or attrition. Where there is a high degree of congruency between the academic goals of the student and the academic mission of the college, academic integration will take place. Conversely, incongruence is allied to the view that:

> Individuals perceive themselves as being substantially at odds with the institution’ (Tinto, 1987, p. 53).

Positive interactions with peer groups and faculty members are conducive to social integration. Positive social and academic integration enhances the student’s commitment to the college, and to the individual’s academic goals. These commitments are active determinants in the decision to withdraw or persist. Tinto (1975) avers that:

> The process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or varying forms of dropout...it is the individual's integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college...
> In the final analysis, it is the interplay between the individual's
Commitment to the goal of college completion and his commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to drop-out (p. 94 to 96).

2.3.3 Quality of Student and Faculty Contact
Validating the work of Tinto, Terenzini (1977, 1979) and Pascarella (1980), found convincing evidence that freshmen’s persistence or attrition was closely related to the frequency and quality of student and faculty contact. The most important predictor of a student’s eventual drop-out from college is the absence of sufficient contact with others (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). Pascarella (1980), framed persistence of students in terms of the interplay between student and institutional characteristics along with three independent variables. The independent variables in Pascarella’s theory, mirror theoretical segments of Tinto’s (1975), model, and include the level of informal contact with faculty, other college experiences and educational outcomes. The independent variables all impact each other. If pressure builds in one area it can upset another variable and have an escalating reciprocal effect. Pascarella believes that negative educational outcomes can lead directly to withdrawal while the other variables have a more indirect influence on attrition usually by impacting negatively on educational attainment.

A related theoretical thrust came from Bean (1980), who expanded on the previous work of Tinto:

> By integrating academic variables, student intent goals, expectations and external and internal environmental factors into a revised model of persistence’ (Metz, 2002, p. 28).

Bean’s Model of Student Attrition, (1978, 1981), was rooted in organisational theory and posits that background variables influence the way a student interacts with college peers and personnel. Bean (1980), cautions that the model will not fully explain the drop-out process across all types of Higher Education institutions but its real significance may be:

> It indicates the information which, if known about a student, would likely indicate if that student was going to drop-out and some of the reasons why (p.17).
Bean’s model of student attrition, comprises four classes of variables including:

- Background variables
- Organisational variables
- Environmental variables
- Attitudinal and outcome variables

Background variables represent facts about students prior to college entry and precede the student’s interaction with the institution. Bean believed that high school grades were the most important variables in this class. This standpoint is echoed in the findings reported in the Higher Education Authority’s report: *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education*, (2010), which declared that:

> Prior educational attainment is the strongest predictor of successful progression through higher education (p.6).

Hirshy’s, (2011), model of student success in community college environments, in essence has strong traces of theoretical affinity with Bean’s model, while introducing the concepts of stability and malleability in relation to background characteristics. The model is based on viewing student’s characteristics as either stable or malleable. Stable characteristics relate to race, socio-economic status, age, gender, ability to pay, pre-college performance, family and community. Malleable characteristics refer to student dispositions, skills, motivation, locus of control, coping skills, resilience, study skills, educational and employment goals. Hirshy believes that colleges can raise persistence among students by addressing malleable characteristics while providing effective interventions for students with certain stable characteristics such as financial supports.

The interventions envisaged by Hirshy will impact the organisational variables, which are central to Bean’s theory on attrition and which are indicators of the student’s interaction with the institution. They are intended to reflect the student’s objective experience of the college specifically in relation to: the number of close friends, the extent of informal contact between student and faculty members, the amount of help students receive from faculty advisers and membership of campus organisations.
Environmental variables lie mainly outside the control of the institution and relate to family circumstances, financial matter and employment prospects. However, institutions may have considerable tangential if not direct influence around the attitudinal variables among students that are shaped by the quality of their interactions with the college structures and personnel.

Attitudinal and outcome variables form a recurring and an intensely detailed theme in Bean’s work on attrition and it is where the most incisive explanatory power of this model is to be found.

Institutional policies and practices do affect rates of student retention and institutions are far from helpless when it comes to creating programs and environments that attract or repel students (Bean 2002-2002, p. 73)

Subjective evaluations by the student are formed about the college. These evaluations reflect the student’s assessment of the value of the educational experience, and of the institution’s quality. Contained also in these assessments are an evaluation of the student’s own self-development, and the extent to which the individual is confident of successful educational outcomes. Bean, like Tinto, specifies adjustment to the institution as a strong predictor of persistence. Certainty of choice of course and college and the strength of the desire to graduate from the chosen institution along with educational goals, feature in this group of attitudinal and outcome variables. All of these variables may impact directly or indirectly on a student’s intent to leave which Bean believed was immediate precursor to drop-out.

2.3.4 Psychological Perspective of Student Attrition

Bean (1980), also developed the Model of Student Departure, which examines attrition from a psychological perspective.

The factors affecting retention are ultimately individual and that individual psychological processes form the foundation for retention decisions (Bean, Eaton, 2001-2002, p.73)
The model borrows from organisational theory that seeks to explain employee turnover. Bean views attrition as being analogous to turnover in work organisations and postulates that:

…the background characteristics of students must be taken into account in order to understand their interactions within the environment of the IHE [institutions of higher education] …The student interacts with the institution, perceiving objective measures, such as grade point average or belonging to campus organizations, as well as subjective measures, such as the practical value of the education and the quality of the institution. These variables are in turn expected to influence the degree to which the student is institutional committed. Institutional commitment is seen as leading to a degree in the likelihood that a student will drop-out of school (Bean, 1980, pp. 158-160).

Variables such as the potential of an individual’s background to influence interactions within the institution, academic attainment and the student’s subjective evaluation of the value of the education and of the institutional quality, feed into a central axis of institutional commitment. Persistence, for Bean, is highly contingent on the strength of that institutional commitment.

Astin’s (1993), study on college drop-outs reinforces both Bean’s and Tinto’s theoretical foundations that the social and academic integration of the student is critical to persistence. Astin (1993), proposed that peer group interaction promoting student involvement in the institution is:

the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years (p. 398).

Student involvement as defined by Astin (1993), comprise four criteria: the student devotes considerable energy to study, the student spends ample amounts of time on campus, the student participates actively in student organisations, and the student interacts frequently with faculty members and other students.

**Self-Efficacy Theories and Student Attrition**

Bean and Eaton (2001), blend elements of Astin’s and Tinto’s propositions and devise a theory that attempts to explain persistence and attrition from a distinctly psychological perspective. There are four salient elements guiding this theory and they relate to:
• Attitude Behaviour Theory: Bean and Eaton emphasise the importance of behavioural intentions as a predictor of persistence. Behavioural intentions, according to Bean, are formed by a process in which beliefs shape attitudes which in turn shape the individual’s behavioural intentions. A student’s beliefs are affected by the quality of the interactions with the different domains of the institution. Retention and persistence is also linked to loyalty to an institution and the extent to which a student feels a sense of comfort within the college.

• Coping behaviour approach/avoidance theory: Resonating with aspects of the transition and incorporation elements of Tinto’s Model, Bean and Eaton believe that a student’s ability to adapt and cope in a new setting will impact on persistence.

• Locus of Control: Students who feel they can control or influence the successes and failures in their lives are said to have a strong internal locus of control. Students with an inner locus of control are believed to have greater chances of success in college. Bean and Eaton contend that a strong internal locus of control drives students’ motivation and leads to increased study, improved grades and greater social connectedness. Conversely, students who feel a weaker sense of control over their life events feel more helpless and tend to be less successful in college.

• Self-efficacy theory: Past experiences contribute to an individual’s belief in their ability to manage a particular situation. A student’s self belief in their own competence to negotiate the academic and social demands of college can be predictive of persistence.

Self-efficacy forms one of the four cornerstones of Bean and Eaton’s (2001) theory which attempts to explain the causes of attrition from a psychological perspective. There are striking similarities to Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory which defines self – efficacy as *one’s belief in their capabilities* (Bandura, 2012, p. 13). For the individual nothing is:
More central or pervasive than people’s beliefs in their capability to exercise some measure of control over their own functioning and over environmental events (Bandura, 2001, p. 10)

Bandura (1995) links self-efficacy to motivation which is perceived as being self–regulated through a person’s perceptions of a task and their expectations of a successful completion. Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009), came to a related conclusion regarding high school graduation rates which they believed revealed much more than mastery of course content and was linked to attributes such as motivation, perseverance, good study habits and time management skills.

There are obvious commonalities across Tinto’s Integration Model, Bean’s Student Attrition Model and Bandura’s Social cognitive Theory. All three of the models view persistence and attrition as the result of a complex set of factors and interactions. Pre-college attributes feature as a predictor of how students will be in adjusting to college life. The models subscribe to the view that the fit between student and institution is a critical factor in determining attrition or persistence.

However, the theoretical parallels between Tinto and Bean’s and Bandura’s models begin to diverge at a number of key points. Bean’s Student Attrition Model, in contrast to Tinto’s Integration Model, considers factors external to the institution. Bean elaborates on the role of parental approval, finances and the opportunity to transfer as factors that impact on persistence. Academic performance, according to Tinto is an indicator of academic integration. Bean regards academic performance as an outcome and the result of the student’s social and psychological development. The self-belief that an individual has to exercise control over their environment is the essence of Bandura’s theory.

Tinto, Bean and Bandura among other luminaries, advance cogent theories that combine to create a complex framework to examine and gain a deep understanding of persistence and attrition primarily in universities. These theories may be judiciously transferred to explore the causes of non-completion in other post compulsory education institutions such as Further Education Colleges in Ireland.
Despite the intense scholarship that has been directed at the issue of student attrition, there is no one unifying theory that is sufficiently comprehensive to account for the complicated set of factors that interact to influence what Braxton and Johnston (1997), refer to as the ‘student departure puzzle’. An inherent limitation in the aforementioned theories of attrition is the implicit assumption regarding the homogenised make-up of the student body. Student bodies have become highly diverse in recent decades. FE in particular has widened participation of underrepresented groups in post compulsory education. A model that focusses on attrition and the non-traditional student would be highly relevant to FE in Ireland.

2.3.5 The Non–Traditional Student

One of the most obvious gaps in the theoretical propositions examined thus far, is the absence of specific reference to the non-traditional student. The majority of FE students may be characterised as non-traditional students, ESRI (2014). The reasons for attrition among mature and other non-traditional student groups are poorly understood, only a very limited body of research exists which focuses exclusively on their experiences. Diversity in age, ethnicity, educational background, employment status, previous family higher education participation and family circumstances make the student body difficult to categorise, (Kates, 1995). Munday (1976), observed that there is not one kind of non-traditional student, but many. Bean and Metzner (1985), commented that:

no theoretical model has been available to guide attrition research on the non-traditional student enrolled in institutions of higher education (p.485).

Bean and Metzner’s definition of a non-traditional student refers to those aged over 24 years, non-resident on campus and commuter students were later added to this list. While there is no official statistical analysis available on the sub groups that make up the FE population, there is evidence from the FE Colleges to suggest that this non-traditional student as defined by Bean and Metzner is highly represented in the sector. Therefore, to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of attrition of FE students in
Ireland the research must examine the underlying causes of withdrawal among both the traditional and the non-traditional groups.

Following an intensive study of literature, Bean and Metzner (ibid), devised a conceptual model of student attrition that focussed specifically on the non-traditional student. Four sets of variables form the basis of the Attrition Model for Non-traditional Students according to Bean and Metzner, (ibid), including: background variables, academic performance, environmental variables, and the intent to leave. The environmental variables refer to factors external to the college such as: finances, hours of employment, family duties, family support, and transfer opportunities. They assert that student’s background variables including educational goals could affect the decision to drop out directly or indirectly by negatively impacting on academic performance.

The Attrition Model for Non-traditional students, explicates the importance of academic variables, specifying study hours as an indicator of potential academic success. Poor academic success can lead to withdrawal either directly or indirectly by causing negative psychological outcomes variables to develop such as stress, decreased sense of utility and weakened goal commitment. These negative psychological variables may lead to attrition. Similarly, the environmental factors can impact directly on a student and result in departure, or they can create negative psychological outcomes variables and lead indirectly to drop-out.

The model deviates substantially from Spady, Tinto and Pascarella’s propositions in relation to the primacy of social integration regarding student persistence. Bean and Metzner, assign a much lower ranking to the importance of social integration in the persistence levels of non-traditional students. Environmental factors outweigh academic variables in the departure decisions of non-traditional students.

Evidence from Irish FE Colleges suggest that the majority of the students’ parents did not progress to post - secondary education themselves. The overarching position of influence that background variables exert on student persistence and attrition as foregrounded in Bean and Metzner’s model is augmented by Choy (2001). Commenting on patterns of attrition in American Community Colleges, Choy, singles
out students whose parents did not go to college as a group at higher risk of withdrawal prior to completion.

Such students are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to post-secondary access—a disadvantage that persists even after controlling for other important factors such as educational expectations, academic preparation..............among those who overcome the barriers to access and enroll in postsecondary education, students whose parents did not attend college remain at a disadvantage with respect of staying enrolled’. (p. xviii).

In a more recent study Pascarella, (2016), concluded that a level of disadvantage persisted for first generation students

Consistent with, but also extending, previous research, our findings suggests that compared to other students, first-generation college students tend to be significantly handicapped in terms of the types of institutions they attend and the kinds of experiences they have during college (p.275).

Choy’s findings might prompt a fatalistic outlook for first generation students. By contrast, the substance of Pacarella’s and Terenzini’s writings on attrition in post-secondary education assign a highly constructive role to the institution regarding the facilitation of the development of social and academic integration and commitment which leads to greater levels of persistence even among non-traditional students.

To sum up the theoretical thrusts thus far, Tinto’s (1993) longitudinal model of institutional departure provides a structured approach to understanding retention. He postulates that attributes such as family background, skills, abilities, and prior education impact on an individual’s choice of goals and commitments. When these goals and commitments interact with college experiences in ways that don’t facilitate students becoming academically and socially connected, attrition becomes the more likely outcome. Tinto (1993), links withdrawal with pre-entry attributes such as family, skills, abilities, and prior education. Crucially for Tinto it is how these attributes interact over time with institutional experiences, both formal and informal, with the academic and the social domains that will determine whether a student persists or withdraws. Central to Tinto’s theory is the concept of integration of students at institutional level. Their academic and social experience in the institution will either serve to integrate them into the College or alienate them from it.
Bean interrogated the notion of institutional commitment from a distinctively psychological perspective. He constructed a Model of Attrition on background, organisational, environmental, attitudes and outcome variables. Astín isolates social and academic integration as the two most predictive indicators of persistence. Social and academic integration as conceived by Astín, mirrors the viewpoints of both Tinto and Bean and incorporates the totality of the student’s experience including grade attainment, peer and faculty interaction, study patterns and engagement in campus activities. Bandura links student success to the notion of self-efficacy. Bean and Metzner’s Model of attrition for the Non-traditional student (1985) will be of particular relevance to the Irish FE Colleges as it offers a theoretical basis for understanding the underlying causes of departure among the groups that comprise a significant proportion of those enrolled in that sector.

The leading models on student attrition and persistence discussed in this study were hewn out of research in the American post-secondary and higher education sector. To what extent have these theoretical propositions have migrated and infiltrated the discourse on student withdrawal from post compulsory education in the UK will be the subject of the next section.
Section 2.4
Student Attrition and Persistence in Post-secondary Education- the Evidence from the UK

2.4.1 Student Attrition and Persistence in Post-secondary Education- the Evidence from the UK.
A synthesis of the research on student persistence and attrition in post-secondary education, which has emanated mainly from the UK and to some extent from Australia will be examined in this section. Almost simultaneously with Tinto’s research in the US a discernible shift in the perception that the factors that contribute to student withdrawal reside outside of the college was beginning to emerge in the UK, with the publication of two reports: *Measuring up: performance indicators in further education* (SOED, 1992), and *Unfinished Business* (Audit Commission/Ofsted, 1993). Both reports converge on similar conclusions that high drop-out rates were unacceptable and that the overall level of non-completion in FE was declared to be too high which was condemned as a substantial waste of national resources.

2.4.2 Institutional Quality and Student Experience
By the mid-nineties the focus of the research on student withdrawal was moving towards examining institutional quality and the student experience of the learning environment. In 1994 and 1995, The Further Education Development Agency, (FEDA), undertook detailed research projects which examined the causes of student withdrawal at three different FE Colleges. Two of the Colleges were located in London while the third was based in the Isle of Wight. The chosen methodology involved the administration of an identical questionnaire to a representative sample of staff, and to current and withdrawn students from the colleges. Teachers and managers of the colleges subscribed to the viewpoint that a number of characteristics of the student community accounted for a substantial proportion of the student withdrawals citing in particular: financial problems, poor English, low motivation, poor educational experiences, family and health problems, and low self-esteem.
The analysis of the responses from the current and withdrawn students could not offer any differentiation in terms of apparent motivation. Both groups displayed similar patterns of agreement on the relative importance which they attached to the various aspects of the educational programme upon which they had embarked. The similarities in the findings suggests that the group who withdraw and the group who completes are not two intrinsically different types, with different sets of priorities. However, striking differences between the two groups were identified when their relative satisfaction with various aspects of College experiences were compared. Further analysis of the data revealed that the withdrawn respondents recorded a significantly lower opinion of the College for:

- Quality of the teaching
- Helpful and supportive teachers
- Help in getting qualified
- Well organised teaching
- Timing of classes
- Help and advice with course work (FEDA 1994).

The citing of personal problems, financial hardship, insufficient financial assistance, and conflict between job and studies, was not significantly greater among the withdrawn group. These problems appeared to be encountered to a similar extent in both groups.

2.4.3 College, Work, Personal and Family Reasons

Medway and Penney (1994), were among the first to contend that the student decision making process could be characterised as a continuous weighing of the costs of continuing with or abandoning the course of study and that the decision to withdraw resulted:

from rational decisions to respond to the difficulties students faced (p.38).

Extending this view, Kenright (1996), in his report *Developing Retention Strategies: Did they fall or were they pushed?* sub-divides the causes of drop-out into three
broad categories: college, work and personal/family related and chimes to some extent with Pascarella. Yorke (1997), one of the most prolific researchers on student retention in higher education in the UK, conducted a comprehensive national survey of students withdrawing from university and succeeds in reverting to earlier debates on retention in post-secondary education by placing the burden of responsibility for departure with the student. The report identified the five most significant reasons for student withdrawal:

- Incompatibility between the student and the institution
- Lack of preparation for the higher education experience
- Lack of commitment to the course
- Financial hardship
- Poor academic progress.

Yorke’s findings suggest that a facile conclusion can be drawn that student early departure is attributed to wrong course selection, to deficiencies in levels of preparedness for college, to a weak commitment to the course resulting in unsatisfactory academic attainment, and to possible financial pressures. On balance, York perceives that the causes of attrition among college students appear to be reside with the student

A more expanded exploration of student attrition is presented in a report published by the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) in the UK in 1998 entitled ‘9,000 Voices: student persistent and drop-out in further education’. The largest study, at the time on the issue of non-completion in the FE sector in the UK it comprised a survey of the views of 9,000 students and staff in 31 colleges. The report creates a broader understanding of the multifaceted nature of attrition as opposed to the limited notions that emerged from Yorke’s study (1997). Findings in the report asserts that students are more likely to drop out if:

- They do not feel they have been placed on the most appropriate course
- They applied to college late
- They find it difficult to make friends
- Find it difficult to settle in at the beginning of the course
- Are less satisfied rather than current students that their course is interesting
- Are less satisfied with the quality of teaching
- Are less satisfied with the course timetable
- Are less satisfied with help either to get a job or to go to university
- Are male
- Have difficult financial circumstances (older students) or family circumstances (younger students)
- Have their fees waived or reduced (P.7).

Comfort, Baker and Cairns (2002), confirms Martinez and Munday’s finding that the wrong choice of course was a highly significant factor in early withdrawal from FE programmes.

2.4.4 Students’ Attitudes to their Experiences of the College

Martinez and Munday’s (1998) study provides further consolidation for the emerging view that student decisions to complete their programmes of study were less likely to be influenced by socio-economic factors which were external to the college, than by students’ attitudes to their experiences of the college. The findings in this report resonates with the FEDA (1994) research which pinpoints the differentiation in the evaluations of the experiences of college, particularly in relation to placement on appropriate courses, and in the perceived quality of the teaching and their relationships with teachers, which received significantly lower scores from the withdrawn student group.

Non persisting students further demonstrated their dissatisfaction with their course and college by indicating their unwillingness to recommend the college to others. (Kenright 1997).

The correlation between financial hardship and drop-out rates was investigated in a survey of 6,500 FE students by the Responsive College Unit in 1998 which found that despite concerns expressed by students regarding the cost of travel and subsistence it had no significant effect on retention rates:
The incidence of financial hardship does not seem to be strongly associated with decisions to drop-out in order to gain employment (Martinez and Munday 1998, p. 29).

Related findings emerged from a study by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in the Higher Education. In Ireland, indicated that financial difficulties as a cause of non-completion arose for a minority of students.

Given the time period during which our data was generated – in the midst of an economic crisis and the context of austerity (2011-2014) – one might have expected that financial issues would loom large in the responses. Although this was not the case generally, issues related to finance are evident for a minority. (2015, p. 46)

Mirroring the FEDA study, dissatisfaction with course, followed by personal, health, medical and family were found to be the major contributors to non-completion at University and Institute of Technology level, in Ireland, as adduced in the afore-mentioned National Forum study.

Davies (1999), in attempting to synthesise the salient elements of theories on attrition, believes that the reasons for withdrawal are often complex and a number of factors contributed to the decision to discontinue. He notes that the likelihood of withdrawal increased when the occurrence of a personal or a financial related difficulty coincided with a lack of confidence in the quality of teaching provision.

Davies perceives the college as a powerful support mechanism which allows external problems to be handled without withdrawal where there was a high level of satisfaction and confidence in the quality of teaching. This viewpoint was amplified by a number of studies from the 1990s onwards, which began to interrogate the notion of student’s experience and institutional quality and their impact on retention and drop-out.
Student Integration and Persistence

The reasons for non-completion became classified broadly as those subject to the control of the College and those which arise from the student’s personal circumstances. In reality, the line may not be amenable to such simple division.

Student withdrawal is a complex and often a very individualised process involving the interplay of institutional, social and personal factors. (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Teese, 2000, p. 1).

This Australian study argues that the lack of fit between student capacities and institutional demands are major contributors to withdrawal stating that factors such as wrong choice of course or subject, poor preparation and lack of readiness and commitment, figure prominently in the reasons for non-completion.

Inspired by Tinto’s work the Australian researchers establish a link between student integration and persistence. They add substantially to the viewpoint that the institution is a social system with its own values and social structures where:

Integration is largely the result of two factors, the degree of congruence that develops between the student and the value patterns of the college collectively, and the sufficiency of interaction with others in the college (staff and students). ((McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Teese, 2000, p. 16).

McGivney (2004), continuing this theoretical lineage, touches on the interplay between the negative quality of students’ experiences with personal difficulties and cautioned against the stated conclusion that, since the main expressed reasons for withdrawal are external to the college, thus institutional quality could not be implicated in the matter of attrition.

Dissatisfaction with a course or institution is also a common reason for non-completion, and if this is on top of a range of external constraints and pressures, there is a strong likelihood that students will abandon a programme before completion (p. 21).

Yorke and Longden (2008), extend the causal repertoire to include: poor quality learning experience, dissatisfaction with location, environment and institutional resourcing, and poor social integration. These findings corroborate the emerging
nuanced view that the roots of student departure are influenced by a combination of personal and institution related factors.

To sum up: studies of student withdrawal at FE level prior to the 1990s perceived the deficits to reside with the student and the institution was exculpated of any responsibility in relation to student attrition. From the 1990s onwards, the focus of the inquiry on retention became re-directed towards the college and the notion of the quality of student experience emerged. The quality or sufficiency of the interactions between the student and the staff and between the peers became one of the key indicators for persistence or withdrawal. The ability of a student to engage in high quality interactions and to integrate effectively into the social and academic culture of the college may be related to the individual’s pre-entry attributes and to their values. How the student’s values and attitudes align or conflict with the prevailing values of the institution will affect how college life is experienced by the student. The impact of the value systems and of the cultures experienced as the lived realities of the institution on retention will be examined in the next section. The work of Pierre Bourdieu will be accessed to inform the theoretical basis to gain an understanding of the individual and their position within the complex domain of a college environment.
Section 2.5
Bourdieu’s Sociological Concepts

2.5.1 Bourdieu’s Sociological Concepts
In this section the notion of student integration will continue to be a central focus. The emphasis however will be on the conditions that prevail at college level and the pre-entry attributes of the individual and how they interplay with the college culture. To get a deeper understanding of the dynamics that impact on student integration and on the quality of college experience, the main elements of Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice will be introduced. The associated concepts of: field, capital and habitus will be explained.

Bourdieu’s concepts will be used to build the theoretical framework which will underpin the analysis of the data and the discussion of the findings in Chapter 5. The usefulness of Bourdieu’s work in relation to this study will be noted and the case for using the conceptual toolkit to inform the analytical framework will be set out.

2.5.2 Theory of Practice
Bourdieu devised his Theory of Practice as a means to expose the complex relationship between agency and structure which he viewed as mutually constituted. Human agency and institutional structures are inextricably linked. Bourdieu attempts to construct a theoretical basis that binds both agency and structure as a relational whole,

Where agency and structure are two interlocking and inextricable dimensions of one social reality (Swartz, 1998, p. 96).

Bourdieu posits that the relationship between agency and structure is dialectical. The dialectical nature of the relationship can be uncovered when viewed through the lens of what is referred to as practice, which can be studied as the interpenetrating connections of three concepts: field, capital and habitus.
Bourdieu’s concept of ‘Field’

Bourdieu introduced the concept of field which represents the structured social contexts, within which an individual operates. The context that is the field can be described as a social space which represents a network of positions where there is competition between groups for available resources. A social field is a: ‘locus of struggles’ (Bourdieu, 1975, p. 19). Grenfell (2004, p. 54) draws on Bourdieu’s own definition of field thus:

I define field as a network, or configuration, of objective relations, between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of power (or capital) where possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as their objective relation to other positions. (1992a, p.72, own translation).

The group within the field possessing the most power or resources can exert their dominance to shape the structure of the field. The structure of the objective relations between the agents on a field defines dominant and dominated positions (Bourdieu, 1997). An agent’s positioning within the field determines what agents can and cannot do. Social fields are based on a historically generated system of shared meaning (Lellatchitch, 2003, p. 723).

Education and all of its associated institutions operate as a structured social context and therefore is a field. Further Education could be viewed as a sub-field in the education field.

Within the field there are a set of strategies or a game. The field specific strategies are set but not everyone knows the rules of the game. Some agents or individuals have more capital resources that enable them to gain advantage in the game and in the field. Strategies are not formalized but are tacit in nature (Wacquant, 2011). These strategies need to be internalized by the agents or individuals in order to demonstrate appropriate practices to that field. Struggles between agents are mainly about relative positions within the field. Lellatchitch (2003) asserts that an individual’s conformity with the rules of the game are a necessity in order to maximize position of advantage.
Fields are, therefore, spaces of power relations. Groups of people may occupy multiple social fields such as the economic field, the education field and the field of government at the same time. Bourdieu referred to this as the field of power. The practices of agents in the fields are not arbitrary but are heavily influenced by the individual’s position within the field. The next sub-section will explain how positions in the various fields are gained.

**Bourdieu’s concept of ‘Capital’**

Bourdieu viewed the social field as an arena where certain rules apply. To enter a social field, agents need to be endowed with a specific quantity and structure of resources. Each field attaches value to a particular set of resources which Bourdieu called capital. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu identifies 4 types of capital, namely economic, cultural, social and symbolic. Economic capital relates to an individual’s monetary wealth and assets. Cultural capital, which is regarded by Bourdieu as one of the main mechanisms for the reproduction of privilege and class, can be described as the advantages an individual has through knowledge, skills, educational qualifications and cultural possessions that give a person a certain status in society. This form of capital is transferred by family and through education and can be institutionalised in the form of educational credentials. Cultural capital is highly influential in relation to status and positions within a field. Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural capital as existing in three forms. Embodied capital is an internalised form and is represented by the individual’s behaviours and dispositions. Objectified capital exists in the form of possessions such as books, paintings and cultural goods. Institutionalised capital is acquired through formal qualifications.

Bourdieu’s social capital represents an individual’s entirety of social relations and networks, which can be legitimised by family and group membership to access material and immaterial resources.

Symbolic capital is associated with honour and recognition. This form of capital derives its value from its acknowledgement by the entirety of the peer competitors in a specific field (Bourdieu 1997).
The capital structure of the field controls who can enter and the agent’s position therein. Bourdieu perceives the positions in social fields to be relative are determined by the volume and structure of the agent’s capital resources in comparison to the other agents in the same field, particularly economic and cultural capital. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). An agent’s practice results from relations between one’s field position and one’s disposition or what Bourdieu referred to as habitus.

**Bourdieu’s concept of ‘Habitus’**

The key to understanding Habitus is to reiterate Bourdieu’s question which engendered this particular theoretical concept: *how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?* (Maton in Grenfell, 2012, p. 49). Bourdieu is essentially asking how the social structures or conditions that one encounters in a field and the practices of an individual who can exercise agency, be reconciled or understood. Bourdieu conceived the notion of habitus which seeks to address the dichotomy of social structures and individual agency. He viewed habitus as a property of the agent which is possessed at an individual, group or institutional level. Critically for Bourdieu it constitutes a: ‘structured and structuring structure’ (Maton in Grenfell, 2012, p. 50). Structured by a complex interplay between an individual’s past and present, particularly family upbringing and educational experiences, ‘habitus refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p.86). The structuring element of the habitus is reflected in its impact on one’s present and future practices. The ‘structure’ component of habitus relates to dispositions which lead to perceptions, appreciations and practice. The structure is systematically constructed in an ordered and patterned manner. Bourdieu uses the term ‘disposition’ in a very intentional way as the connecting concept between structure and agency and explains it thus:

> It expresses first the result of an organizing action, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination (Cited by Maton in Grenfell, 2012 p.50).

The systems of dispositions are a product of history that: ‘produces practices in accordance with the schemes engendered by history’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p.82). By
acting in conformity with the ‘schemes’ or with the structure, the structure is reinforced and reproduced. The habitus is durable but not eternal. It evolves and adjusts to changing contexts and is reinforced by further experience. ‘Habitus illuminates the variegated logics of social action’ (Wacquant, 2011, p. 82) and is:

The strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

The dialectic relationship between structure and agency and between objective structures and subjective dispositions which manifests in habitus can be used to unpack the reasons why FE students depart prior to course completion.

The use of Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital and habitus to map out the power lines across the educational field and within the FE sub-field, by identifying the agents who have the most valued currency or capital in the field has the potential to reveal the conditions which operate in the field. The use of the concept habitus to examine the dispositions of the key agents in the field how the structuring structure of the key agent’s habitus has structured the field and how the FE students relate to the objective structures of the FE field and of the wider field of education and of the field of power may bring to light how the alignment of structured conditions impact on the FE student. While individuals choose strategies or make choices they do not necessarily ‘choose the principles of these choices’ (Wacquant, 1989, p.49).

Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice and the three associated concepts of: field, capital and habitus used in an interrelated way, offer an alternative and a deeply penetrating mechanism to interrogate the sub field of FE and how it relates to the broader field of education and the field of power. The key agents in the FE sector and in the wider field of power, and how the volume and composition of capitals they possess structure the social space, will be explored.

The world is ‘socially produced’ in and by a ‘collective work of construction of social reality’ (Bourdieu, 1992a, p. 239).
Bourdieu’s sociological concepts have been described as:

Tools to deconstruct this social construction in a way which reveals the dynamic relationship between the *modus operandi* (structuring structure), and the logic of differentiating practice which constitute them. (Grenfell, 2007, p. 54)

The evolving logics of the relations between the *habitus* of the key agents and the *field* in FE and related domains, may be made visible with careful application of Bourdieu’s thinking tools which will be utilised in the Discussion Chapter (Chapter 5). College management and teachers together possess vast reserves of agency which can be used to shape the interior domain of the institution in ways that have the potential to impact positively on the students’ experience and thus enhance persistence rates. The next section will explore what colleges can do to enhance student retention.
Section 2.6

How do College Policies Influence Retention?

2.6.1 How do College Policies Influence Retention?

Drawing from the voluminous literature which advocates various strategies that institutions could undertake in order to enhance student retention this section will focus on a variety of approaches that could be adapted or developed in the Irish FE sector to reduce attrition. Improving student retention in Irish FE Colleges, some of whose rates hover around fifty percent will require an overall strategic commitment at institutional level. The commitment needs to encompass evidenced informed strategies which are recommended in the available literature. The strategies, which are wide ranging, comprise: improved provision of pre-entry information, induction and transition support, improvement of teaching and learning environments, developing curricula that are relevant and accessible to a diverse student body, moving towards formative assessment models, enhancing student and faculty contact, building social engagement and student support mechanisms and devising appropriate data collection and monitoring systems.

2.6.2 Pre-entry Information and Preparation

Mismatch between student needs and the course content regularly appears in the research as a contributory factor to attrition. Yorke and Thomas (2003), found that Colleges exceeding their benchmarks for retention levels were engaged in outreach work with potential students which helps to bridge any potential communication deficits and inform choice and shape expectations about the relevant FE courses.

Harvey and Drew (2006), are more explicit in recommending induction programmes as a strategy to promote student retention. Similarly, Yorke and Thomas (2003), endorse the potential of inductive processes in particular for:

Students whose backgrounds may not have given them an appreciation of what is expected of them: i.e. they lack cultural capital. (p.75).
Induction programmes may help to address the findings of a study by Ozga & Sukhnandan (1997, 1998), which indicated that the most common reasons for early withdrawal amongst students was a lack of preparedness for college education.

Recognising the diverse composition of FE students, particularly with increasing enrolment from underrepresented groups the need for tailored and targeted induction programmes is very compelling. There is mounting empirical evidence to document the efficacy of high quality induction programmes as a strategy to support social and academic integration which become the cornerstones of retention. The teaching and learning modalities, which will be the main subject of the next sub-section could also be introduced to prospective students during induction sessions.

2.6.3 Improving Teaching and Learning

In this sub-section the impact that the quality of teaching and learning has on student retention will be examined. Teaching and learning and assessment practices are within the control of the college. Colleges are increasingly challenged by Government policy directives to address the issue of retention as part of a quality assurance process and as a drive to optimise use of resources.

Crosling (2009), ardently believes that the quality of the teaching and learning as experienced by the student in higher education institutes has a significant impact on retention. McInnes and James (1995), in an extended version of this view assert that student engagement with the teaching processes is generally acknowledged as a key factor in student retention. Enhancing student engagement is an obvious strategy for improving student retention, success and educational outcomes. Student engagement is defined by Kuh (2003), as a student’s academic commitment and application and demonstrated by the time and effort invested in activities that are educationally purposeful.

Bryson and Hand, (2007), capture the essence of the evolving debate on the roots of attrition by distributing a portion of the responsibility on the institution particularly in relation to the student interactions with the learning environment. Thus College
management and teachers have a responsibility to provide opportunities to foster student engagement in learning that:

get students to participate in activities that lead to success. (Kuh, 2003, p. 150).

Chen (2008), contends that academic success underpins student retention. In support of this view Meyer and Land (2005), advanced the notion that the mastery of what they call disciplinary threshold concepts are critical to academic survival and success. There are implications here for teaching strategies and methodologies, which must facilitate the learner with active and engaging approaches that support the acquisition of key disciplinary concepts. Bryson and Hand (2007), remind us that there is a dynamic interplay between student engagement and learning and between the quality of student learning in the teaching and learning context. Chen, (2008), in a further refinement of the concept, sub-divides student engagement into two component parts. The students’ investment in study and educational activities on the one hand but:

also the way an institution organises learning opportunities and services. (p. 340).

The pivotal role that the institution has in delivering the curriculum, including teaching, learning and assessment, in ways that engender student engagement, provide scope for the college to be highly pro-active regarding retention (Crosling, Thomas, Heagney, 2008). Tinto (2000), in a stern challenge to institutions to uphold their responsibilities regarding student retention, decries the inaction on the part of colleges to change their overall character and laments the paucity of progress in addressing the deeper roots of attrition. In his paper entitled ‘Taking student retention seriously’ which is characterised by a tone of exasperation Tinto pursues a very direct line of questioning aimed at college authorities.

What would it mean for institutions to take student retention seriously? (p.1)
Tinto himself offers his own stark reply:

to be serious about student retention, institutions would recognise that the roots of student attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings in which they ask students to learn, namely the classrooms, laboratories, and studios of the campus. They would recognize that student learning is the key to student retention and by extension realize that the involvement of faculty……………..is critical to institutional efforts to increase student retention, (p. 1).

Adding his considerable scholarly weight to the argument that colleges have the capacity to create the environmental climate for students that is highly conducive to retention, Tinto (2000) pinpoints five conditions for student success. These include the institutions and teachers holding high expectations of students regarding their learning. Recognising that not all students are sufficiently academically prepared, Tinto (2000), advocates the provision of appropriate academic supports such as supplemental instruction to help newcomers ‘know the rules’ (p, 91). Feedback concerning academic performance, involvement with fellow students and relevant learning, are three further critical conditions for student success and retention according to Tinto (2000).

The reverberating theme of relevance in learning across the curriculum, is picked up by Crosling, Edwards and Schroder (2008), who argue that the curriculum ought to be culturally relevant to support widening participation, and to prepare graduates for living and working in a diverse society. Similarly, Haggis and Pouget (2002), advise that to support first generation entrants, links need to be made between the curriculum and students’ own experiences and their world views. Roberts, et al. (2003), found that the differences between students who doubted the merit of their courses but persisted and those who had doubts and departed was that the former group believed the course would benefit their careers while the latter group failed to link the course with career aspirations. Extending this theme, Berger and Braxton (1998), propose that curricular relevance could be enhanced by integrating the students’ future and career aspirations into the learning processes and advocates that modules in personal,
social and employability skills should be provided in all post-secondary programmes. Barrie (2005), Crosling, (2009), endorse a related strategy and affirm the potential of work placement modules and submits that greater consideration be given by college authorities to capitalising on the learning and competencies that students derive from their engagement in part-time employment.

Thus, part of the learning experience should prepare students for graduation in the broadest sense and should contribute to the validity and authenticity of the curriculum of all students (p. 13).

The vocational oriented nature of FE courses is clearly enunciated in the Irish Government Strategy. (The Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019). The FE sector has been given a government mandate to produce graduates with the necessary skills to meet the needs of a range of growing industries in the economy.

The skills focus in FE offer real and substantial opportunities for colleges to deepen the relevance of the curricular content of the programmes by forging strategic links with appropriate industrial or service bodies thus providing scope for interactive and student centred learning.

2.6.4 Leading Learning

An abundance of research appears to verify the claim that interactive as opposed to didactic teaching improves academic success and promotes inclusivity among learners (Crosling, et al. 2008, Thomas 2002). Interactive teaching facilitates student centred learning which enables the student to take an active role in the learning process. Active learning approaches often incorporate experiential, problem solving and project based collaborative learning, strategies that bear conceptual resemblance to Kolb’s (1984) theories of learning.

Tight (2002), broadening the application of the active learning concept, elucidates the benefits of experiential learning in training contexts as a means of fostering collaboration among students to solve problems, and the use of real life scenarios can lead to a deeper understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. If the learning connects with the students’ sense of emotional and social well-being a
deeper feeling of belonging to the institution can develop which will influence motivation and the goal to succeed (Thomas, 2002).

Tinto (1998, 2000), lends further substantiation to the notion of collaborative learning and develops the concept of learning communities:

----so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (p.26)

Tinto firmly believes that a college can change its educational climate in order to retain more students. He is a firm believer in his conviction that the learning community model of academic and social interaction represents an ideal structure to increase students’ connection with the college and with learning processes. Warren (2003), encapsulates the positivity that abounds in the literature regarding learning communities and concludes that the student centred and group based learning promotes:

- Enhanced student participation and interaction
- More willingness by students to express their ideas
- Improved communication among students in culturally diverse classes
- Better adjustment to college
- A shift towards deep learning as a space is created for learners to test out new concepts
- Increased motivation (p.3).

Effective study skills are essential for academic success. The emerging evidence from FE Colleges would indicate that a modicum of progress has been made regarding the development and delivery of study skills programmes. Supporting students to devise effective study strategies has the potential to increase academic success and integration thereby leading to possible improvements in retention. Research on widening participation, commend the value of integrated models of study.
skills and academic support along with the provision of one-to-one support. (Dodson and Bolam, 2002).

### 2.6.5 A Cultural Theory of Learning

The need to improve the teaching and learning in FE has been enunciated repeatedly in many publications dating back to the Crowther report of 1959, as a strategy to raise retention, James and Biesta (2007, p.47), grappling with this issue, states that:

> The problem of ‘improving teaching and learning’ is ritually invoked as the solution to a range of external problems

However, there is a lack of detail and an absence of a theory of how improved teaching and learning could be improved in FE. (Coffield, 2000, p.18), pinpoints this deficit in attempts to raise standards in FE thus:

> There is no mention of a theory (or theories) of learning to drive the whole project

Endeavouring to address what was described as a *notoriously under-researched area* Transforming Learning Cultures, TLC, (2005) the research project on Further Education, offers a cultural theory of learning and a theory of learning culture, as an approach to an understanding of what constitutes good teaching and learning. Coffield cited in James and Biesta (2007, p. 120) explains the two concepts as follows:

> A cultural theory of learning conceives of learning, not as something that happens in the heads of students (or tutors), but something that happens through social practices. Learning cultures stands for the social practices through which people learn.

Adopting a cultural theory of learning moves the discussion around improved teaching and learning away from a technical approach, which is based on implementing the right means and techniques. James (2007, p.124) asserts that:

> Improvement is always a matter of changing the culture….cultures are complex entities that are partly beyond the control of the main participants – tutors and students

Approaching improvements using learning cultures in FE requires an understanding of the complexity of learning cultures. The TLC research project on FE (2005), takes
a broad definition of learning cultures to comprehend the relationships between colleges, government agencies, and employers that form the FE field. James, (2007, p. 160), posits that:

Improving learning and teaching in FE is thus not limited to the transformation of the immediate, visible aspects but requires transformation of elements of the learning culture that go well beyond the learning site.

There is a presumption in the literature that there is a universally accepted understanding of the notion of ‘improvement’. Biesta (2007, p. 5) noting the lack of consensus, links improvement with ‘judgements about what is educationally desirable’. Judgements imply that somebody has the power to adjudicate and is thus enabled to shape a particular culture. The TLC project (2005), advocates the empowering of teachers as one of the actors in FE who could be equipped to adjudicate on improvements. A finding from the research project concludes that the road towards improvement in teaching and learning in Further Education requires that we transform existing learning cultures by focussing on the following four key drivers for improvement:

- Student interests
- Tutors’ professionalism
- Pedagogy
- Taking a cultural view of learning. (James, 2005, p. 149)

The TLC project is unequivocal in asserting that if these drivers are considered together with the dimensions of learning cultures, and acted upon, that possibilities for the biggest improvements in learning in FE could be opened up. Picking up on one of the key drivers highlighted in the TLC project for improvements, an examination of theories relating to how adults learn may offer insights regarding the construction of adult oriented educational environments. The concept of andragogy will be introduced in the next sub-section.
2.6.6 How Adults Learn

Is there a coherent theory or body of theories that differs sufficiently from pedagogy that justify their treatment as a distinct domain or practice in education?

Malcolm Knowles popularised the theory of andragogy in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Knowles defined andragogy as ‘the art and science of helping adults learn’ (Knowles, 1984, p.43). His andragogical modes incorporates five assumptions. First, learners move from ‘being dependent personalities towards being self-directed’ (Knowles, 1980, pp.44-45). Andragogy’s second assumption is that:

Adults come to an educational activity with both a great volume and a different quality of experiences from youth (Knowles, 1990, p. 59).

As a person matures Knowles believes that he gains a growing reservoir of experiences that becomes an increasing resource for learning.

The third assumption states that:

His readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles (Edwards, Hanson, Ragatt. P. 84, 2002).

The fourth premise of andragogy relates to an adult’s time perspective which shifts from one of:

Postponed application to immediacy of application. And accordingly his orientation towards learning shifts from one of subject centredness to one of problem—centredness (Edwards, Hansen and Ragatt. P. 84, 2002)

The fifth premise of andragogy relates to motivation. Knowles believed that adults are internally rather than externally motivated to learn. Knowles offers a coherent theory for attempting to understand how adults learn.

Knowles theory presupposes an almost automatic readiness for self-directed learning in adults. It may be more appropriate to support adults who are still at a dependent stage of learning towards being responsible for their own learning. Self-directed learning becomes part of the continuum of adult learning rather than a starting point. Adults may need to go through a process of re-orientation to learning as adults and to adapt to new ways of learning.
Once an adult makes the discovery that he can take responsibility for his learning, …… He experiences a sense of release and exhilaration. He then enters learning with a deep ego-involvement, with results that are frequently startling, both to himself and to his teachers (Edwards, Hanson, Raggatt, 2002, p. 85)

A strong proponent of Knowles theory, Knud Illeris (2006) contrasts children’s learning as uncensored and confident to adults’ learning as basically selective and self-directed. He states that:

- Adults learn what they want to learn and what is meaningful for them to learn;
- Adults draw on the resources they already have in their learning;
- Adults take much more responsibility for their learning as they want to take;
- Adults are not very inclined to learn something they are not interested in. (Sutherland and Crowther, 2006, p. 17).

Illeris reiterates the concept of adults taking responsibility for their own learning and deciding what they want to learn. However, he cautions that the impact of institutionalized learning situations, generates a regression in adults to childhood patterns of learning, (Sutherland and Crowther, 2006). The pitfall of over institutionalizing learning may be particularly prevalent in FE programmes in Ireland. FE Colleges are rarely a stand-alone entity. They are normally an adjunct to a former or current second level school. Teaching staff may be deployed across both sectors. While not impossible, it is particularly challenging to operate a dual educational system for teenagers and adult learners, on the same campus, under the aegis of the one management structure and sharing teaching personnel.

Boud’s view of the adult learner resonates deeply with the theory of andragogy as proposed by Knowles.

There is, however, no doubt that the learning progresses best when adults themselves accept decisive responsibility. But this presupposes that the framework of the education programme provided opportunities for such responsibility. (Boud, 2003, pp. 27-29).
There is a consensus among the andragogy theorists that adults have a fundamental need to take responsibility for their own learning. Andragogy is rooted in the concept of ‘self-directivity’ which is closely linked to Knowles process that facilitates a diagnostic experience in which the learner can assess his current level of competencies with the requirements needed to succeed in the programme undertaken by the student.

However, to fully embrace this theory would require a culture that locates the responsibility for learning with the learner and that the teacher’s role would be one of facilitation rather than instruction. Knowles is critical of teachers who do all of the planning for their students and who come into the classroom and impose pre-planned activities. This approach may lead to apathy, resentment and possibly withdrawal and is incongruent with the adult’s self-concept of self-directivity.

Knowles (2002), further explains the function of planning as that of translating diagnosed needs into specific educational objectives or directions for growth that guide the design and conduct of learning experiences to achieve these objectives. These objectives will need to be evaluated and in andragogy the responsibility for undertaking this function is a mutual one between teacher and the learner. Knowles has a clearly defined view of the teacher in the adult learning context.

Andraglogical practice treats the learning–teacher transaction as the mutual responsibility of learners and teachers. In fact, the teacher’s role is redefined as that of a procedural technician, resource person and co-inquirer: he is more a catalyst than an instructor, more a guide than a wizard. (Edwards, Hanson and Ragatt, 2002, p.88).

In terms of the organisational framework for adult learning, andragogy challenges the facilitators to create an environment that is ‘alive’ with meetings of small groups, planning committees, learning–teacher teams, consultation groups, project task forces-sharing responsibility for helping one another learn.

Knowles is disparaging about the teacher’s role in evaluation as culminating in the assigning of a grade to a learner’s work, which he refers to as:
The crowning instance of incongruity between traditional educational practice and the adult’s self-concept of self-directivity is the act of a teacher giving a grade to a student’ (Edwards, Hanson and Ragatt, 2002, p. 88).

The theory of andragogy prescribes a process of self-evaluation. The teacher guides the learner to accumulate the evidence for themselves about the progress they are making towards their educational goals. Implicit in this process is the evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the educational programme and how it facilitates or inhibits the learner’s progress. Evaluation is undertaken as a mutual process.

The debate surrounding the dichotomy between pedagogy and andragogy as played out in the relevant literature is inconclusive.

Andragogy as a theory of learning sees the adult as autonomous and self-directed. In reality, the institutional control and the prescribed curricula severely curtail the exercising of complete autonomy and self-direction.

Any theory of adult learning which advocates the importance of each individual as an individual, but avoids issues of curriculum control and power does little to address the actual learning situations of adults (Hanson, 2002, p. 101).

Knowles’ theory has not attained universal acceptance and has been dismissed by Rogers (2003) who has assertively stated that:

there is nothing distinctive about the kind of learning undertaken by adults (Rogers, 2003, p. 7)

While the theory of andragogy may be contested the propositions relating to the self-directed approach to learning for adults would have resonance with FE Colleges considering the age range of the student population. The approaches used in relation to assessment opens up possibilities to integrate strategies that reflect an adult’s need to control their educational journey.
2.6.7 Assessment

The transition from a highly structured second level education system to the more autonomous environment in FE can pose challenges for some students. George (2004), suggests that transition difficulties can be ameliorated by incorporating both summative and formative assessments procedures which have the potential to contribute to a positive attitude towards learning and successful engagement with the cognitive demands of the programme. Crosling, (2009), a proponent of formative assessment procedures, sees an instructive value to the teachers who will through the process be guided by how to realign their teaching methodologies to meet the students’ needs and furthermore:

Formative feedback provides a vehicle for interaction between students and staff, thus helping to develop student familiarity and confidence to approach staff for additional clarity and guidance if necessary (p.15).

Implementing formative feedback processes can provide clear roadmaps for students to plot and direct their own academic progression. Collateral benefits in the form of academic integration can accrue to the student from the increased faculty contact that normally accompanies formative assessment procedures. The influence of faculty contact on student persistence will be examined in the next sub-section.

2.6.8 The Influence of Faculty Contact

The quality, frequency and nature of contact between student and faculty has been established as a practice that has the potential to impact positively on persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (1976), are highly affirmative of the positive cognitive and affective outcomes that faculty contact can generate for students which include intrinsic rewards of intellectual and personal development, and a deeper sense of satisfaction with college. They highlight three types of contact which are strong indicators of affective and cognitive development and of persistence which included:

- contact which imparts information about the students’ academic progress,
- contact to discuss career matters with student,
- contact to discuss course related and intellectual matters.
Informal faculty and student interaction outside of the classroom setting are repeatedly mentioned in the literature as an important factor regarding academic integration. Colleges are challenged to exploit the rich potential that informal faculty contact has in relation to influencing student attitudes, values and behaviours. Cultivating the fertile context that such informal settings provide for faculty influence Pascarella and Terenzini (1977, p. 461) exhort college leaders concerned with enhancing institutional impact to:

Focus on the implementation of programs and the structuring of physical facilities that increase the likelihood of such interactions taking place.

A pupil teacher ratio of sixteen students to one, in Irish FE colleges, where enrolments range from one hundred to twelve hundred create the possibilities of developing faculty contact practices that are supportive of the learners’ needs.

Relationship building is at the core of student faculty contact and is closely allied to policies that deliver student supports. Thomas (2002) favours a broad spectrum approach to student support incorporating, academic support, skills development, pastoral support, financial information and advice. Student support can be delivered using various models. Warren (2002) describes three means of providing academic support: separate, semi-integrated and integrated curriculum models. Comfort (2002) similarly advocates the implementation of student supports by means of integrated models, and comments favourably on the value of these strategies regarding academic attainment particularly when they are delivered on a one to one basis. Extending the concept of student support to include an electronic dimension, Dodson and Bolam (2002), urge colleges to use information communications technology (ICT), to provide online information and interactive access to relevant learning communities.

There appears to be scholarly uniformity of the view that the provision of student support services is an effective and indeed a necessary strategy to increase persistence. The strength of the evidence in favour of the provision of student supports points to an area of considerable influence within the remit of FE Colleges to influence retention rates in a positive way. Student engagement in the social and
academic life of the college can be supported or thwarted by institutional structures and cultures.

2.6.9 Student Engagement and Social Integration

Student engagement in college life is a broad concept which eludes a simplistic definition. A consensus of understanding from the literature conceives student engagement as representing the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and crucially, the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices (Kuh, 2003). Student engagement has been linked to improved grade outcomes and persistence (Astin, 1993, Braxton, 2004, Kuh, 2003, Pacarella and Terenzini, 2005). Students who left college prior to course completion were found to have been less engaged than their peers who persisted, Hughes and Pace (2003). Reflecting the consensus that student engagement is a powerful mechanism to support persistence Zhao and Kuh (2004) advocate interventions by the institution to positively influence student engagement through teaching practices, seminars and the development of learning communities.

Highlighting the compensatory effect of student engagement Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert and Pascarella, (2006), recommend that institutions seek ways to harness student energy towards educationally effective activities with a special emphasis on supporting students who are disadvantaged by family circumstances or by poor grade attainment. Mirroring this approach Allen, (1999) and Fleming (1984) assert that faculty staff must use effective educational practices throughout the institution to help compensate for deficiencies in students’ academic preparedness. Further affirmation for this strategy comes from research by Kuh,(2005,2007) which established that students attending institutions that implement a comprehensive system of compensatory initiatives comprising effective educational practices lead to improved grades, better levels of satisfaction and increased persistence. Kuh enters a cautionary caveat regarding the need for the compensatory programmes to be customised to the needs of the student and to be of high quality and anchored in a student success orientated campus.

Capturing the co-created nature of effective student engagement which is seen as a shared responsibility between the student and the institution, Outcalt and Skewes-Cox
(2002), constructs the notion of ‘reciprocal engagement’ which views student involvement and campus environmental conditions existing in a mutually shaping relationship with the aim of supporting student success. The co-created approach would be supportive of students in their first year who are culturally unfamiliar with the dynamics of college life to facilitate the learning gains associated with leadership involvement in campus clubs and organisations (Harper, 2006).

The evidence from the literature would strongly suggest that student engagement in college life has the possibility of generating a range of benefits for students including: improved social integration, cognitive gain, raised academic grades and enhanced persistence rates. The strength of the research evidence to support the desired outcomes associated with student engagement provides a compelling case for a systematic approach to policy development and implementation with appropriate strategies.

**Summary**

In this chapter a range of literature was accessed to gain an understanding of the theoretical perspectives on attrition among students in post compulsory education. Research on attrition among students in the HE sector was used in order overcome the limited availability of material on attrition relating to FE.

Attrition was strongly linked to socio-economic factors. There was considerable debate on the causes of withdrawal that resided within the influence of the college. A range of theoretical models that seek to understand student drop-out among college students was examined. A model which was specifically devised to take account of attrition and the non-traditional student and would resonate strongly with the student body enrolled in FE in Ireland, was explored.

The discourse on student non-completion in post-secondary education is clearly more evolved in the UK considering the volumes of reports and research projects on the topic which have been published. A range of these publications were reviewed for the purpose of gleaning insights into the broader issue of student departure in educational systems which bear similarities to Ireland.
To gain a deeper understanding of the conditions that prevail both within the FE sector and how the sector relates to the wider education field the sociological concepts of Bourdieu were explored.

Literature which focussed on the impact of institutional strategies and policies with a view to improving persistence was reviewed. Theories raising the issue of leading learning and the associated concepts of what adult learning or andragogy means, were expounded. The notion of learning cultures and how it might guide improvements of learning were presented. Colleges have scope to influence the students experience is the organisational structures relating to assessment of course work and the mediation of student faculty contact.

The key messages from the literature accessed in this study indicate that attrition among students in post compulsory education results from a combination of social, personal and institutional factors. Related issues such as home background, socio-economic status, poverty and financial circumstances were also highlighted as causes of student drop-out. The theoretical perspectives on student attrition in post compulsory education, advanced by the leading writers on the topic could be summarized as sociological, institutional, psychological, and economic in nature. Bourdieu’s theory of practice offers a conceptual toolkit which could be used to deconstruct the social field of education. The concepts of field capital and habitus, when applied to FE, to the wider education field and to the field of power, which is the government policy and the DES, may help to illuminate the hidden asymmetries of power and the associated structures and conditions that contrive to limit the choices or agency of the FE student.

The key messages from the literature will be used to inform a series of research questions that aim to explore the causes of attrition among FE students in Ireland. The Research Questions will be set out in the next Chapter: The Methodology.
Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction
This chapter provides a detailed description of the research methodology used in this study. The chapter is subdivided into five sections as follows:

Section 3.2: In the first section the purpose of the study will be explained. The context of Irish Further Education which is the setting for the study will also be described. The underlying theoretical framework which has been informed by the literature review and which also shaped the research questions will be set out.

Section 3.3: The second section will focus on the research methodology. The argument in favour of using a case study approach will be put forward. The theoretical basis of a case study will be set out. The various categories of a case study will be described with a view to distilling the elements and features of case study that are most relevant to this study. The research design will be described. In the context of this study the thinking frameworks of positivism and of interpretivism will be explained and the theoretical basis of a qualitative approach to research will be outlined.

Section 3.4: In the third section the research methods to be used in the case study will be explained. The methods to be used are: questionnaires, interviews and focus group interviews. The section will be divided into 2 separate sections to deal with: the questionnaire and the piloting of the questionnaire, the interview and the focus group interview. In sub-sections 3.4.1 to 3.4.4, a theoretical understanding of questionnaires, and of the piloting of questionnaires will be provided. A report on the piloting of the questionnaire will be included. A Figure indicating the schedule for the conduct of the pilot questionnaire and the research questionnaire is included. The interview and the focus group interview will be outlined in sub-sections 3.4.5 to 3.4.5.5. A theoretical description of interview types and focus group methods will be set out. The conduct of the interviews and the focus group will be described. The chronology of the
schedules for the conduct of the interviews and focus group interview will be provided.

**Section 3.5:** The fourth section explains how the data will be analysed. There will be a discussion on various theoretical approaches to thematic analysis. Procedures for coding and categorisation of data will be explained. How the theories and conceptual propositions from the literature will shape the analytical process will also be outlined. An indication is given of where the research questions will be answered.

### 3.2 Purpose of the Research

#### 3.2.1 Purpose of the Research

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the causes of drop-out from the Irish FE sector in a selected number of Further Education Colleges. The study will also endeavour to gain an understanding of the causes that are within the control or influence of the college particularly in the context of the quality of the student experience. Factors which impinge on student withdrawal which are external to the college will also be explored. The study will investigate approaches that support students toward attaining completion of programmes while probing the dynamics or processes that lead to withdrawal. How colleges can be more efficacious in their efforts to raise retention levels of FE students will also form part of the study.

#### 3.2.2 Theoretical Framework

Two major theories of student drop-out by Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993,) entitled *Student Integration Theory* and Bean’s *Student Attrition Model* (1980, 1985, 1990), inform the theoretical foundations of this study. Combining Bean’s and Tinto’s theories creates a comprehensive framework to examine attrition and persistence of students in Higher Education. The salient themes from the above authors work on students’ attrition centred on:

- Pre-enrolment factors such as academic attainment and ability, and attitudinal dispositions,
- Appropriate and desired course placement
- Social and academic integration of students
• Academic progression
• Quality of student experience
• Institutional ability and willingness to meet students’ educational needs.

It must be acknowledged that both Tinto and Bean’s research and theories were formulated in Higher Education and relate specifically to students enrolled in universities on degree programmes. However, bearing in mind the sectoral genesis of the theories it is still possible to transplant their substance to the FE field and cultivate a framework that yields a viable theoretical basis to examine the issues of attrition and persistence therein. Salient elements of Tinto’s and Bean’s models can be used to create a theoretical framework that will facilitate the examination of attrition and persistence in the FE sector. The theoretical framework shaped the Research Questions which will be outlined in the next sub-section.

3.2.3 The Research Questions
The research questions have been shaped by the overall objectives of the study, by the author’s experience as a Principal in a Community and Further Education College and by the salient theoretical standpoints which emerged in the literature review. The questions are informed by with the extended treatment in the relevant literature, on persistence and attrition of students in the Higher Education sector. By contrast the availability of research and data on the causes of drop-out in the Irish FE sector is very limited. Therefore, the following research questions were framed to focus on the fundamental issues relating to attrition and persistence of students in the Irish FE sector:

• What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?

This question will be posed to students who have withdrawn from FE courses prior to completion and to FE Directors and tutors.

• What causes of withdrawal are due to factors that are within the control or influence of colleges?
Writers such as Martinez and Mundy (1998), place strong emphasis on the responsibility of the college institution to influence the internal factors which support course completion among students.

- *What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to colleges?*

Callender (1999), notes that external conditions can exert influences beyond which the College can impact. Challenging this view Davies (1999), asserts that personal pressures such as financial and family difficulties can be mitigated by the provision of access to appropriate supports.

- *What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?*

There is a convergence of opinion among a range of writers (McGivney, 2004, Yorke and Longden, 2008), which contends that the quality of student experience is critical to persistence. The quality of the experience is derived from social and academic integration combined with relevance of curriculum and high quality teaching and positive faculty contact.

- *Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?*

The literature is replete with advice as to how Colleges could improve student retention rates. Student supports are strongly advocated, (Dodson and Bolam, 2002, Warren, 2003) particularly with a focus on engendering self-efficacy and social and academic integration.

The research methodology and design will be guided by the research questions. The research design will set out the most appropriate data collection techniques which offers the best prospect of yielding the information that is pertinent to answering the research questions. The next section will contain a description of the Research Design and Research Methods.
3.3 Methodology and Research Design

3.3.1 Methodology and Research Design
In this section the overall design of the research project will be outlined. The methodology will be guided by the purpose of the study and by the need to answer the research questions as effectively as possible. Methodology is also deeply influenced by the researcher’s frameworks for thinking about the social world. These frameworks relate to ways of thinking which are described as positivism, interpretivism and constructivism. These concepts will be explained in the next sub-section.

3.3.2 Positivism and Interpretivism
In the social sciences the dominant paradigm until the nineteen seventies, was a way of thinking called positivism, which is based on the rationalistic, empiricist philosophy, dating from Aristotle and later informed by Francis Bacon, John Locke, August Comte, and Emmanuel Kant. Comte, author of *A General View of Positivism*, (1856) declared that scientific reasoning was the most advanced form of thinking. For positivists knowledge about the social world can be obtained objectively, measured, observed and studied scientifically.

Essentially, positivists look for the existence of a constant relationship between events, or, in the language of experimentation, between two variables (Robson, C. 2002, p.21).

From a positivist’s perspective the researcher is placed outside the site of enquiry, and watches as a disinterested observer endeavouring to avoid contamination of the findings. That the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural world is one of the chief underlying assumptions of positivism. The method of studying the social world is value free and explanations of a causal nature can be described. Positivists subscribe to the view that the scientific methods of experimentation and measurement of what can be observed is the only justifiable way of discovering general laws to describe constant relationships between variables. The world that is out there is viewed as straightforward and studied using scientific methods and quantifiable variables and measures. Positivists hold tenaciously to the view that the
The purpose of scientific research is to discover or develop universal causal laws. The search for scientific laws aims to uncover empirical regularities where two or more elements appear in a discernible sequence which is referred to as a constant conjunction. Positivists claim that ‘*scientific knowledge is valid, certain and accurate*’ (Crotty, 1998, p 29).

With positivism, there is limited scope for interpretation and the exploration of the possible multiple motives for, and causes of the human behaviour that lie at the heart of the issue of non-completion of FE in Ireland. A positivist’s approach would impose undue constraints on the nature of the research in this study. It was therefore necessary to explore alternatives to the positivist paradigm.

**Interpretivism**

To grapple with the complex underlying causes of attrition among FE students will necessitate the devising of a research framework that enabled respondents to interpret their actions and construct meaning from their behaviours. Data collected in this mode would not be congruent with scientific or quantifiable analytic approaches. An alternative view that sought to capture the complexities of the social world developed. The world as it is studied by social scientists is not amenable to a straightforward quantifiable perception, because it is constructed by each individual in a different way with words and events carrying meanings that vary in each individual case. Capturing this point of epistemological dichotomy, Burell and Morgan, cited in Cohen and Mannion, 2000, posit that if knowledge is viewed as hard, objective and tangible an observer role will be demanded of the researcher:

> to see knowledge as personal, subjective and unique, however, imposes on researchers an involvement with their subjects and a rejection of the ways of the natural scientist (p.7).

Interpretivism emerged as a paradigm deemed to be more adequate to capture the meanings and nuances of human behaviour. Thomas, (2009) explains that the:

> main point about interpretivism is that we are interested in people and the way they interrelate – what they think and how they form ideas about the world: how their worlds are constructed (p.75).
An interpretivist stance demands that the researcher is immersed in the contexts being studied. The researcher may use one’s own knowledge of the world to understand the meanings that the participants in the study attribute to events and experiences. With the interpretivist approach it will be permissible for the researcher to draw from one’s own professional expertise and to validate the experiences and viewpoints of the respondents. Mertens, (1998) contends that the defining assumption guiding the interpretive paradigm is that knowledge is socially constructed by the participants who are active in the research process. Therefore, the onus is on the researcher to strive to understand the

complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118).

Similarly, Thomas (2009) believes: ‘The key is understanding’ (p.75). What understandings do the participants in the study have about their world and how does the researcher make sense of these understandings? In interpretivism the researcher becomes a participant in the inquiry and can use one’s own interests and understandings to help interpret the views and behaviours of the informants.

The researcher as a participant or insider needs to declare one’s positionality and recognise that social background, preferences and predilections, gender, class and ethnicity may affect interpretation of data. As an active participant in the study the researcher may not necessarily be trying to be objective but rather accepting the centrality of subjectivity. The lack of emphasis on objectivity does not suggest an impaired quality of research. Crotty (1998), questions the existence of an objective truth in the social world, one that can be identified with precision and certitude. Research in this realm may be engaged in ‘meaning making’ (Crotty, 1998) of humanly fashioned ways of seeing things that are underpinned by processes that need to be explored in order to understand how they contribute to the construction of meaning. Expanding on this notion, Mertens, 1998 (p. 11), takes the stance that:

the researcher’s goal is to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge
Further affirmation for the significance of the participant’s knowledge is offered as follows:

The constructivist perspective holds as a chief assumption about much complex behaviour that the ‘subjects’ being studied must at a minimum be considered knowing beings and that this knowledge they possess has important consequences for how behaviour or actions are interpreted (Magoon, 1977, p. 651).

The research in this study will be aligned with an interpretivist paradigm as it will allow the author to be a participant in the inquiry and the informants will be enabled to construct meanings from their experiences, behaviours and decisions and thereby shed light on the complexity of underlying processes that lead on the one hand to student attrition and on the other to persistence in the FE sector. Constructing meaning and deepening understanding of human behaviour as opposed to the discovery of indubitable laws of nature, is at the core of this research which places it firmly in a qualitative perspective. The next sub-section will expound the qualitative basis of this study. The theoretical basis for case study research will be described and the arguments in favour of utilising this method will be offered.

3.3.3 Qualitative Research

In this section the research methods that will be utilised in the study will be outlined. The merits of a qualitative methodology coupled with a case study method will be presented. Research methods should be chosen based on the specific task at hand and the research problem should define the most appropriate methods, (Silverman, 2010). Capturing the authenticity of human experiences and to arrive at a rational understanding of the meanings that the subjects attach to their actions will be one of the key challenges in this study. The purpose, the nature and the research questions signal that a qualitative methodology would offer strong possibilities of attaining the desired outcomes. Creswell (1998), conceives qualitative research is ‘an enquiry process of understanding’ and enables the researcher to form a:

complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting’ (Creswell, 1998, p. 15).

The knowledge claims will be based on the constructivist perspective, which is the epistemology that qualitative research tends to evoke. The research instruments will
try to probe the meanings that the participants ascribe to structures, experiences and interactions they encounter in FE colleges. It behoves the researcher to endeavour to undertake the research in a manner that facilitates the articulation of the truth or the unleashing of the font of knowledge that the participants are custodians of:

Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world…….Meaning is not discovered, but constructed…… In this view of things, subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning. (Crotty, M. 1998. pp. 8, 9).

Mertens (2010), sees qualitative research as a situated activity and locates the observer in the world. The research consists of a set of interpretive practices that make the world visible and transforms it into a series of representations including field notes, interviews, conversations, recordings and memos. Qualitative research at this level, involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, meaning that phenomena are studied in their natural settings, and interpretations are guided by the meanings people bring to them.

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials-case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artefacts, cultural texts and productions, observational, historical, instructional, and visual texts-that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals’ lives. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 3).

A qualitative approach to the research would appear to be highly compatible with case study methodology. Hakim (2000, p.35), states that

Qualitative research is concerned with individuals’ own account of their attitudes, motivations and behaviour.

The qualitative approach can facilitate the generation of richly descriptive reports of individuals’ perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, views and feelings. The meanings and interpretations given to events by the individual can be explored. It can search for underlying factors that illuminate motivations, attitudes and behaviour. By positioning the respondent in a pivotal meaning making role, qualitative research can be used to:
examine causal processes at the level of the intentional, …. by a self directing and knowledgeable actor (Wrong 1961, p. 26)

The case study method which will frame the qualitative research generated in this study will be explored in the next sub-section.

3.3.4 Case Study

Case study, as an approach for undertaking the research was interrogated and assessed for its suitability in relation to the nature of this enquiry. The theoretical basis of case study methodology as derived from the relevant leading authors will be set out in this sub-section. The features of case study as detailed in the literature, which will be expounded, indicated a number of strengths that would be highly useful to this study and which can be summarised as follows:

- Concentration on a small number of cases
- The use of multiple sources of data
- The capability of exploring a multiplicity of issues
- The respondent’s narrative and the voice of the actors can be captured
- Cases in their uniqueness can be viewed, the context of the natural phenomena can be captured
- Data can be observed at a micro level with the potential for in-depth exploration
- The design of the case study can be adapted to study naturally occurring social situations
- The robust nature of this methodology, though contested, can be defended.
- The case study can be designed to be exploratory, explanatory or evaluative to meet the needs of the research project.

The central defining characteristic of this methodology is a concentration on a particular case or a small set of cases studied in its own right. This study will concentrate on data gathered from 23 FE Colleges throughout Ireland. Case study is presented as a sufficient approach for certain research tasks in the social sciences by a range of writers. However, this methodology has been subjected to criticism regarding
validity and the inability to draw generalisations from a case study. Some explorations of the opposing arguments on case study will also be examined.

McDuffe and Scraggs (2008) assert that a case study involves an in-depth exploration of a single case, example or phenomena. Using multiple sources and techniques in the data collection process is a principal feature of the case study. Instruments to collect data in this study will include surveys, interviews and focus group interview. The case study method enables the researcher to focus on the multiplicity of issues, from a number of sources, which are intertwined with attrition and persistence in the FE sector. The utilisation of a range of data collection instruments such as surveys, interviews and focus group interviews with a range of respondents will facilitate an understanding of the actions, experiences and the views of the participants.

Case study emphasises detailed contextualised analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. It is hoped that the case study approach will generate data which will shed light on the educational, socio-economic and societal context of FE in Ireland. A case study can provide a richly detailed portrait of a particular social phenomenon. One of the leading scholars on case study research methodology, Robert Yin (1984, p.23) explains that:

Case study is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context: when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.

Flyvberg, (2011), reiterates the notion of context or relation to environment as a central focus in case study methodology.

Contrary to Yin’s view on boundaries, Stake (1994), argues that the rationale for calling it a case study is stronger if the ‘object of study is a specific, unique, bounded system’ (p.237). The emphasis on the bounded and unique nature of the study offers the prospect of greater clarity around the definition of the scope of the research.
This approach allows for the exploration and understanding of complex issues. It is considered a robust research approach particularly when a holistic and in-depth investigation is sought. The case study has been presented as the:

prime strategy for developing educational theory which illuminates educational policy and enhances educational practice (Bassey, 1999, p. 3).

Recognised as a tool in many social science studies, the role of case study approach has achieved prominence when issues where education and community are the focus of the enquiry, (Gulsecan and Kubat, 2006).

A case study is a unique way of observing any natural phenomena which exists in a set of data. Case study allows a researcher:

- to reveal the multiplicity of factors which have interacted to produce the unique character of the entity that is the subject of study (Yin, 1988, p.82).

The experiential understanding of processes behind the real life phenomena can be captured in the case study. Stake (2002) states that:

- case studies can be expected to continue to have epistemological advantage over other enquiry methods as a basis for naturalistic generalisation because of the universality and importance of experiential understanding, (cited in Gomm, Hammersley and Foster, p. 24).

Unlike quantitative analysis which observes patterns in data at a macro level on the basis of frequency of occurrence of the phenomena being observed, case studies observe the data at a micro level. In these types of studies limiting the analysis only to quantitative methods would obscure some of the important data that needs to be uncovered.

Yin (2009), identifies three conditions that guide the choice of research methodology: the type of research question, the control an investigator has over actual behavioural events, and the focus on contemporary as opposed to historical phenomena. Yin (2009) favours the case study approach when:
‘(a) ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events and (c) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context.’ (p.2).

The questions to be posed in the questionnaire, and in the interviews of this study fall into the ‘how’ and ‘why’ category. The researcher has no control over the events that operate in the FE Colleges and the focus of the study is on a contemporary phenomenon in a very real life context.

Case Studies may be exploratory if relatively little previous research exists on the topic or they may be illustrative portraits of social entities or patterns thought to be typical, representative or average. After a body of research has accumulated on a topic selective case studies can focus on particular aspects or issues to refine knowledge. Case studies can be used to provide a more richly detailed and precise account of the processes at work within particular types of cases as highlighted by surveys.

Case studies are typically based on two or more methods of data collection. Three data collection methods will be used in this study.

The use of multiple sources of evidence allowed case studies to present more rounded and complete accounts of social issues and processes. (Hakim C. 2000 p. 61).

Through case study approach, it may be possible in this study to go beyond the quantitative statistical results and understand the behavioural conditions through the actor’s perspective. By including both quantitative and qualitative data, case study helps to explain both the process and the outcome of the phenomena through complete observation, reconstruction and analysis of the cases under investigation, (Tellis 1997). Two important dimensions of case study relate to the number of cases investigated and the amount of detailed information that the researcher collects about each case studied. Similarly, Hammersley and Gomm (2002), believe that the fewer cases investigated, the more information can be collected about each of them. Usually, case study refers to research that investigates a few cases, often just one in considerable depth.
One of the strengths of this approach research is its ability to capture cases in their uniqueness. This may require a narrative approach rather than one constructed in terms of variable analysis. This view echoed Burgess (1927) who argued that case studies gives access to the inner lives of people, to the emergent properties of social interaction and insight to the underlying causal mechanisms which generate human behaviour.

Articulating the inner lives of the informants including the withdrawn FE students, the College Directors and tutors can facilitate the development of narrative. Case studies often contain a substantial element of narrative. The narrative in the study may elucidate the complexities and contradictions of the real life phenomena under investigation. Such narratives may be difficult or impossible to summarize into neat scientific formulae, general propositions, and theories. (Roth, 1989, Benhabib, 1990).

The purpose for which the case study is intended to serve will impact on its design. In relation to the current study where the interest is in some problem in the situation investigated, then, the discussion is geared to diagnosing that problem and identifying the sources. The analysis may go beyond description and explanation to include evaluation and prescription. Having regard for the qualitative orientation of the research the issues of generalizability and validity need to be addressed.

3.3.5 Generalizability and Validity
Critics of the case study approach claim that the examination of a small number of cases can offer no grounds for establishing reliability, generalisation of findings or for theoretical inference. Commentators on case study have focussed on the issue of ‘generalisation’. The concept of the ‘generalizability’ of research was introduced by Campbell and Stanley in 1963. They asserted that:

External validity asks the questions of generalizability: To what population, settings, treatment variables, and measurement variables can the effect be generalized? (p. 175).

A formidable benchmark for validity and generalisability of research generated by case studies had been set by Kaplan (1964). In order to be accepted generalisations must have the following characteristics;
The generalisation must be truly universal, unrestricted as to time and space. It must formulate what is always and everywhere the case, provided only that the appropriate conditions are satisfied (Kaplan, 1964. p91).

Some argue that what is involved is a kind of inference or generalisation that is quite different in character from statistical analysis, being ‘logical, theoretical or analytical in character, (Yin 1994). Schofield (2002) suggests that there are ways in which case studies can be used to make what are in effect the same kind of generalisations as those which survey researchers produce. Stake (2002) argues that case studies need not make any claims about the generalisation of their findings, but rather that they describe the cases they have studied properly. What is critical is the use others make of them and that they feed into processes of ‘naturalistic generalisation’ Stake (2002). Case studies are: ”generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” Yin, (2009, p.15)

The notion of context is central to case study research. Equally the notion of context is highly relevant to this study. The research questions is rooted in the context of FE while the literature reviewed focussed on theories relating to attrition in the HE sector. Guba and Lincoln (1981) argue that it is the ‘context’ that weakens the claim of generalisations:

> it is virtually impossible to imagine any human behaviour that is not heavily mediated by the context in which it occurs. One can easily conclude that generalisations that are intended to be context free will have little that is useful to say about human behaviour, (p. 62).

Guba and Lincoln, (2002. p. 27), attach no value to generalisations that are contaminated by context: ‘generalisations are assertions of enduring value that are context free.’

Valsiner (1986), by contrast, an ardent believer in this methodology claims that:

> the study of individual cases has always been the major (albeit often unrecognised) strategy in the advancement of knowledge about human beings (p. 11).
Connolly (1998), adding value to the generalisability issue, introduces the concept of ‘causal or narrative analysis’ in the case study debate. By examining one or two cases it is possible to identify causal processes in a way that is not feasible in survey research. The in-depth study carried out over a period of time rather than at a single point facilitates causal or narrative analysis. Case study research can investigate causal processes in a real world setting as opposed to an artificially created one.

The Case Study approach would appear to be highly suited to collecting the data and information from the FE students, tutors and FE College Directors. The case studies comprised empirical investigations on issues relating to persistence and attrition in the Irish FE sector. The research will be conducted with withdrawn students, practising FE tutors and Directors of FE colleges. The focus will be on contemporary phenomena in a real life context. Yin (2009), declares a strong preference for case study methodology in examining contemporary events. This method creates the possibilities for an enquiry to proceed in a multifaceted way and to benefit from

Case study researchers construct cases out of naturally occurring social situations. FE Colleges, their former students, their current Directors and tutors will provide a naturally occurring social situation for the basis of this study. Case study, as the chosen approach, was deeply influenced by the purpose of the study and by the research questions. Within this methodology, there are a number of categories. The ‘case’ to be studied signalled the category or categories most suited to the nature of the enquiry. The next sub-section will examine the various categories of case study.

### 3.3.6 Categories of Case Study

While the literature outlines several categories of cases studies, Yin (1994), narrows it down to three main types. This sub-section will attempt to elucidate Yin’s definitions of the exploratory, descriptive and explanatory case studies (Yin 1994). Exploratory case studies try to explore any phenomena in the data which serve as a point of interest to the researcher. Yin (1984) recommends prior field work and small scale data collection. As a prelude, the initial fieldwork helps prepare a framework. McDonough and McDonough (1997), advocate a pilot study that becomes crucial to
the protocol to be used. In line with this advice a preparatory pilot study was conducted and will be described in sub-section 3.4.3.

A descriptive case study aims to describe the natural phenomena which occur within the data in question. The goal of the researcher is to describe the data as they occur. McDonough and McDonough (1997) suggest that descriptive case studies may be in a narrative form. Bassey, (2009 p. 145), echoes this view and describes this form as ‘story-telling and picture drawing case studies’. The challenge of the descriptive case study is that the researcher must begin with a descriptive theory to support the description of the phenomena or story. In the data gathering phase, the respondents will be given an opportunity to describe and narrate their experiences in the FE Colleges. It is expected that the data will go beyond description and provide more in-depth reflections on issues relating to attrition in FE Colleges.

Explanatory case studies examine the data closely both at a surface and deep level in order to explain the phenomena in the data. On the basis of the data, the researcher may form a theory and set to test the theory, McDonough and McDonough, (1997). Furthermore, explanatory cases are also deployed for causal studies where pattern-matching can be used to investigate certain phenomena in very complex and multivariate cases.

McDonough and McDonough (1997) add two further categories: ‘the evaluative and the interpretive case study’. Through interpretive case studies, the researcher aims to interpret the data by developing conceptual categories, supporting or challenging the assumptions made regarding them. In evaluative case studies, the researcher goes further by adding their judgement to the phenomena found in the data. Bassey (2009), specifies practical application for evaluative case studies as enquiries that set out to explore some educational programme, system, project or event in order focus on its ‘worthwhileness ’ (p.149). The case may be structured to examine how a programme has met its stated objectives. The case may be described as ‘illuminative ’ (Parlett and Hamilton, 1997). Bassey (2009), also contends that a case study can be ‘formative ’ in helping the development of a programme or ‘summative ’ in assessing it after the event.
Stake (1995), distinguishes between three different types of case studies: ‘the intrinsic, the instrumental and the collective’. In an intrinsic case study, a researcher examines the case for its own sake. In an instrumental case study, the researcher selects a small group of subjects in order to examine a certain pattern of behaviour. While in a collective study data is coordinated from several different sources. Instrumental and collective studies may allow for the generalisation of findings to a bigger population.

The category and nature of the case study is captured in the terms ascribed to them. The categorisation serves to order the array of various forms of case studies. However, it is unlikely that studies fit neatly and exclusively into one or other categories. Attempting to uncover the underlying causes of attrition in FE in Ireland as it is constructed in this study is exploratory in nature, but there is also a descriptive element of the natural phenomena in a contemporary context.

There are also strong elements of an explanatory case study in this research. Data will be examined closely at surface and at a deeper level in order to explain or understand the phenomena as presented in the findings. The data will be examined in light of the theoretical framework underpinning the study. Parts of the study may reside within the interpretive case study category also, as data will be interpreted by developing conceptual themes during the analytical process. This research project contained elements of a number of categories of case studies including exploratory, descriptive, explanatory and interpretive. The dominant categories are exploratory and interpretive. This broad approach to the case study will facilitate the collection of a range of data that will offer the best possibilities of answering the research questions. The data collection methods which will be used in this study will be explained in the next section.
Section 3.4
Research Methods and Instruments

3.4.1 Research Methods and Instruments
In this section the data collection techniques will be described. The theoretical bases of a questionnaire, and the piloting of a questionnaire, the various types of interviews and focus group interviews will be set out. Structured and semi-structured interviews types will be examined. The conduct of the pilot questionnaire, the questionnaire and the interview and of the focus group will be described. The issues of reliability and validity will be addressed.

The data collection methods that appear to best support the task of attempting to access and gather the data to answer the research questions are surveys and interviews. There are myriad manifestations of both of these forms of data collection. The literature on this topic informed the final technique and design of the questionnaires and interviews that will be a central part of this research.

Regarding the conduct of the study Yin (2009), sets out three main tasks which must be carried out for a successful research study: ‘Preparation for Data Collection, Distribution of the Questionnaire and Conducting Interviews’. Yin (1994) identified six primary sources of evidence for case study research:

- documentation,
- archival records,
- interviews,
- direct observation,
- participant observation
- and physical artefacts.

While not all sources will be utilised in this case study, the importance of multiple sources of data to the reliability of the study is well established. (Stake, 1995).
Yin (1994), suggested three principles of data collection for case studies: the use of multiple sources of data, the creation of a case study database and the maintenance of a chain of evidence.

The use of multiple sources of data leads to the triangulation of evidence. The process is used to corroborate various sets of data when:

Theoretical insights are derived from one type which are also put to the test on another dataset. (Brannen, J. 2008, p. 284).

Triangulation involves the use of two or more methods of data collection for the purposes of improving validity and ‘to enhance the rigour of the research’. Robson (2002, p. 174). The reliability of the data and of the process of collection is strengthened by triangulation.

The case study data base will be generated by the 3 main data collection methods which are: questionnaire, interviews and focus group interview. The chain of evidence will be formed by the tracking and careful compilation of the data from each of the sources. The first source of data will be accessed by research surveys or questionnaires.

3.4.2 Research Surveys
Research surveys may be conducted by mail, telephone, personal interviews, e-mail, web based surveys or videos. Surveys are useful for the collection of data from a large group of people. Having regard to ethical considerations, the survey in this study will be conducted by mail because the identities and addresses of the target groups are retained in the FE Colleges and are not disclosed to the researcher. The surveys will be dispatched from and returned to the College.

The survey is essentially a framework for a question and response interaction between the researcher and the informants. The research instrument involves:

The collection of information from a sample of individuals through their response to questions (Schutt. 2009 p. 256).
Ruane (2005) avers that:

A questionnaire is a self-contained, self-administered instrument for asking questions and that: The survey is a research instrument that allows us to gather critical information by posing questions. (p.123).

Oppenheim (1992) confers a calibrating function on the questionnaire and posits that it:

is essentially a measurement tool an instrument for the collection of a particular kind of data. (p.10).

The key characteristic of a research survey is that the same information is collected from all cases in the sample, (Seale, 2004). The appeal and enduring popularity of survey research is due primarily to two features: versatility and efficiency. Surveys are efficient with regard to data collection from many respondents, at relatively low cost and within a specified timeframe and many variables can be measured simultaneously. (Schutt, 2009), maintains that a well-designed survey can enhance our understanding of just about any social issue. May (2011), affirming this view, submits that good survey research follows a common process in the testing and development of a theory.

The purpose of the survey, the nature of the data and the size and characteristics of the sample are key considerations in the selection of this method. The issues of validity both internal and external will need careful reflection in the design phase. Surveys rely on individuals’ self-reports of their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Thus the validity of the responses is contingent on the honesty of the participants. Securing a high level of involvement by respondents to a survey is a challenge associated with this method. The issue of generalizability or external validity will be impaired if the sampling is faulty. Another caveat to be entered regarding the responses to a survey is that we cannot generalize from what people say in a survey to what they actually do as behaviours and attitudes do not always necessarily correspond.

Reliability can be established by presenting all respondents with the same standardised questions. Thomas (2009), gives some basic considerations regarding the construction of survey questions. He advocates keeping both the questions and the
questionnaire short. Because the only source of clarification is on the paper there is a need for precision in content and structure. The survey needs to be designed with a view to collecting all of the necessary data. The researcher needs to be aware of ‘prestige bias’ Thomas, (2009, p.124), when posing questions and interpreting responses, bearing in mind that the need for self-preservation on the part of the respondent may supersede the inclination to be fully truthful.

Securing the respondents’ cooperation is a particular challenge associated with survey research. Generally, questionnaires suffer low response rates. Ruane (2005), advocates a range of steps that may help to convince potential respondents to complete the questionnaire, and, to do so in an accurate and honest manner. The wording, the format, sequencing and the judicious use of open ended questions are recommended. Compelling cover letters and introductions coupled with appealing layouts and coherent organisation are advised to motivate the target group to engage with the research. Systematic follow up, may also be considered necessary to generate a reasonable level of response. Mertens, (p.190), eschews the words ‘questionnaire’ or ‘checklist’ and considers the title ‘Response Form’ to be more useful.

A survey, with all of the attendant risks of bias, distortion and the fallibility of the informants’ internal search processes, was deemed appropriate as a data collection tool in this study because it could facilitate access to a potential sample of two hundred individuals who withdrew from a FE course prior to completion, in the three years prior to the research. The function of the survey will be to elicit information from the respondents on the causes of their withdrawal from their chosen FETAC course. Having decided on a survey tool as one of the main data collection techniques to be used in this study an examination of the relevant literature on questionnaire design will follow in the next sub-section.

3.4.3 Questions and Responses

The deceptively complex task of eliciting worthwhile and relevant information from respondents in the form of a questionnaire is aptly captured by Oppenheim (1992), who likens questioning people to:
Trying to catch a particularly elusive fish, by casting different kinds of bait at different depths, without knowing what is going on beneath the surface (pp.120-121).

This sub-section will reflect the guidance from the key authors on research methods regarding the design, the content and the piloting of questionnaires. A report on the piloting exercise will also be included.

Mertens (1998), offers a detailed, twelve step approach to questionnaire design. Its simplicity and the logical sequencing of the steps to be followed give it widespread application in the design of the questionnaire. Sensibly, the initial steps state that an outline of the various topics to be included in the survey need to be undertaken and an explanation why each question is being asked. Structuring and formatting the questionnaire so that it facilitates the maximum engagement of the respondents is a major design consideration. Deciding on open versus closed format, or multiple choice questions, or true of false responses, or a checklist will be influenced by the theoretical propositions, the research questions and data needed to answer the questions. With closed –ended questions a set of pre-determined and fixed response alternatives are provided for the respondent. Open –ended questions invite the respondents to devise their own unique answers. The following considerations should influence the questioning format. A pre-determined set of responses is appropriate when it is possible to anticipate the full range of expected responses and they are few in number. Ruane (2005), believes that:

Open-ended questions are advisable when posing a complex question that defies any ready or apparent answer (p. 131).

At all stages of the questionnaire design the researcher needs to be mindful of how the recipient will respond to the tool in its entirety.

Survey data is only as good (i.e., as valid and reliable) as the questions posed. (Ruane, 2005. p.127).

Mertens (1998), advises that words in the questionnaire need to be chosen carefully. Psychologically threatening questions, negative wording, jargon, unclear expressions, acronyms, biased or leading suggestions are to be avoided. Clarity is critical in
questionnaire design. Recognising the social construction of reality and the possible multiple interpretations of phrases, the wording of the questions to be used in the questionnaires in this study will require intense scrutiny so that ambiguous terms may be culled. Piloting of the questionnaire is strongly advocated.

3.4.4 Piloting

Everything about a questionnaire should be piloted, (Oppenheim 1992, p. 48). A pilot can be a pre-testing or a ‘trying out’ of a particular research instrument (Baker, 1994, p. 182). The functions of piloting as set out by Wilson and McLean (1994, p.47) include: checking the clarity of the questionnaire, items, language and format, and to gain feedback on the validity of the questions. Franklin and Bloor (1999, p.54), advocate the use of piloting particularly in qualitative research as it provides ’a clear definition of the focus of the study’.

An initial draft of the questionnaire was piloted in one FE College for the purposes of checking clarity of questions, of the language and of the format. Piloting the questionnaire was conducted with a view to assisting the development and testing the adequacy of the instrument. The intention of the pilot was also to bring to light any ambiguities in the questions and demonstrates a range of responses for each question. The aim of the exercise was to act as a filtering procedure, shedding light on any potential operational problems with the research instrument or the data collection process.

3.4.4.1 Testing Reliability and Validity

Ensuring that the data is reliable and that the findings are valid are two primary concerns of any research. The piloting of a questionnaire can enhance both the reliability and the validity of the data collected. A questionnaire is said to be ‘valid ’if it examines the full scope of the research questions in a balanced way and measures what it aims to measure. (Black, Brazier, Fitzpatrick and Reeves, 1998). The questions were informed by both the research questions and by the underpinning theoretical framework of this study. The pilot group comprised a group of 30 FE students in a dual campus college.
Reliability is defined as an assessment of the reproductibility and consistency of an instrument. The possibility of a poor rate of response to the postal questionnaire poses a threat to the reliability of this research.

3.4.4.2 Conduct of the Questionnaire

The pilot questionnaire contained twenty six closed questions using a Likert scale response format. The questions which were informed by the key messages from the literature and by the research questions focussed on:

- The course content and course placement
- The college experience, quality of teaching and learning as experienced by the student, relationship with teachers, relationship with peers
- The college facilities, college social and cultural life
- The student’s personal circumstances
- The reasons for enrolment on the course and the reasons for leaving the course prior to completion

At the end of each question the respondent could elaborate on the questions further by adding a comment. Two open ended questions were included at the end of the questionnaire to elicit more in-depth responses to questions seeking to understand the causes of withdrawal and what might have facilitated course completion.

With the assistance of the Principal and the FE Coordinator, thirty questionnaires were posted in February 2012, to individuals who had withdrawn from FE courses in the previous three years in a FE College in Leinster. A cover letter was enclosed which explained:

- The purpose of the research
- The ethical procedures
- That participation was voluntary
- That the identity of the respondent was known only to the college and they had the option of remaining anonymous or declaring their identity.
- That confidentiality would be assured regarding all information received.
A copy of the letter is available at Appendix 2. A copy of the questionnaire is available at Appendix 3.

3.4.4.3 Response to the Pilot Questionnaires
Cognisant of the possibility that withdrawn students may be a disaffected group who may not be favourably disposed to engaging with the College from which they have departed prematurely the prospect of a low return on a postal questionnaire was a consideration. There was the added complication that the College’s data base of contact addresses for past pupils had not been updated. Notwithstanding these factors a response of three out of thirty was an abysmal response, falling below the 20% that Williams (2003) refers to as a poor rate of return. It is clear from the pilot that the data collection process needed further reflection and the questionnaire may need greater refinement.

The questionnaire contained twenty six questions. Consideration was given to a reduction in the number of questions as Williams (2003) points out that the greater the number of questions the less likely the response. A more professional print presentation of the questionnaire would add a sense of gravitas to the document.

Access to data is critical to the success of the research project. In order to access sufficient respondents that can partake in the data collection exercise a number of FE colleges were engaged. Closer engagement with the FE Coordinator and greater follow up from the college would enhance the rate of response. In order to drive the maximum learning and insight from the piloting exercise the responses were subjected to analysis.

3.4.4.4 Analysis of Pilot Questionnaire Responses.
The analysis of the data generated by questionnaires need to be approached in a systematic manner. Coding is a commonly used strategy in the analysis of both questionnaires and interviews. Coding is the process of converting questionnaire or interview data into meaningful categories to facilitate analysis.
The surveys were read a number of times and the dominant and recurring themes noted and coded, particularly those that emerged in the comment boxes. Figure 3.1 lists the main themes that emerged from the questionnaires and indicates whether the three respondents: 1, 2, or 3 declared a favourable (✓) or a negative (✗) experience in relation to that theme.
Figure 3.1 Emergent Themes in Questionnaire Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Respondent 1</th>
<th>Respondent 2</th>
<th>Respondent 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Placement</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal College Climate</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Teaching</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning support</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/personal Circumstances</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to meet academic requirements of course</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College facilities</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience of College location</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetable</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement in College Social Life</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial status</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4.4.5 Findings from Pilot Questionnaire

The findings in this pilot can only be tentative due to the modest volume of data. However, the factors that contributed to the respondents’ decision to withdraw from their FE course prior to completion echo some of the assertions in Martinez and Mundy’s (1998) study entitled ‘9000 Voices’. All three informants indicated the following factors contributed to their decision to withdraw:

- Dissatisfaction with course placement
- Poor or no engagement with College social life
- Difficulties with financial circumstances noting in particular the late arrival of the students’ grant
The three respondents rated their engagement in the social life of the College as poor. Bean and Tinto (1993), are adamant that weak social engagement of students in College life heightens the risk of drop-out.

The findings in this study concurs with the contentions of Comfort, Baker and Cairns (2002), Martinez and Mundy (1998) that the wrong choice of course is a significant factor in early withdrawal from FE courses.

Financial difficulties impacted negatively on all three participants. It would be impossible to declare any definitive finding on the matter on the basis of three responses, also Martinez and Mundy (1998) were inconclusive regarding the significance of financial hardship as a causal factor in student attrition as both the groups that persisted and withdrew reported similar financial challenges.

All three reported positive responses regarding their experience of the College’s internal climate, in contradiction to the prevailing view in the literature which links the student’s negative experience of an institution internal climate and culture with an increased risk of premature departure.

Two of the three respondents noted, in line with Martinez and Mundy (1998) study their dissatisfaction with the timetabling, the College facilities, and College location as contributing factors to their early exit from FE. Family and changed personal circumstances impaired the ability of two of the group to progress with their studies. The quality of teaching and learning support met with approval of two of the informants. Two of the trio rated themselves as capable academically for the course while one found the curriculum too challenging.

3.4.4.6 Implications for the FE College

These findings raise a number of key issues for FE Colleges regarding the raising of retention rates. It is clear from the survey that appropriate course placement requires greater attention at recruitment stage. College management need to be more proactive with regard to supporting the integration of students in the social life of the institution. Delayed payment of student grants need to be pursued by College authorities with the relevant agencies. Greater flexibility with regard to timetable schedules is necessary.
to accommodate parents with child care needs. Colleges must aim to continuously upgrade facilities. The findings from the pilot indicated that the students expressed dissatisfaction with the level access they had to IT equipment. Furthermore, the canteen and social areas facilities were deemed inadequate by the students who partook in the pilot. With one of the three respondents clearly dissatisfied with the quality of teaching and learning support, it is a signal to the College leadership and teaching staff that there is an imperative to continually strive to enhance the professional competencies of the FE tutors and to examine provision for students who need additional assistance to complete the course.

3.4.4.7 Conclusions

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from such a small scale pilot. The results could be tentatively interpreted to suggest that the causes of drop-out among the three respondents align to some extent with the findings in the literature on student persistence and withdrawal and the experiences of the respondents resonate with the main tenets in the theoretical framework of this study. A number of key issues for FE College management emerge, specifically: appropriate course placement, poor engagement in the College social life and financial difficulties exacerbated by delayed receipt of student grants. The relevant educational leaders need to embark on proactive strategies to reduce the impact these issues have on student attrition.

The voice of the withdrawn student in this pilot signals that there are a range of internal college factors that contributed to the attrition process. The respondents also expressed dissatisfaction with learning support, college facilities, and timetable schedules. The evidence suggests that the questionnaire has the potential to answer the research questions and will undoubtedly reveal some of the causes of FE attrition. The pilot responses indicate that there are a range of factors that are within the control or influence of colleges and points to where the institutes should concentrate their efforts in order to improve retention rates.

The findings from the pilot guided modifications to the design and conduct of the survey research. In order to facilitate greater personal engagement by the respondent, three open ended questions will be included at the end of the response form. The
following questions probe more deeply the motivations for the student’s reasons to withdraw from the course.

*I enrolled on a FETAC/PLC course because I wanted to _____________________________

*I would have completed my FETAC/PLC course if ________________________________

*I withdrew from my FETAC/PLC course because ___________________________________

It is hoped that the open ended questions will encourage respondents to reveal more vital clues regarding the causes of their non-completion of FE courses.

3.4.4.8 Distribution of Revised Questionnaire
Following the piloting exercise the final draft of the questionnaire was completed. With the assistance of the Directors of 5 FE Colleges, a total of 200 questionnaires were posted to individuals who had enrolled on a FETAC Level 5 or FETAC Level 6 course in the three years which preceded the research and had opted to withdraw from the course prior to completion and did not succeed in attaining an academic award for the course that the individual enrolled on.

Designing the questionnaire in this study was influenced by the relevant literature on the topic as well as the overarching need to answer the research questions and to test the stated theoretical proposition. The final questionnaire which reflected the learning from the pilot, could be described as eclectic in style. The number of questions was reduced to twenty four closed questions with a facility to offer additional comments in response to all questions. The final four questions are completely open ended. Questions one to twenty four contains an attitude scale, consisting of a set of statements, and the respondent is asked to ‘agree strongly, agree, disagree, strongly disagree’ with the statement. An attitude continuum constructed in this manner is known as a Likert scale. The questions, the format and the structure were motivated solely by the aims to gain the best possible understanding of what are the causes of
attrition among the former FE students. The schedule for the conduct of the questionnaires is set out in Figure 3.2.
**Figure 3.2 Schedule for Conduct of Research Questionnaires.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action no.</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>With whom</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Letter by researcher to 40 FE Colleges in Ireland, explaining the purpose of the research and inviting Colleges to participate in the study</td>
<td>40 Directors of FE Colleges in Ireland</td>
<td>January 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Follow up phone calls to 25 Colleges from whom no response had been received in relation to invitation to participate in the research</td>
<td>With 25 FE College Directors</td>
<td>January 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>An FE Director was asked and agreed to participate in a piloting exercise of a questionnaire</td>
<td>A Director of an FE College</td>
<td>February 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>A pilot questionnaire was issued to a FE Director for dissemination among withdrawn FE students</td>
<td>A Director of an FE College</td>
<td>February 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Follow up with FE Director with regard to the pilot</td>
<td>A Director of an FE College</td>
<td>March 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>The responses from the pilot were analysed and a report of the process was written up. Redrafting of the questionnaire was discussed with FE Director and with Thesis Supervisor</td>
<td>A Director of an FE College</td>
<td>March and April, 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Directors of 5 large FE Colleges were contacted and asked to work with researcher to reach withdrawn FE students. A letter to the withdrawn students and stamp addressed envelopes were enclosed for the Directors so that the questionnaire could be posted to the prospective respondents.</td>
<td>Directors of 5 large FE Colleges</td>
<td>September 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Follow up by phone call to Directors regarding the response from questionnaires.</td>
<td>Directors of 5 large FE Colleges</td>
<td>September 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The questionnaires were analysed with a view to identifying emergent themes which would inform the next phase of the research project, the interview.</td>
<td></td>
<td>October and November 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>The key themes emerging were collated and used to draft interview questions. College Directors contacted and invited to participate in research interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td>January 2013.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A total of 64 completed forms from the postal questionnaire of 200 was received, which amounts to a 33.5% response rate. The low rate of response combined with the limited amount of information contained in the responses reduced the usefulness of the questionnaires to such an extent that it was not possible to draw any firm findings from the data. Therefore, it was decided to use the data from the questionnaires to inform the questions in the interviews.

3.4.5 The Interview and the Focus Group Interview

3.4.5.1 The interview

The research methods literature is replete with an array of interview types. This section will attempt to distil the pertinent concepts regarding interviews and present a summary of the relevant classifications of this form of data collection that may be germane to this study. Kerlinger, (1970) notes that the research questions govern the questions asked in a research interview. Their content sequence and wording are entirely in the hands of the interviewer. The features of the various interview types will be assessed for suitability of application to this research endeavour.

Types of Interview

Le Compte and Preissle (1993) outline six types of interviews:

- Standardised interviews
- In-depth interviews
- Ethnographic interviews
- Elite interviews
- Life history interviews
- Focus groups

Bogdan and Biklen. (1992) add a further two forms which may incorporate other types from the previous list:

- The semi-structured interview
- Group interviews

Lincoln and Guba (1985), expound the concept of a ‘structured interview’, where the contents and procedure are organised in advance. Oppenheim, extending the scope of
the instrument, (1992), formulates the ‘exploratory interview’. The purpose of the exploratory interview is heuristic in purpose and is focussed on the development of ideas and research hypothesis rather than gathering facts and statistics. It is concerned primarily with gaining an understanding of how the respondents think and feel about the topic of the research. The sequence and wording are pre-determined. There is little scope for the interviewer to make any modifications. By contrast, the ‘unstructured interview’ is more open with greater flexibility and freedom making it more amenable than the exploratory interview to the requirements of this study which will involve teasing out the complex issues of attrition among FE students with College Directors and tutors.

In qualitative research, the in-depth interview and the group interview feature very prominently, (Hakim, 2000). The in-depth interview is unstructured and can vary greatly in length. It may be conducted over a number of sessions. While the researcher guides the process the interviewee is given the freedom to control the content of the responses. The literature on qualitative research makes a clear distinction between the depth interview and the sort of structured interviewing that takes place in questionnaires and in large scale surveys. Miller and Crabtree (1999), sees the participant in the in-depth interview largely free to say whatever they like on the broad topic of the interview, with minimal prompting from the researcher.

Fontana and Frey (2005) and Robson (2009) differentiates interview types on the basis of the degree of structure or standardisation of the interview as follows:

Fully structured interview: Has predetermined questions with fixed wording, usually in a pre-set order.

Semi-structured interview: Has predetermined questions, but the order can be modified based on the researcher’s perception of what appears to be most appropriate

Unstructured interviews: The researcher has a general area of interest and concern but allows the conversation develop within the topic often in an informal way.
Minichiello (1990), similarly, defines unstructured interview as interviews in which neither the question nor the answer categories are predetermined. They rely on social interaction between the researcher and informant to elicit information.

Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are widely used in flexible qualitative designs. King (1994 p. 16) refers to them as ‘qualitative research interviews’. In a further refinement, Powney and Watts (1987) makes a clear distinction between ‘respondent interviews’ and ‘informant interviews’. In respondent interviews, the interviewer aims to remain in control throughout the process. In the informant interviews also referred to as non-directive the control shifts to the interviewee whose perceptions within a particular context is of prime concern to the researcher. Interviews are by nature, social encounters:

where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective and prospective accounts or versions of their past or future actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts (Rapley. T. 2008, p.16).

Kvale (1996, p.11), is equally affirmative of interviews as a strategy for data collection and lauds their capacity to capture the ‘centrality of human interaction for knowledge production’ facilitated by the emphasis on ‘the social situatedness of research data’.

The centrality of the respondents’ experiences is articulated by Cohen, Manion and Morison (2009, p.347), who see the interview as a process that enables participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express their own point of view. The interview in this context, is not solely concerned with data collection but ‘it is part of life itself: its human embeddedness is inescapable’.

Interviews are a very flexible method of data collection. They are compatible and amenable to integration with a combination of other methods. Case studies can effectively incorporate interviews as a mode of data collection as a complement to questionnaires, to participant observation and to review of documents.
Having considered the broad array of interview types that can be used as part of a case study, particularly their associated features, both unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews appear to be the most amenable to facilitating the data collection requirements of this study. They can be exploratory in nature and there is an inbuilt flexibility and adaptability in the design which will enable the researcher to engage in a responsive way to the interviewees in relation to emerging issues. The unstructured interview will be used with the Directors and tutors and the semi-structured format will be used during the focus group interview with leaders from the FE Sector. The unstructured format will facilitate the interviewee to reflect on the issues at a personal level. It offers greater possibilities to capture the individual’s unique experience of attrition from their FE course. The researcher will be able to explore more deeply with the participants any pertinent issues that arise during the course of the interview.

The next sub-section will explore the elements of the unstructured interview that renders it the most useful format to undertake the data collection relevant to this study. Undertaking the interview process, which Oppenheim (1992, p.65) describes as ‘a task of daunting complexity’ requires detailed planning. The next section will also map out the stages and procedures to be followed in order to maximise the data collection potential of the interviewing process.

3.4.5.2 Why an Unstructured Interviews?
In this sub-section the unstructured interview as a data collection method, will be explained. The merits of the unstructured interview will be examined in relation to the task of collecting data on the issues of persistence and withdrawal in a selected number of Irish FE Colleges. Cognisance will be taken of the strengths and the limitations of this widely used data collection tool. The decision to use the unstructured interview as a data gathering method is usually informed by the researcher’s epistemology and research objectives. This methodology is normally congruent with a constructivist view of social reality and is congenial to an interpretive research paradigm. The unstructured interview appears to be highly applicable to theory developing as opposed to theory testing. This method of enquiry is especially useful for studies purporting to find patterns, generating models, and informing information system design and implementation. The merit of the unstructured interview resides in its conversational nature, which allows the
interviewer to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes. (Patton, 1990). The interview can move beyond being merely a source of data to a dynamic social interaction wherein multiple dialogues are conducted between multiple selves. Denzin, (1978, p.112), sees the interview as an ‘interactional situation’ and Mason (1996, p. 35) states that it is more helpful to talk of interviews in terms of ‘data generation’ as opposed to ‘data collection’. All data collection and analysis methodologies behoves the researcher to strive for the possibility of objectivity. There are pitfalls to the possibility of objectivity with unstructured interviews.

**The Possibility of Objectivity**

The possibility of objectivity in terms of the data generated by unstructured interviews is under threat for a number of reasons. The epistemological status of facts generated during interviews is ambiguous. Emotion is immanent in all social interactions. The interpretation of emotions can be highly subjective. It must be acknowledged, that interviews may not be an open and free dialogue between egalitarian partners. Kvale and Brinkman, (2009, p.33.), avers that the:

research interview is……a specific professional conversation with a clear power asymmetry between the researcher and the subject

There may not be any intentional exertion of power but the interviewer is in a structurally dominant position and needs to be conscious of its potential impact on the respondent particularly in relation to bias. The researcher needs to be aware that the informant may be consciously or unconsciously selective regarding which ‘self’ or ‘selves’ they choose to present during the interview process or to which audience they are addressing their responses. Unstructured interviews can also be conceived in a more egalitarian light as a form of conversation between the researcher and respondent. The process, which requires active listening and asking:

is a meaning making endeavour embarked on as a partnership between the interviewer and his or her respondent (Hess-Biber, Leavy, 2011, p. 94).

The participants in the study are the custodians of the information, of the insights and of the knowledge that will be required to progress the research project. The
partnership approach to the interview exercise would appear to be the most appropriate disposition.

Directors of FE Colleges are answerable to many stakeholders. It may be reasonable to assume that the governing body, the tutors or the learners are moving into focus when the Director is forming a response to the interviewer’s questions. The unstructured interview will enable the respondent to explore the complexities of the issues of withdrawal and persistence in FE.

The monopoly of interpretation of the data rests with the researcher. To minimise this threat to objectivity standard conventions of interpretation involving categorisation and coding need to be applied with regard for rigour and validity. The coding and categorisation conventions will be explained in Section 3.5.3.

Based on the response to an invitation to participate in this research study, a total of twelve 15 College Directors agreed to participate in interviews. A further three College Directors nominated FE tutors, to partake in the interviews, because of their close involvement with the FE students. Interviews were carried out with three FE tutors and twelve FE College Directors. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to probe more deeply the issues of withdrawal and persistence among FE students from the perspectives of the former students, the tutors and the college directors. Themes that emerge from the survey of the withdrawn students was examined at a more granular level in the course of the interviews. The three longest serving FE Directors who agreed to take part in a focus group following the conduct of the interviews with the Directors and the tutors.

Consent to record the interviews will be sought from the respondents. Field notes will also be taken throughout the interview session. The participants will be assured of confidentiality and will be given the option of withdrawing from the interview process at any stage, without giving a reason. The interview schedule is set out in Figure 3.3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action no.</th>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Research sample</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Interview no. 1 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>October, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>October 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Interview no. 2 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>November 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>November 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Interview no. 3 with a FE Tutor</td>
<td>FE Tutor</td>
<td>December 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>December 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Interview no.4 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>January 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>January 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Interview no. 5 with FE Tutor</td>
<td>FE Tutor</td>
<td>January 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Interview no. 5 was disrupted on first occasion and was resumed a week later</td>
<td>FE Tutor</td>
<td>February 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>February 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Interview no. 6 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>February 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>March 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Interview no. 7 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>March 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 7</td>
<td></td>
<td>March and April 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Interview no. 8 with College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>April 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 8</td>
<td></td>
<td>April and May 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Interview no. 9 with FE Tutor</td>
<td>FE Tutor</td>
<td>September 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 9</td>
<td></td>
<td>September 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Interview no. 10 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>September 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Transcription of interview no. 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Interview no. 11 with FE Tutor</td>
<td>FE Tutor</td>
<td>October 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 11</td>
<td></td>
<td>October 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Interview no. 12 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>October 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Transcription of interview no. 12</td>
<td></td>
<td>November 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Interview no.13 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>November 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 13</td>
<td></td>
<td>December 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Interview no. 14 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>December 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Transcription of interview no. 14</td>
<td></td>
<td>December 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Interview no. 15 with FE College Director</td>
<td>FE College Director</td>
<td>January 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Transcription of Interview no. 15</td>
<td></td>
<td>January 2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An initial analysis will be carried out on the transcribed versions of the interviews with a view to distilling the main themes, which will inform the semi-structured interview format that will be conducted in the focus group setting with FE College leaders.

3.4.5.3. Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are formed around some key questions but with a degree of latitude for the interviewer to explore topics in greater detail. The semi-structured interview has predetermined questions but Robson (2002, p. 270) advises that ‘the order can be modified’ and the interviewer may omit questions if appropriate.

The less structured process enables the interviewer to respond to non-verbal clues, or to unexpected insights that the respondent may offer. The combination of both structure and flexibility is a strength of the semi-structured interview. The format is particularly useful for exploring perceptions, motivations and behaviours of respondents. Semi-structured interviews:

Allow researchers to develop in-depth accounts of experiences and perceptions with individuals. (Cousins, 2009, p.71)

The defining characteristic of semi-structured interviews according to Mason (2004) is their flexible and fluid structure. In semi-structured interviews:

Open, direct verbal questions are used to elicit detailed narratives and stories. (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p.314)

This form of interview was used in the focus group interview and provided greater flexibility than the structured interview and more structure and focus than the unstructured interview. The format of the semi-structured interview will afford the opportunity to gain access to in-depth and rich data. This format of the interview will allow the interviewee to set part of the agenda. The interviewer will be in a position to probe more deeply with the interviewees in relation to interpretations and meanings. With the semi-structured interview, the interviewer is enabled to pursue an independent line of probing which seeks out the respondent’s perspectives on a particular topic.
There are a number of limitations associated with semi-structured interviews that are worthy of note. The format is not suitable for collection of quantitative data. The possibility of biases may arise if respondents are not carefully selected. There may be susceptibility to interviewer bias. The success of the interview is dependent on the skill of the interviewer, who may give unconscious signals which influences the respondent’s answers. The respondents may give incorrect information or have imperfect recall, which cannot be verified by the interviewer. The choice of a semi-structured format for the focus group interview is intended to sharpen the concentration on the themes which will emerge from the questionnaire and from the unstructured interview responses.

3.4.5.4 Focus Group Interview
The transcripts of the unstructured interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis process. This process will be described in more detail in Section 3.5. In order to triangulate the findings a focus group interview was conducted with three of the FE Directors who offered to engage with the research.

The Focus Group also provided an opportunity to explore in greater depth the findings and themes which emerged from the questionnaires and from the unstructured interviews. The three participants for the focus group were selected from the group of Directors who agreed to engage with the research, on the basis that they had extensive experience at both FE College leadership and policy development level. Morgan (1988, pp.41-48) advises extreme care when selecting the participants for the focus group so that each individual is the bearer of a particular characteristic relevant to the study. The participants had not been interviewed in the earlier phase of the research project. Furthermore, the interviews with the three Directors, demonstrates the view articulated by McFee, (1992), that:

The reality of a situation is not to be apprehended from a single viewpoint. (McFee, 1992, p. 216).
Focus groups can be used to amplify and deepen understandings of the findings from the questionnaire and from the unstructured interviews. Morgan (2002, p. 141), defines focus group interview as:

A research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher.

The focus group meeting took place in an office in a FE College in March, 2013. Two of the participants had expressed reservations about the use of a recorder. It was agreed that notes would be taken during the Focus Group interview. The conduct of the focus group was heavily influenced by R.A Kreuger’s (1998, 2002) work on designing and conducting focus group interviews. He offers very practical steps which relates to: the selection of the right monitor, the mental preparation, the use of pauses and probes, subtle group control and the use of an appropriate conclusion.

An initial thematic analysis had been undertaken on the existing data. It was becoming evident that the themes emerging in relation to attrition could be categorised under three main headings: the individual, the college or institution and the wider educational and socio-economic policies and social values.

The three participants were not given the findings of the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews. They were asked to reflect on their own experience as leaders in FE Colleges and consider what contributed to attrition among their students. They were directed to consider how attrition might be influenced by college and by external factors. The questions posed in the focus group were influenced by the research questions and informed by the analysis of the data which was generated by the unstructured interviews. The focus group participants were questioned about the strategies a college could undertake to address the issue of attrition among students. The ‘group interaction’ element was very evident throughout the session and helped to refine the discussion in relation to a number of questions.

The focus group interview was scheduled for 2 hours. The actual interview lasted for 2 hours 40 minutes. The schedule for the conduct of the focus group interview is set out in Figure 3.4.
### Figure 3.4 Focus Group Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action no.</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Research Sample</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Listening to recording of 15 interviews and reviewed scripts. Carried out an initial thematic analysis of interview scripts</td>
<td></td>
<td>January 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Contacted FE Directors from original list of who had agreed to participate in the research study with a view to forming a focus group. 3 Directors agreed to join a focus group. Arrangements were agreed for meeting of the focus group.</td>
<td>Directors of FE Colleges</td>
<td>February 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Questions were prepared for the focus group interview which was based on a semi-structured interview format</td>
<td></td>
<td>February 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The focus group interview was conducted in an FE College, with 3 Directors (1 of whom had recently moved from her position of College Director to a policy role on FE in the DES and another had retired since initially agreeing to participate in the research in September, 2012.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>March 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The focus group interview was not taped as two of the participants expressed unease about recording their contributions. Some notes were taken throughout the interview. Extensive notes were written up immediately afterwards.</td>
<td></td>
<td>March 2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The focus group interview was facilitated by the researcher. Issues, which emerged from earlier round of data collection formed the basis of the questioning. The notes, taken at the meeting, were written up soon afterwards and subjected to a thematic analysis process. The combined data from the interviews and the focus group
interview were assembled and prepared for analysis. An outline of how the data were generated will be outlined in the next sub-section.

3.4.6 Generating the Data

This sub-section described how the data bank was created. One of the key challenges of this study was to access the voice of the withdrawn students from FE. The most effective way to link with this hard to reach group was to issue a survey. The survey questions and design was influenced by the substantive issues which had emerged from the literature review and by the research questions, in particular by Martinez and Munday’s (1998) study entitled ‘9,000 Voices student persistence and dropout in further education’.

The survey contained 24 closed questions related to the student’s college experience and 4 open ended questions allowing the respondents greater scope to elaborate on the reasons why they chose the course and why they withdrew from the course prior to completion. The questionnaire was piloted in a dual campus Further Education college.

A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed by post by 8 Directors of Further Education Colleges in September 2012. Each College posted 25 questionnaires to students from their data base who had enrolled on a Level 5 or Level 6 FETAC in 2010 and had dropped out by May 2012. By October 2012 a total of 64 completed questionnaires were returned. To mitigate the poor response, 3 of the Directors engaged in pro-active follow up of former students by contacting them by phone thus leading to a greater response with one college returning 17 questionnaires and the other 2 managing to generate 14 and 13 respectively. The intervention of the Guidance Counsellors in 2 FE Colleges, who contacted former FE students by phone, and encouraged them to complete the ‘response form’ yielded a combined total of 20 responses. No responses were received from 3 Colleges.

The poor rate response to the questionnaires and the limited amount of information provided in the responses created a difficulty with regard to the usefulness of the data for the purposes of analysis. The data generated by the questionnaires was used to guide the questions in the interviews with the FE Directors and tutors.
The questionnaires were examined and predominant themes from the responses were identified. The themes broadly related to the individuals’ motivations, to the college experience and to government policies in relation to resources and funding of FE and to the status of FETAC as a progression route to HE or access to employment. These themes were combined with the key messages from the relevant literature to guide the questions for a series of interviews that were carried out with twelve FE College Directors and three FE College tutors. A total of fifteen FE College Directors agreed to participate in the research. A further three College Directors nominated tutors, who had a high level of direct involvement with FE students as part of their teaching roles, to participate in the research. The three longest serving FE Directors agreed to take part in a focus group following the conduct of the interviews with the Directors and the tutors.

The interviews were carried out over a period from October 2013 to January 2015. They were all conducted in FE Colleges in the Director’s offices or in an office space in the College as in the case of the interviews with the tutors. The interviews took place during the normal school or college day and lasted between 40 to 80 minutes. Field notes were taken during the interviews. All interviews were audio taped with the consent of the participant and were subsequently transcribed verbatim. Each interview was replayed and compared with its transcript several times to ensure accuracy.

A focus group interview took place with three FE College Directors one of whom has recently been appointed to a policy development position in the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and has over 25 years of experience in the FE sector. Notes were taken by the researcher during and after the focus group. The emerging themes from the interviews and from the questionnaires were probed in the course of the focus group.

Across the country there are forty six schools and colleges involved as the major providers of FE programmes. A total of twenty seven Colleges of FE were involved in this research as follows:
• 1 FE College was engaged in the pilot of the questionnaire
• 8 FE Colleges involved in withdrawn student questionnaire
• 15 FE Colleges involved in interviews
• 3 FE Colleges involved in focus group.

The key messages from the relevant literature indicated that attrition among FE students was related to the following issues:

• The demographic profile of the student particularly in relation to first generation students.
• Curriculum relevance and the quality of provision or institutional quality.
• Student experience, student lecturer relations, and the level of institutional commitment.
• Student pre-enrolment characteristics and pre-enrolment attainment, personal attributes, motivation, goals, levels of preparedness for FE.
• Student social integration, normative congruence, a sense of social comfort within the college, and social connectedness.
• Academic integration, transition and adaptability.
• Choice of course.

The FE Colleges from which the data was generated were a mix of dual campus school and FE College and stand-alone FE and were located in a city setting or in a provincial town. The data from the three sources: questionnaire, unstructured interviews and focus group interviews were prepared for a thematic analysis process which will be described in the next section.

3.4.7 Limitations of this Study
The access to up to date official data on drop-out rates in FE Colleges, for courses or for the overall sector, was a major drawback for this study. FE College Directors reported that they submitted this data on an annual basis to the DES. However, no official publication of figures from the DES for the sector is available. There was repeated mention of drop-out and retention figures throughout the interviews with the
Directors and tutors, but it was not underpinned by any reference to official statistics. Although HE records numbers of FE students entering via designated FE access routes, this does not provide a full picture.

There is a lack of reliable data on FET provision in Ireland and this proved to be a major constraint in underpinning the research process. There exists no single information source that tracks FET participants so as to enable the accurate and integrated measurement of enrolments, completion rates, levels of accreditation and progression by subject area or level of study. (ESRI, 2014 p.xii)

At the outset of the study it was envisaged that withdrawn students would be engaged to provide a significant proportion of the data. The FE colleges were supportive of the efforts to contact withdrawn students. Despite the mailing of 200 questionnaires and an invitation to participate in a face to face interview the response of 64 completed surveys represented a poor level of engagement from one of the key sources of information in this study. No withdrawn student agreed to engage in a face to face interview.

The quality of the responses in the questionnaires completed by the withdrawn students varied greatly. In some cases the withdrawn students provided an eloquent and generous description of their experience in FE and the reasons that led to drop-out prior to course completion. Other questionnaires contained sparse and limited information on the experiences of the student in FE and of the factors that contributed to the early departure from their course. It has to be acknowledged that the volume and quality of data derived from the withdrawn students in this study can provide a basis from which only tentative findings can be formed, and thus is a major limitation of this study. In view of the low level response to the questionnaires it was decided to use the limited data generated by the exercise to inform the questions in the interviews with the College Directors and tutors and in the focus group. The main findings in the study are derived from the interviews with the Directors, tutors and from the focus group of FE College leaders.

The low level of engagement by withdrawn students led to further limitations in this study. Sometimes it is possible to find illuminating insights into a situation by
focussing on the unique and particular circumstances that pertain to that specific context. With a greater volume of withdrawn student responses it would have been possible to examine the various subsets of students in FE and analyse the data from the perspective of:

- The student entering FE as an adult who has not been involved in formal education for a long period
- The student entering FE directly after Leaving Certificate
- The student entering FE directly after Leaving Certificate Applied
- The student using FE as a progression route to HE
- The student entering FE as a default position because they did not secure a CAO offer
- It would also have been possible to explore the experience of students in dedicated FE Colleges and in the dual campus colleges

The analysis of the data generated findings that alluded to the various subsets of students. The vast proportion of that data emanated from the interviews with the Directors, tutors and from the focus group interview. A more compelling version of the withdrawn students’ narrative would only be possible with more direct contact with the individuals.
3.5.1 Analysis
The researcher sought to address the following issues in analysing the data. How can the material generated by the interviewees and questionnaire respondents be analysed in a manner that would deepen and enrich the meaning of their responses? How can the dialogue with the text that was co-authored with the interviewees be continued? In this section the steps which were undertaken to analyse and interpret the data generated by the interviews with the Directors and tutors of Further Education Colleges, are described. Creswell (2011), has helpfully set out six steps in the process of analysing and interpreting qualitative data, which will be set out in subsection 3.5.2. This six step approach will be applied to assist with the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Dillman and Christian (2005), caution researchers to be mindful of bias when examining responses, and to be alert to the following influencing factors:

- Social desirability: where cultural expectations influence the responses.
- Acquiescence: the respondent has a tendency to agree when interacting with another person.
- Recency: an inclination to choose the most recently offered option and Primacy: a marked tendency to select the first option.

Oppenheim (2006.p.121) alludes to similar concerns when he refers to the ‘inner curbs on private and self-incriminating information’ that may be affecting respondents.

The software package NVIVO was used to assist with processing the data. The findings were subjected to interpretation in light of the research questions, the theoretical framework and in relation to the emerging theories from the literature review.
3.5.2 Steps in the Process of Analysing and Interpreting Qualitative Data

The six step process advocated by Creswell (2011) are interrelated and envisage the researcher engaging in a meticulous process of data preparation and organisation at the outset. Careful and systematic storage and transcription of the corpus of data is advised. Transcripts were coded for identification and reference purposes. The interviews were transcribed with each line numbered. The data was then explored and coded. The concept of coding is explained as:

the process of breaking down, examining, comparing and conceptualising and categorising data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61).

Coding is a central element of content analysis in qualitative research. Berelson (1952), views content analysis as a systematic and replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding. Coding helps the researcher to treat interview scripts as stepping stones towards a continuous unfolding of the meaning of the data. The analysis of the transcripts can become a continuation of the interview, revealing the horizon of possible meanings.

The coding was undertaken following a thorough reading of the transcript and key text segments will be underlined. Codes reflecting the emerging themes in the text will be devised. These codes were used to anatomise the text into thematic segments. Coded text segments were grouped together to form broader themes or categories that may signal the route to key findings:

analyzing the content of interviews …..is the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns of the data. (Patton, 1990 p.406).

Coding and categorisation are interrelated processes in the analysis of interview transcripts. Categorising was a critical task in the interpretation of both survey and interview research in this study. The next sub-section will examine the process of categorizing in greater detail.
3.5.3 Categorizing Data

In this section the process of categorising the data is explained. According to Bruner, Goodnow and Austin (1972), ‘To categorize is to render discriminally different things equivalent’ (p.16). Categories based on the clustering of such ‘things equivalent’ formed the basis for the organisation and conceptualisation of the data. ‘Categorizing is therefore a crucial element in the process of analysis’ (Dey, 1993, p. 112). The data was examined and emerging themes were noted. This inductive form of analysis means that the patterns, themes and categories emerged out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to the interviews. According to Dey (1993), a natural creation of categories occurs with:

the process of finding a focus for the analysis, reading and annotating the data (p. 99).

In attempting to ensure that the emerging categories have real meaning in the research context and that they are rooted in relevant empirical material Patton’s (1990) advice was applied to the process by moving back and forth between the logical construction and the actual data in a search for meaningful patterns (p. 411).

Lincoln & Guba (1985) purport that the essential task of categorising is to bring together into temporary categories those data pieces that apparently relate to the same content. Then the analyst must:

devise rules that describe category properties and that can, ultimately, be used to justify the inclusion of each data bit that remains assigned to the category as well as to provide a basis for later tests of replicability (p. 347).

Categorising is a challenging task. The researcher must render the category set internally consistent. They must be meaningful internally in relation to the data understood in context and externally, in relation to the data understood through comparison. The meaning of the category evolves during the research process. The assigning of data to categories is one of continuous refinement and provides the basis
for theme building. Flexibility is necessary to accommodate fresh observations and emerging concepts in the analysis.

In defining categories, therefore, we have to be both attentive and tentative-attentive to the data, and tentative in our conceptualisations of them (Dev, 1993 p. 102).

Conscious of the potential biases that a researcher may unknowingly bring to bear on the interpretative processes the need to prepare and categorise the data forensically and in line with established conventions is essential as part of the preparatory groundwork for the analysis and the discussion of the findings. The questionnaire responses and the interview data were subjected to phased series of coding, categorisation and refinement of categories. Each code was inputted into files set up using the NVIVO computer software package. The codes were grouped into initial categories. The transcripts were reread and a final coding exercise was carried out. All codes were assigned to at least one category. A very long list of codes and a wide range of categories emerged. Some codes were assigned to a number of categories. Further refinement of the categories led to the following 3 major categories: the individual, the institution and the state and society. Codes relating to pre-enrolment attributes, educational history and attainment, values and motivation, family circumstances, finance were grouped in the category relating to ‘The Individual’. In the category relating to ‘The Institution’ the codes containing references to: academic and social integration, curriculum, assessment, pre-selection procedures, quality of educational provision, quality of teaching, quality of college experience and college identity were collated. Codes connected to issues of government policy, qualification frameworks, resource allocation, employers’ dispositions and student grant eligibility were absorbed in the broad category of ‘State and Society’.

Reconnecting with the literature it was decided to use Bourdieu’s sociological constructs of ‘Field’, ‘Capital’ and ‘Habitus’, which have been described in Chapter 2, to provide an analytical framework to render the body of data more amenable to interpretation. Using Bourdieu’s concepts offered the possibility of exploring the connections and relationships between categories. Greater insights may be gleaned into how the conditions that prevail at a personal level interact with the culture in the
FE College, which is impacted by state policies, which can lead to attrition among a sizeable proportion of students. The notions of power and agency and where it resides within the ‘field’ can be explored, with a view to understanding the decision making around college drop-out. Further explanation of the use of Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ will be provided in Chapter 5.

Drilling down on each of the major categories and their associated themes and codes, assisted with answering the research questions. The findings related to ‘The Individual’ shed light on Research Questions 1 and 3:

- *What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to course completion?*
- *What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to colleges?*

Findings in the ‘Institution’ category and the associated themes may generate answers to Research Questions 2, 4 and 5:

- *What causes of withdrawal are due to factors that are within the control or influence of colleges?*
- *What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?*
- *Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?*

The third category ‘The State and Society’ may provide further material to answer Research Questions 1, 3 and 4.

Analysing the findings and elaborating in detail on the emerging themes and patterns from the data generated from the interviews is the central focus of the next chapter. Assessment of the level of correlation between the data findings and the key messages from the literature review will form part of the discussion. An evaluation of the extent to which the theoretical propositions have been confirmed or refuted and the
efficacy of the methodologies with regard to answering the research questions will also be undertaken in the next chapter.

The fifteen interview transcripts were imported into the NVIVO file. The data was subjected to three separate cycles of coding. The first phase is referred to as open-coding and mirrors an approach to analysing qualitative data set out by Maykut and Morehouse (1994). The data is deconstructed from its original chronology into an initial set of categories or ‘codes’ in NVIVO terminology. Each code is labelled and a definition is inserted which guides the inclusion of units of meaning or text segments to be categorised to that code. The open coding of the interview transcripts yielded 54 open codes as shown in Figure 3.5 and are in unranked order.
The second phase, which is referred to as ‘coding on’ in NVIVO requires a detailed reading of the contents of each code with a view to the categorisation of the codes. Codes from the first phase are grouped on the basis of connecting material. A unifying category for the grouped codes is formed. Related themes are grouped under each category and the focus of the task in this phase is distilling, re-labelling and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wrong choice</th>
<th>In-college support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unknown reasons for leaving</td>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>Guidance counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher qualifications</td>
<td>Financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student supports</td>
<td>Family supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student retention</td>
<td>Family life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student feedback</td>
<td>Exit interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student as stakeholder</td>
<td>English as a second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs</td>
<td>Employment links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social fit</td>
<td>Default option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social attitude to FETAC</td>
<td>Curriculum relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>CPD support for teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of FETAC</td>
<td>Course information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of teaching</td>
<td>Course fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of provision</td>
<td>College self- preservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression</td>
<td>College experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency in English language</td>
<td>Child care supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure of assignments</td>
<td>Attendance tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-enrolment attributes</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-selection</td>
<td>Adult learning experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal problems</td>
<td>Adjunct to second level school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time employment</td>
<td>Adaptability Academic integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Mental health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>Learning difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local application procedures</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
merging common codes generated at open coding stage. The emergence of a framework that furthers the analysis of the data is becoming evident in this cycle of coding. The original 54 codes were re-grouped into 11 categories as outlined in Figure 3.6. The categories are not ranked.

**Figure 3.6 Phase 2 Coding on and Categorisation NVIVO**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student supports</th>
<th>College experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social and academic fit</td>
<td>Attendance tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of teaching</td>
<td>Adult learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of provision and government policies re: FE</td>
<td>Academic integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-enrolment attributes, motivation</td>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-college support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Phase 3 Code Reduction**

The third coding phase in NVIVO sets about reducing the number of codes or categories. Bazeley (2009), recommends that specific connections between codes that are assigned to the categories be mapped to reflect processes or associations that have been observed in the data. The text segments of each code and category were re-read with a view to consolidating the categories around centripetal themes that emerged from the data. The major themes related to: individual efficacy, the internal college organisation and to societal attitudes towards FETAC, and to government policies that impacted on funding, resourcing and progression to Higher Education and to the economy and employment.

**Figure 3.7** represents the mapping process that demonstrates the evolution of the themes from the data. The subordinate and sub-subordinate themes were generated at the open coding phase of the NVIVO process. The ordinate categories were created at the phase 2 or coding on in the NVIVO process by coalescing related themes. The Superordinate themes were forged from an in-depth examination of the data content of the ordinate themes.
**Figure 3.7 Superordinate, Ordinate, Subordinate and Sub-subordinate Categories.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate categories</th>
<th>Ordinate categories</th>
<th>Subordinate categories</th>
<th>Sub-subordinate categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Personal circumstances</td>
<td>Family</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Financial</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>employment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special educational</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>needs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Additional needs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mental health</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Transport</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SES</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child care supports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-enrolment attributes</td>
<td>Academic attainment</td>
<td>Prior learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Proficiency levels</td>
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<td></td>
<td>in English</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Educational history</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Default option</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wrong course</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Progression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Quality of provision</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student supports</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supports for students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with additional learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>needs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>English language supports</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IT support</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peer to peer support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Support with assignments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>College or school</td>
<td>Rhetoric and reality</td>
<td>not rhyming –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Issue/Concern</td>
<td>Example</td>
<td></td>
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<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student as stakeholder</strong></td>
<td>Students enabled or not to engage in the decision making structures in college, sense of belonging, scope for personal and social development among students</td>
<td>The invisibility of the student as stakeholder concept in College life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student’s voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Students’ silent retreat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality of teaching</strong></td>
<td>Teacher qualifications, Teacher competence, Recruitment, CPD, Quality assurance, Teacher student relationships</td>
<td>Redress, if any, for student where difficulty arises with teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum relevance and progression</strong></td>
<td>Curriculum content relevant to students’ educational needs, Mode of delivery appropriate for students, Flexibility with regard to modules, Modular content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
consistent with expectations and Curricular content capable of delivering quality qualification Curricular content designed to facilitate progression to HE

| Special Education Needs | Adequacy of supports for students with SEN-discontinuity of supports from second level school |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate categories</th>
<th>Ordinate categories</th>
<th>Subordinate categories</th>
<th>Sub–subordinate categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Social, Cultural and Political Climate and Culture. Government policies</td>
<td>Official Status of FE</td>
<td>Funded as a second level</td>
<td>HE grants for SEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State funding for students</td>
<td>Student grants BTEI allowances Social Welfare restrictions Medical Card Rigidity of student grants regarding progression from Level 5 to Level 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status and value of FETAC qualifications</td>
<td>Status of FETAC qualifications in relation to employment and progression to HE</td>
<td>Progression possible in theory in reality opportunities very limited eg ;Nursing Degree programmes in Ireland</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society’s perception of FE Colleges</td>
<td>Are they viewed as a low cost quick turn-around way to produce skilled</td>
<td>Majority of students come from disadvantaged communities except</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
workers for the IT, Healthcare and Tourism industry that are paid substantially less than graduates from IT Colleges and Universities for highly specialised FE programmes such as Film, Animation Studies, Dance and Drama Studies.

3.6.1 Validity

Cognizant of the need to be attendant to the issue of validity, which is seen as a strength of qualitative research, the themes were peer reviewed as advocated by Creswell (2003) as one of a range of strategies to enhance validity. Establishing the validity of the research is central to the task of determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the informant and the reader. A peer researcher reviewed the questionnaires and four interview transcripts and the notes from the focus group and traced the coding and categorisation procedures and the theme building process that had been undertaken. Confidentiality with regard to the identity of the sources the data was maintained. The researcher was asked to assess the ‘trustworthiness’ ‘authenticity’ and ‘credibility’ of the findings in terms recommended by Lincoln and Guba (2000). The peer reviewer, who had also worked as a tutor in a FE College, concurred with the categorisation and the thematic framework as being an accurate reflection of the content of the data but felt that the notion of college self-preservation and organisational inertia was underrepresented. The reviewer highlighted that the transcripts indicated that the Directors displayed a tendency to justify and describe their operational practices rather than to critically engage with the issue of how their colleges were failing to meet the needs of students who withdrew prior to completion. Commentary from the peer reviewer reinforced the need to be aware of researcher bias. As a former Director of a dual campus FE College the researcher may need to be more sensitized to possible unedifying assessments of college leadership. Following the peer review, categories were revisited and a number of text segments were reassigned in the student supports and quality of college experience and provision sections. In the Discussion Chapter there will be greater scope to incorporate the perspectives of the peer reviewer and to penetrate the layers of meaning and nuances in the data from the various sources.
3.6.2 Conclusion

In this chapter the purpose of the study was reiterated and the research questions were re-stated. The task of answering the research questions which informed the research methodology was described. The conceptual frameworks of positivism and interpretivism were explained. The wider scope offered by an interpretivist approach as opposed to the constraints of a positivist stance, when dealing with the qualitative nature of this study, was argued. The case study research approach was set out in detail. The strengths of the case study were elucidated and shown to have merit when dealing with this study. The categories of case study were noted and the associated features of the various types were examined for their utility in relation to the research project.

The 3 main research methods: questionnaire, interview and focus group interview used in the case study to generate the data were outlined. The conduct of the questionnaire was preceded by a pilot exercise which has been documented. The difficulties with the poor rate of response to the questionnaire were detailed. The construction of the questionnaire and the interview contents and formats were heavily influenced by the research questions, by the literature review and by the theoretical perspectives on these techniques which have been included in the chapter. The schedules indicating the conduct of the questionnaires, the interviews and of the focus group interview were detailed.

The analytic approach to the data has been laid out. The processes advocated for managing a corpus of data which was produced in the course of this study by Creswell (2011) and other key writers, were adhered to. The questionnaire responses and the interviews transcripts were coded and refined a number of times. NVIVO was used to manage the coding process. The codes were grouped to form categories that would assist with theme building. Three broad categories were hewn from the bank of codes namely: The Individual, The Institute and the State and Society.
Revisiting the literature review, the theoretical concepts by Bourdieu provided an analytical framework to interpret the data and the emerging themes. The conceptual ‘toolkit’ of ‘Field’ ‘Capital’ and ‘Habitus’ will be used to explore the less obvious relationships between the major themes eg: how the individual interacts within the institution, and how the institution engages with the state and within wider society and how the individual is impacted by the power dynamics operating in the relevant ‘fields’. Drawing on the responses in the interviews, which were collated to build categories and themes, it was possible to map out where the research questions may be answered. The themes emanating from the categories, combined with the conceptual framework, will be used to design an ordered mechanism to narrate the findings in a meaningful way. The findings, as distilled from the data, will be main focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 4

The Findings

4.1 Introduction
In this chapter the findings from the research project will be presented. There are 5 sections in the Chapter as follows:

- **Section 4.1**: The Introduction: The purpose of the study will be restated and a brief recap on how the research was conducted will be provided. An explanation of how the theoretical framework: *Attrition in Further Education* was formulated, will be set out.

- **Section 4.2**: The findings in relation to the superordinate theme: The Individual, and the associated ordinate and sub-ordinate themes will be presented in this section.

- **Section 4.3**: The Educational Institute will be the focus of this section. The findings in relation to the superordinate, the ordinate and the sub-ordinate themes will be presented.

- **Section 4.4**: The findings in relation to the Superordinate Theme: State and Society and the related ordinate themes will be detailed in the fourth section.

4.1.2 Attrition in Further Education: A Theoretical Framework
The purpose of the theoretical framework is to explain and represent the basic features of a complex system by pinpointing the central relationships. Begg, Fischer and Dornbusch (2000) found that a model or a theoretical framework is a deliberate simplification of reality and may help to deduce how people will behave within a set of circumstances. Frameworks bring order to seemingly disordered realities thus allowing for a more penetrative analytical process of the constituent parts and of the underlying relationships that prevail in that domain. Two compelling imperatives combined to create the impetus to devise the current theoretical framework *Attrition*
Firstly, a range of theories that sought to explain student attrition in post compulsory education were reviewed. All theories contributed in varying degrees to the unravelling of the departure puzzle that continues to perplex education leaders and policy makers. A unified theory or model that explains attrition and persistence that resonates sufficiently with the practical reality of Further Education in Ireland remained elusive. The theoretical framework postulated in this study is positioned in that lacuna. It must be acknowledged that the propositions from the leading writers in this field have exercised a formative influence on the theoretical architecture and on the content of the framework.

The second motive behind the theory building stems from the attempt to render the data more amenable to meaningful interpretation. The framework will enable the researcher to penetrate beneath the prima facia evidence and probe for the underlying conditions that exert less visible but powerful influences on the individual in the FE setting.

The analysis of the data produced through a coding and categorisation process, three main themes in relation to understanding the issues of attrition and persistence among FE students in Ireland. The themes were: political and economic conditions which will be referred to as: the Individual, the College Institutions, and the State and Society.

The framework entitled *Attrition in Further Education* is framed on the Superordinate themes that emerged from the analytical process namely: the state and society, the institution and the individual. Each element contains an inherent set of conditions and capabilities that interact internally and externally to confer advantage on certain individuals and to create impediments to progress for others.
Section 4.2
Superordinate Theme
The Individual

4.2.1 Individual Circumstances
The findings in relation to the Superordinate theme of individual circumstances will be presented under a number of subheadings to reflect the underpinning ordinate themes. The subheadings are: Personal circumstances, Pre-enrolment attributes and Motivation. These subheadings will be further divided into sub-ordinate and sub-subordinate themes. The amplitude or the density of the representation of the material in the data, relating to the themes and to the relevant categories will guide the chronology of the findings. Across the two data sources the issue of financial difficulties was raised as a contributory factor to drop-out among FE.

4.2.2 Finance
Financial pressures as a contributory factor to attrition among FE students was corroborated by both the Directors and the tutors. Extensive reference to the various ways that lack of access to financial support impact on FE student completion rates was contained in twelve of the fifteen semi-structured interviews. The bureaucratic rigidity associated with social welfare payments, with the Back to Education, (BTEI) allowance and with eligibility for the student grant was frequently alluded to during the interviews

For the mature student who starts in September a very basic thing is that Social Welfare won’t let them do the course that’s one of the reasons that they initially? drop out  (Director 9, page 1, lines 9 to 11)

and then if they are school leavers and it’s something I find very hard to accept is that they do ?not qualify for the Back To Education grant. (Director 10, page 8, lines 16 to 17)

The Director of one FE College highlighted how financial constraints led to students opting for FE courses by default which creates a risk for drop-out.
Director A, in the focus group was adamant that

Financial pressures are pushing students out of college, in the past they had more means to make up the shortfall, they could get a part-time job or they might have collateral to raise a loan.

Directors observed that financial pressures or lack of access to funding is a definite contributory factor to attrition among FE students. In the absence of state funding a student is dependent on the family’s financial resources. The availability of supports and the level of supports that are available to an individual from their family is an important indicator as to whether a student persists to course completion. The financial resources within the family are only one aspect of the overall family dynamic that impacts on FE students’ educational progress. The depth of the student commitment is one of the key determinants of persistence. The degree to which that commitment is shared by the student’s family has implications for the students’ retention particularly when critical incidents occur.

4.2.3 Family and Personal Circumstances

Personal circumstances encompass a range of sub-ordinate themes relating to family, financial status, employment, educational needs, mental health and employment.

In ten of the semi-structured interviews with Directors of FE Colleges, family circumstances were highlighted as a contributory factor to attrition among FE students. One Director dwelt extensively on the struggle that lone parents in particular, endure. She noted that lone parents are an at-risk group for drop-out especially if they are not surrounded by a family that is highly committed to their educational goals.

family reasons, they have a family and they can’t juggle the two, particularly ?lone parents, lack of ?creche facilities, lack of crèche funding, that is the kind of thing these are some of the reasons why ?students leave (Director 12, page 8, lines 19 to 22).
Director 9, referred to the ‘very precarious balance’ (line 22 p.11) between the student’s desire to do the course and their family responsibilities. She noted that for students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds that in the event of a family crisis that the student’s commitment to family often superseded their commitment to their education. When critical incidents arose such as bereavement or illness the possibility of drop-out becomes highly probable in the absence of a family network that shares the educational goals of the student.

One fifth of the withdrawn students in the questionnaires cited family issues such as: bereavements, children’s illness, family member’s illness, as the critical reasons for their early departure from FE courses. The focus group alluded to the family dynamic on numerous occasions throughout the discussion particularly in relation to contributory factors to attrition that reside outside the influence of the FE College. Participant B, asserted that in some cases families are either unable or unwilling to support a student for the duration of the FE programmes especially when the pressures of assignments and examinations build. He firmly believes that students need back up, not just financial but moral support and they need their families or their partners or spouses to value education and the courses they are undertaking.

Expounding at length on the role of family in relation to attrition and persistence in FE, he submitted that students coming from highly supportive second level school environments struggled to make the transition to the more independent learning ethos of FE. If these students come from families where there is no tradition of further or higher education, that vital support, understandings and commitment from the family is not necessarily available to the individual which he believes is crucial to sustain the student through challenging periods of the course.

The need for the educational goals to be shared by the immediate family of the student was a recurring theme among the Directors in the interviews and in the focus group discussions and were aptly summed up by Director 9, as follows:
I would find that when I talk to people who have completed the course would say that the support of their families and their partners was crucial if you don’t have the support of you family it’s not going to happen and if you hit a crisis you may fall apart and leave the course and even in the general and even as the work goes on during the year they have got to go home and do their work and unless their family or their partner is there to look after the children and give them the time to do the work that is really crucial (page 9, lines 11 to 18).

Lack of commitment by family members to the educational goals of the FE student was identified as a contributory factor to attrition. On the other hand, three Directors and one tutor raised the scenario of students enrolling on FE programmes as a parental appeasement strategy.

They are only here because a parent, usually the mother is pushing them to do something........sometimes against their will (Tutor 2, p.8, lines 4 to 6)

Directors and tutors found that the students who enrol on FE programmes to placate parents tended to display low levels of motivation and were at risk of departure prior to completion similar to those who opted for FE as a default option in the absence of a CAO College place.

4.2.4 Motivation, Adaptation, Course Choice and Pre-enrolment attributes. Grouping the subordinate themes of motivation, course choice and pre-enrolment attributes together, resulted primarily from the interviews with two of the tutors, both of whom worked in a guidance counselling role with FE students. They explained how they explore motivation for applying for courses with students and how the choice of courses links to their aptitudes, their attitudes and dispositions which is collectively referred to in the literature as pre-enrolment attributes.

All three FE tutors and eight of the FE Directors attributed some of the attrition to the motivational deficits on the part of the student:

they leave for a number of reasons, probably ?primarily they leave because they were aimless, in the first place and hadn’t had good guidance, in terms of what the course could do for them, (Director 2, page 1, lines 16 to 19)
Tutor 1, who is a Guidance Counsellor, observed that those students who drifted into FE as an easy option were far more likely to drop out prior to course completion than students who were using it as a progression route to HE Degree courses.

*Student motivation is a significant factor of course..... their reasons for doing the course as well as their goals for higher education and beyond. Students who take an FE course as an “easy” option will not be academically integrated with the students who want nothing less than a distinction.* (Tutor 1, page 5, lines 3 to 7).

In his guidance counselling work he explores with the students their own understanding of their aptitudes and strengths. Drawing on this awareness he guides the students to consider what they can aspire to in their educational journey. He believed that young people in general, make better choices around college courses when:

*they have engaged in serious self–reflection and form a realistic grasp of their aptitudes and what they can aspire to.....it helps them to figure out what they really want to do or study in College and you would hope that they would then be more motivated........... to stick it out and adjust to the demands of college* (Tutor 1, page 9, lines 11 to 18).

A weak commitment to the course of study was referred to in seven of the interviews as a factor that led to drop-out. Students who failed to gain a CAO place and opted to enrol on a FE course to fill in the year were noted by six Directors as a group that are less likely to persist to completion.

*the ones that drop-out at mid-year, some of them it’s just when they come in in September they are the ones that take up whatever course is available and not the ones that they want to do..... it’s kind of like what courses are left at this stage and you know straight away from that attitude that the chances are that they will... that they will drop-out* (Director 10, page 4, lines 19 to 25).

The focus group also mentioned the issue of student motivation several times in their discussion on contributory factors to the causes of attrition among FE students. They differentiated between the competitive FE courses such as Dance, Drama, Fine Art, Film Animation and Nursing Studies that were heavily over - subscribed in terms of application numbers and those courses that were less competitive such as Business Studies, IT and Technology courses. With courses such as Dance, Drama, Fine Art and Music focus group participant C, believed that the rigorous pre-selection process...
had become more effective at identifying students who were highly motivated and determined to complete the course if offered a place. Focus group participant A, felt that students using the FE as a progression route were in general more motivated to complete and to aim for the necessary ‘Distinctions’ that are required to secure a CAO offer. There was a consensus among the Focus group participants that pre-selection procedures needs to be more fine-tuned so that applicants offered FE places are assessed in terms of their motivation to engage in and complete the course.

All of the Directors of the FE Colleges stressed that the pre-selection process was a critical part of the strategy to prevent drop-out, among students. All colleges now interview prospective students. Colleges have drawn up their own criteria for assessing a candidate’s suitability for the course. Linking rigorous pre-selection procedures to the internal quality assurance processes, four Directors stated that, it is an area that falls within the Colleges’ influence, which can have a strong impact on completion rates. One Director captures the importance of effective pre-selection procedures when allocating FE places to applicants and the relationship between fine-tuned pre-selection procedures and completion rates thus:

*Oh very ?selective very selective, application, interview, ?practical dance demonstration to see ok to see can ??you ?dance and they have to have a physio report to show that they don’t have bad knees or bad back to see that they are capable because they are? on their feet dancing or performing or training or whatever 15, 16 hours a week maybe 20 hours a week as well as doing their few theory subjects but it is primarily activity based they do have to be reasonably fit well active but I would notice across the range of courses here this one this one you take in 20 students you take in.... and there is 20 graduates (Director 8, page 14, lines 11 to 19).*

The Directors of nine FE Colleges reported that the pre-selection process which usually took the form of face to face formal interviews between FE tutors and prospective students, or a written assessment to establish level of proficiency in the English language, sought to gauge applicants’ attitudinal attributes and their levels of motivation. The issue of maturity and preparedness for FE was picked up by four Directors. Coming from the cosseted second level school system some students struggled to cope with the demands of a more independent learning environment according to four Directors and one tutor.
Six Directors and two tutors contended that students entering FE needed to be capable of adapting to a changed learning environment. Students emerging from the Leaving Certificate and second level school need to adjust to learning with adults and mixed aged groups. Adults on the other hand needed to adapt to learning with younger students who have just graduated from second level schools. One Director noted that the potential for drop-out was high among those who exhibited difficulties with integration at the early stages of the course and that he had developed strategies to respond promptly to indications of what he referred to as ‘adjustment anxiety’ (Director 1, page 2, line 5,).

In relation to pre-enrolment attributes two Directors expressed the view that Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students were exercising what they believe is their right to go to ‘College’ by enrolling on a FE course. LCA graduates were highly likely to struggle with the course content and even with additional learning supports that a College may make available to them they remain a high risk category for drop-out.

The members of the Focus Group explained that, in theory, FE was a logical progression for students who had completed the LCA. In reality the leap from LCA to FETAC Level 6 was beyond the capability of most of this student group. Ideally, according to Focus group participant A, LCA graduates should be offered FETAC Levels 4 or 5, but the students would not be able to avail of a grant. It was pointed out in the focus group discussion, that there is an increase in the numbers of LCA students progressing to FE but without the additional learning supports that they are accustomed to at second school level and without the flexibility to enrol on a Level
that is appropriate to their ability this is a group who are vulnerable to drop-out. Tutor 1, provided a different perspective from the views of some of the Directors. He observed that LCA students, particularly those who have attained high level grades in their final exams, can successfully transition to a PLC course that is in line with their career aspirations. He added that ‘some Colleges have become more proactive’ (page 11, line 19), in providing supports for students who struggle with the course content.

With increasing applications from students for whom English is not their first language, seven of the Colleges have implemented an English language assessment test as part of the pre-selection process. The increased cultural, racial and age diversity of the student population in FE Colleges was referred to as a strength and a positive development in the focus group. However, participant B added that some students find it challenging to socially integrate in such a diverse milieu. The importance of social integration for students in terms of persistence and overall wellbeing was mentioned in various ways by all Directors. Inability to socially integrate within the College community was noted by six Directors as a contributory factor to students’ departure.

4.2.5 Social Integration and the Individual.

Directors in all of the colleges addressed the issue of social integration from various angles. Inability to social integrate was specifically referred to as a contributory factor in the departure of students by three Directors.

there was a huge dropout rate from that group last year. The reason for that was something around the integration of the class. The social reason within the class itself ..... The class didn’t gel ..... and then there were lots of personal issues (Director 7, page 12, lines 4 to 8).

The majority of Directors lamented the lack of facilities in their colleges in respect of providing opportunities and scope for social engagement. Canteens were mentioned frequently throughout the interviews usually in reference to the inadequacy or complete lack of provision of this basic facility. ‘I would feel awe full that they do not have a decent canteen’ (Director 6, page 7, line 16.).

Director 1, spoke of the need to develop some students’ social skills and to build their confidence as part of an overall strategy to increase retention rates while
acknowledging that the current construction of FE Colleges in Ireland was not propitious to student social and cultural engagement.

*Many PLCs started out in pre-fabs without any facilities so socialisation was impeded. As FE courses are delivered in varying types of settings, the facilities available for socialising vary considerably (Director 4, page 13, lines 15 to 17).*

Impediments to students’ social integration arising from operating an FE College as an adjunct to a second level school were raised by five Directors. It was the view of the majority of the Directors and tutors interviewed, that the dual purpose campus was not a satisfactory way to deliver FE and that it can be more socially inhibiting to the adult and FE students. Engendering a sense of belonging to the College among FE students in a dual campus scenario was a challenge highlighted by four Directors and I tutor.

*FE colleges which are small and adjoined to the local second-level school have less to offer the FE student in terms of availing of the school facilities for sport – gym, playing fields- and canteen facilities may be shared. (Tutor 1, page 14, lines 12 to 15).*

The focus group singled out the issue of social integration as an area where FE in Ireland is under performing. Participant B, explained that in his twenty six years of working in FE that he has witnessed an increasing number of students coming into FETAC programmes who need help with personal and social development. He believed that the burgeoning number of students who presented with low levels of self-confidence, poor self-esteem, and inadequate relationship building skills are at risk of drop-out from the outset. These students are further disadvantaged because many FE Colleges do not have the resources and facilities to nurture their social and personal development.

Directors 11 and 12 identified another challenge for FE Colleges which relates to the need to support the social and personal skills of students. The Further Education and Training Strategy, 2014-2019 (SOLAS, 2014) aims to develop a world-class integrated system of further education and training in Ireland which will promote economic development. The main focus of the FET strategy is to become a leading provider of skills to meet the growing needs of the Irish labour market.
Participant B, in the focus group, welcomes the idea of a national strategy for FE, because we ‘have been making it up for too long’ however, he sees a number of pitfalls that could emerge from the drive towards a world-class FE service and the sharp focus on skills development. The space for social and personal development appears to have been occluded in favour of a clearly stated prioritisation of the skills acquisition agenda. Participant B, is of the view that the Strategy document may be signalling that funding will be contingent on the College’s level of success with student completion of major awards. He queried, ’where does the weaker academic student fit in’? The other members of the focus group said it could lead to FE Colleges becoming more selective in their recruitment of students if funding was to be linked to graduation rates as opposed to the number of enrolments.

Common to almost all of the theories that seek to explain attrition and persistence in post compulsory education is the notion of integration. The extent to which a student integrates both academically and socially appears to be a strong indicator of the likelihood of either persistence or withdrawal for the student. The theories that are built on the integration cornerstone also contain the assertion in various forms that it is the interplay between the student’s pre-enrolment attributes and the organisational milieu that determine the possibilities for social and academic engagement. The extent to which the FE College can support student integration is impacted by the availability of resources, which is directly related to government funding and policies.

The student integration theme provides scope for exploration of how the three components of the Attrition in Further Education theoretical framework intersect in a powerful way to create conditions that increase the chances of attrition. The intersection of the superordinate themes of: the state and society, the educational institute and the individual will be picked up in Chapter 5: The Discussion Chapter
Section 4.3
Superordinate Theme
Educational Institute

4.3.1 Educational Institute
The data from the unstructured interviews and the focus groups interview highlighted a number of institutional elements that either led to withdrawal for students prior to course completion or countered attrition by tailoring provision to the needs of the students. Emerging as ordinate themes both in relation to factors that contribute to attrition and to strategies that FE Colleges implement to increase student retention are: Student supports, College experience, Adult Learning Experience, Quality of provision and Quality of teaching, Progression and Identity. Each theme will be examined in conjunction with the associated sub-ordinate and sub-sub ordinate themes from the perspective of the central research questions: What are the causes of attrition among FE students in Ireland? What can Colleges do to improve retention rates among FE students in Ireland? Embedded in the data were frequent and various iterations of the notion of quality in relation to curricular provision and to the quality of teaching and the resultant impact on student persistence.

4.3.2 Quality of Provision
The issue of quality of teaching, was probed in the interviews with all of the Directors. There was universal agreement among the Directors that the quality of teaching was linked to both retention and attainment rates.

What you deliver in the classroom is what we are all about (Director 6, page 10, line 29)

Questions were framed to elicit from Directors how they managed to quality assure the performance of teaching despite being prohibited from conducting formal evaluations of staff members. In response to the question: Do you ever observe the work of FETAC teachers or coordinators in class or carry out any form of evaluation of their work? no Director had undertaken direct evaluation of the teachers’ performance in the classroom:
Never, they are fully responsible for their own classes no there has been no formal evaluation of their work we haven’t done anything like that. (Director 14, page 7, lines 2 to 4).

College Directors have circumvented the absence of direct observation of teachers by using a range of strategies to gauge the quality of teaching. Students are surveyed at the end of the year in five Colleges. An exit interview is undertaken with students who are departing prior to completion in two Colleges. Directors of four Colleges indicated that students actively report their displeasure with the quality of provision to members of management.

The best mechanism of all is the student knocking on the door, is the student council knocking on the principal’s door (Director 12, page 11, lines 5 to 6).

Reflective practice and self-evaluation for teachers has been formally introduced in one College as explained by Director 3. A systematic examination of the data relating to attainment and retention is an established process in three Colleges.

You would see trends where particular courses would have very high retention levels, and other courses may not. And definitely it comes back to the relationship, the relationship between the class tutor or class coordinator and the student is key. (Director 3, page 6, lines 13 to 17)

Setting targets and devising common briefs across departments is an embedded practice in two Colleges. An internal moderator for each department is deployed in two Colleges. Each staff meeting and subject meeting is availed of as an opportunity by one Director to drive the conversation on standards of teaching and learning. The majority of Directors depend heavily on the external examiners reports, following the end of year assessment of FETAC modules as an indicator of the quality of teaching and if necessary as a trigger to intervene if standards appear to be unsatisfactory.

Honestly there are ways to make sure that people are producing. Firstly they have got to meet the targets, secondly they are externed, if their work isn’t up to scratch the extern is looking for them and the principal and the deputy principal will meet with the extern feedback will come back and you have got to take it up with the teacher and that would be vigorously done. (Director 12, page 8, lines 14 to 19).
Mentoring is provided in four Colleges for teachers whom the Directors feel may need additional professional support. Effective staff selection procedures were noted by two Directors, as a strategy to ensure high quality teaching. In response to a question relating to managing underperforming teachers a Director stated that

*I haven’t had too much of that now over the last number of years. It has improved a lot over the years we are better at selection’* (Director 11, page 14, lines 7 to 9)

Continuous Professional development (CPD) was referred to as a means of raising teaching standards by nine Directors. CPD is widely available and provided by a number of agencies such as CDVEC, the Curriculum development Unit (CDU) and by some Universities. Teachers were encouraged by College management to attend in-service and training. In two Colleges, timetables were constructed to facilitate the release of teachers to pursue post-graduate courses in adult learning.

The focus group participants took a wider view in relation to the quality of teaching. Participant A, believed that there was ‘undoubtedly’ a link between the quality of teaching and retention rates. During her years as Director of a large FE College she observed that the drop-out rates were higher on courses where some of the teachers were not ‘high end performers’. Explaining that ‘high end performers’ included the ability to adapt teaching methods to suit the students need and to reflect the diversity of the FE intake in most Colleges in respect of academic ability, attainment, age and cultural backgrounds. Participants B and C, conceived the quality of teaching as part of the overall standard of provision of the College to students and included the curricular and extra-curricular supports. Participant B, felt constrained as a Director by not being permitted to observe teachers in the classroom. However, he contended that it behoves Directors to circumvent that constraint and explore ways of evaluating the teaching because it:

*is at the core of what we do ….. if that foundation is not solid everything is undermined and we are letting down our students and that is just not acceptable.*

Participant C, dwelt on what he called a ‘continuum of supports’. He asserted that in FE in general ‘we are required to provide a highly supportive approach’ in relation to
the delivery of courses which is driven by the needs of the student population. There was a consensus view among the participants in the focus group that a supportive culture needs to permeate the classroom and the overall climate of the College. In the next section the supports that are available to students or that are needed by students to raise retention levels will be extracted from the data.

4.3.3 Student Supports

Within the Superordinate theme of Educational Institution there were abundant references to students’ supports and they were prevalent in all of the interviews with College Directors and tutors.

You don’t get a group of independent learners coming in from the Leaving Cert at all they are quite needy and they do need a lot of support and what they are asked to do is quite challenging the Childcare students are asked to study Biology, maybe for the first time (Director 6, page 10, lines 3 to 6).

The focus group participants were equally voluble about the existence of students’ supports. In the questionnaires the reference to the issue of student supports are more opaque.

The responses to the research questions: Where can Colleges concentrate their efforts to raise completion rates and what causes of attrition are within the influence of the College coalesces around the concept of support.

Hand-holding can help them stick out a course and get over a bad month and move on, what else helps? here we use a VLE it helps a certain amount it helps a certain amount students who have missed a bit who have missed lectures its put up on the Moodle they can read the lecture at home teachers put up study notes and handouts and things like that on the VLE system having /that will help a certain amount of people if they didn’t have it they would be lost if -they were out sick for a week or two you have the lectures there they can be online and you can be at home and read them that type of thing if you wanted to I suppose simple things like having a College library Computer facilities, where people can print out their assignments simple as that who don’t have a computer at home it helps to a certain extent we have a library here and it opens early and late. (Director 2, page 12, lines 2 to 13).
Half of the Directors interviewed believe that their student retention rates have improved in recent years and that the provision of a range of supports is largely responsible for raised completion figures. Building a supportive environment for students in FE Colleges is operationalised at five different levels. At a structural level, the class tutor system was established in the majority of the Colleges that took part in this research. Learning supports and additional educational interventions were provided in ten of the Colleges. All of the Directors spoke of the importance of Guidance Counselling as an essential service to support students to successfully complete their courses. Accessing appropriate supports for students with special educational needs was raised by seven Directors. In endeavouring to support student learning four Directors have made available library facilities, IT equipment and a virtual learning environment. At the fulcrum of the support matrix is the class tutor who is charged with a duty of care towards the students.

4.3.4. The Class Tutor

The class tutor system was described in various ways by nine Directors and was presented as the centrepiece of the care and support system for students.

_We have the class tutor system ...every single class has a tutor who would be their first port of call’_ (Director 1, page 3, lines 6 to 7).

The tutors’ frontline role in actualising the care function of the College is captured in the following quote:

_I was talking to a girl this morning and she came from an Applied Leaving certificate. Very very weak struggled with the course and got a lot of one-to-one support from the guidance and she got her results this morning and she has three distinctions and she is going into a level six. She never ever thought she would get past a level five ........... It’s gotten her to this point. The tutoring here is second to none, and I’m not saying that because I’m here. Our tutor spotted her immediately, we organised with the principal that she got extra help. She met me every week, she has an after care worker outside and the after care worker came in here ‘what can we jointly put in place’_ (Tutor 3, page 9, lines 3 to 14).

One of the key roles of the tutor appeared to be the early identification of difficulties and the formulation and implementation of a strategy that involved accessing the additional learning supports that are available in the College in a manner that would
help to alleviate the impediments encountered by the student. The provision of additional learning support was frequently deemed necessary in relation to literacy, mathematics, IT Skills, English language and assignment completion and with some elements of courses eg Biology in the case of Health Care and Nursing students. Learning supports were mentioned in various ways by all of the Directors and tutors in the semi-structured interviews. The struggle to provide appropriate levels of student supports was highlighted by six Directors as an area that is particularly challenging because there is an increase in the numbers of students who enrol in FE from the following groups:

- LCA background
- Students with a SEN Diagnosis
- Students for whom English is not their first language or who may not have high levels of proficiency in the language
- Adults returning to education following a long absence from formal schooling.

Fulfilling a communications role permeates the work of tutors. Key information is channelled through the tutor to the students and from the students to other teachers and to College management as appropriate. Feedback to students on their assessments and assignments has been highlighted in the relevant literature to be a motivational aid to students. Tutors in one College lead a formalised feedback session with all FE students four times a year. Students are given an opportunity to have an in-depth one to one session with their tutor to review their performance in assessments and assignments. It is evident from the descriptions of the role by the Directors that the class tutor play a lead part in facilitating access to the Colleges’ learning supports for students where necessary.

**4.3.5 Learning Supports**

All of the Directors expressed the belief, in various ways, that the delivery of the courses solely in a mainstream way was not sufficient to meet the needs of all of the FE students. A variety of additional learning supports was necessary. Colleges do receive any additional or specific resource allocation for learning supports in FE. The
extent to which resources are made available to learning support, is the prerogative of College management.

the real problem is..... If we do provide extra help it has to come out of somewhere else in the system I don’t have extra resources I can draw on to provide extra literacy or one to one help it has to come out of the existing allocation so while it is possible .........it can be difficult to find resources internally. (Director 9, page 6, lines 7 to 13).

Supports, which were delivered in a personalised manner, were described by four Directors. This tailored approach to learning supports was activated when students fell behind with submission of assignments.

If there’s a student who badly needs and just isn’t coping with certain classes that maybe for one or two hours a week a teacher or a part-time teacher whatever, can help them combine assignments (Director 4, page 8, lines 11 to 13).

Workshops facilitated by teachers in the particular subject areas are organised with small groups of students so they can receive intensive assistance with assignment completion. One to one tuition, is also provided in two Colleges. The learning supports described by the Directors and tutors took the form of one to one or small group tuition in an aspect of the course content or in the Literacy, Maths or the English language.

it consists of the students to have one to one help if they need it with projects with things like that we would also have workshops during the year for students to attend say child development would be ?identified as a module in Child Care that a lot of students who find difficult so we would have 3 to 4 workshops during the year on particular aspects of that module we have 3 members of staff who have ?time on their ?timetable to give Learning Support there is there is ?one teacher who gives ?Maths support to the Access Students who do Statistics (Director 5, page 12, lines 2 to 9).

The mature students may need:

handholding ....help them stick out a course and get over a bad month (Director 11, page 14, lines 9 to 10).
Director 6 held the view, in common with the Focus group participants, that it was prudent to reserve a quota of teaching hours from the overall College allocation and to use them judiciously throughout the year for additional learning supports as the need arose.

Directors 2, 5, 6, 10, 11 and 12 stressed the need for learning supports as a strategy to increase completion rates among FE students. Frustrations were expressed by four Directors in relation to the absence of a specific allocation for this purpose in FE despite the increased intake of students who were in receipt of learning supports at second level.

Teachers with middle managements posts, have been assigned to the role of Disability Officer in four of the Colleges in this study. The Directors commented on the increase in the numbers of students with disabilities such as Dyslexia and Asperger’s Syndrome. FE Colleges can apply for additional learning resources to the HEA for students who declare that they have a recognised disability.

*There’s a massive increase with students coming on board who have been diagnosed with Aspergers or even Mild Aspergers, Dyslexia (Director 2, page 4, lines 15 to 17)*

The procedure is cumbersome and a medical or psychological assessment must be carried out, for the purposes of the application even for students who have had these supports throughout their primary and post primary education. The outcome of the application is not usually determined until the end of the first term. The student will have been without the necessary assistance for up to three months. If the College is unable to support the student during that period the impact may cause the student to lag behind course work and cause the students to drop out in some cases. Creative solutions to circumvent the delayed sanctioning of supports for students with special needs were outlined by three Directors.

*We’d have about 12 laptops here with special software they’d have built up a bank over the years.......once we identify somebody or somebody self identifies has a need for that particular piece of equipment we can hand it to them straight away (Director 1, page 6, lines 2 to 7)*
If you are accessing it the first time you could very easily lose a sizeable cohort of students before the supports are in place (Director 1, page 5, lines 17 to 19).

Appreciation for the defined policy on supports for students with disabilities was expressed by one Director who contrasted it with the lack of clarity for assistance in relation to mental health conditions.

That is the one thing you see with disability there is something you can apply for help but with mental health what exactly you can apply for I don’t really know. (Director 9, page 6, lines 2 to 5).

While supporting students in a general way is largely the remit of the class tutor. When more intensive help is needed they are normally referred to the Guidance Counsellor. All of the Colleges have the services of a Guidance Counsellor which is allocated by the DES in a manner similar to a second level school. The Guidance Counselling post originated in the second level system and combines both personal and vocational counselling. Colleges, like schools are granted an overall teaching allocation of resources from the DES, based on their previous year’s enrolment. College management have the authority and the responsibility to utilise those resources to provide the best possible educational services for their student population. Guidance counselling is viewed as a key support and is given timetable priority in seven of the Colleges in this study.

4.3.6 Guidance Counselling

In 2012, the Guidance Counselling resources were reduced as part of overall Government budgetary reductions. Schools now receive an overall resource allocation and it is the responsibility of the principal and the Board of Management to decide how to use the allocation. Prior to 2012 there was a specific ex-quota post allocated to second level schools for the provision of guidance counselling services. In recognition of need to support students who needed assistance with mental health issues, seven Directors stated they had prioritised Guidance Counselling. The Directors were adamant that it was a critical service to support student’s participation and retention. One Director singled out improved Guidance resources as the one area she would concentrate her efforts on in order to increase levels of completion among the FE students.
I think its more supports improved resources more resources for the whole Guidance area and supports more time given over to that and more time to be able to follow up with people you know trying to work with them and support them I thinks that’s what keep people going but its definitely human resources and having a person with time to do that (Director 3, page 9, lines 16 to 21)

Directors have to make very deliberate timetable choices with regard to the provision of Guidance Counselling. The impact that retention of the Guidance Counselling services, comparable to levels prior to 2012, had on the timetable, was explained by four Directors.

The social aspect is huge……that is huge but also the care aspect in this college the principal she has great foresight she kept the hours for Guidance the full twenty two hours which would put pressure elsewhere on the timetable of course but the teachers were aware of that and listened to her reasons and supported it. (Director 6, page 12, lines 28 to 31 and page 13, lines 1 to 3).

Having access to a Guidance Counsellor who is unfettered by teaching duties was held to be an effective way to deliver counselling services to students by four Directors and one tutor. The evolving role of the Guidance Counsellor in the FE College is captured by Director 4 as follows:

But it has turned seriously into counselling predominantly as opposed to guidance, careers, you know that’s more happening on block with talks to students and the one to one is become more of a counselling service. (Director 4, page 6, lines 8 to 11).

Directors also reported that they struggle to meet the demand for counselling supports from within their internal resources. An increase in the presentation of mental health issues was cited by four Directors and one tutor as a contributory factor to drop-out in FE Colleges. Dealing with students who are suffering with clinically diagnosed depression, anxiety, social phobias and suicide ideation is not unknown to Directors or tutors in FE Colleges but to quote one respondent: ‘the numbers, the bigger numbers is a new phenomenon’. (Director 4, page 6, line 12).
Participant A, in the Focus group conceded that mental health problems leads to drop-out, but she submitted that a targeted use of existing counselling services within colleges could result in the provision of a more effective support for those who really need it. Participant B, argued that it was not possible for FE Colleges to meet the counselling needs of students within the existing curtailed resources and furthermore that issues of such gravity should be referred to appropriate healthcare agencies. Participant C, held another view entirely and asserted that FE Colleges need to be more pro-active in terms of promoting mental well-being for all members of their FE community.

With a ratio of six hundred students to one Guidance Counsellor, Director 6, realised that the support services in the College needed to be augmented. To embed a more active caring ethos in the College she devised a peer mentoring programme. The action was prompted by the results of a student survey which indicated very strongly that ‘they need support they actually need support’ (Director 6, page 10, line 4). Second year students were trained in peer mentoring techniques. First year students were offered mentoring on a one to one basis with second year students. The peer to peer mentoring strategy is only in its first year in the College but the Director has found the response of the first year students as ‘really eye opening’ (Director 6, page 10, line 9), and is confident that it will lead to a reduction in the number who drop-out because:

*they have no friends.....they just feel at sea and they are afraid to ask for help.*

(Director 6, page 10, lines 14 and 15).

Feedback from the mentors indicated that the first year students were engaging in a very open and honest manner with their second year peers and that ‘the teachers think they understand’ (Director 6, page 10, line 17). The mentors because of the depth of their relationship with the first year students were in a position to reflect more authentically their realities.

Good guidance is important in FE because according to a Director one of the main reasons students drop-out is because they enrol on a course that is wrong for them. She attributed wrong courses selection to poor quality Guidance Counselling in the first place. To support their progression to employment and with CAO or UCAS
applications to HE courses, students need access to Guidance Counselling. A tutor who works as a Guidance Counsellor in a dual purpose campus detailed the level of support that he believes is necessary to adequately meet the needs of the FE student:

*Individualised support similar to what they get in secondary school where they are encouraged, reminded and its explained to them about the different courses eg in Art in Third Level, .............. and they are encouraged to avail of Guidance Counselling as one of the supports available to them. (Tutor 3, page 12, lines 5 to 9)*

Assisting students with the development of effective study techniques was raised by one Director and by one tutor as an area where Guidance Counsellors could make a greater contribution.

Responding to the question regarding the area where the College could concentrate their efforts to increase retention among FE students, one Director was adamant that improved Guidance resources would yield positive results in terms of enhancing completion rates.

Guidance Counselling in a FE setting, according to Participant A, in the focus group, could be used to support students to adapt to a college oriented learning environment and to help ‘*wean some of the students off the spoon-feeding*’ that they are accustomed to at second level.

Guidance counselling was highlighted as a key resource to support FE students by seven of the Directors interviewed. The mode of delivery of the guidance counselling provision in FE Colleges is similar to the approaches in second level schools. To what extent can the FE sector carve out a separate identity while models of delivery are heavily associated with second level school practices and its effect on the notion of college experience will be the subject of the next section.

**4.3.7 Identity and College Experience**

Further Education is a discrete sector in Irish Education. The current model of administration and delivery of the FE courses complicates the identity of the separateness of the sector. All of the Directors explained that FE Colleges are treated
as second level schools in relation to resources, funding, staffing and public examinations by the DES. But FE students apply for HE grants in the same manner as students in Universities and in Institutes of Technology. Applications from FE Colleges for supports for students with disabilities or special needs are processed through the Higher Education Authority, (HEA).

Director respondents in attempting to grapple with the issue of identity intertwined it with the notion of college experience. Unsurprisingly the stand alone FE Colleges were more assertive in respect of being a ‘College’ in contrast to the split identity that emerged from the dual campus colleges.

The notion of college experience is raised in the literature as a significant factor in determining whether a student will persist or drop out prior to course completion. While no unifying definition of what college experience emerged, the elements of identity and the concept of an adult or independent learning environment were common across the discussion on the topic.

The question: ‘Do they see themselves as being in College or School?’ was posed to all of the twelve Directors in interviews. The Directors were of the belief that the students saw themselves as College students and perceived themselves to be ‘in College’.

The prevailing feeling is that they are adult learners in a third level college we treat them like that we push it that way. (Director1, page 12, lines 4 to 5).

Directors of dual campus Colleges readily admitted that it was challenging to create a College identity separate from the secondary school identity especially when staff and classrooms are shared across the two sectors. Participant C, admitted that the issue of identity created tension for him. He described being a principal of an educational establishment that provided both second level education and FE as akin to ‘riding two horses at the same time.’

One of the tutors interviewed, is a Guidance Counsellor, in a Community School which offers two strands of FE courses. A separate stand-alone purpose built unit is used to deliver the FE Art courses while the Health Care courses are delivered in the
Community school. He differentiated between the strong sense of ‘College ‘identity the students in the stand-alone unit had compared to the weaker sense of College identity the FE students in the community school have. When they inhabit the same educational physical space and operate under the organisational norms of a second level school creating an authentic ‘in College’ experience for the student is very difficult.

There is a huge difference in relation to identity between how the courses are perceived by students and by the community. The course which takes place in a separate building where students have no contact with the second level school results in LC students being quite enthusiastic about taking the course. (Tutor 1, page 11, lines 14 to 19).

The tutor believes that students in the School of Art perceive themselves to be in College which is made possible by the clearly defined identity policy led by the vision of the leadership. The strong links with, and the established progression routes to Degree Courses in Art Colleges in Ireland and in the UK make a FETAC Level 6 Art course in this College very appealing to relevant Leaving Cert students. Students who attain distinctions in their FETAC Level 6 assessments can transfer to the second year of certain four year Fine Art Degree programmes from this FE College.

The strong sense of a College identity in this FE College has impacted on policies and practice in relation to cultivating transfer links with the HE sector that is yielding benefits to students in terms of increased access to degree programmes.

In terms of identity one Director sees FE as a bridge between second level school and University or Third Level Colleges. She believed that;

the ‘Scottish idea of 2 plus 2, 2 years close to home followed by 2 years away in a University makes absolute sense for certain young people’ (Director 5, page 9, lines 12 to 13).

A Director in a dual campus college revealed, possibly inadvertently, how the timetabling constraints disadvantaged the FE provision in his College. The timetable is constructed on the basis of using the qualifications of the teachers in the second level school thus ensuring that it is keeping those teachers (Director 5, page 5, line
21). The overall organisational strategy would appear to suggest that the staffing of the second level school and the retention of the existing teachers are key priorities. The FE provision is subordinated to the accomplishment of these priorities. The extent to which it is possible to build a separate and credible college identity in a dual campus scenario, where the second level element is so admittedly prioritised, is questionable.

Identity was linked to the more functional aspect of the institution for three Directors who felt that FE offered a College experience for students who were seeking ‘a sense of independence’ but who did not have the ‘maturity’ to accompany the freedom. The young person’s desire for freedom and independence along with the need for support are captured in the following quote:

*We have a number of students who are not from Dublin and they are living in accommodation in Dublin. I just spoke to one of the girls today, she got her results today, she did ok but not without us ringing her at eight in the morning to get her up out of bed …….she just didn’t have the maturity to deal with it.*

(Director 4, pages 7 to 8, lines 24 to 27 and 1 to 2).

The high level of support provided by the College in this instance is suggestive of strategies undertaken at second level to help students who struggle with attendance and examinations. It may be a practice that emanates from the culture of a College that once was a second level school in a socially and economically disadvantaged area. The drive to create a College culture while providing a level of supports that are more associated with strategies deployed in disadvantaged second level schools will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

Focus group participant A, felt that students in her FE College felt they were ‘in College’ largely because the second level school constituted a very small portion of the overall institution and FETAC provision was highly visible throughout the College. Participant B, was exercised about the whole issue of identity and FE. He believed that FE providers owed it to their students to create a definite College identity. Students who have completed their Leaving Certificate or adults returning to formal education do not want to be subjected to a secondary school experience. They would find that demeaning and de-motivating. Participant C, concurred that identity as a College student was important and that it imbued a sense of importance and value
on the course and in turn it impacted on the commitment that a young person has to
the course. There was universal agreement among the focus group participants that
the area of identity in the FE sector was neglected and that students are not best
served when there is fuzziness around the identity of FE Colleges and qualifications
that are obtained therein. Even within dual purpose campuses participant B,
submitted that it was possible to carve out a separate and distinct identity for the FE
students. He cited uniform policy, separate social and assembly area, and two
different sets of codes of conduct reflecting a more adult orientation in the
relationship between the teacher and FE student. He believed that these approaches
are necessary in order to send out a clear message that the FE students are valued and
respected in their own right. The student’s self-identity as a college student can be
strengthened or weakened by the institution’s sense of identity as a college. One of
the key features of a College or post-secondary educational environment is the
facilitation of a contributory role for the student body to engage to some extent in the
decision making processes of the college. A college identity suggests an adult
orientated learning environment, where students are given a stake in the institutional
structures that govern the college.

The lack of clarity around identity or the inability of the College leaders to define a
distinctive FE ethos may reflect the tradition of policy neglect of the sector. The
fragmentation of FE alluded to in the interviews mirror the findings in the ESRI
Report on Further Education, 2014. There was a notable lack of reference by the
Directors or tutors in this study to external markers such as government policy in
terms of how the Colleges defined their identity. This may be linked to the organic
development of the system which has led to multiple providers and duplication of
programmes in some areas. Stakeholders who participated in the ESRI study of FE
(2014), criticised the inconsistency of the quality of provision and the lack of an
overall national strategy to guide FE in Ireland.

In setting out the context for a national strategy for FET in Ireland, SOLAS identifies
a range of policy weaknesses in the current provision of FE, (SOLAS, 2014). The
FET sector lacks clarity of definition. The haphazard development of FE across the
country gives rise to fragmentation. The ‘substantial variations in regional
distribution’ (SOLAS, p. 7), of FE programmes are noted. The poor connection
between the courses provided and the skills needed in the labour market is highlighted very sharply by SOLAS. The lack of data available to FE College leaders to guide planning in terms of programme provision is identified as a major deficiency. The absence of a dedicated funding structure and model for FE is viewed as an impediment to development. All of the Directors raised the issue of funding from a number of perspectives, predominantly in respect of the inadequacy of resources for FE. Four Directors described the convoluted model of funding for FE Colleges. Staffing and capitation payments are allocated through the post-primary section in the DES. Resources for students with a SEN diagnosis is funded through the HEA.

SOLUS, in identifying policy gaps pertaining to FE, sets out a framework to address the overall governance weaknesses and the lack of strategic direction for the sector. The arbitrary manner by which the progression pathways between FE and HE are operated, and the communication deficits which lead to a lack of information about FE provision among key stakeholders such as parents, students and guidance counsellors are also addressed in the strategy document.

4.3.8 Student as Stakeholder

Students are one of the key stakeholders in any college. It would be reasonable to expect that their stakeholder status would be honoured by representation on the decision making and governance structures of colleges. Scholars who have studied both school and college drop-out would argue that validating the student’s stake in the institution can engender a sense of belonging to the organisation and thereby increase the students chances of persistence. Only two Directors responded in the affirmative to the question: *Are FE students represented on the board of management?* one of which was qualified as a sub-committee of the board of management. The other ten FE Colleges did not have formal representative bodies where students could engage in the decision making processes or influence governance decisions in the college. A tutor highlighted how disadvantageous it is for the FE students in a dual campus College:

*In cases where the FE course is an add-on to the second level, FE students do not have any stake in school governance without reps on student council or the BOM. (Tutor 1, page 8, lines 10 to 12).*
Director 7 expressed it succinctly:

It is lacking in the college........ but there is no formal ways for them to be represented (Director 7, page 5, lines 18 to 21).

A system of ‘class rep’ was described by five Directors. Each class nominated a class representative who. The role of class rep appeared to be limited to bringing issues to the attention of the class tutor or to college management as appropriate.

While the majority of the Directors conceded that there is a complete lack of activity such as clubs that are associated with a College experience. In two of the FE Colleges that denoted a modicum of extra –curricular activity for the students it was teacher led as opposed to student organised.

In the dual campus college the status bestowed upon the FE student is weaker than in the stand alone FE Colleges.

in this school there are two representatives of the Teachers because we are a second level school we have a Board of management for the second level school I am not sure whether Further Ed Colleges that are stand alone have students on their Board of Management but we definitely don’t no no. (Director 8, page 8, lines 4 to 7).

Participant B, in the Focus Group recognised that the formal structures for honouring the stakeholder status of the FE student are poorly developed but that representation on the BOM or on student Councils is a narrow view of stakeholder engagement. He believed that the stakeholder engagement was lived or played out in the open and respectful relationships between student and teacher and between student and management. Participants A and C, asserted that representation on a BOM or a student council was not a narrow manifestation of stakeholder engagement but a powerfully symbolic way of recognising the valid role that the student body has in college governance and that the FE fraternity has been remiss in the development of these structures.
Findings relating to the state policy and the perceptions of FE by employers, parents and school personnel will form the basis of the next section.
Section 4.4
Superordinate Theme
State and Society

4.4.1 State and Society
In this section findings in relation to government education policies and how FE qualifications are viewed and valued by the wider elements of society, which emerged as a broad theme in the surveys and in the interviews with FE College directors and tutors and in the Focus Group, will be presented. The Irish government’s Qualifications Framework will be described. The findings relating to this topic are categorised as the role of society and the state in FE. This theme encompasses the status of and the attitudes to FETAC in the educational spectrum. The societal attitudes to FETAC are influenced by Government Educational policies pertaining to the status of qualifications specifically in relation to the value of the academic award as a means to progress to HE or Degree Courses.

The other strand of this theme relates to Government policy in relation to funding of the FE sector and financial supports for FE students. A further strand of this theme focuses on the economic conditions that impact on FE students specifically in relation to the employability of the graduates of FE and to the availability of employment for FE graduates. How these conditions which are determined external to the Colleges can impact on student retention is evident from the responses that link persistence or withdrawal to factors that connect directly to government educational policies such as progression, financial support for FE and for FE students.

4.4.2 The Qualifications Framework and Progression
The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched by the Irish Government in 2003 and is informed by the Bologna Process 1999. The framework is a system of 10 levels that is used to describe the Irish qualifications system. It is the single structure mechanism for recognising all education and training in Ireland. All framework awards now have an NFQ Level that ranges from Level 1 to Level 10 and reflects the standard of learning for each level. The NFQ Award type indicates the purpose, the volume and progression opportunities associated with a particular award.
Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence setting out what an individual is expected to know, understand and be able to do following successful completion of a process of learning.

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is constructed to some extent on the basis that it facilitates progression towards higher level awards. Many FE Colleges have integrated progression pathways to higher awards levels as part of their overall educational provision. Common features in FE Colleges are links that allow students who attain distinctions in Level 6 FETAC Awards to access Level 7 Degree Courses in Institutes of Technology or Universities in Ireland and in the UK.

Using the FETAC route as a progression route to HE was raised by 10 of the FE Directors and two of the FE tutors. There was a consensus among the respondents that the possibility of progression enhanced motivation among students in relation to attainment and consequently improved completion rates. The three participants in the focus group recalled that the students who were using FE as an access route to HE were more determined in relation to their studies and tended to achieve higher than average outcomes in terms of attainment and retention.

*Such students are doing the PLC courses for progression and would be very motivated as this is a stepping stone to what they really want – a course in an IT College or in a University (Notes from focus group, page 7, lines 3 to 5).*

Director 3, explained that 6 Distinctions in a Level 6 Award will be accepted as 400 points on a CAO application by Institutes of Technology thus opening up access to a wide range of Degree courses for FETAC graduates.

The Director of an FE College that specialises in Art programmes claimed that

*retention rates ....would be close to 100% in terms of progression any of the people who are here and are committed to moving on and getting into college you get 100%. (Director 2, page 7, lines 11 to 14).*
Directors in five FE Colleges highlighted the excellent completion rates among students who were using the FETAC route as an entry to an Arts Degree courses in Trinity College Dublin or in NUI Maynooth.

*We have access courses, Liberal Arts and we have a link with Trinity from that so in the course where we had the link with Trinity the retention rate is very high. Students can progress to Arts in Trinity.* (Director 6, page 8, lines 17 to 19).

A highly evolved progression pathway between FE and the Institutes of Technology was described by five Directors. Students who have attained a merit or distinction profile at Level 6 are eligible to transfer into second or third year of a number of four year Level 8 Degree courses.

‘Dovetailing’ was how a Director described the practice between an Institute of Technology and the FE College in an arrangement that helped both institutions improve completion rates. The Head of the Business School in an IT established links with the FE College and worked with the teachers to dovetail the modules with the Business Degree Course. A total of fifteen of the eighteen FE students in 2012/2013, transferred to the IT Business Degree Course following completion of FETAC Level 6.

In the Focus group the issue of progression was seized upon by Participant A, who viewed it as a two edged sword. She believed that students were lured into FETAC on the promise of a progression but in reality there were far less progression opportunities than FE leadership intimated. She cited nursing studies as a case in point. Each year hundreds of students enrol in FETAC Health care and Nursing Courses in the hope of getting one of the very few places in University Level 8 Nursing Study courses as a result of completing FETAC Level 6. Participant C, only partially agreed with this viewpoint and noted that there were well established progression patterns between IT and FE Colleges in courses such as Business Studies, ICT, Culinary Arts, and Sports Sciences. Participant B, saw validity in both arguments but stated that progression is theoretically possible and impacts positively on students’ performance but that in operational terms it is very haphazard and relies on the initiative of Colleges to establish progression pathways and links in some
cases. He stressed the need for a more overarching national approach to guarantee consistency of application procedures and standards.

Progression to higher level academic awards is made possible by policies at a macro level and impact on individual student’s persistence in FE Colleges. Policies in relation to financial supports for FE students that are determined at a macro level impact directly on participation and completion rates among FE students. All FE Directors interviewed alluded to the concentration of students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds that make up their FE enrolment. Meeting the eligibility criteria for students’ grants and other welfare payments was critical for many of these students in terms of their ability to complete their FE courses.


The government is a powerful player in the field of education. The policies in respect of FE impose themselves very explicitly on the students in relation to the eligibility criteria for students’ grants and the continuation of welfare payments. The effect of the bureaucratic rigidity in relation to the allocation of grants and welfare payments is acutely felt in FE where the participation of a preponderance of the student body is economically dependent on state financial supports.

Director 8, in this study reported that out of a total of eight hundred students enrolled in his FE College, five hundred of them held medical cards and were in receipt of a student grants or a welfare payment or a Back to Education allowance. All Directors and tutors noted that the majority of students in their FE Colleges could be described as economically disadvantaged and their participation in education is contingent on their eligibility to access student grants, social welfare or qualify for a Back to Education allowance (BTEI) which is aimed at people who are on long term unemployment benefits.

There was a consensus among ten of the College Directors that the qualification process for student grants has become very rigid. The tightening of regulations pertaining to the BTEI resulted in increased drop-out among mature students in five FE Colleges according to the Directors. Following registration, some mature students who are in receipt of unemployment welfare benefits, discover that they are no longer
eligible to receive social welfare payments. Students in this predicament almost always drop out of the FE course.

Somebody could be settled in the class they thought they were fine, and then all of a sudden their money is cut off, the dole is cut off and they go to the dole office wondering why the money is not in the bank and to be told that we deemed you ineligible for BTEI …… That’s a huge issue’ (Director 1, page 7, lines 11 to 17).

The inflexible conditions, associated with grant applications, were specifically mentioned by seven of the College Directors.

The grant system is very rigid, hugely rigid hugely rigid and it goes against a student who needs time’ (Director 9, page 5, lines 2 to 3).

Students who may need further time to complete a full set of modules that are necessary to obtain a FETAC award are not accommodated within the student grant system. Directors in four FE Colleges believed that if some students were allowed to complete their courses over two years the completion rates would be enhanced. Currently there are no financial supports or grants for students to complete FETAC courses in a part time capacity.

The delay in the payment of student grants in 2012/2013 following a newly established centralised system for the disbursement of the funds was noted by six Directors as a contributory factor to attrition among students.

The reduced availability of part –time work as a consequence of the economic downturn was signalled by four Directors as a difficulty for students who needed to generate an income to support themselves through College.

Some students just couldn’t afford to be here, because a lot of them in the past students could actually have another job but that seems to be gone (Director 3, page 9, lines 2 to 7).

The wider issue of securing employment based on the value of or the recognition of a FETAC qualification as an education credential was explored with the Directors and tutors during the course of the research interviews.
4.4.4 The Recognition of and the Value of FETAC Qualifications in the Employment Market

The extent to which FETAC courses are recognised, accepted and esteemed by employers was explored with all twelve Directors and with the three tutors during the interview process. There was a consensus among the fifteen respondents that FETAC has become more recognised among employers particularly the language used to describe courses such as ‘medical office administration’ and ‘legal executive’ titles. It was noted by five Directors that FETAC qualifications are not sufficiently well recognised by the private employment sector or by the professional bodies.

Expressing some degree of frustration one Director believed that FETAC needed to:

    Market the image and standing of the courses that they were doing plus the fact that they were changing the names so often they were amalgamating and changing names and changed them again as soon as people get used to them employers or business people. (Director 5, pages 9, lines 1 to 7).

A tutor spoke of the long standing issue she had with the Dublin City Council in respect of applications from FETAC Level 5 graduates. Dublin City Council did not recognise a FETAC Level 5 as an equivalent to a Leaving Certificate. However, in recent years the Council has agreed to recognise Level 5 as an equivalent to a Leaving Certificate and a Level 5 with Distinction as an equivalent of an Honours Leaving Certificate. This breakthrough sets a benchmark for the recognition of FETAC qualifications among public bodies in Ireland.

Participant A, in the focus group attributed some of the difficulty to the recognition of FETAC qualifications to our

    locked in thinking about education in this country……….and anything that falls outside of the big markers such as the Leaving Cert, the diploma or a degree or a Masters is not valued.

Participant C, concurred with this view but reminded the group that the whole FETAC framework was very new and only in existence since 2003. However, the task of communicating the value of the courses and the content of the FETAC courses has not been undertaken in any systematic way. Colleges are responsible for their own
communications strategy which mainly focussed on targeting potential students as opposed to targeting employers.

Participant B, made a more nuanced contribution and related recognition and value of the qualification to the demand for the skills in the marketplace. He instanced the tourism and the health care industries as being very aware of the relevant FETAC qualifications because there was an ‘almost insatiable’ demand for the graduates in both of these expanding sectors.

The lack of awareness for FETAC qualification is not confined to certain employment sectors. Commenting on how poorly informed key educational personnel are in relation to FETAC, one Director explained that:

*Very often a lot of Guidance Counsellors don’t understand the links process in terms of moving on to Higher Ed, they are still very much in the dark about the benefits of FETAC certification.* (Director 12, page 10, lines 3 to 5).

Only two Directors felt reasonably certain that FETAC qualifications would be recognised internationally. Responses from the other ten Directors indicated that they were unsure of what level of international recognition there is for FETAC awards. Stakeholder in the ESRI Study of FE (2014), noted that the former FETAC system suffered from a lack of international recognition.

In an FE College where one fifth of the enrolment is from the migrant community the Director added that the international applicants for FETAC courses are highly informed about content and levels. The Director deduced from this level of awareness among the students from migrant communities, that FETAC courses may be valued and recognised by employers at an international level.

The non-inclusion of FETAC courses in the Central Applications Office (CAO) system stymies the recognition of the awards by the schools, by parents and by the public according to one of the Directors. Being outside of the CAO system, which is the overarching mechanism for access to and allocation of places on HE courses, weakens the status of FETAC in the educational sector.
And there is the parental thing …….it has to be a CAO course or nothing
(Director 4, page 6, lines 18 to 20)

The impact of the CAO structure radiates across the entire second level and higher education system in Ireland. FE, by contrast operates from a more marginal position on the Irish educational landscape.
Section 4.5
Summary

4.5.1 Summary
In this chapter the purpose of the study was restated and the conduct of the research project was briefly described. An explanation of how the *Attrition in Further Education* theoretical framework was formulated was set out. The generation of the data base was explained. An overview of the thematic analysis process was provided. The genesis of the major themes which emerged following the analytical process was explicated. The major themes are referred to as superordinate themes. Related topics to the superordinate themes are referred to as ordinate, subordinate or sub-subordinate themes. Three major superordinate themes emerged from the findings as follows: The state and society, the educational institute and the individual. The finding will be summarised under each superordinate theme.

The Individual
The student enrolling in a FE College is embarking on what could be expected to be a period of growth. The theoretical framework: *Attrition in Further Education*, perceives that upon enrolment the student’s likelihood of course completion is influenced by the individual’s attributes, dispositions and family circumstances. The student’s immanent attributes such as academic attainment, education history, embodied values or *habitus*, motivation and resilience have the potential to either enrich or impair the quality of the educational experience. Other conditions that impact on the individuals chances of course completion are family circumstances, family values in respect of education, and access to financial resources. The framework perceives that persistence for students whose personal attributes and dispositions are not conducive to course completion is contingent on the College’s capability or willingness to provide a supportive educational environment. Continuation to course completion is influenced by the internal conditions that prevail in the College. This is particularly true for students who enter College coming from a disadvantaged position prior to entry. The internal conditions operate in a dynamic, sensitive and interconnected way that fuses the impact of the educational institute, the personal attributes of the individual student. The relations between the college and the
individual with the powerful elements of government and with other influential strongholds in society such as the employers and the HEIs were picked up at various junctions in the findings.

**Educational Institute**
The second major element of this framework is termed educational institute and it encompasses all of the internal conditions and capabilities that a College can offer its student body. There are four main subsections within this element. The first section relates to the physical environment of the college. The second component of institutional ecology constitutes the broad expanse of the conceptual terrain that covers academic and social integration. Curriculum, assessment, pre-selection procedures, quality of educational provision, quality of teaching, quality of college experience, college identity and scope for student personal and social development all reside within this sub-section. The two remaining sections focus on College Heritage which examines the history and status of the institute within the field of education. Finally the external dimension section examines the College’s educational capital and attempts to determine how desirable a qualification from that institution is viewed and how is it rated by employers and to what extent does it enhance access to Degree programmes in Institutes of Technology or Universities.

The findings indicate that the educational institute could be further examined from two opposing perspectives. One of which seeks to establish the degree of control which rests with the institution in determining the internal college systems and secondly, to what extent is the interior world of the college impacted upon by socio/political and cultural factors that reside outside the college’s control. The evidence from the findings indicate that the individual student’s experience of the internal college conditions has a critical impact on the possibilities of persistence.

**The State and Society.**
This element of the framework is located in a pivotal overarching position outside of both the individual and the institution. It exercises a powerful and pervasive influence on almost every facet of the institution and in turn on the individual students. Primarily this element is concerned with government policy, resource allocation and official validation of qualifications. The extent to which a FE student’s aspirations to
access Higher Education is facilitated or frustrated by both government and Higher Education establishment’s policies featured as an issue of importance in the findings. A second aspect of this element considered the more nebulous notion of society’s endorsement or perception of the qualifications emanating from Further Education Colleges and the confused identity of FE colleges as a post-secondary educational institution.

The findings will be discussed in light of the key messages from the literature review and in respect of the research questions in chapter 5.
Chapter 5
Discussion Chapter

5.1 Introduction
In this chapter the findings from this study are discussed in light of the research questions. The findings are also discussed in an integrated manner with the key messages from the literature review. There are 6 sections in this chapter as follows:

- **Section 5.1:** In this section a description of the layout of the chapter will be provided.

- **Section 5.2:** In this section the purpose of the study and the research questions will be re-stated. An outline of where each research question will be answered will be indicated. A summary of the findings from this study will be set out and the thematic approach and the narrative terminology used to describe the findings will be explained. The approach used to analyse the data in this study generated the three major themes which are referred to as Superordinate themes: These themes are: The Individual, The Institution and State and Society. Each Superordinate theme is underpinned by a range of associate or closely related themes which are referred to as ordinate themes. A further group of associated themes are referred to as sub-ordinate themes.

In order to interrogate the findings, thinking tools are required. Bourdieu’s conceptual toolkit will be used in an attempt to illuminate the processes and conditions in the education spaces where their presence may not be easily visible. The concepts of *field, capital and habitus* will be used to explore the issues of power, dominance, and agency in the *field* of education and in the *sub-field* of further education. The second section will also briefly reconnect with Bourdieu’s theory of practice, which was described more extensively as part of the literature review in Chapter 2.
This section will also contain a brief recap of the key messages from the literature. In sections 3, 4 and 5, the findings from this study will be compared with the messages from the available literature. Convergence and divergence between the findings in this study and with the literature will be noted.

- **Section 5.3**: This section will focus on the Superordinate theme of the: Individual. Sub-ordinate themes such as: personal circumstances, finance, family circumstances, motivation, adaptation, course choice and pre-enrolment attributes. Social integration and the individual will also be discussed.

- **Section 5.4**: This section will focus on the Superordinate theme of the: Educational Institute. The related ordinate themes which will be discussed in this section include: - quality of provision, student supports, class tutor system, learning supports, guidance counselling, identity and college experience, FE policy development and student as stakeholder.

- **Section 5.5**: The fifth Section will focus on the Superordinate theme of Society and State. The related ordinate themes which will be discussed include: The Qualifications Framework and Progression, Government Policy and Financial supports for FE Students, the recognition of and the value of FETAC qualifications in the employment market

- **Section 5.6**: There will be a brief summary of each of the sections. The extent to which the research questions have been answered will be assessed. Reflections will be offered on the usefulness of Bourdieu’s conceptual framework as a means to interrogate the findings from this study.
Section 5.2
Purpose of the Study

5.2.1. Purpose of the Study
Further Education (FE) is a distinct strand in the Irish Education system. Students enrol in FE programmes either after the Leaving Certificate or as adults who uses the FE system as a re-entry route to formal education. Students embark on an FE programme in order to gain a qualification to enhance their employability or to use the FE as a progression to Level 7 and Level 8 Degree courses in the Higher Education (HE) sector. FE is also viewed as part of the Irish government’s strategy to address the educational deficits in the adult population.

Evidence from the FE College Directors interviewed in this study indicate that the typical educational profile of students enrolling in FE divide into 3 broad categories as follows: The Leaving Certificate Applied student who has completed a vocationally oriented programme, and whose option for post compulsory education is confined to FE. The Leaving Certificate student who is using the FE route to progress to HE and the adult who is returning to formal education after a long absence and is using FE to address educational deficits, and to enhance employability prospects and in some cases for purely personal development reasons.

FE in Ireland is characterised by high levels of attrition among students. While there are no official published centralised statistics on FE retention rates, College Directors indicate that the drop-out rates prior to course completion can reach and sometimes exceed 50% of the student intake.

The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand the causes of attrition among Irish FE students. The attrition levels of FE students in Ireland are a cause for concern particularly among FE College Directors and management. The research questions which framed the study will be set out in the next sub-section.

5.2.2. Research Questions and Answering the Research Questions.
The following five research questions reflects the purpose of the study and were further refined by the key messages from the literature reviewed.
• What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?

• What causes of withdrawal are due to factors which are within the control or influence of colleges?

• What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to colleges?

• What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?

• Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?

Elements of the research questions will be answered in all of sections 3, 4 and 5. A more specific focus on the research questions will be addressed in the sections as follows:

Research Question 1: What causes students to withdraw from FE courses prior to completion? will be answered in part in sections 3, 4 and 5.

Research Question 2: What causes of withdrawal are due to factors that are within the control or influence of colleges? will be addressed mainly in section 4 which is entitled: Educational Institute.

Research Question 4: What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to the college? will be addressed for the most part in sections 3 and 5.

Research Question 4: What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal? will be addressed in section 3, 4 and 5.
Research Question 5: Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates? will be focussed on in section 4.

A summary of the findings of this study will be set out in the next sub-section.

5.2.3 Summary of Findings from the Study
The analysis of the data, as outlined in Chapter 3, produced, through a coding and categorisation process, 3 main themes in relation to understanding the issues of attrition and persistence among FE students in Ireland. The themes are: The Individual, the College conditions which is referred to as the Educational Institute, and the Economic, Political and social conditions which is referred to as the State and Society.

The evidence from the data suggests that the impact of any one of the themes was difficult to single out and it appeared more likely that it was the inter-connectedness of the themes that produced a set of conditions which influenced student’s behaviour around persistence or attrition. The 3 Superordinate themes were drawn together to form a theoretical framework which aims to understand attrition among FE students in Ireland. The framework is entitled: Attrition in Further Education. The 3 elements of the framework which align with the Superordinate themes and their interconnectedness will be teased out in Sections 3, 4 and 5 in this chapter.

Section 5.2.4 Key Messages from the Literature.
The key messages from the literature accessed in this study indicate that attrition among students in post compulsory education results from a combination of social, personal and institutional factors. Related issues such as home background, social class, poverty and financial circumstances were also highlighted as causes of student drop-out. The theoretical perspectives on student attrition in post compulsory education, advanced by the leading writers such as Tinto and Bean on the topic could be summarized as sociological, institutional, psychological, and economic in nature. The findings from this study will be integrated with the key messages from the literature and interrogated using Bourdieusian thinking tools in Sections 3, 4 and 5, in this chapter.
5.2.5 Using Bourdieu’s Sociological Concepts

Can Bourdieu’s social theory be mobilised to understand the relationship between the FE student and the FE Institute and the intricacy of the relations between the Institute and the other fields of power such as the state, the HE sector and the post primary education sector, and the employer bodies?

Bourdieu’s extensive writing on a broad range of socio-cultural issues and in particular, on unequal educational achievement and how the amounts and types of capital conspire to reproduce educational inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). These perspectives hold the potential of offering a penetrative perspective on the data in this study and bring a fresh approach to the examination of attrition among FE students in Ireland. The real potential, which Bourdieu’s methodological framework offers for this study begins to emerge when the key concepts of field, capital, habitus are considered as part of field theory. Grenfell and James (1998, p. 20) assertion that ‘no field ever exists in isolation’ and that ‘there is the sense of fields within fields’ reflects the position of FE in relation to the fields of HE and of the second level education in Ireland. From a Bourdieusian perspective FE students have to negotiate and survive a number of fields of practice. The post-primary school sector is a key field and also the FE sub-field itself and the downstream effects of the field of practice of the HE sector and possibly for some students the fields of practice of a variety of employment sectors

Using what are referred to, as Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ of field, habitus and capital helps to create a break with the pre- given or the pre-conceived objects of the social world of the fields pertinent to this study. Exploring the relational association of habitus with capital and field allows for the examination of the relationships between the student, the institution and the various government policies which impact the student’s life. The importance of maintaining a relational mode of thought when employing habitus is emphasised by Maton (2008, p.81) and can be achieved by analysing the field positions and the underlying logic of practice, and, most importantly, the relationship between field and habitus-not just one and/or the other (Grenfell 2008, pp.223-224.).
Drawing on Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective to inform the analysis of data requires researchers to look at the dynamic interaction between individuals and the surroundings in which they are situated and to take account of the social, political, economic and cultural context. Using Bourdieu’s theoretical thinking toolkit and the related concepts of: misrecognition, doxa will elucidate the conditions which contrive to weaken the tenure of some FE students in the education field and in the FE sub-field in particular.

In undertaking an analysis of the field Grenfell (2012), explains the necessity of looking at a field in relationship to other fields, especially the dominant field of power, which usually relates to political power and government. Central to Bourdieu’s approach is an analysis of the field conditions as a whole and the relationships within the field in order to understand what is going on rather than just tabulate an aspect of the field. Bourdieu asks us to look at the overall conditions and how those conditions are determined, produced and what their effects are and how they impact upon individual personalities and their trajectories. The links between the three levels in the methodology, which gives a very good kind of topography of the field as it exists, creates a vision of the totality of the problems, which are not individually deterministic, but are the consequence of an alignment of a set of constituents, which combine to exclude certain groups from what Bourdieu refers to as the scholastic enclosure (Sketch for a Self Analysis, Nice. R. (English translation), 2004).

The first superordinate theme: The Individual, will be the focus of Section 5.3 and will include a discussion of the relationships between the individuals and the objective structures of the FE field and how those relationships are structured by habitus of the agents or the actors.

The structural topography of the FE field will be mapped out as part of the discussion of the second major theme: The Educational Institute, in Section 5.4. The positioning of the agents with reference to the capital they possess will be considered.
The FE field will be analysed in relation to the field of power, which is mainly the government and the Department of Education and Skills (DES), in association with the super-ordinate theme of: State and Society in Section 5.5. The relationship between the sub field of FE and the dominant field of power, particularly in relation to government educational policies will be explored.
Section 5.3
The Individual

5.3.1 Introduction
The analysis undertaken of the data in this study generated a cluster of themes, which related to the students’ personal circumstances and to their individual dispositions. The themes, which emerged included: Personal circumstances, Finance, Family circumstances, Motivation, Adaptation, Course Choice and Pre-enrolment attributes. These themes were grouped to form an overarching theme, which is entitled: the Individual. The Superordinate theme: The Individual is the third part of the theoretical framework, which was distilled from the empirical work in this study which sought to gain an understanding of the causes of student drop-out in the FE Colleges in Ireland. The framework is entitled: Attrition in Further Education. In this section, the overarching Superordinate theme of the Individual will be discussed along with the associated subordinate themes.

Upon enrolment the student’s likelihood of course completion is influenced by the individual’s attributes, dispositions and family circumstances. The student’s immanent attributes such as academic attainment, education history, embodied values or habitus, motivation and resilience have the potential to either enrich or impair the quality of the educational experience. Other conditions which impact on the individual’s chances of course completion are family values in respect of education, and access to financial resources. The findings in relation to these themes will be drawn out in relation to the messages from the literature and will be directed towards answering the following Research Questions:

- **Research Question 1.** What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?

- **Research Question 3:** What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to colleges?
• Research Question 4: What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?

• Research Question 5: Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?

The findings will be discussed under three main headings: Personal Circumstances, Pre-entry attributes and Habitus.

5.3.2 Personal Circumstances

This theme overlaps with state policy on funding further and higher education, which will be dealt with in Section 5.5 of this chapter. The issue of economic capital or lack of it, within the wider family was a recurring topic across the sources of data in this study. There was a sense that the majority of students were responsible for their individual financial affairs. The evidence suggests that a significant number of those enrolled in FE Colleges, are not from families who are endowed with sufficient economic resources to relieve the student of the onus of combining financial self-sustainability and fulltime study. The study points to an element of economic deprivation which impacts on student persistence in FE. Participation in post-secondary education was not cossetted for some of the students in this research by what Bourdieu (1990, p. 381) refers to as a ‘distance from the world and from the urgency and necessity’. Low-income parents were found to be less likely than affluent parents to financially support their children during young adulthood and offer less assistance when they provide it. (Schoeni and Ross, 2005).

There were two contradictory dimensions to the financial issue, as a contributory factor in student attrition in Irish FE Colleges. Pronouncements, that financial pressures led to withdrawal among the FE students were confidently asserted by all of the Directors. In the literature the belief that financial issues are a major influence on withdrawal is more tenuous. It is difficult to assess, the extent to which the issue of financial hardship is a convenient and acceptable reason for both the student and the college. Why do some students choose to stay and others withdraw even though they exhibit similar backgrounds and circumstances? (Wray et al, 2014). Beneath the thin veneer of financial difficulties, may lie some of the institutional dynamics that impact
negatively on the student’s college experience, which will be discussed in Section 5.4 of this chapter. Further exploration of the interplay between the pre-entry attributes and the college structures points to the notion of self-efficacy on the part of the student, which will be examined in more detail in the next sub-section.

5.3.3 Pre-enrolment Attributes
Bean and Eaton (2000), drilled down on the pre-entry attributes of students in their scholarship on college drop-out. They harnessed the insights of psychological theories to inform their propositions on attrition. In their Attrition model they propose the self-efficacy theory. Personality types which exhibit a stronger sense of self efficacy according to Bean and Eaton are more likely to persevere when confronted with academic and social challenges. The model also links persistence with higher levels of self-confidence and self-esteem among students. Bean and Eaton introduce the notion of locus of control to the attrition debate. Students guided by an internal locus of control were found to have a belief that they can succeed in college, while those who are externally controlled were found to be more fatalistic and more likely to leave college when confronted with major challenges.

Bean and Metzner (1985), proposed the Attrition Model for Non-Traditional Students premised on four key variables including background, academic performance, environment and intent to leave. Bean and Metzner’s model has obvious relevance to the Irish FE sector which comprises largely of what would be termed the non-traditional student. The findings from a major study by the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) in the UK in 1998, in a report entitled: 9,000 Voices: student persistence and drop-out in Further Education’ mirror the tenets of Bean and Metzner’s model. Dissatisfaction with course placement, difficulties with social integration, dissatisfaction with course content and with the quality of teaching, difficult family and challenging financial circumstances emerged as strong risk factors for attrition.

Data from this study echoes the findings in the FEDA report, but the significant difference is in the order of ranking of the factors. Family and financial circumstances are more strongly represented in the interviews with the Directors of the Irish FE Colleges. High levels of motivation was cited extensively in the
interview data, especially in relation to students who were using FE as a progression route to HE, as a major contributory factor in retention. Students in this category may exemplify elements of Bean and Eaton’s self-efficacy theory. McGivney (2004), offers a more evolved perception that it is the interplay between a student’s pre-enrolment characteristics and the quality of the interactions with the antecedent’s attributes and college experiences which have a critical influence on student persistence.

The notion of self-efficacy was identified in the literature as a key driver of persistence. Students with high self-efficacy were found to be more resourceful in finding strategies to complete their educational goals and respond more positively to challenges than people with low self-efficacy. (Seijts, et al., 2004). Nightingale et al. (2013) concluded similarly that students who demonstrate a high degree of emotional management and high levels of self-efficacy were found to adjust better to University.

The possession of self-efficacy may be influenced by access to knowledge and supports. Cultural and social capital influences knowledge of the purposes and requirements of different postsecondary programs as well as the resources to pursue them. (McDonough, 1997).

The ability or the motivation to become fully conversant with the course content is an implicit element of self-efficacy. Enrolling on the wrong course was signalled by both withdrawn students and by Directors and FE tutors as a cause of drop-out. The mismatch between the student’s need and the course content arose as a result of a default because the student didn’t receive a CAO offer for a place in a HEI or because the student had to, or chose to, accept the limited range of courses available in the local FE College. Self-efficacy, as it is conceived in the literature suggests that the individual is capable of both defining and pursuing personal goals.

As a result of this perceived hierarchy. FET was seen as catering for students who failed to obtain a higher education place rather than a valued pathway in its own right. (ESRI, 2014, p. 39).
This was in line with the profile of some of the students described by the Directors and tutors in the interviews who: *drifted into FE, aimless, opted to enrol on a FE course to fill in the year*, The student referred to by the participant who described: *The College ringing her at eight o clock in the morning to get her up out of bed* contrasts sharply with the concept of an individual possessed with self- efficacy for whom a successful college outcome is eminently possible.

Deficiencies in these attributes were demonstrated in the students described by Directors and tutors who dropped out because they were *immature and not ready for the transition into Further Ed* (Director 7), and because LCA students who were accustomed to a highly supportive environment and could not adapt to the more independent and self- reliant approach to learning. By contrast the refined recruitment processes that select students who are highly motivated and demonstrate extensive profiles of achievement in the dance, film and arts, who are exploiting the FE progression pathways, are in essence, exemplifying the notion that self-efficacy and educational success are positively correlated. A closer look at the individual’s dispositions will be undertaken in the next sub-section.

### 5.3.4 Habitus

It is tempting to embrace the theoretical propositions of self – efficacy to explain attrition among FE students. The theory is closely aligned to the deficit model and views the shortcomings as residing with the student thereby externalising the causes of attrition from the perspective of the College. Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* offers a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between the individual and the context of their actions. The concept of *habitus* has been defined by Bourdieu (1971, p. 83) as:

> A system of lasting, transposable dispositions …..a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions

And by Webb Shirato and Danaher (220, p. 114) as a:

> A set of durable dispositions that people carry within them that shapes their attitudes behaviours and responses to given situations
An individual’s response to a given situation is shaped by the amount of *cultural* and *social capital* s/he may possess. *Habitus* ensures the active presence of past experiences within individuals in the forms of schemes of perceptions, thought and action (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Bourdieu has written extensively about the differentiating effect that *social* and *cultural capital* has on educational attainment.

The FE Directors described the profile of the FE student who dropped out as follows:

- Low SES Status families
- Lone parents
- Welfare dependent
- Do not come from families where education is valued
- Adults with low level initial education
- Students with LCA
- Students who failed to get a CAO offer
- Students enrolling on a FETAC at the behest of parents
- Students using the FETAC progression route.

The SES profile of the students as portrayed by the respondents is confirmed by ESRI (2014), in their study on the FE sector.

SOLAS (2014), offers some commentary on the socio-economic backgrounds of the FET learner group which echoes the views of the Directors. The entrants to FET reflect a particularly significant representation of students from the less advantaged socio economic groups.

In Ireland when you look at the socio-economic backgrounds of those in FET they are from disadvantaged backgrounds and it is very much associated with that (SOLAS, P.40).

The FE student is essentially entering a college environment which operates under the traditional academic models with considerably less of the *cultural* and *social capital* which has been identified in the literature as an enabling feature of success in the educational sphere.
Careful analysis can help to reveal the power relations that have been rendered invisible by habitus and misrecognition. (Navarro, 2006. p. 19).

Bourdieu’s practice and field theory is further developed by the concept of doxa. Doxa relates to the rules of the field and are created by the dominant group in that field.

A sharper focus on some of the reasons for drop-out as adduced by the withdrawn group of students who indicated deep dissatisfaction with the educational provision on offer at their chosen FE College could be interpreted as an individual’s rejection of a system where he felt subjugated under hidden linkages of domination. The field of FE like all fields represents a site of struggle. Bourdieu contends that all actions by individuals in social contexts are interest driven. Confronted with the entrenched hierarchies of power as evinced by the state, by HE and by the college management and teachers in the educational field the individual student is excluded from the decision making spaces. The habitus of some of the withdrawn students as perceived by the Directors is one where loyalty to family responsibilities supersedes commitment to educational success, particularly for the female students. The structures shaping the FE field have not evolved to accommodate the structuring habitus of the student in that context. The rigidity, the time bound scheduling and the teaching methodologies fail to take account of the habitus of the student, where family responsibilities are prioritized over assignments and college attendance. In fact it is characterised in a negative way by college personnel and interpreted as a weak commitment to education rather than being viewed as competing priorities and in keeping with their habitus, where family wins out. It must be stressed that the habitus of the students referred to here has been described by the Directors.

The extent to which the needs of these students are ignored by government policy on student grants and welfare payments and by college timetabling and scheduling policies reflects a rigid power distribution and the perpetuation of the subordinate position of the student in the field and the naturalisation of the dominant. Applying Bourdieu’s tools helps to decipher the power asymmetries. As previously established the student in most of the FE Colleges accessed in this study are subjected to the objective structures which were arbitrarily created by the structuring habitus of FE
College management and teachers. These structures are very evident in the controlling mechanisms that form part of the work of the class tutor comprising attendance tracking and assignment submission. It is an unequal relationship of power. The College management and teachers deploy their greater volumes of cultural and social capital to situate themselves in a more favourable position in the FE field vis-à-vis the student who is consigned to a weaker place. From the confines of this weak position it is difficult to envisage how a student who possesses low levels of the cultural capital, valued in educational institution, might develop the agency or self-efficacy, so lauded by previous writers, that is an essential component for success in post-secondary education.

The three very different examples of FE Colleges working in a way that is evidently affirmative of the student’s capacity to shape and structure the college structures at the physical, social and educational level, provide an alternative to the asymmetrical power arrangements. The 3 examples are worthy of highlighting:

- The FE Art College which enables students to design and decorate their own space and use it as a personal studio for the duration of their course. Independent thinking is actively fostered among students regarding critical art appreciation which must be demonstrated in the assignments. This College has almost a 100% rate transfer of students to a second year of a Level 8 Degree in a HEI on an annual basis.

- The FE College which experienced an appreciable rise in first year completion rates following the introduction of a peer to peer mentoring initiative, where second year students were trained as mentors to work with first year students.

- The FE College where formal arrangements are in place for students to work jointly on assignments with the Business Department of a HEI leads to a very high percentage of transfer of students to the Level 8 Degree Business and Accounting programme.
The approach taken by the management and teachers in the above FE Colleges, represents a substantial shift in the relationship between student and college personnel. There is a rejection of the oppressive controlling structures, which emanate from traditional secondary schooling settings in favour of the formation of relationships that are validating of the emerging adult status or of the actual adult status of the student. Condensing the approaches evinced in the three examples provides a cluster of strategies that would lead to positive college experiences for an individual and the student would be empowered to shape the trajectory, physically, socially and educationally and of their career or of FE.
Section 5.4
The Educational Institution

Section 5.4.1. The Educational Institute
The second major Superordinate theme and component part of the theoretical framework: Attrition in Further Education is entitled: The Educational Institute. This theme encompasses all of the internal conditions and capabilities that a College can offer its student body. The analysis of the findings generated a range of themes which related to the interior domain of the FE Colleges. The themes were grouped together to form an overarching theme, which is entitled: The Educational Institute. In this section the Superordinate theme of The Educational Institute will be discussed along with a range of linked underpinning sub ordinate and ordinate themes which include: Quality of Educational provision in the FE Colleges, Student Supports, Learning Supports, Guidance Counselling, Student Identity, College Experience and Student as Stakeholder. These findings and the associated themes shed light on the internal college dynamics and processes. These processes which relate to curricular provision such as: teaching, student supports, assessment and course progression, operate in a highly interconnected manner.

Focussing on the internal processes and dynamics of the FE Colleges will be helpful in attempting to answer Research Questions Number 2 and Number 5, which seek to explore the causes of withdrawal which are due to factors which are within the control or influence of the colleges. The findings will indicate where colleges should concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates? The quality of educational provision resides firmly within the ambit of the College and this topic will be the focus of the next sub-section.

5.4.2. Quality of Educational Provision
James (1998) posits that student experience needs to be understood in relation to practices of teaching and research. Relationships between students and staff appear to be understood as critical towards learning and dealing with academic difficulties. Within any particular ‘field’ individuals, groups and institutions exist in structured relations to each other. These relations are mediated by habitus. The relations between
staff and students reflect the institutional habitus which impacts on how the student engages with the college processes such as curricular provision.

Kuh (2007), views student engagement as participation in effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable and positive educational outcomes. Harper and Quay (2009a), in an extended view, conceives student engagement as more than involvement and participation to include feelings and sense-making as well as activity.

Responsibility for quality of provision rests with the College management. The emergence in this study that College Directors are prohibited from evaluating the work of their teachers and tutors restrict what can be done to ensure quality of provision. The standard of teaching has a direct bearing on the quality of curricular provision. The teachers are using their agency to exert their dominance regarding management practices that would further the interest of the student. The principals’ role in leading and assessing the quality of the learning environment is diminished. In the course of the interviews the Directors were asked about their role in quality assurance of the teaching in their College. The responses were unequivocal that the Principals do not undertake evaluation of the teacher in the classroom. Furthermore, they are prevented from teacher observation in the classroom by trade union agreements. The system is constructed in a way that divests the principal of the authority to assure the quality of educational provision in his/her FE College.

Concerns regarding the competencies of teachers in FET were raised by the stakeholders who participated in the consultations during the formulation of the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 (SOLAS, 2014).

Stakeholders raised concerns around the extent to which the current composition of teachers employed in FET was adequate to meet the needs of the sector (SOLAS, 2014, p 123).

A student who is profoundly dissatisfied with the quality of teaching in an FE College, has a very limited range of options for redress. The Strategy, underpinned by legislation set out commitments to address the issue of staff competencies among FET teachers.
The Further education and Training Act 2014, states that SOLAS will:

Provide or assist in the provision of training to persons charged with the delivery of further education and training programmes. (Section 7 (k), The Further education and Training Act 2014).

The Strategy also highlighted the need for standards around staff qualifications in the FET sector to be examined.

Roberts and McNeese (2005) assert the very challenging contention, that it is the responsibility of particular colleges to ensure retention of, and completion by the students who enrol at their institutions.

Each institution must tailor retention to fit the specific needs of its students and the context of that particular institutional environment. (Roberts and McNeese, 2005, cited in Berger & Lyon, 2005, p.3)

All of the FE colleges in this study described their systems of student care supports. The majority of Directors cited their class tutor and student care structures as a key part of their strategy to support persistence. The predominant system revolved around the class tutor. Directors asserted in the interviews that the student care function is the responsibility of the class tutor whose role is to provide a comprehensive service for a particular group. The class tutor system is prevalent in both stand-alone FE colleges and dual campus school/colleges. The approach is a second level school system student pastoral care construct. FE Colleges appear to have imported the strategy from the secondary level in a completely unreconstructed format and imposed on the FE students.

The majority of the teachers in the FE Colleges are formerly or currently affiliated to second level schools. It could be assumed that they would be culturally familiar and comfortable with the class tutor care system. The class tutor system as it is described in the interviews by the FE College Directors perceives the student to be on the receiving end of the care structure as opposed to being an active agent in managing their own needs which would be more appropriate to post-secondary or adult students.
While providing a comprehensive and systematic care framework for students is admirable and is a critical part of the efforts undertaken by FE Colleges to support students and enhance completion rates, the relational structures fail to perceive the student’s own agency. Institutional habitus as understood by Thomas (2002) refers to relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice. The values, and cultural beliefs of the dominant teachers and management in the FE Colleges determine how care is to be delivered to the students. The student is positioned as the passive recipient of the process as opposed to being enabled to engage in a manner that would shape or influence the provision. The structuring *habitus* of the second level principal and teacher is very evident in the student care structures of the FE Colleges. Similar *structuring* dispositions are to be found among the Guidance Counsellors which will be explored in the next subsection.

5.4.3 Guidance Counselling

The provision of the guidance counselling was identified by the FE Directors and tutors as one of the most important resources, in terms of student support. Two of the three tutors who participated in the interviews were Guidance Counsellors. One of the tutors was a Guidance Counsellor in a large second level school, which operated a FE section. He delivered the guidance service in exactly the same manner with both the post-primary and the FE students. His engagement with the FE students related mainly to applications to HE Courses through the CAO system. By contrast, the role of the Guidance Counsellor in the stand-alone FE College was predominantly focussed on the counselling dimension, which she attributed to the increase in demand for supports from students presenting with mental health issues. Essentially a second level school model of guidance counselling is transplanted onto a post -secondary system.

It is unequivocally clear from the interviews that mental health is an increasing issue among FE students. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of students presenting with complex mental health issues including suicide ideation. The Directors recognise that the guidance counselling resources in their colleges are inadequate to meet the need for mental health supports. They argue that an increase in the guidance counselling allocation would alleviate the problem. There appears to be
an uncritical assumption on the part of FE College management that the second level guidance counselling model is appropriate for the FE College. The FE field is thus shaped by the orthodox values, practices and beliefs of the key agents such as the management and the guidance counsellors.

Guidance counsellors are trained for the most part to impart career and college information, to carry out some psychometric testing and to provide basic counselling. It would appear from the interviews, particularly from the responses by the Guidance Counsellor in a stand-alone FE College who participated as a tutor in the research, that FE students need access to psychotherapy and more advanced therapeutic interventions beyond what is normally provided by a second level trained guidance counsellor. Guidance counsellors have the same rank and status as second level teachers. The dominant position of the teachers in the field maintain and secure their positions within the FE Colleges even when it is clearly not in the interest of the students. Further discussion on student supports will be provided in the next subsection.

5.4.4 Student Supports and Learning Supports

In this study it was found that the learning supports are delivered in a second level mode. However, unlike second level schools there are no dedicated additional resources allocated by the DES to FE colleges. Learning support resources at FE level must be drawn from the overall existing teaching hours, allocation. A number of FE College Directors articulated a view that perceived the deficits to reside with the students in terms of their lack of preparedness for FE. The Colleges respond where possible by making available some learning support to the student or to a group of students.

There was no mention of resorting to the strategies described in the Literature Review chapter, which were identified by Johnson (2014) such as collaborative or cooperative learning and communities of learning to augment the academic progress and social integration of students who are in need of additional supports. Cooperative learning strategies in instruction, are based on the theory of constructivism, with particular attention to the contribution that social interaction can make. Constructivism is based on the idea that individuals learn through building their own knowledge, connecting
new ideas and experiences to existing knowledge and experiences to form new or enhanced understanding, Bransford, et al. (1999). The consideration of the role that groups can play in this process, is linked to the social interdependence theory, which emerged from the work of Kurt Koffka and Kurt Lewin on the identification of groups as dynamic entities that could exhibit varied interdependence among members, with group members motivated to achieve common goals. Instruction approaches based on collaborative learning would appear to hold the potential to support both academic and social integration among students, which are two important factors in relation to persistence.

Furthermore, these approaches would foster the four crucial assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners expounded by Malcom Knowles (1984), in his development of the concept of andragogy. In essence, adult learning needs to accommodate the adult’s need for self-directed learning, to value the adult’s life experience as a resource for learning, to facilitate his readiness to learn becomes more oriented towards the social dimension of learning and shifts from one of subject-centredness to one of problem centredness. Knowles’ work on adult learning has been described in the Literature Review Chapter along with references to the critics of his view of andragogy. Its relevance to this study rests on the sharp focus on the distinctive needs of the adult learner, which is the essence of the theory.

How the FE Colleges, which participated in this study, organise learning deviates substantially from the theoretical thrust of andragogy. It appeared that in the FE Colleges, with only one notable exception, that fellow students were not viewed as a learning resource and that the teaching remains firmly in the didactic mould. Behind this approach there may be a unconscious view that FE students, given their origin as low academic attaining Leaving Certificate or Leaving Certificate Applied students or mature students, who have low initial level education and have been away from formal education for a prolonged period, would not have the correct habitus or have the right language, knowledge, style or symbols to engage in the process of leading learning activities in the College. The capital that is residual within the class groups appears not to be valued by the dominant teachers and management. The teacher centred model is more aligned to post primary approaches to teaching.
Deviating from the prevalent didactic approach one Deputy Director of an FE College recognised the potential for peer to peer support and established and trained peer supporting system for students particularly for first year entrants. The Deputy Director in question found the initiative to have a definitive educational benefits for first years and added considerably to the care capacity of the College, but also recognised and valued the skills and *capital* of the students. A more detailed examination of the interactions between student and teacher which would have an impact on the quality of student experience, is discussed in the next sub-section.

5.4.5 *Identity and College Experience*

The issue of the sense of identity was probed with the interview participants in this study. An unclear picture emerged. While some of the Directors’ rhetoric may resonate with college parlance, the practice at FE college level distinctly mirrors the secondary school system. It is reasonable to surmise that the confused sense of identity evident at college leadership level filters through to the students’ thinking in relation to the position of their college in the education sector. It may permeate through to the notion of ‘belonging’ which has been underlined in the literature as a key requisite for educational success. Terrell L. Strayhorn (2012), defines a sense of belonging as a student’s perception of affiliation and identification with the college. Baumeister & Leary (1995), offer a more comprehensive view of what it means to have a feeling of belonging in college, entailing frequent and ongoing relational interactions and to feel part of something greater, which becomes a motivator to drive behaviour. A synthesis of the theoretical postulations on the notion of ‘belonging’ by Hoffman, (2002), Tovar & Simon (2010) and France (2010) generates a multidimensional construct comprising: student faculty relationships, student – peer relationships and student classroom interactions.

The student faculty relationships described by the majority of the FE Directors and tutors in this study capture the paradoxical nature of what is essentially a college student in a secondary school culture. The teaching methods appear to cleave to the conventions of the traditional didactic approach. The class tutor marks the attendance register, and processes doctors’ medical certificates in relation to absences. The teachers pro-actively pursue students for assignments. The relations between the FE student and teacher are hierarchical in nature and follow the norms of second level
schools with an inherent focus on control that is not conducive to engendering independence of learning which is concomitant with the target age group.

The causes of student withdrawal which are within the control and influence of the college and where efforts could be directed towards enhancing the retention and completion rates of students are the foci of two of the research questions in this study. There are recurring themes from the literature honing in on institutional factors which are critical to student retention.

The quality of the student experience is alluded to by a range of writers, as a condition that is pertinent to persistence. An operational understanding of the concept of quality of student experience is hewn from a synthesis of the views from a range of writers such as Bryson and Hand (2007), Chen (2008) and Crosling, Thomas, (2009), Heagney (2008). The quality of student experience, is strongly related to the way an institution organises learning opportunities and services and the opportunities for students to engage with the curricular and co-curricular processes in a positive manner. Data from this study reflects an impoverished quality of engagement, both academic and social, with the academic and social life of the college.

Hirshy’s (2011), model of student success in community college environments is instructional as it is based on the notion of stable and malleable characteristics. Stable characteristics relate to race, socio-economic status, age, gender, ability to pay, pre-college performance, family and community. Malleable characteristics refer to student dispositions, skills, motivation, locus of control, coping skills, resilience, study skills, educational and employment goals. Hirshy believes that colleges can raise persistence among students by addressing malleable characteristics while providing effective interventions for students with certain stable characteristics such as financial supports.

None of the Colleges in this study have a structure whereby the FE students are recognised formally as a stakeholder by holding a position on a governance body in the college. This is a striking symbolic dishonouring of the stakeholder status of the FE student body. It is further compounded in the dual campus school and FE college scenario where the second level students have a democratically elected and representative student council. The FE students’ agency is reduced to such a degree
that they are unable to influence or shape the decisions affecting how the FE College function in a way that impacts on them. It reflects an unwillingness on the part of College management and teachers to cede control or influence to the FE student body and it reaches to the heart of the concept of *institutional habitus* where deeply embedded assumptions are sub-consciously guiding practice.

The FET Strategy 2014-19 sets out very clear commitments to the ‘Learner Voice’

By ‘voice’ is meant asking learners to provide feedback on their course and learning and also by actively involving learners and supporting them to act as partners with policy makers, providers, practitioners and other agencies in the FET sector. (Further Education and Training Strategy, 2014-2019, pp 46-47).

The vision that the FE learners will act as partners with policy makers strongly suggests power sharing in a decision making forum. The mechanism to give recognition to the partnership or how the power sharing is to be achieved, is not specified in the Strategy.

The wider dimension of identity was explored with Directors and tutors in this study to establish if the FE Colleges operated as part of a regional or a national network in order to strengthen the recognition and credential value of the qualifications. It was obvious from the responses that FE Colleges functioned at a very individual level. They engaged separately and directly with employers in an attempt to promote the value of FE qualifications and the employability of their graduates. Each college engaged in separate recruitment processes. Students in the FE sector may be denied the valuable social capital that accrues to members from what Bourdieu (1986) describes as the collective resources linked to the shared ownership of durable networks of institutionalised relationships. By operating as discrete and separate organisations FE Colleges deny graduates the backing of the collectively owned *capital* that would help to create recognisable and valued credentials in society, in schools and in particular in the employment market.

In this study the lack of recognition of the FE sector emerged across three key domains:
• Among the key players in the second level system especially among guidance counsellors.

• The reticence among some employers to recognise and value the FETAC qualifications.

• Directors alluded to the difficulties of convincing some parents of the merits of FE qualifications.

It is axiomatic to conclude that FE students would benefit from stronger recognition of the FETAC qualifications among agents such as employers. Benefits for the FE student would also flow from a network of connections which could derive from a more integrated approach as opposed to the individualistic stance to the operations of the FE colleges. A network of FE Colleges working in a coherent manner to shape policies for the sector would have the potential to strengthen the FE foothold in the overall education field.

**FE Identity and FE Policy**

It was evident from the responses in the interviews and in the focus group that Directors and tutors struggled to articulate a clear identity of FE in the Irish educational landscape. It was not at all clear where the leaders of the FE sector located the FE College in the wider educational landscape. The assertions that what was on offer was a third level college were undermined by the secondary school cultures and practices that the FE students were subjected to, eg roll call, the collection of sick notes, attendance monitoring and homework checks.

The confused identity for the sector has been attributed to the wide ranging nature of the provision which is captured in the ESRI study on FE (2014). The study represented the first attempt to map FET provision in Ireland in a systematic way.

The FET sector was viewed by stakeholders as being less clearly defined and of lower perceived status than Higher Education (HE). (ESRI, 2014, p. 111)… and lacking in overall identity. (ESRI, 2014, p.119)
The position of FE Colleges in the education field will be the subject of the next subsection.

5.4.6 FE Colleges in the Education field

How the FE Colleges individually and collectively function within the overall field of education impacts materially on the students. What positions agents or institutions within a field is the possession of capital or power that is valued in a particular field. The relations between positions in a field are central to analysing the field for Bourdieu. A critical property of a field is the degree of autonomy it exerts (Bourdieu, 1993). Wacquant (2007), offers further explication of Bourdieu’s conception of autonomy by describing as:

The capacity it has gained, in the course of its development to insulate itself from external influences and uphold its own criteria of evaluation over and against those of neighbouring or intruding fields. (cited by Waquant, 2007, p.269)

Levels of autonomy in fields may depend on how they are defined by agents and institutions in other fields. The agency in the FE field is influenced by the dominance of the second level education system and the HE. The logic of practice which the CAO system operates, embodies the traditional norms and rules of the HE field. The underlying purpose of the CAO system is to act as a sorting mechanism, which perpetuates a hierarchical stratification of the HE field. The admissions infrastructure ensure that valued academic capital, as evinced by students with high levels of scholastic attainment, is accumulated in the HE sector. This is accomplished by curricular and assessment collaboration with the second level system. Bourdieu used field and the related concepts of habitus and capital, to understand social practices which have the potential to uncover the workings of power and inequality in social spaces. The HE sector possess large volumes of cultural, scholastic and social capitals thus enabling it to occupy a very dominant position in the overall education system.

Admissions policies to HE Institutions impact on FE students and on FE Colleges. The power to determine who gains admission to HE is defined by the powerful agents in the HE field. FE students and colleges must conform to the admissions dictates set down by the dominant agents in the HE field. A number of HE Institutions in Ireland
and in the UK engage with the FE sector in relation to progression arrangements. The institutions are generally viewed as being positioned in the lower status sub-field of HE such as the Institutes of Technology. It is evident from the interviews with the Directors and tutors in the FE Colleges in this study that the progression pathway is a pervasive influence on the sector but its minimal effect on the HE field, is noted in the literature as follows:

The HE field may accommodate these alternative practices, this only occurs where accommodation does not threaten the autonomy of those in more powerful positions in that field where the field is structured by (higher status) autonomous and (lower status) heteronomous principles of hierarchization (Maton, 2005, p. 694).

Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power is useful to illuminate the mechanisms that serve to perpetuate the patterns of domination in the Irish education system which subordinate the FE sector. Symbolic power can be interpreted as the power to legitimate authority and order in a social space. The most powerful distinctions are those that are viewed as arbitrary. These distinctions are described as follows:

Defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it (Bourdieu 1994, p. 170)

The HE Institutions act as the gatekeepers for admissions to degree courses. They exert their full authority in relation to the progression policies from FE to HE. The standards to be attained and the numbers of students to be accepted through this route are the sole prerogative of the HE institution. The FE College and student must submit to this legitimated power exercised by the HE authority.

There is evidence in this study that the second level schools exert their dominance in a way that subordinates the FE sector. Guidance counsellors in second level schools are in a position to influence a student’s choice in relation to FE in a positive or negative manner. Directors in this study were highly critical of how uninformed guidance counsellors are of the FE sector.

Within the FE institution the FE student is in a weakened agentic position vis-à-vis the teachers and management and in a dual campus there is evidence from this study
that the scales of power is asymmetrically balanced in favour of the second level system. Location in the social space shapes an individual’s experiences and life chances. In the overall education field the evidence from this study indicates that the FE, is a willing subject vis-à-vis the HE and the second level system. FE Colleges are consensual to the controls of HE institutions with whom they operate progression arrangements. In the course of the interviews with College personnel the acquiescence to the control that the HEIs exerted over FE by Directors and tutors was very evident. Bourdieu used the concept of Misrecognition of power relations to explain why individuals are not aware of their own subordination to powerful agents.

Research Question no. 3 seeks to explore what colleges can do to increase retention rates among FE students. The evidence distilled from the themes relating to The Institute suggests that FE College management and teachers need to critically evaluate how the students can be enabled to become agents and major partners in their own educational journey. They need to be given the space and place to define the purposes and procedures by which their educational journey can be undertaken in a way that raises the chances of successful outcomes. A more detailed discussion of the findings in relation to how state policies and societal perceptions impact on FE will be the focus of the next section.
Section 5.5
The State and Society

5.5.1 State and Society

In this section the theme of: The State and Society, which emerged as one of the key findings as set out in Chapter 4, will be discussed, with particular reference to R.Q 3: What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to colleges? The relationship, which the FE sector has with central government particularly with the DES, will be of major interest. How state policy in relation to post-secondary education impacts on the status and development of the FE sector will be explored.

R.Q 5- Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve retention rates? will be addressed from the perspective of FE Colleges, with reference to government policy under the progression provided for as part of the NFQ and the effect that the prospects of accessing Level 8 Degree courses through the FE route has on retention rates.

The state and society theme is located in a pivotal overarching position outside both the individual and the institution. It exercises a powerful and pervasive influence on almost every facet of the FE College and in turn on the individual students. Primarily this element is concerned with government policy, resource allocation and official validation of qualifications. Specifically, it explores to what extent an FE student’s aspirations to access Higher Education is facilitated or frustrated by government policies. A second aspect of this element considers the more nebulous notion of society’s perception of the qualifications emanating from Further Education Colleges.

This superordinate theme will be examined in conjunction with associated ordinate and subordinate themes. Convergence with and divergence from the key messages from the literature review will be noted.

The state and society emerged as one of the Superordinate themes from the data analyses process as set out in Chapter 4. The repeated references to the fragmented evolution of the FE sector in Ireland as depicted by the Directors and focus group
participants in this study have been documented in the previous chapter in section 4. The sector grew not because of ‘but despite the lack of government policy’ (Participant A-Focus Group). There were underlying suggestions by the Directors that the lack of any form of centralised planning has hampered the development of the sector and the status of FE within the Irish educational field has been stymied as a result. Without appropriately formulated government policies it was difficult to establish how the sector derived the necessary sustenance that normally underpins state driven strategies. This may explain the resourcefulness that characterises the sector with much effort being directed to survival and sustaining the courses and colleges from year to year. This resourcefulness was evidenced in the interviews with the Directors as they expounded on the need for continuous exploration of new courses and progression possibilities for their graduates.

The fragmented FE policy framework which emerged in this research mirrors the conclusions from a number of studies alluded to in the literature. The ESRI Report, (2014) notes that various parts of the FE sector developed organically to serve different purposes which impacted on the programme provision. The FE landscape was described in the ESRI report as being fragmented and disjointed with duplication of provision very evident. In the Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-2019) the absence of national policies on FE led to provision that was driven by the nature of supply, by ‘who’s already in place’ (p.87) as well as the availability of European Funds. The ESRI noted that ‘National Policy does not appear to play a central role in the determination of places across regions’. (ESRI, 2014, p. 9) The ‘lack of structure and planning and coordination within the sector’ (p.87), was evident both in the interview responses and in the research sites. Stakeholders emphasised the need to address existing fragmentation and diversity within the FET provision. The organic development of the system had resulted in too many providers and possible duplication of provision in some areas. Provision therefore lacked a national focus. Stakeholders also agreed that the quality of provision was inconsistent. (ESRI, 2014, p. 9).

It was noticeable in the twenty four sites visited as part of this research that the FE Colleges operate as very discrete entities and the availability of courses is
circumscribed by the availability of qualifications of the teaching staff who are generally affiliated to the second level component of the school. Additional staff, with technical skills, are recruited on short term contractual basis to teach courses that require specialised instruction. There was no evidence that the FE Colleges operated as part of a wider network or as part of a national strategy. Operating in this singular status appeared to absorb enormous managerial efforts particularly at administrative level which may be at the expense of the programme delivery to students.

Taking an overarching view of FE in Ireland there is a compelling case from the evidence adduced by the Directors, which has been set out in Chapter 4, Section 4, for greater collaboration and integrated planning so that the sector can provide the best possible services to the students. It was apparent that the FE sector has not evolved to a point where the individual institutions could benefit from the synergies of a network of colleges where there could be collaboration in respect of recruitment and student transfer and shared resources. This poor network framework, which was lamented by the FE Directors in the interviews, (chapter 4, section 5), has curtailed development in FE and in turn reduced the scope of provision to students.

Prior to the publication of the Further Education and Training strategy (2014-2019) there was no sense of an overall strategic vision for the Further Education and training sector in Ireland. The impact of the impoverished government policy in relation to FE in Ireland was apparent in the interviews and in the focus group discussions in this study. All of the twenty four FE Colleges visited as part of this research were either operating in current or former post primary schools. FE appears to be inserted into a second level system and operate in compliance with second level norms and cultures. FE Colleges owe their existence not to any centralised plan or strategic government vision but to the vagaries of history. It was not possible to pinpoint any national strategic logic to the location of these FE Colleges, each VEC or College has acted independently in planning courses based primarily on the qualifications of existing staff rather than the education needs of the potential students. The imperative guiding the schedule of courses available was driven by utilising the teachers employed by the school which guaranteed job security. The teachers and their unions use their agency strategically in the field to achieve their objectives. The needs of the students, who
have considerably less agency than the teachers, are subjugated by those more dominant players.

Operating as adjuncts to second level schools, borne out of a survival strategy in particular for urban based vocational schools, FE Colleges have not coalesced in a unified way to secure prioritised funding for buildings and resources from central government. The admission by one of the Directors that it would be far more strategically advantageous to seek funding for a specialist room such as a Technology or Science Laboratory for his second level school, rather than seek resources for his FE College which operates in the same building, reveals the relative weakness of the negotiation power of the FE in the education field vis-à-vis the DES compared with a second level system.

The poorly developed government policy on FE creates a struggle for the College Directors to carve out an identity for the sector on the educational landscape.

It is clear from both the national and international evidence that the Irish FET system has historically lacked an appropriate governance structure that gives strategic direction to providers (ESRI, 2014, p. 13).

Directors repeatedly stated in the interview responses that they believed that the FE section of their school is a college and what is on offer is a college experience. This rhetoric, however well intentioned, does not fit with the reality on the ground or in the corridors or classrooms of the FE Colleges visited in the course of this study. Operating from this weakened position in the educational landscape, the Directors of FE, possess less of the valued currency of what Bourdieu would refer to as capital, specifically educational capital, which enables them to negotiate for policy development and the procurement of resources for their Colleges with central government.

In the absence of a defined and developed national policy on FE the Colleges operated with an inherent weakness derived from the reality that no government strategy existed, from which they could draw sustenance and guidance for their work. The policy weaknesses impacted in a range of critical ways across FE Colleges. At institutional level, the governance of the FE was very similar in constitution to a
second level school. Tutor number one, identified the lack of representation of FE students on the BOM as a deficiency in governance structures.

The impact of poor formulation of relevant government policy undermined the status of the sector particularly among the critical agents such as guidance counsellors, parents, teachers and employers. Chapter 4, Section 4.5, captures the references by Directors to the guidance counsellors’ lack of understanding, or awareness of the FE courses and what they have to offer which were highlighted by six FE College Directors in the unstructured interviews. Tutors number 1 and 2, stated in a forthright manner that FE can be ‘a hard-sell’ with both parents and students due to the perception that it was not a high status option. Tutor No 1, who is a Guidance Counsellor, explained that in a Leaving Certificate class of students with a range of post-secondary education aspirations, the students considering FE options preferred to conduct the discussion on a one to one basis rather than in the open forum of a classroom.

The ESRI Report, (2014) study captures the perception of the FE sector as follows:

There was a strong consensus that FET was seen as having a lower status than other parts of the educational system, especially higher education. Stakeholders repeatedly used terms like ‘the poor relation’ and the Cinderella sector’ to characterise public perceptions of the sector. Trends in post-school educational participation were seen as having established higher education as the cultural norm, with FET seen as a second best option in this context. (ESRI, 2014, p. 39).

Frustration was evident among the Directors that one of the most important conduits for information about FE to prospective students, schools and parents was impaired due to lack of information about the sector, which arose due to the absence of an overall network and a coherent national framework for FE. Without an overarching national framework, (Chapter 4, Section 4. 4,) no overall identity emerged around FE and instead each individual FE College appears to operate as a separate and discrete entity.

In the course of the research and during the site visits it was difficult to form a palpable and distinct sense of an overall sectoral identity. The amorphous sense of identity added to the challenge of promoting the sector to prospective students at
second level and to parents particularly in middle class communities as Director 3, pointed out. The invisibility of FE in the overall education landscape in Ireland is observable and a factor that the Directors alluded to, in the interviews in relation to the task of engendering confidence in the qualifications and programmes that the sector has to offer.

Lack of awareness of the range of FET options was seen as a factor in influencing the poor status of FET, with guidance viewed as potentially playing a significant role. (ESRI, 2014, p. 40).

It was also striking that Colleges linked directly on a one to one basis to inform employment bodies about the FETAC qualifications as evinced by the findings in Chapter 4, Section 4. There is no representative body for a unified FE sector to explain its programmes to the various employer organisations which would create a greater sense of status for both the colleges and in particular for the students and graduates of FE. The communication between the FE sector and the employment bodies appears to be haphazard with:

Lack of awareness of FET among employers was viewed as a further factor influencing the lack of value placed on FET courses. (ESRI, 2014, p. 41)

Drawing together the views proffered by the Directors who report that key employers do not recognise a FETAC LEVEL 5 as a Leaving Certificate equivalent suggests that there may be a lack of a confidence in the actual credentials of the FE qualifications.

Further corroboration for this perception is found in the literature particularly in the NESC Report (2013), where the employer bodies are quite explicit in relation to a confidence deficit in FE credentials and make the following observation:’ With a notable lack of confidence in certification by employers who find the award holders still cannot do the jobs for which they have been recruited, due to lack of skills’ (NESC, 2013).

Employers are a dominant agent across a number of what Bourdieu would term social fields. They possess large amounts of economic capital and are endowed with volumes of cultural capital which positions them at a powerful junction in a
hierarchized *social field*. A *field* is profoundly hierarchized and shaped by dominant agents. Employer bodies, through their relations with the *field of power* can influence what happens in the education *field*. Their negotiating position can and does extend to influencing government policy on education most especially on training and skills development. FE has been gaining recognition over the past two decades as a sector which provides skilled graduates for mainly the IT, Healthcare, Culinary and Tourism industries. The guiding principles informing The Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019, which has been accessed in Chapter 2, The Literature Review, reflect two of the government’s key priorities which are addressing the unemployment challenge along with meeting the needs of the employer groups. FE will be used as a vehicle to:

> Provide targeted skills programmes that support job seekers to re-skill and up-skill for areas where sustainable employment opportunities are emerging (The Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019, p.3).

The main focus of the Strategy which gives Further Education a strong economic orientation is to provide skills for a range of growing industries through FE.

To re-orientate the FE colleges towards provision that is closely aligned and responsive to the labour market requires extensive policy reforms. A major policy development agenda is set out in The Further Education Strategy 2014-2019 (SOLAS, 2014).

To guide decision making, FE College leaders need access to reliable data. The data infrastructure to date in FE in Ireland has been noted as particularly poor. (ESRI, 2014). The PLSS system which has been explained in the Literature Review will address the major data deficiency and will provide FE leaders with the necessary information to guide them to deliver programmes and courses that are responsive to the skills needed in the economy. The requirement to be responsive to the labour market needs has been emphasised throughout the Further Education and Training Strategy, 2014. However, the lack of sensitivity to employment trends in the economy has been identified in the research by the ESRI on the Irish FE sector, as one of its weaknesses. This fault-line in FE is attributed to the absence of any overarching strategic governance or planning structure to guide the sector. FE has been
characterised as lacking in ‘agility’ in terms of its ability to adapt to changing employer demands. Tutor 1, referred to what he saw as an element of ‘inertia; with the range of FE courses provided, which in his school had remained unchanged for many years and was strongly linked to the availability of teachers on the staff. The ESRI report notes the poor synergy between FET and the employment requirements in the economy which is evidenced by the number of major FE awards that were poorly aligned to the vocational sectors offering increased job opportunities:

It is clear that the absence of overarching planning central direction has led to some problems with a relatively poor connection between the composition of full-time labour market oriented provision and the requirements of the labour market. (ESRI, 2014, p. 87).

The government’s vision for FE as a provider of skills in conjunction with the enunciated needs of the employers is indicative of the strength of both the government and of the employers in determining and setting out a national educational strategy. The government and the employer bodies have exerted their dominance in shaping the future direction of FE in Ireland. By contrast the FE Colleges were described in the focus group as on the ‘receiving end of the government’s and the employer’s wish list’, reflecting the weaker position of FE in the field of education vis-à-vis the government and the employers.

The Irish government’s policy framework for FE exhibits a clear alignment around the economic function of this particular segment of post compulsory education. Bourdieu’s concept of Doxa is useful to explain how a taken for granted common sense world view is promoted in government FE policy texts and is a product of and is linked to relations of power. A Doxa is the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 57). This commonsense view of FE as a producer of skills needed for economic growth which has influenced the Irish government’s policy narrative reflects a striking similarity to the UK policy pronouncements which state that:

A clear mission for FE, focused on the employability and progression of learners, is central to delivering the skills and qualifications which individuals, employers and the economy need. (Department for Education and Skills, 2006, p. 20).
This policy narrative which forms the taken for granted common sense has been articulated so cogently in the Irish government’s strategies for FE that it creates a sense of a hegemonic discourse which is exerting a pervasive influence on policy and practice in the Further Education colleges. Global processes more commonly referred to as globalisation, such as economic restructuring have reconfigured the relationship between national economies and global markets and education policy (Marginson, 2018). The Irish government subscribes to the dominant economic thinking of globalisation in an attempt to optimise the country’s position for inward investment and entrance to global markets for exports. The Irish government’s embrace of the globalised economic thinking is refashioning the kinds of skills and knowledge perceived as necessary for economic growth and competitiveness.

The predominant emphasis on skills acquisition in the Further Education and Training Strategy prioritises servicing the economy to the neglect of the social and developmental dimensions of FE. Economic discourses are being imposed very assertively on the FE sector constituting a new form of domination. Bourdieu is again drawn upon as a conceptual resource to explicate the influence of social structure and agency as it relates to the unfolding field of FE in Ireland. With a mandate to deliver a skills based curriculum in FE the teacher’s agency is considerably reduced to a functionary and differs from the concept of an expanded pedagogical professional which is more associated with the perception of the teacher in Irish educational institutions. From this weakened agency the teacher is required to deliver the curriculum and has limited scope to adapt and tailor the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. The student is positioned as the recipient of a pre-determined curriculum with a pre-eminent focus on skills acquisition which provides very limited scope for the learner to take on a self-directed approach to his or her learning which is concomitant with the theories of learning associated with post compulsory education provision. The learner as an agent in the field is in a weakened position and has limited opportunity to influence the power dynamics of the field.

The pre-eminence of skills development in the FE strategy was noted as a matter for concern among the Directors in the focus group and was alluded to by four of the Directors in the interview responses. The notion that the FETAC courses are reduced
to the narrow focus of skills acquisition as distinct from the broader concept of education is likely to undermine Colleges’ attempts to remedy the students’ social integration deficit which has been identified in the majority of the interviews.

Persistence in post compulsory education has been linked to both academic and social integration. Tinto (1993), Astin, (1993), Medway (1994) and Bean (2000). The almost complete absence of the social domain of education or the scope for social integration among FE students was noticeable across all of the twenty four sites accessed in this research. This is in complete contrast to the social development opportunities which are available to students in other post-secondary settings such as Institutes of Technology and Universities. With an intense focus on skills acquisition, FE Colleges will be obliged to respond to the stated and emerging skills requirements of the employers. Colleges’ efforts will be directed towards the course content with even less attention on the student’s social engagement and development. Poor social integration has been identified both in the relevant literature and in the data in this study as a contributory factor to student attrition. Directors have noted the pressure to concentrate on skills development and on course content to the exclusion of the students’ social development.

Reforms envisaged for the FE sector as set out in the government strategy will include a major emphasis on improving quality and accountability. Continued state funding will be linked to quality assurance processes. The evidence from the data as set out in Chapter 4, Section 4.5, in this study suggests that the skills development courses with emphasis on portfolios of competencies and on assignments do not meet the needs of a number of cohorts of students who enrol in FE. Students who need support in the areas of personal development and in literacy and numeracy and language acquisition struggle with the demands of the skills orientation of the courses. This mismatch between the needs of the students and the demands of the course raises the possibility of drop-out.

The consequential attrition due to a mismatch between course content and students’ needs is extensively documented in the relevant literature, most noteworthy in Munday’s study of 9,000 Voices (1998). Attrition due to this nature of a mismatch is also an unintended consequence of the government’s overriding drive towards skills
development in the FE sector. Economically it may be justifiable from the government’s point of view to devise a strategy which positions the FE sector as the supplier of a steady stream of low to medium skills, to meet the emerging and changing needs of the various industries. However, it is the singular focus on skills acquisition to the exclusion of the social and personal development of the student which may impact on student retention.

Directors in this study identified the need for social and personal development programmes and strategies to support student retention reflecting the assertions of Astin (1993) and McGivney (2004), both of whom, link social engagement with the quality of college experience. Students who need social and personal development programmes and activities to enhance their chances of course completion will be ‘squeezed out’ as one Director noted, in the relentless drive toward skills production in the FE Colleges as an unintended consequence of the government’s strategy for FE.

The Government in collaboration with powerful agents such as the employer bodies and prospective multi-national investors have asserted dominance over the field and reconfigured the valued currency or capital in the FE field. To succeed in FE in Ireland a student needs to focus exclusively on the acquisition of pre-determined marketable and employable skills in a limited time period.

Government policy to widen participation particularly of students from non-traditional backgrounds enables some FE colleges to use the National Frameworks Qualifications (NFQ), to open up progression possibilities for students to Level 8 Degrees in HE. The evidence from the data as set out in the findings in Chapter 4, Section 4.4, indicates that, using FE as a progression route to HE impacts very positively on retention rates among FE students. The success of this aspect of government policy will be discussed in the next sub-section.

5.5.2 FE and Progression to HE.
In this sub-section three aspects of government policy and the effects on attrition or persistence among FE will be discussed. The progression options from FE to HE as presented in the findings in Chapter 4, Section 4.4, which are made possible through
the NFQ will be dealt with. Government policy on widening participation and the broadening of access to Level 7 and Level 8 courses in IOTs and its impact on recruitment in FE Colleges will be discussed in the second section and thirdly how the dominant CAO structure diminishes the FE recruitment potential.

The state’s impact on retention and attrition among FE students in Ireland is manifested through the NFQ which has been outlined in Chapter 4. Theoretically students can use FE to progress to Level 7 or Level 8 Degree Courses in Universities or in Institutes of Technology following successful completion of FETAC Level 5 or 6 courses.

Research question Number 5 seeks to explore how colleges could prioritise their efforts to improve retention. The progression possibilities that are permissible under the NFQ are being utilised to varying levels, by all of twenty four FE Colleges which were used as research sites in this study. All of the FE College Directors and tutors concur that the students using the FE as a progression route to HE were almost invariably deeply motivated and retention rates among this group were found to be very high. In three of the Colleges surveyed in this study the Directors identified specific courses which have almost 100% retention rates. The courses include: Art and Design, Dance and Film Animation. All three of these FETAC Level 6 courses are fully aligned with Level 8 Degree courses in HE Colleges both in Ireland and in the UK. The Directors of the FE Colleges in question have approached the relevant HE Colleges and ‘work’ with them on progression policies and arrangements.

Exploring what to ‘work’ with the HE Colleges meant for the relevant Director, it transpired that the HE College sets out the standards and requirements which the FE students must meet to gain entry to the Degree Course. The HE College being the dominant player in this field also determines the number of students which a College will enrol from FETAC. This restrictive practice pertains in particular, in relation to nursing studies. The impact of the failure of FE programmes in the UK to deliver the aspirations of the student when progression dreams aren’t realised is captured by Atkins:

> they also revise down their original career aspirations, so that intended nurses become carers and dreams of being a computer whiz-kid become the reality of
working at PC World (a UK IT and technology chain store) (Atkins, 2010, p. 258)

But FE Directors who have established progression pathways with Universities and Institutes of Technology, where 6 Distinctions in a Level 6 FETAC award are accepted as the equivalent of 400 points for a range of Level 8 Degree Courses in a number of Institutes of Technology use this access to HE as a powerful recruitment strategy for students.

Colleges who can claim that they have a 100% success rate of student transfer to a Level 8 College of Art and Design Degree Courses or a similar scintillating achievement in progression rates for Dance, Drama or Film Animation attract volumes of applications, which exceed the number of places available. Colleges offering these courses receive applications from all over Ireland and from abroad. In contrast, the majority of FE College courses attract applicants from a regional or even from a localised area.

Directors of Colleges with large numbers of applicants for their Art and Design, Dance and Film Animation, described very selective recruitment processes which actively seek out highly motivated students particularly those who are interested in progression to HE Level 8 Degree Courses and applicants whose previous attainment demonstrate the required level of appropriate capabilities and competencies.

Such Colleges are in a position to be selective of applicants. The selected students, clearly have accumulated the necessary cultural capital in the form of highly developed artistic competencies in dance, drama, music or film. Conditioned by the dispositions espoused by their families, where the value of such activities as dance, drama and music was inculcated in the applicants, the students in turn had internalised these values to become part of their habitus. Students without the necessary cultural capital as evinced by the acquisition of competencies in the various artistic endeavours would find it impossible to gain a place on an FE course in the Colleges which took part in this study.
The inequalities associated with cultural capital reflect inequalities in capacities to acquire capital which themselves reflect prior inequalities in the possession of cultural capital. (R. Moore, cited in Grenfell 2012, p. 106)

It is quite possible that the teachers engaged in the selection process unconsciously opt for students whose portfolio of cultural capital mirrors their own, thus creating greater alignment for the student with the prevailing values of the college. The teacher may be misrecognising accumulated cultural capital for innate talent.

Such unknowing collusion lends weight to belief in a process of natural as opposed to social selection. What is occurring is ‘misrecognised’ what is occurring is left unrecognised. (Grenfell, cited in Olssen, Ed. 2004.p. 52).

Adopting a selective approach at the recruitment stage has been identified by the Directors as an effective strategy leading to persistence among FE students. This is an example of where there is inter-sectionality of the three Superordinate themes, of the Attrition in Further Education theoretical framework, creating conditions which support course completion. The state policy of progression as set out in the NFQ, the institutional endeavour to establish the progression pathways between the FE College and the HE College and the personal attributes of the individual, particularly the student’s motivation to use the FE course as a stepping stone to a Level 8 Degree Course, align to create conditions conducive to successful education outcomes.

The exceptional retention rates in these Colleges and courses confirm the established argument in the literature that pre-entry attributes have a profound impact on student completion patterns. There are also echoes of Bean and Eaton’s (2001) Attitude Behaviour Theory, which emphasise the importance of behavioural intentions as a predictor of persistence. The notion of habitus as conceived by Bourdieu is pertinent to understanding the extraordinary successful completion rates of students in this small group of FE Colleges. The large numbers applying enable the Colleges to recruit students who exhibit aptitudes that fit the College culture. Students who have the dispositions which align to the institutional norms are what Bourdieu would describe as ‘fish in water’ and more likely to adapt to the scholastic expectations and routines of the College.
The use of the FE sector as a pathway to HE by students who fail to attain direct access to Degree Courses or by adults who are re-entering the formal education system forms part of the government’s national policy on widening participation of students from non-traditional backgrounds in post compulsory education. The findings as presented in Chapter 4, Section 4.5, indicate that the College Directors in this study have reported the positive impact it has both on recruitment and on the retention of FE students to course completion. However, it could be argued, that there are aspects of state policy that are inadvertently contributing to attrition among FE students.

Institutes of Technology have been enabled through government policy and funding to increase the numbers of students they enrol and thereby broaden access to a range of courses similar to what is available in FE Colleges. This policy has led to competition between the FE Colleges and the IOTs for prospective students. The impact of this competition on FE Colleges will be discussed in the next sub-section.

5.5.3 Widening Participation and the Institutes of Technology

The entry requirements for a broad range of Business, Computer and Information Technology and Healthcare courses in Institutes of Technology have become highly attainable with many courses only needing what is referred to as All qualified applicants or AQAs; which usually means a minimum of 5 Grade Ds in Ordinary Level Leaving Certificate. It was noted among the Focus Group and highlighted by four of the FE directors that due to the government’s widening participation policy which resulted in channelling additional funding to Institutes of Technology that FE Colleges and the IOTs are in direct competition for a certain cohort of students particularly those with mainly Ordinary Level grades in the Leaving Certificate.

It was the view of the Directors that the IOTs are performing better than the FE Colleges in the competition for students. The IOTs would have a greater amount of what Bourdieu would refer to as scholastic capital and are in a stronger position in the field to compete for students, which in turn leads to increased enrolment which equals increased state funding. The additional resources and expanding student intake results in enhanced academic status. The FE sector on the other hand, has seen an increase in the numbers of students with the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), and students
who have had a range of additional learning supports during their primary and post primary education. Pre-entry attainment has been identified in the literature as an indicator of persistence in post compulsory education. Bean (1980) and the ESRI/HEA Study (2010), argue that pre-enrolment academic attainment is a key indicator in relation to persistence in post compulsory education. Students from LCA or with poor Leaving Certificate grades, who have very limited options for post compulsory education, are noted in the interviews among the Directors and tutors as a group who struggle with the academic demands of the FETAC Level 5 and 6.

Participant B, in the focus group, described the transition for LCA students from their ‘heavily scaffolded education setting’ to FE as very often a ‘bumpy journey’. This is reflected by Bourdieu:

Their choices already orientated as a consequence of their position in the field of this particular community (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66),

The Directors of four FE Colleges highlighted the increase in the number of students in FE who had a range of supports such as Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) or Reasonable Accommodation for public examinations or who had been granted additional learning resource hours during their second level education. The challenges for FE to meet the needs of the changing calibre of students was highlighted in the interviews with the Directors.

To achieve success, the FE students must use the capital they have received from their families, communities and schools. It has been noted already that students in both LCA and in FE are predominantly from SES disadvantaged communities. Bourdieu (1977a, p. 495) contends that a lack of cultural capital adversely shapes the attitudes and outlooks of youth who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Students who are LCA graduates or with a Special Needs diagnosis bring a schooling experience that is child centred and highly supportive of the individual student. The curricular content of LCA, is primarily focused on social and personal development and on literacy and numeracy enhancement. Government policy does not provide for any additional learning supports in FE. The overriding focus of FE programmes is
skills acquisition in a very tight deadline as set out by government policy and which represents a radical departure from what the LCA student would have been accustomed to prior to entry into FE. The FE student is a weak position in the FE field and does not have at his or her disposal the necessary capital to influence or shape the rules of the game in the field. The FE student is the passive recipient of the objective structures of the field which are influenced by the dominant agents namely the government and the employer groups.

LCA graduates has been singled out by nine FE Directors and two Guidance Counsellors in this study as a group that are at high risk of drop-out because of the discontinuity of additional learning supports. The solution put forward by two Directors where LCA students or students with a SEN diagnosis, could opt for FETAC Level 4 would lead to ineligibility for a student grant. To qualify for a college grant the LCA student enrols on a FETAC Level 5 course and without the necessary learning supports students in this category may encounter difficulties to such an extent that persistence with the course becomes untenable.

Reflecting on government policy, with its noble aspirations to widen participation, it has unwittingly created conditions, which contribute to attrition among FE students. It could be contended from the evidence of the data in the interviews that an unintended consequence of this policy led to a weakening of the FE sector in terms of its recruitment ability of prospective students.

The recruitment of students for HE is institutionalised through a central applications process known as the CAO. The ability of FE to recruit prospective students is also greatly hampered by government policy, manifested in CAO system, which was highlighted by the respondents in this study and will be discussed in the next sub section.

5.5.4 FE and the Central Applications Office (CAO)

Enrolment applications to the HE sector are governed by national policy and are delivered through the Central Applications Office (CAO). The FE sector is not included in the CAO system and this was identified as a weakness in the FE field by three of the Directors. The Central Applications Office (CAO) is a major landmark
structure which interconnects the second level system and the HE sector. The CAO system is tied to the points system which is based on the grades attained in the Leaving Certificate. The points needed for entry to courses are determined, ostensibly by supply and demand, but also by the dominant structures within HE namely the Universities and the Institutes of Technology. The power rests with the Government and the HEIs to decide who is included in the CAO system. Applications to the FE sector are separate from the CAO system thereby residing outside of a major mediating structure in the landscape of the Irish educational system.

Directors in the interviews alluded to the profile of some of those who enrol in FE as students who failed to ‘get a CAO offer’ and resort to FE as a default option. Both Directors and tutors singled out this group of FE students as at risk of drop-out due mainly to poor motivation and possibly a mismatch of course. Martinez and Munday (1998) and Comfort, Baker and Cairns (2002) conclude that the wrong choice of course is a highly significant contributor to early withdrawal from FE programmes. The mismatch may arise due to acceptance of the limited opportunities available to late applicants.

It is arguable that being excluded from the CAO, which is a powerful gravitational force radiating across the secondary schooling system and underpinning access to the HE, helps to ensure that FE, a weaker sector, is consigned to the margins of both educational and societal structures.

SOLAS (2014) advocates the enhancement of partnership agreements between further and higher education providers in relation to access agreements and progression pathways. QQI’s key role in the development and standardising of the progression routes from FE to HE, is underlined in the 2012 Qualifications Act. The Act prioritises access, transfer and progression involving movement into and between education and training programmes with recognition for knowledge, skill and competence previously acquired. The Qualifications Act, 2012 is very explicit in setting out the key functions of QQI:
To determine policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression and monitor the implementation for procedures for access, transfer and progression in relation to learners by providers (Qualifications Act, 2012, Section 9 (g)).

QQI’s role in the monitoring of the effectiveness of the access, transfer and progression arrangements between FE and HE is clearly stated in the legislation. If the full scope of QQI’s statutory functions are realised it should lead to greater access and more consistent transfer pathways from FE to HE. It has the potential to redress the balance of power between the HEIs and FE Colleges, enabling leaders from both sectors to work in a more equitable manner on policies pertaining to access, transfer and progression.

The pervasive presence of the dominant structures of the universities and institutes of technology in the post compulsory sector was evident in the response of a Director who was critical of Guidance Counsellors whom she described as having very little or no awareness of what FE has to offer. Guidance Counsellors are a key agent both at second level and in the HE Fields. It can be detected from the comments as presented in the findings in Chapter 4, Section 4.5, that the Guidance Counsellors are conditioned to view HE, namely the universities and the Institutes of Technology as the only ‘legitimate’ options for post-secondary educational progression. FE is essentially locked out of the major application and enrolment mechanism for post-secondary education in Ireland thus weakening its position and status within the education field.

In stark contrast to the HE, the FE sector has limited scope in setting entry standards for applicants. Government policy is also viewed by both Directors of FE Colleges and by tutors as locking students out of FE by the imposition of restrictions to accessing financial supports such as student grants and welfare assistance. The resultant attrition due to financial difficulties will be discussed in the next sub section.

5.5.5 Financial Difficulties and Attrition
The ineligibility to qualify for student grants or for welfare payments due to government policy was identified by all Directors as a contributory factor to attrition. Consequently, both withdrawn students and FE College personnel identified financial
difficulties as a major cause of withdrawal among FE students. Financial difficulties featured in the literature as a contributory factor to student attrition but it emerged as one of the leading causes of drop-out in this study. In two extensive studies on the causes of withdrawal among FE students in the UK, Yorke (1997), found that financial difficulties ranked in fourth place out of five significant factors. The FEDA (1998) study entitled *9000 Voices: student persistence and drop-out in further education* attrition linked to financial reasons was placed as the ninth out of ten causes of drop-out.

The picture, which emerges from the data in this study, is very different. Financial difficulties are cited as one of the key contributory factors to attrition among FE students in this study. There was almost an uncritical acceptance by Directors, that financial difficulties arising from ineligibility for student grant or discontinuance of welfare payments was the sole reason for drop-out among a significant number of FE students.

In the literature a more nuanced view of the links between students’ financial hardships and attrition is expounded. Davies (1999), posited the view that withdrawal became more likely when financial difficulties coincided with a low level of confidence in the quality of teaching and support. The refined view of financial difficulties as an associated factor as indicated in the literature contrasted with the findings in this study.

All interviewees were steadfast in their belief that financial difficulties were an overriding and stand-alone contributory factor to attrition among FE students. It could be posited that the alacrity with which Directors imputed financial difficulties as the cause of drop-out created barriers to a more critical assessment of the complex nature of student attrition. The foregrounding of financial difficulties as one of the primary causes of drop-out among FE students without examining the broader issues may inadvertently be College personnel exculpating themselves of responsibility with regard to student drop-out. Davies (1999) expands this point where he conceives the college as a powerful mechanism to mediate external problems in a manner that does not lead to withdrawal.
5.6.1 Summary

In this chapter the findings from this study were discussed in the light of the main messages from the literature review and in relation to the task of answering the research questions. The findings generated three main superordinate themes namely the: State and Society, the Institutional Educational Institute and the Individual. The analysis of the data also produced a range of ordinate and sub-ordinate themes associated with each major theme. The superordinate themes formed the basis of a theoretical framework entitled: *Attrition in Further Education* which aims to gain an understanding of drop-out among FE students.

Bourdieu’s theory of practice and his conceptual toolkit of field, capital and habitus was used to explore the relations between the individual FE student and the seat of power, namely the government and the DES, and the relationship between the student and the agents such as the management and teachers in the FE Colleges. By utilising Bourdieu’s three level methodology to map out the relations both within the FE field and within the wider field of education the dominant power structures of the HE and the second level sector became visible and the resultant impact of the structuring of the FE field came into view. The FE field was also structured by the habitus of the management and of the teaching personnel.

The state and society has undoubtedly a pervasive effect across all aspects of FE through the medium of policy directives and financial supports. Respondents noted that the status of FE, was adversely impacted, by the absence of specific policy development, until 2014. Respondents viewed the almost singular emphasis on skills development as the overriding imperative for current FE curricula as a concern which had the potential to create greater mismatch between the needs of the student and the educational provision on offer.

The progression possibilities provided for as part of the NQF are exploited to the benefit of FE students. However, the progression pathways are arranged on an individual basis between the FE College and the HEI. There is no national overarching strategy to operationalise progression from FE to HEI in a consistent and transparent manner. The entry requirement standards appear arbitrary which are
determined by the dominant HEI which relegates the FE College to a weaker position in the field.

Mapping the internal terrain of the FE College revealed a topography dominated by controlling structures which are more apposite to a traditional second level school and reflected the *habitus* of the teaching and managerial personnel.

The majority of the FE students, come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and may have low level academic attainment. There are increasing numbers of students who have a SEN diagnosis and LCA graduates enrolling on FE Courses. This profile would not suggest the possession of volumes of *cultural capital* or *scholastic capital* which is the valued currency in the education field. The use of Bourdieu’s thinking tools of *field, capital* and *habitus* helped to unveil the marginalised positioning of the FE student in the FE field. The weak positioning of FE in the wider field of education when compared with the strength of the positioning of the second level system and the HEIs was brought into sharp relief. Further subjugation of the FE sector, under the linkages of domination by the centre of power, namely the government and the organs of the state such as the DES, in collaboration with powerful agents such as the employer representative groups have ordained that FE Colleges focus on skills education to meet the needs of a range of industries. Ultimately, for students in the majority of FE Colleges, agency is so heavily restricted by the systemic and embodied structures of state, society and the education system, which serve to perpetuate inequality, that the movement beyond a familiar *habitus*, Bourdieu, (1990, pp. 52-53) needed to make an alternative future becomes all but impossible, unless progression routes have been established between the FE College and a HEI.

**Answering the Research Questions**

The purpose of the research was to explore the causes of attrition among FE students in Ireland. The five research questions are very explicit. The complexity of the issue of attrition and the multifarious versions of FE Colleges, militate against straightforward explicit answers. However, what has been achieved is a deepening of the understanding of the multiplicity of causes of attrition. The causes of attrition among FE students, which emerged from the research in this study revolved around
three major themes, namely, the Individual, the Educational Institute and the State and Society. There was a strong element of interconnectedness between the themes. How the conditions within the elements aligned to create structural barriers for which the FE student did not possess the necessary economic or cultural capital to overcome was explored e.g., financial circumstances and the enrolment of LCA graduates without additional learning supports.

The research also led to the unearthing of exemplars of good practice where college management and teachers use their considerable reserves of agency to co-create learning environments with the learner, thus facilitating the growth and development of agency in the students that is concomitant with adult and independent oriented learning settings.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 Introduction
In this chapter the conclusions that can be drawn from the study will be set out. There will be 8 main sub-sections in the chapter as follows:

- **6.2** The context and the purpose of the study will be reiterated.

- **6.3** The key messages from the literature accessed, will be alluded to in order to explain and underpin the theoretical foundations of the study. The Research Questions will be restated.

- **6.4** A brief description will be provided to outline how the study and the research element was carried out.

- **6.5** A resume of the findings of this research will be set out and where the findings provide a basis for answering the Research Questions will be indicated. There will be a recap of how Bourdieu’s sociological concepts were used in the analytical and discussion process.

- **6.6** The implications of the findings will be drawn out particularly in relation to the policy recommendations that arise from the study.

- **6.7** The limitations of the study will be stated.

- **6.8** Areas for further research in relation to this topic will be pointed out.
**Constraints to Accessing Official Data. Defining FE Students?**

A number of constraints to the access of data and the absence of published official statistics in relation to FE in Ireland, emerged in the course of the study, which placed some limitations on the scope of the research. These limitations will be noted. The wide ranging and heterogeneous nature of FE in Ireland makes it difficult to define and identify a singular representative group of FE students. In the course of the study a number of very distinctive sub-sets of students emerged such as: adults who have not had engagement with formal education for a long period of time, Leaving Certificate students, Leaving Certificate Applied students, and students enrolled in dual campus or stand-alone colleges.

**6.2 Context of Study**

The study is rooted in the Irish Further Education sector. The aim of the research is to examine the causes of attrition among FE students in Ireland. An estimated 30,000 students enrol on FETAC Level 5 or 6 courses annually, in Ireland. The sector experiences very high levels of non-completion by students. While the FE was a distinct strand in the overall Irish education it was inextricably linked to both the second level and the higher education sectors. Irish education and economic policies have exerted a heavy influence on the development of the FE sector over the past three decades particularly in relation to the widening participation agenda. More recently the economic imperative has become more dominant in government policy documents pertaining to FE. The publication: *Further Education and Training Strategy, 2014 -2019*, sets out the Irish government’s policy directives for FE. The strategy document contains an unambiguous declaration that skills acquisition is the overarching imperative of the sector.

The main focus of the Strategy is to provide the following skills through FET:

- Skills as a resource for economic growth
- Skills as drivers of employment growth
- Skills as drivers of productivity increase
- Skills and ‘smartening’ of the economy
- Skills as a driver of social inclusion and social mobility
- Skills as an insulator from unemployment. (SOLAS, 2014, pp 4 to 5)
The growth in the provision of FE programmes was driven also as part of a survival strategy for second level schools in what was known as the VEC sector. In urban areas where there was a choice of second level schools, enrolment in VEC run schools declined sharply during the 1970s and 1980s. The Vocational schools diversified and began to offer a range of Post Leaving Certificate Courses (PLC). Courses were developed and offered in a range of areas such as business studies, childcare, community care, telecommunications, e-commerce, equestrian studies, multi-media, sports, leisure and the hospitality industry skills.

The PLC courses were targeted at students who were not opting for degrees or diplomas in higher education. Adults with low level initial education who wished to re-enter formal education to acquire training and skills for the enhancement of employability were also part of the FE target group which was supported by the European Social Fund, (ESF). Further developments in the FE sector led to the establishment of progression pathways for students between PLC Colleges and HEIs.

The author of the study is a former Principal and Director of an FE College. The high rates of attrition among FE students was a concern the author shared with other College Directors. To date there has been a lack of any major study into the causes of withdrawal among students who enrol in a FE programme and depart prior to completion. This study makes a significant contribution to advancing an understanding of the causes of non-persistence of students in the Irish FE sector. A broad range of scholarly research on attrition among students in post compulsory education was accessed with a view to informing the theoretical basis of the study.

6.3 Key Messages from the Literature on Student attrition in Post-Compulsory Education

To position this study against existing knowledge a range of available literature on student attrition was reviewed. It became clear from the outset that the availability of research and scholarly papers specifically on FE was very limited. To circumvent this obstacle, literature on student attrition in post compulsory education in general, was
accessed. Writers such as Tinto (1993), Astin, (1993), Medway (1994) Yorke (1997) and Bean (2000), provided very useful theoretical foundations from which to build and shape the study. However, while there are obvious parallels between HE and FE students embarking on college programmes there are notable and critical differences in terms of socio-economic status and academic orientation among the students. The key messages from the literature indicated that attrition among students in post compulsory education is related to a variety of social, institutional, psychological and economic conditions.


The quality of student experience emerged as a concept in the literature that was viewed as being highly connected to student persistence. The institution is viewed as the critical agent in shaping how a student experiences the college. The quality of student experience is strongly related to the way an institution organises learning opportunities and services and the opportunities for students to engage in the curricular and co-curricular life of the college. Bryson and Hand (2007), Chen (2008), Heagney (2008), Crosling, (2009), Thomas (2009).

The psychological perspective forms the basis of Bean and Eaton’s (2000) self–efficacy theory. Students with personality types which exhibited a stronger sense of self efficacy, and higher levels of self – esteem were found more likely to persevere when confronted with academic and social challenges.

There are conflicting messages in the literature with regard to the importance of finances in relation to college student drop-out. Martinez and Mundy (1998) found that the correlation between financial hardship and attrition was weak. Davies (1999) was not convinced that financial difficulties was an overriding contributor to student departure but only as a catalyst when combined with a student’s lack of confidence in the quality of educational provision by the college. Yorke (1997), ranked finances in
fourth place out of the five main contributors to attrition while the FEDA (1998) study assigned finances as a factor in student drop-out to ninth out of ten causes of attrition.

The key writers accessed and drawn upon in the Literature Review Chapter 2, provided a theoretical basis for the study. The overall objective of the study was to arrive at a deeper understanding of the causes of attrition among FE students. Combining the theoretical foundations of the study along with the purpose a number of research questions were framed to guide the study.

- What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?

- What causes of withdrawal are due to factors that are within the control or influence of colleges?

- What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to the college?

- What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?

- Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?

To gain a deeper understanding of how social, cultural and economics dynamics interconnect to create structural barriers for students in FE in a manner that prevents them from deriving the personal and societal benefits that participation in education would generate, Bourdieu’s theories and conceptual tools were utilised. Bourdieu used field and the associated concepts of habitus and capital to understand social practice, and to make visible the workings of power and inequality in particular social spaces. Bourdieu conceived a field as a social space, which involves a network or configuration of relations between positions. The field can be viewed as a space, with many dimensions, which is differentiated by the possession of a set of properties or
capital by agents which is valued in that particular field. Bourdieu’s thinking tools are used to make sense of the differentiated nature of social space and the practices within it. The position of agents or institutions in a field is determined by the volumes of relevant capital they possess.

6.4 Conduct of the Study
A case study approach was used as it was deemed the most suitable means of gaining access to the views and insights from withdrawn FE students and College personnel, from whom some authentic data could be adduced in relation to the lived realities of college drop-out. Data collection instruments included: questionnaire, interview, focus group and field notes. A pilot of the questionnaire was conducted in one FE College for the purpose of testing the instrument. Following the response from the pilot questionnaire and discussions with the FE director and tutor a number of changes were made to the design and to the format of the questions in the questionnaire.

Drawing on assistance from the Directors of 5 FE Colleges who agreed to be part of the study, a total of 200 questionnaires was posted to former students who had withdrawn form a FETAC Levels 5 or 6 course in the previous three years, prior to completion. The postal questionnaire produced 64 completed responses, which equates to a response rate of 33.5%. Postal surveys can suffer from low rates of response. The response rate from the postal survey in this study may have been further impacted by the fact that the target group were hard to reach and having dropped out of college may have been in some way disaffected. Accurate contact details also emerged as a pitfall reflecting the fluid nature of students’ domicile.

The low rate of the responses from the questionnaires sent to the withdrawn students and the limited amount of information provided reduced the usefulness of the data to such an extent that it was impossible to draw any definitive findings from the material. It was therefore, decided to use the data from the questionnaires to guide the questions for the interviews.
Contact was made with 15 FE Colleges Directors who agreed to participate in this study for the purpose of setting up a schedule of interviews with the Directors and with some FE tutors. A total of 15 unstructured interviews were conducted with FE College Directors and tutors from the period October 2013 to January 2015. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview scripts were read and an initial thematic analysis undertaken for the purposes of informing and guiding the focus group interview with College Directors.

The data from the interviews and from the focus group were collated and prepared for deeper thematic analysis, using a software package entitled NVIVO.

The thematic analysis approach using NVIVO involved initial coding of themes of clusters of similar causes of drop-out into a nodal group. The next step involved the grouping of codes into categories and the subsequent merging of categories of themes into Superordinate or major themes and related themes into Ordinate and Subordinate themes. The main Superordinate themes to emerge as a result of the analysis were: *State and Society, The Educational Institute, The Individual.*

### 6.5 Findings from the Study and Answering the Research Questions

The findings from the study generated three major categories of themes which related to attrition and persistence in post compulsory education. The three themes were: The State and Society, The Educational Institute, and the Individual. Using these major a theoretical framework entitled: *Attrition in Further Education* was devised for the purposes of examining the causes of student drop-out in FE. The components of the framework comprise the 3 major superordinate themes. Interrogating the data in the course of the analytical process from the perspective of the Research Questions and utilising the 3 superordinate themes it was possible to devise or arrive at a proposition that attrition in FE is caused by a combination of interconnecting factors which relate to: the individual, the educational institute and state policies and societal factors.

The thematic analysis approach used in this study generated an array of themes. The use of NVIVO accentuated the segregation of the data into separate units. The
repeated regression to the original transcripts provided a powerful reminder of a context where the factors across the major themes, which contributed to attrition among FE students, operated in a dynamic and interconnected manner. To explore how the linkages between the themes combined to create barriers to progression in education for a sizeable proportion of the FE entrants Bourdieu’s theories, which were outlined in the Literature Review Chapter 2 were used.

**Findings**

**Superordinate Theme No 1: The Individual**

The findings, which underpinned the superordinate theme: The Individual, provides a basis for answers to Research Questions 1, 3, 4 and 5 as follows:

- **1. What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?**

- **3. What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to the college?**

- **4. What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?**

- **5. Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?**

The findings in relation to the superordinate theme of the Individual could be distilled to form the following three themes:

- Personal and family circumstances
- Pre-enrolment attributes- previous academic attainment:
- Motivation for Enrolment on a FE Course
**Personal and family circumstances:**

Financial difficulties experienced by students combined with the inability of their families to provide funding emerged as a contributor to attrition. Lone parents who did not have access to a supportive family network to assist with domestic and child care duties were singled out as a group that were at high risk of drop-out. Four Directors believed that this particular group would benefit from being facilitated to complete the one year programmes over a two year period. Social welfare and student grant policies would need to be adjusted to permit students to extend completion timeframes of programmes.

Three Directors spoke of the lack of value placed on education by some of the students’ families. Students may be deprived of the resilience derived from being supported by their family who shared their values around education and was prepared to provide assistance to help the young person realise their goals particularly during challenging episodes with assignments and examinations.

**Pre-enrolment attributes- previous academic attainment:**

Pre-enrolment attributes and in particular previous academic attainment emerged as issues that impact on persistence in FE. The Directors and tutors who participated in the interviews in this study drew attention to the increased numbers of students enrolling in FE from the following categories:

- Students who have completed the LCA
- Students experiencing mental health challenges.
- Students with a SEN diagnosis

All of the Directors interviewed highlighted the LCA graduates as a group that struggled with the academic standards of FETAC Levels 5 and 6. The majority of Directors believed that access to Level 4, would be more appropriate to their educational needs. FE Colleges do not normally offer FETAC Level 4. Enrolment on a Level 4 would not meet the requirement for a student grant. One tutor offered the
contrasting view that LCA graduates can successfully transfer to FE if the College can provide some additional learning supports, particularly with literacy and numeracy.

Students experiencing mental health challenges were singled out by seven Directors and by two of the tutors, as a group that needed a high level of intervention in order to enable them to continue with their college course. Directors conceded that the services that they can provide at College level are not always sufficient to meet the needs of students presenting with mental health challenges. Therefore, they believed that failure to provide adequate mental health support services is leading to drop-out among students who are unable to access the interventions needed. Directors believed that the allocation of additional guidance counselling resources to the FE Colleges would address the needs of the students experiencing mental health issues.

Directors in this research, while broadly welcoming diversity of student intake, identified students with a SEN diagnosis as a group that were at risk of drop-out due to the inability of the FE College to meet their needs. Applications for resources and assistive technology are processed through the HEA. The time delay in securing resources can pose serious difficulties for students which sometimes leads to drop-out. The resources available to SEN students in FE Colleges do not match the level of supports provided at second level school. The delay in accessing resources and the level of supports provided for SEN students in FE create a risk to persistence for this particular group.

**Motivation for Enrolment on a FE Course**

The motivation for enrolment on an FE Course was highlighted by all of the Directors as a key indicator of persistence. Students using the FE as a progression route to HE were found to be highly motivated and were more likely to persist to course completion. Conversely, students who enrolled on an FE course due to failure to secure a CAO offer for a course in a HEI were identified as a group that were not as likely to persist to course completion. This was due in some cases to a mismatch between the student’s need and the course content.
Superordinate Theme 2: The Educational Institute

The findings which underpinned the superordinate theme: The Educational Institute, provides a basis for answers to Research Questions 1, 4 and 5 as follows:

• 1. What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?

• 4. What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?

• 5. Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?

The findings in relation to the superordinate theme of The Educational Institute could be distilled to form the following three themes:

• The Physical environment
• Academic and social integration in the college
• Value of FE academic credentials

The Physical environment

The FE Colleges visited as part of this study were either operated as adjuncts to second level schools or were based in buildings which were formerly used as second level schools. All of the Directors cited inadequacies regarding the physical environment such as the lack of library, canteen, social areas and sporting facilities which impacted negatively on the College in terms of FE provision.

Academic and social integration in the college

It is firmly established in the literature accessed in Chapter 2 that there is a strong link between academic and social integration and persistence. Directors reported difficulties with supporting the academic integration of students for whom the course
content proved too challenging for reasons of poor previous academic attainment or because there was a mismatch between the course and the student’s needs.

Findings also indicate that FE Colleges are ill equipped to support the social integration of students due to:

- The lack of facilities, canteens, social areas, sporting facilities, student clubs and societies.

- The imposition of the second level school culture may be inhibiting the social and personal development of students who are young or mature adults.

- The emphasis on the assignments, examinations and skills acquisition may not be sufficiently supportive of students who have particular needs for social and personal development.

- The distinct lack of student voice in FE College governance and management structures.

**Value of FE academic credentials**

The value of the FE College academic credentials as perceived by employers and by other stakeholders such as parents and potential students emerged as an issue in this study. Directors lamented the ‘invisibility’ of the FE sector in Irish education and in society among employers and parents. The lack of awareness of FE among guidance counsellors, employers and parents may be due to the poorly developed sense of identity of the sector. The data in the study indicated that Directors and tutors were aspiring to provide a third level or ‘College’ education but operationally the provision had all of the hallmarks of a second level education.

The recourse to the FE sector as a progression route to HEIs, either Universities or Institutes of Technology, emerged as one of the strengths of the FE programmes.
Superordinate Theme 3: The State and Society.

The findings which underpinned the superordinate theme: The State and Society, provides a basis for answers to Research Questions 1, 3 and 4 as follows:

- 1. What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?

- 3. What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to the college?

- 4. What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?

The findings in relation to the superordinate theme of The State and Society could be distilled to form the following three themes:

- Government Policy
- Financial Allocation
- Recognition of qualifications

Government Policy

The historic lack of official government policy development relating to the FE sector emerged very clearly in this study. The organic development of FE Colleges as a survival strategy reflects a commendable resilience and adaptability of the former Vocational schools. The absence of an overarching unifying policy or strategic development for FE resulted in regional disparities, duplication and fragmentation in FE provision. There was also poor connection between course provision and labour market needs. Course development and provision was haphazard and disjointed. Decisions around course provision was often linked to the utilisation of teaching staff thus safeguarding their employment contracts. Provision was also linked to the availability of teaching staff with particular qualifications. Access to information in relation to FE was hindered due to the absence of any official database at national level.

Financial Allocation
The organic nature of the growth of the FE Colleges in Ireland appears to have impaired the development of a unified representative network that could negotiate with the state for funding, and that could secure greater status recognition and a clearer identity for the sector. All Directors alluded to the underfunding of the sector which was allocated under a second level model of financing.

**Recognition of Qualifications**

The lack of clarity around identity and the uncertainty surrounding the status of the sector impacts in a negative way on FE graduates with poor awareness of FE qualifications by employers.

Access to FE courses is not included in the CAO process. The exclusion of FE from the CAO system, which is perceived as a high status route to post-secondary education, was viewed by the majority of Directors as a weakness for the sector. While FE could be used as a ‘backdoor’ to HE, it was contingent on a set of arbitrary arrangements between an FE College which had taken the initiative to negotiate a progression pathway to certain degree programmes with a HEI.

**Using Bourdieu’s Sociological Concepts**

Using Bourdieu’s concept of field to examine the configuration of relations that exist in the education field in Ireland it was possible to delineate how the power lines operate at HE and at second level in a manner that places FE in a peripheral position. FE Colleges are dependent on the second level schools for a major proportion of their prospective students. It was very clear from the data that the agents in the second level schools such as guidance counsellors who are in the influential position to disseminate information regarding opportunities in the FE colleges were either unaware of what the FE College have to offer or were unwilling to explore the sector.

The IOTs exerted their stronger position in the HE field, relative to the FE sector, to expand admissions by enrolling students who had attained pass grades in the Leaving Certificate thus encroaching on the target group that would have traditionally opted for FE. The FE Colleges were unable to resist these changes from their weak position in the field.
The progression from HE to FE, though initiated by the FE College, is controlled by the HEI. The HEI operating from a position of strength in the education field determines if a progression agreement is put in place. The terms and conditions of the progression pathways are stipulated by the Institute of Technology or by the University. The FE College is in the role of a compliant partner.

Bourdieu has written copiously about the autonomy of Universities, particularly in relation to French education. The level of autonomy is concomitant with their high status and strong position in the education field. This autonomy is reflected in the control the institutions have regarding curricular design and the regulation of assessment. By contrast the curriculum in the FE sector is designed to align with Government policy which has clearly ordained that the aim of FE is to meet the skills shortages in the economy. Countering social exclusion, which was traditionally the goal of FE, has been eclipsed by the drive to provide employment oriented programmes. The Directors and tutors in this study recognise that the utilitarian focus of the courses do not meet the needs of a proportion of the FE students. The respondents elaborated at length about the need for social and personal development programmes, literacy and numeracy supports, English language tuition, as a means to scaffold the students thus enabling them to persist to course completion. The Directors and the tutors do not occupy sufficiently powerful positions in the field to determine curriculum design, rather they deliver programmes that exemplify Government policy which directs that skills based courses are the purview of FE.

6.6 The Implications of the Findings for Policy and Practice in FE
The policy implications of the findings will be addressed under the three main Superordinate themes namely: The Individual, the Institution and The State and Society.

*The Individual*

The findings in this study indicated that financial difficulties were a major cause of drop-out among FE students in Ireland. By contrast, the UK studies did not find as strong an association between financial hardship and college drop-out. The return to fulltime formal education impacts negatively on a number of respondents’ welfare
entitlements, which resulted in their departure from the course prior to completion. At a policy level there is a need to streamline welfare payments and educational grants so that access to further education for economically disadvantaged groups is not disincentivised by a reduction in income.

The evidence from the findings indicate that adverse family circumstances increases the likelihood of attrition among FE students. The implications of this finding, which were highlighted, by College Directors and by tutors means that programmes need to be provided on a part-time basis with appropriate access to financial or welfare supports. Provision at FE level, which is more responsive to the student's needs could include: access to courses on a part-time basis, the accommodation of deferrals, online provision, the facility to accrue and transfer credits would enable students who are struggling with options to progress their education as opposed to dropping out in the face of challenging family circumstances.

**The Educational Institute**

It became apparent during the research that FE Colleges operate in a discrete manner. There was very little evidence that a College is part of a network of Institutions that would provide a coherent voice to represent the FE sector. With the exception of the City of Dublin ETB, Colleges, the notion of a coordinated approach to the provision of FE courses in a region, was non-existent. The fragmentation of FE provision, referred to in the ESRI report (2014), was mirrored in this study. To address the fragmentation and the uncoordinated nature of the FE sector, greater rationalisation of curricular provision is needed. Increased collaboration between Colleges, particularly those which are geographically close to each other, could lead to less duplication of the same courses and greater specialisation of programmes. It is interesting to note that the FE Colleges that focussed on specialisation of provision such as the Colleges that provided courses in Art, Theatre Production, Dance and Film Animation reported exceptionally high rates of retention. These particular Colleges enjoy a highly favourable reputation among prospective students, which is reflected in the oversupply of applicants for their courses. The implication of this finding is that greater consideration might be given to College specialising in particular disciplines.
At local College level, the College might aim to focus on providing courses, which are responsive to the needs of the student population. Directors indicated that the availability of staffing and their specific qualifications is a major determinant of course provision. The provision of programmes in some colleges appear to be driven by the utilisation of the teaching staff as opposed to devising programmes in response to the market trends or to the needs of the students. Directors referred to students who opted for courses on the basis of what was available in their local college as opposed to pursuing programmes that motivated them. The commitment to course completion among this group was found to be weak and as indicated in the literature these students were at risk of drop-out. The implication of these findings is that Colleges need to engage in research that would help them plan in a strategic way with regard to the provision of programmes and that the needs of students be given a higher priority over the issue of staff retention.

To address the issue of students dropping out due to inappropriate programme placement, a more conscious effort to match aptitudes and interests with courses could be made. The awareness of the importance of social integration for students in College, among college personnel was evident. There were repeated acknowledgements that the physical environment of the colleges militated against the possibilities of large scale socially engaging opportunities for students. At College level, creative policies and practices need to be devised to address the shortcomings of this important dimension of student life. It may involve the expansion of the view of the College campus boundaries to include external venues and amenities that facilitate social engagement by students. The social dimension of FE students requires a greater level of prioritisation at College level. It may be useful to link this issue with the enhancement of an FE student’s stakeholder status in the college. Student leadership might be developed, along with the devolution of some degree of responsibility and autonomy to students to shape the social environment of the FE College. This level of collaboration between college management and students is more typical and appropriate to the age range of the learners.

The majority of the Directors interviewed, lamented the lack of awareness among key school personnel such as guidance counsellors and among parents regarding the availability of FETAC programmes and the possibilities for progression to HEIs. FE
Colleges, some of which are small scale, undertake their own communications strategy, thus competing with other FE colleges, some of which can be in close proximity. Greater rationalisation across the sector might include a communications strategy that would have the potential to increase awareness of the extensive programme provision in FE Colleges. A more coordinated approach to communications at FE level could enhance the perception of the Colleges from the perspective of potential students and stakeholders, and lead to a stronger identity for FE in the Irish Education field. More rationalisation and coordination across the FE sector could provide a unified forum to negotiate with the State or Department of Education on behalf of the Colleges.

The State

The legitimacy of the FE sector to provide valid and academically recognised courses is derived from the status granted to the colleges by the state through the DES. The funding for the sector is entirely dependent on the state. The funding priority has been the provision of courses. The condition of the physical environment of all of the colleges visited during the course of this research was self-evidently, seriously under-funded. Since the completion of the study two colleges have relocated to newly-built second level schools which accommodates a further education college on the same campus. The Directors of the Colleges in the sub-standard buildings argue vehemently in favour of state investment in new college buildings and facilities. Furthermore, they contend that the status of the sector is undermined by the reliance on the use of poor quality facilities. Ideally the Directors, believe that stand alone FE Colleges, which was recommended in the McIvor Report, 2003, are the preferred option for optimal growth and for the development of a distinct third level identity.

The National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) provides the structural basis for progression from Levels 1 to 10. Some FE Colleges have exploited the progression potential of the NFQ to excellent effect. Students and adults who have been unable to gain direct entry to HEI courses can use the FE progression route. The progression possibilities that can be accessed through the FE route was strongly emphasised by the majority of the Directors and tutors and was also alluded to by the withdrawn students. The findings portray a fractured picture of progression. The cultivation of the pathway to progression appeared to be entirely dependent on the initiative of the
College leadership. The availability and the number of places assigned to FE applicants is determined solely by the HEI partner. The arrangement is exclusive to the agreed contract between a specific FE College and the HEI. Students in other FE colleges who attain the required results or higher grades, have no entitlements to avail of these progression routes. There is a clear need for the development of a more standardised overarching progression policy that is fair and transparent to all FE students. Recognising the localised nature of the FE college operations and the competitive rather than collaborative relationship that exists among them, a drive towards integration and rationalisation of FE provision would need to be driven and underwritten by state policy. A more defined policy in relation to progression to HE Degree and Diploma levels needs to be devised which provides for fair and consistent standards of access to Level 7 and Level 8 courses for FE students.

Policies that take cognisance of the educational and socio-economic background of the student body of FE need to be developed at national level. Student grants and financial assistance that support part-time participation would enhance completion rates among lone parents in particular. There is a compelling argument in favour of the continuation of specialised supports at FE level for students who have been granted Special Education Needs (SEN) status at primary and post-primary level, particularly where an individual has a life-long health or has specific learning difficulties. The need for appropriate additional educational supports for literacy and numeracy where necessary and funded interventions for English as a second language, as highlighted by the respondents in this study, would lead to improvements in persistence among the relevant students. Furthermore, the Directors explained that the FE College intake is made up of significant number of students who would be deemed vulnerable and therefore would be at risk of drop-out. The evidence from the ESRI report (2014), which is corroborated by the respondents in this study, shows that the student body in FE in Ireland, comprises a high proportion of underrepresented groups, which therefore should position the sector as a strategic player in the progression of the widening participation agenda.

Widening Participation
The widening of participation of underrepresented groups in further and higher education is a guiding principle of the Irish government’s education policy. The
Institutes of Technology have embraced the widening participation agenda in a highly pro-active manner. The IOT initiatives have resulted in additional funding from the government thus enabling the Colleges to increase enrolment across a whole range of disciplines. The increased enrolment at IOT Colleges has led to a lowering of the entry requirements. In some cases, the entry requirement is simply: All Qualified Applicants (AQA), which normally equates with 5 pass grades in the Leaving Certificate.

The IOTs were in a stronger position in the field to benefit from Government policy in relation to widening participation. The ability of FE to shape the policy in relation to widening participation was curtailed which reflected the weaker position in the field vis a vis the IOTs. Traditionally, FE Colleges attracted the student with such a moderate academic attainment in the Leaving Certificate. An unintended consequence of the governments widening participation policy is the competition between the IOTs and the FE Colleges for the same profile of students.

The Directors in this study believe that the increased enrolment in IOTs resulting from more accessible admission requirements, is impacting on the profile of students entering FE Colleges. The Directors have highlighted repeatedly that the intake of FE comprise a significant proportion of LCA students and students with a Special Education Needs (SEN). Furthermore, a number of the LCA students and almost all of the SEN students would have had additional learning supports throughout primary and post-primary schooling. These supports do not automatically transfer with the student to FE. Additional supports can only be acquired at FE after a long and bureaucratic process. Among the group who enter FE having completed LCA, there are a high proportion of students with learning difficulties and with literacy and numeracy deficits.

Throughout this study the Directors have voiced frustration that the Colleges cannot secure additional learning supports for this group. Without the appropriate and additional supports these students struggle with the demands of the course particular with the submission of assignments. Directors described the efforts at College level to provide additional tuition for students who have learning difficulties, for students with significant deficits in numeracy and literacy and for students for whom English is a
second language. There is no dedicated curricular provision for students who need additional learning supports in FE. The Directors and tutors who participated in this study identify the absence of these supports as a contributor to attrition among FE.

6.7 Limitations of this Study
The access to up to date official data on drop-out rates for the Colleges, for courses or for the overall sector, was a major draw-back for this study. Directors reported that they submit this data on an annual basis to the DES. However, no official publication of figures from the DES for the sector is available. There was repeated mention of drop-out and retention figures throughout the interviews with the Directors and tutors, but it was not underpinned by any reference to official statistics. No official figures are collated for the numbers of students who transfer from FE to HE courses. The lack of reliable data on FE in Ireland was highlighted in the ESRI study (2014) and was viewed as a major impediment to planning in the FET sector.

At the outset of the study it was envisaged that withdrawn students would be engaged to provide a significant proportion of the data. The FE colleges were supportive of the efforts to contact withdrawn students. Despite the mailing of 200 questionnaires and an invite to participate in a face to face interview the response of 64 completed surveys represented a poor level of engagement from one of the key sources of information in this study. No withdrawn student agreed to engage in a face to face interview. The questionnaires contained sparse and limited information on the experiences of the student in FE and of the factors that contributed to the early departure from their course. It has to be acknowledged, that the volume and quality of data derived from the withdrawn students in this study can provide a basis from which only tentative findings can be formed, and thus is a major limitation of this study.

The low level of engagement by withdrawn students led to further limitations in this study. Sometimes it is possible to find illuminating insights into a situation by focussing on the unique and particular circumstances that pertain to that specific context. With a greater volume of responses from withdrawn students it would have
been possible to examine the various subsets of students in FE and analyse the data from the perspective of the:

- The student entering FE as an adult who has not been involved in formal education for a long period
- The student entering FE directly after Leaving Certificate
- The student using FE as a progression route to HE
- The student entering FE as a default position because they did not secure a CAO offer
- The student both in dedicated FE Colleges and in the dual campus colleges.

The analysis of the data generated findings that alluded to the various subsets of students. The vast proportion of that data emanated from the interviews with the Directors and with the tutors and in the course of the focus group interview. A more compelling version of the withdrawn students’ narrative would only be possible with more direct engagement with the individuals.

6.8 Further Research
Areas for further research in relation to the issue of attrition among FE students would include an examination of the causes of drop-out among the various groups of students. FE is made up of diverse groups of students. Various causes of attrition emerged in the course of the study which pertained to particular groups of students in FE. The various groups or subsets have been mentioned above. A more targeted rather than a generic study of attrition in FE which examined the causes in relation to the groupings of students would shed greater light on the reasons for drop-out and would therefore provide the basis for policies that are more responsive and sensitized to the needs of the particular students.

There would be real value in identifying a cohort of students in each of the sub-groups who would be deemed to be at risk of dropping out based on an agreed set of criteria from the literature and from the findings in this study. A study could be constructed that would track these students in the course of their FE trajectory. The emphasis could be on finding out why some students, despite fitting the ‘at risk’ of dropping out
of college profile, persist and why others depart prior to course completion. Despite the difficulties encountered in this research in attempting to engage the withdrawn student it is important that an in-depth study of non-persistence focusing specifically on the student perspective in further education is undertaken.

Drawing on empirical data from the FE colleges which is submitted to the DES but is not published, studies could be devised to explore the great variations in retention rates across the sector. It should be possible to identify Colleges and particular courses with high rates of retention, such as the College of Art in this study, and to engage in a fine-grained examination of the conditions that lead to such impressive completion rates. On the other hand, further study is also needed to draw out the causes of high rates of attrition prevalent in some FE colleges and across a number of courses. Studies could be constructed to examine the internal dynamics of these colleges which focus on the culture, the curricular provision, the structural and organisational dimensions of the college with a view to understanding the impact on the student experience and on the quality of the learning environment.

Follow up studies could be undertaken with students who have used the FE progression route to HE courses. It would be helpful to find out to what extent the FE course enabled the student to gain entry to the desired HE course. The effectiveness of FE as preparatory stage for HE could be explored.

Using the theoretical framework *Attrition in Further Education* to examine FE from a number of perspectives could yield further illumination as to why the sector, on the one hand has shown such resilience and adaptability, while it continues to exist in the twilight between two of the superpowers on the Irish educational landscape, namely the second level system and the HE sector.
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Appendix 1

Letter to Students who have withdrawn from FE Course inviting them to partake in the research study on attrition in FE.
I need your help!

I am currently undertaking research as part of a doctoral programme in Education at TCD. The research relates to Further Education (FE) and PLCs. I am specifically examining the causes of drop-out from FE and PLC courses. The research will be carried out in Institutes of Further Education in throughout Ireland. The research questions are:

1. What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?

2. What causes of withdrawal are due to factors that are within the control or influence of colleges?

3. What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to colleges?

4. What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?

5. Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?

The Principal of ------------------ has granted permission for the research to be undertaken at his college. The enclosed response form has been sent to FE/PLC students who enrolled on a FE/PLC programme at ------------------ in recent years but who withdrew prior to completion.
Please note that ---------- is not disclosing the names or addresses of any student, past or present to me or to TCD. In order to maintain confidentiality the names and addresses are only known to ------------, and all of the correspondence will be directed from the college. However, if you wish to include your contact details in the response form you have the option of doing so or you may opt to remain anonymous. Either option is perfectly acceptable. The information and data gathered is strictly confidential and will not be used for any other purposes other than to contribute to the essential research component of the doctoral studies that I am currently engaged in.

May I respectfully invite you to complete the enclosed response form and return it to ------------ at your earliest convenience. An SAE has been enclosed. May I also thank you in anticipation for your assistance with this vital part of my course and I look forward to hearing from you, who are the real experts on the causes of withdrawal from FE/PLC programmes and in particular the light that you will shed on how retention rates of students can be improved.

Thanking you
Yours sincerely,
_______________________
Mary Kenny
Appendix 2

Letter to FE College Directors inviting them to participate in a research study of attrition among FE students in Ireland.
Dear ______________,

I need your help!

I am currently undertaking research as part of a doctoral programme in Education at TCD. The research relates to Further Education (FE) and PLCs. I am specifically examining the causes of drop-out from FE and PLC courses. The research will be carried out in Institutes of Further Education in throughout Ireland. The research questions are:

6. What causes students to withdraw from FE or PLC courses prior to completion?

7. What causes of withdrawal are due to factors that are within the control or influence of colleges?

8. What causes of withdrawal are due to factors external to colleges?

9. What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?

10. Where should colleges concentrate their efforts in order to improve their retention rates?

I would be most grateful if you could offer some assistance in any of the following ways:

- By assisting with access to students who have withdrawn from their FE courses prior to completion in recent years?
- By participating in an interview on the subject of attrition among FE students?
• By participating in a focus group interview on the subject of attrition among FE students.

I am available to discuss the research project with you if you would like further information.

Please be advised that the research will be carried out within the TCD ethical guidelines and policies. Please note that the names or addresses of any student, past or present will not be disclosed by me to TCD. In order to maintain confidentiality the names and addresses are only known to -----------------, and all of the correspondence will be directed from the college. The information and data gathered is strictly confidential and will not be used for any other purposes other than to contribute to the essential research component of the doctoral studies that I am currently engaged in.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

_________________________________

Mary Kenny
Appendix 3

Samples of questionnaires from former FE students who had withdrawn from course prior to completion.
Response Form for students who have withdrawn from a PLC/FETAC course prior to completion

Participants were asked to underline one of the responses: (a), (b), (c), (d), which most reflected their experience in relation to each of a list of 28 statements. Participants were also asked to add comments in relation to each of the statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) Agree strongly</th>
<th>(b) Agree</th>
<th>(c) Disagree</th>
<th>(d) Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>strongly</td>
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Comment:

1. I was allowed to take the course I wanted
2. I would encourage someone else to do the same course
3. The course was the right one for me
4. The college treated me as an equal
5. I was satisfied with the quality of teaching
6. I got on well with my teachers
7. My course was interesting
8. My family circumstances did not change during the course
9. Teachers were always prepared for class
10. I had no health or personal problems during the course
11. The course was not too difficult for me
12. I got on well with other students
13. I felt safe and secure in the class
14. There was the right amount of coursework
15. College facilities were good
16. The college was convenient to get to
17. I got adequate feedback on my assignments and coursework
18. The timetable was convenient for me
19. I engaged in college social and cultural life
20. I got the help I needed for my coursework
21. I did not experience financial hardship during the course
22. I found it easy to make enough time for study
23. I received enough guidance from the college
24. I was encouraged by the college to resume my studies
25. I enrolled on a FETAC/PLC course because I wanted to
26. I would have completed my FETAC/PLC course if
27. I withdrew from my FETAC/PLC course because
28. My most recent experience of fulltime education was
Appendix 4

A sample of an unstructured interview with an FE College Director, which has been transcribed verbatim.
Researcher: Thank you for granting me this interview, as I was explaining to you I am particularly interested in exploring the issue of attrition among FE students and to explore with you what might be the causes of attrition among this group of students and what colleges can do to increase and improve the rates of courses completion.

Director: Well the kind of things we, we’re looking at, we have ya know we have been doing some researcher over the last while essentially cause of the change in Solas and all that. We’re looking at em coming down the road that (..) the notion is out there around funding and retention and progression and all that ya know. So kind of, we’ve been looking over a number of years. So we have a fifteen day kind of policy, so if someone misses fifteen days in the first fifty days or the first, up to November or something like that, we call them and that ya know. So generally tutors chase them up. But we’re finding, in the beginning there are a number of reasons, the reasons are different at different times of the year. In the beginning it’s about sometimes students not picking the right course and sometimes an incident happening very early on that (..) makes it difficult for them to continue ya know. Em sometimes students just don’t settle into the class. Another one this year ya know, it’s reported widely around the VEC is around money. Some students just couldn’t, yeah that they just couldn’t afford to be here. Because a lot of them in the past, although some courses would be maybe three days academic and two days of work experience, students could actually have another job ya know. And sometimes care, social care
students were doing their work experience and they were getting a job, extra hours and that kind of stuff. They had ways of making money but that seems to be gone. Very few of them are saying they are missing because they have jobs. Em with some people. Then later in the year ya get kind of phases things kind of settle between November and Christmas usually, then after Christmas you get students leaving because they find the work, they can’t do the amount of work they have to do and the whole thing about assignments and that, some students find that difficult, and some students would say that if assignments are bunched together (..) ya know they just can’t cope with that and they stop attending. And we follow those students up, ya know and we try to get them to come in and we try and get them help and we try and get them to finish because they really then have to get to ya know, the end of April to finish because the exams are then at the end of the month of May. So, but a lot of students, there’s a lot of kind of in and out around between January, ya know around January, February, March trying to get them to come in.

**Researcher:** Socio-economic factors have been highlighted in the literature as a contributory factor to non-completion among FE students would your experience resonate with that view?

**Director:** Some of it is yeah, and I think the money, the, the financial em (.) matter is there in the background all the time. (.) and sometimes people are, well the other big thing of course is em life issues, family issues. If something happens in the family, some, a lot of our, some of our students are people who would be in recovery of various types and if there’s a problem there, well they’re gone for a period of time. Em metal health issues is another big reason for people dropping out, and that’s
emerging quite strongly ya know. And em (..) well we have a pretty good counselling service and a lot of time is committed on the time table to guidance and counselling and that but em, that is (..) a big issue especially among older students, students who are coming back, who have had challenging histories before they have come back. That’s a big issue. [ok]. That one kind of goes through the year ya know ya spot that very early on. Or some students would come forward and tell you (..) but it’s not easy in most cases.

**Researcher:** Curricular relevance is another issue that features strongly in the literature as an important factor in relation to student retention, the evidence also from other FE College Directors is that when the FETAC programme is part of a progression route to a HE course there appears to be higher levels of retention would that be your experience in this College?

**Director:** Yeah you get students who, we have access courses, liberal arts and we have a link with Trinity from that so in the course where we had the link with Trinity (..) the retention rate is very high. Students can progress to Arts in Trinity. We find some students try to go to psychology with this, would be a subject a lot of students are interested in.

**Researcher:** Noted particularly strongly in the literature is the notion of academic and social integration in other words if a student can integrate effectively at academic level and also at the social engagement level they are more likely to complete the course even if they experience serious challenges over the duration of the course would you share that view?
**Director:** Well em, if you get students (..) you might get students in a social studies group that isn’t necessarily attached to a professional job (..) but it varies from year to year. Say last year we had a mature adult group of social studies students (.) and they would normally be interested in going on to third level. (???) Coming back into education after a long time, there was a huge dropout rate from that group last year. The reason for that was something around the integration of the class. The social reason within the class itself ya know.

The class didn’t gel yeah and then there were lots of personal issues ya know. So i’m not sure if it’s largely from, ya know we would have childcare students ya know, have very high retention rates in that group ya know. Em social care, quite good except if they get work. Then if they don’t complete the course they won’t get continuing work cause of the kind of qualifications they need. This year we had, we have a two year Montessori programme and we had (..) ya know in the first year they do a Level Five and in the second year they do a Level Six and the Montessori Tuition? Is finished. We had a big dropout rate from one group last year. And that was down, that was... the reason given for that was because they went to work (.), even though they’re required to have one, at least one grade C in Leaving Cert on an honours paper (..) so they wouldn’t be, they’d be [middle ability] middle ability students yeah. It was the.. I’m not sure it’s the (..) it’s the amount that they have to do. They have to go on work placement for two days and they have to do ya know, a lot of assignments and I think sometime they find that hard. And some of the reason attached to that is the way we teach Leaving Cert I suppose {the spoon feeding}. The spoon feeding and then here, ya know a certain amount of spoon feeding is done obviously and then, but so much of the work is (..) an assignment that you must hand up ya know. For every subject
there might be two or three for every subject and something like the new
communications module, a FETAC level five there is nine pieces of work. Now
sometimes you can (..) use the same piece for a number of subjects but still it’s a lot
of work.

**Researcher: Are there supports in place to help students with their academic
integration particularly with the assignment workload?**

**Director** The workload continues on for the year. And sometimes the students don’t
(???). or if something happens, ya know there is deadline for every project and if
somebody is falling behind we have, we have, at Christmas a date where if somebody
hasn’t handed up work ya know between September and Christmas they have got to
come to the office then talk about it (..) so at least you catch them (.) there and you
can try and do something give them some help or something, ya know. But ya know,
we would have at the end of the year then we have another, another session like that
ya know. We would have one maybe Christmas, January and then maybe in April
maybe there would be a date ya know if somebody is behind we would try to see them
and the reasons the students give for not having the work in are the reasons that I have
given you why students drop out. Ya know they have to, (..) they haven’t got the
money, something happens at home, getting sick ya know. You just can’t do it. (..) ya
know what’s involved in an FE course isn’t as well known as what’s involved in the
leaving cert or Junior Cert or the Leaving Cert Applied, ya that kind of way. It’s kind
of a bit of a mystery ya know. Parents I think ya know. So it’s kind of harder to get
help ya know. You can’t really go for a grind, I’ve never heard of anybody going for a
grind in Child development or Childcare ya know. Students are reluctant to ask for
help, they prefer just to drift out and because the courses are just one year courses, (..) ya know (.) if you have been teaching them in schools (.) and you get them in fifth year ya know the ones that are going to have problems with their work. In this case we don’t find that out maybe until November, that somebody is under performing ... and then they’ve already missed maybe (..) handing up three pieces or something. So they are behind then and then it’s a struggle for them.

Researcher: Other FE Directors indicated that many of the FE student come socio economic disadvantaged communities and are first generation post compulsory education students.

Director: That’s probably a general statement but it’s probably true enough yeah yea. Ye know a lot of, ya know sometimes we get eh parents ringing and saying, (..) ya know (..) my son or daughter tells me that, ya know their failing or something like that ya know. (..) or they’re in trouble about their work. Sometimes ya kind of find out in those kind of conversations that parents don’t really have a clue what they have been doing. There’s a mixture, in different courses there’s a different kind of socioeconomic kind of make up yeah. Ya get Performance, ya know which is a very different kind of course would be very mixed ya know mostly (muttering) if you want to categorize it, mostly middle class kind of. Students who em (..) a lot of the others are coming from DEIS schools, The adults are ya know, broad range (..) but a lot of people with ya know a challenging past.

Researcher: Would the teachers/lectures/tutors view the student as being adult learners or emerging young adults who are moving towards being independent
learners or would a more second level mind-set prevail where the teacher/lecture/tutor takes a hands on role and is very engaged with the student in relation to the course work?

**Director:** I think they do yeah. They do yeah. And that would be the kind of atmosphere we are trying to create ya know. We would talk to students a lot about independent learning and trying to do things, ya know just trying to do things themselves and trying to take responsibility about (..) (???) lots of FE colleges will tell you, ya know em (..) ya know at the end of the year if some student is failing because they decided to drop a mandatory module but they didn’t tell anybody. Ya know the teacher would have been would have been chasing them up, they just weren’t attending the class, they weren’t handing up the work. So we have a system in place where no student can drop any module without going to see the Guidance Counsellor, and the tutor and sitting down and having the conversation and signing a form saying I understand the consequences and implications of dropping this module coz often they don’t ya know

**Researcher:** So there is still a lot of engagement with the student a lot of monitoring and various supports?

**Director:** Absolutely ya absolutely, You don’t get a group of independent learners coming in from the Leaving Cert at all they are quite needy and they do need a lot of support and what they are asked to do is quite challenging the Childcare students are asked to go out and work in a crèche or playschool 2 days per week and sometimes sometimes what they lack most is the social skills you know to seek help or to engage
with the place its quite a big ask some of them wouldn’t know how or when to ask for help not all of them some are more capable

**Researcher: Do you call them students or teachers or lectures or?**

**Director:** I kind a call them teachers myself, you see there are two a tutor and a teacher a tutor is somebody who is a tutor to a class group and a teacher is somebody who has a class,

**Researcher:** So there is a kind of a pastoral care element?

**Director:** Yeah there is

**Researcher:** Would the teachers have specific qualifications to teach Further Ed or would they be mainly second level teachers?

**Director:** They are a mixture we have some people in the social care area say that were nurses, that were em working in those area and have particular expertise in those area we have a number of people who have come through second level and have re-trained in various ways we have some people who are quite specialist say something like media who were actually working in media and who were employed from that the people who are doing the are teaching on the media course are job-sharing are are here some of say half the time and are working in the media the rest of the time, coz they fell coz all that stuff changes so quickly that that wouldn’t be the case
everywhere a lot of people most of the people teaching in the access courses would be
would come from second level

**Researcher:** The Access Courses are?

**Director:** Trinity Access Courses Its quite a mixture of people, I think people are
coming to realise you know a lot of people are not trained teachers. And their attitude
and working with them you know to get them to understand that they do have a duty
of care to students is their job is a big job. It’s been going on for a number of years a
lot of people take the idea that they are a lecturer you know go in and deliver the
lecture and it’s up to the student to take it or leave it but that is not the ethos or
philosophy of the school we don’t see it that way we see it you know in all of the
circulars we are second level we get all that second level stuff you know and
essentially there is there is a responsibility to have a duty of care towards students no
matter what age they are that is our attitude anyway a lot of people wouldn’t
necessarily agree that they have that duty of care and that level of responsibility bit in
the system we are in that is the way it is you know

**Researcher:** Do you see much difference between the group of students that come
in straight from Leaving Cert and the group that come in having been in the
workplace for a number of years and who have been away from formal
education?

**Director:** I think the group that who come in and haven’t been away at work have
much more expectations of what the College will deliver the students emm em
coming in from second level em don’t want it to be like second level they want it to be different ok em whether they can cope with the difference there is a gap between expectation and reality if you know what I mean you know students who come straight in from school need a lot of help mature students are vary and varied some come in and all students who come in and who has been absent from education for a long time any kind of education for a long time have a difficulty in the beginning most people try to create the situation that existed when they were in school em you have got to work through that and that is a process

**Researcher:** What is emerging as a critical factor in relation to retention is the notion of the quality of the student experience and teacher performance in the classroom

**Director:** It’s quite a difficult one its quite a difficult thing because in a second level setting its not unknown for a principal to walk into the class you know and say how are things and that but you wouldn’t usually do that here that is not really the ethos but I think there are ways that it’s the kind of conversation that one needs to have with teachers you know we have done we have invested a huge amount in classroom technology you know data projectors and training and all that kind of stuff you know we have got Moodle up and running you know what that got to do with quality in the class well we essentially there is much more conversations going on at staff meetings about learning and teaching it’s one of the things we work on myself and the Deputy it’s one of the things it’s one of our values it’s almost like you have got to keep talking about it all the time like a broken record over and over again until people begin to think about it we give a lot of time to people for programme meetings we do
everything we can to indicate that what you deliver in the classroom is what we are all about I suppose what happening us now I suppose when the externs come in and look at them and look at the work and all that kind of thing we and write a report so the report does give you information Em you know and feed back so that you can sit down with teachers and have a conversation about what is happening say for example take a case you know where you have 8 modules and em students get merits and distinctions in 6 and 1 where they are failing and another where they are barely passing you know you would have that conversation with the teacher about what is happening you are touching on learning and teaching there you know it’s not easy in any situation but it has to be done what we did last year we put together all of the positives and responses from the externs and mentioned them to staff and then we put together all of the areas for improvements and delivered them to staff then we sat down with the programme teams and we delivered more detailed feedback but it was named yeah this year eh the externs are also getting more precise about what they are saying and this year there was a situation where somebody’s work wasn’t up to scratch and that has huge implications for students so we have to deal with that on an individual basis having done what we did last year it is easier not that it is easy but there is a context to do it in you know we have put in help and we have put in mentoring in some programmes from time to time you know every time we send out emails to with assessment we always put in a note saying if you have any difficulty with this come and talk to us so we have created some people will some people will just carry on we are we are obliged to get feedback from students you know from each programme and from that there are clear statements that students make about different areas we have to work out a way of addressing those you know
Researcher: As Director of the College it appears you have responsibility for the overall quality of teaching and learning but you do not have the authority to deal directly with a teacher’s performance in the classroom?

Director: At second level you have the WSE but that hasn’t happened at this level yet. But I have been Principal for two years and I have sat down with people and have had very direct conversations with them you know how the issues come to you is one matters but if students if students complain which they do I mean I mean my response is to deal with it you know in a sensitive way as you can sit down with the teacher and say this is what the student is saying about what is happening in the classroom I am not accusing you here I am telling you that this is what the students are saying it gives you an out it gives you some scope yeah yeah and also its always better if students are saying stuff to their tutor or say it to the teacher because some other teacher is going to say it in the staffroom and create a gossipy situation just to take and say is this a problem or is this something we need to deal with some people like some people in some years have stuff going on and therefore their performance isn’t as good you know and people come and they tell you that so you can do something you know the day when you could put in an extra person or put in another person is gone the allocations are really tight

Researcher: It appears to me that each College of Further Education operates as if it is its own little independent republic take for example here in Dublin you have something like 16 Colleges of Further Education in the Dublin area would you think there is a case for rationalisation and that some Colleges could become
more specialised in terms of the programmes and courses they offer and become an academy of excellence in a number of specialisms unique to each College

**Director:** Yeah yeah that is true to some extent and we have had conversations among ourselves within the system about that and I think once people begin to talk about that something might or might not happen but I suppose the point is the way they way teachers work and the way schools have grown up and all that and how that comes about and there was a time when schools were in competition with one another but that was like 22 Colleges in Dublin VEC all fighting their own corner with one another just didn’t make sense to anybody really but I suppose that is the world we live in at the moment you know there would be informally a lot of discussions around contractual issues and issues that arise if we can’t run a course here and there are students who want to do it and I know there are the same course in ……. College or something I will talk to the Principal there and we try to get students to go there that is something that works I mean there are kind of informal engagements but but if I wanted to put on a new Childcare course of some kind you know that might not work because some other College might say that you would be taking their students that is the way it is at the moment you know I don’t maybe the whole world of Solas and ETB will change all of that you know but I don’t know it will be interesting to see as time goes on

**Researcher:** Interesting, I get a huge sense that there is a lack of clarity around the role that Solas will play with the Colleges of Further Education……
Director: It’s a new world I don’t even know if Solas even knows what role they will play in all of this I suppose it’s going to be all funding in eh eh Dublin? City nothing is changing in terms of the ?VEC we are staying the way we are yeah FÁS FÁS two training centres will be integrated eh the Community Training workshops will be all part of the Vocational Training Board and it remains to be ?seen how ?that I mean there is a certain amount of anxiety about it ?amongst Principals but I don’t know if there is much amongst ?teachers it’s kind of sent the information to people but we did a ?whole session an information session with? Staff about the ?whole development you know I thought that staff would be much ?more ?concerned than ?they ?were you know we did it and it was ?April it was coming to the end of the year things look different then you know We could explain to them the cost of running courses and the cost of FAS Would FAS run their courses? Or emm I mean one of the >criticism of FE is the ?lack of ?statistics we talk about here ?retention and ?drop out and absenteeism you know if you get a grant for 24 students to do an Archaeology Course you know what is the successful ?outcome that you need to have to be able to run the course ?again that is not how it is happening ?but you ?can see that it could go that ?way with undergoing so much change it could become outcome ?driven and largely you know all ?colleges need to focus on our agreement and make sure we are doing ?that developing it every ?year and being clear about you know the ?journey our students go from the ?day we take them ?in and so on and how they finish and how we ?follow them ?up We have put a Special Duties Post in ?place for next year to do ?that in fairness to the College and the course and that we can say next year we can say that we took x ?amount and we took on students for a Tourism Course and at Christmas there was Y number and Z number took the exam and so many got the award and so many got Major awards and so many got minor awards and this is where
they are now on a particular date in October or November this is where they are now. I think we have to do that
You know and its working out ways within the College to do that put in systems where students trying to get students to respond when we ask them you know

**Researcher:** And would they have clubs and societies similar to other Colleges……

**Director:** Oh Yeah they would they would we have a teacher who has got a Special Duties Post for Student Activities we have an A Post you know whose post is ?Student ?welfare so that person would you know the ?grants and ?learning Support there would there would be a good Learning Support System throughout the College there would be clubs we ?don’t have that ?many of them

**Researcher:** When you say Learning Support what exactly do you mean by Learning Support in this College?

**Director:** It consists of the students to have one to one help if they need it with projects with things like that we would also have workshops during the year for students to attend say child development would be identified as as a module in Child Care that a lot of students who find difficult so we would have 3 to 4 workshops during the year on particular aspects of that module we have 3 members of staff who have ?time on their ?timetable to give Learning Support there is there is ?one teacher who gives ?Maths support to the Access Students who do Statistics so there would be that and there would be Guidance we have ?2 Guidance Counsellors now not all of
their time is in Guidance but they would you know you know do a lot of the work
with ?progression So we would have SCC the Sports and Cultural Council with the
VEC so we have a member of staff who encourages students to get involved ?there
so some of them would be there the there’s debating there’s public speaking there’s
basketball there’s football so all of these things would be one –off kind of things so
we try to get a group together for it you know we have a ?green College kind of
committee as well it is hard enough to get students involved because by the time they
are settled ?in its November and that but the thing that worked best this year was a
‘Stitch and Bitch’ session (Laughter) it was knitting they met in the room over there
and some staff joined in and some just ?sat around they were making a quilt
?basically they just started by doing one day a week and it was two days by the end of
the year there would have been about 15 ?mostly girls but ?large a lot of the school
population are girls you know but that was very ?successful so it says something
about setting up situations where students can ?meet and be part of something ?more
than their class group. Yeah yeah so we have 2 canteens now so that helps because
students programmes are so tightly organised in terms of Work experience and that
groups tend not to mix that much with one another and they tend to and that ?hard to
break down because they don’t have time to do that say the Montessori Students
would be out for 2 days so they only have 3 days and the 3 days that they are here are
quite full in terms of their timetable ah you are kind of aware all the time that it is a?
years experience for students and you want to kind of make it for students as
interesting as possible what works against it is the shortness of the time you know
your
Researcher: Where would you direct your efforts to increase retention among Further Education students?

Director: Well I think it is about you know learning and teaching I think it is about how teachers teach and the methodologies they use and the technologies and the digital technologies I am not saying the digital technologies are everything the digital route is everything it’s not necessarily any better or any worse than anything else lots of students like that but I suppose essentially what works is we know what works is how teachers engage with students you know in a group or in a one to one in terms of a teaching relationship the groups that are happiest are the groups where you know the person in charge really engages with them that focuses their attention so learning teaching how teachers teach is largely the key to success I think with students you know some of the drift away is students who feel that they do not have somebody that they are responsible to for attendance some students say that I left secondary school because Mrs _------kept ringing me to see where I was so you try to explain to them that it is a bit is different here and that they have to be responsible for themselves but if that is where they are at you have to go there but that is difficult to convince some teachers to do that

Researcher: So its students’ need that drive your practices!

Director: It can be sometimes yeah yeah but I think But I think what the person in the classroom does is key to the whole thing when you build everything else around that you build all the support around that so there isn’t much point in sending a student to Guidance and all that if the reason the student is dropping out of the course
because the teacher is not delivering you know what I mean, you can have all the policies in the world but if the teacher isn’t delivering it undermines everything

**Researcher:** Is the profile of the student that you are seeing in Further Education a student that needs that extra level of support in terms of academic and social supports and are mainly coming from disadvantaged communities?

**Director:** So I suppose the challenge in Further Education is that a lot of people who work in Further Education are not trained teachers it’s very hard any of us who have come from second level and has trained and upgraded their skills knows very well that a duty of care is there and teaching is what it is about you know somebody comes from industry sometimes and talks about training and lecturing you know a lot of people here in the past mainly would have described themselves as lecturers I have no problem with that really so long as they are delivering in the classroom No no teacher coming in from second level would describe themselves that way they would all say that they are a teacher

**Researcher:** Is there CPD put in place for teachers to build on that notion of teaching in an adult environment and developing the notion of the independent learner it’s a different relationship to that of the relationship between the teacher and the second level student and the teacher and the Further Education student

**Director:** There are loads of opportunities for people to do CPD well there’s the VEC and the Curriculum Development Unit the CDU who put stuff
on for people you know so that they can up-skill there is a budget every College has a certain amount of money every year to do provide training and we have a number of people who would have done Masters and over the last couple of years and we have facilitated that on the timetable now it’s tough it means that the teaching is all bunched together but we do it to free people up there’s a Masters in It which a number of a number of people have done you know so there is that commitment from People you know in Adult Learning, Learning and Teaching in Third Level I think it is called there at least 5y people doing it which is quite a lot in the kind of environment that teachers are working in now So in that way its good they can train others internally and its adds to the conversation around the table what’s going on and I think that’s good essentially there isn’t and some of the difficulties with some people and you know with the younger people is the block in promotion they don’t get an opportunity to do anything you know the opportunity for promotion is an incentive for people just jizzes things up and gets people interested in things and that is gone completely

Researcher: M------ thank you so much for your time and your invaluable insights thanks again.
Appendix 5

A sample of an unstructured interview with an FE College Director, which has been transcribed verbatim.
Researcher: Thank you for agreeing to give me this interview, as I explained to you as I was explaining to you I am particularly interested in the area of attrition among FE students. And I would be interested to hear your views, your understanding from your work as a Director of a FE College of what are the main causes of attrition among FE students…

Director: For the mature student who starts in September a very basic thing is that Social Welfare won’t let them do the course that’s one of the reasons that they initially drop out now if you do a FETAC Level 5 course the Dept of Education won’t let you do another Level 5 you can do another PLC course you can do several courses but the Dept of Social Welfare won’t allow anyone on Social Welfare payments to do more than one course at each level so if you do a Level 5 course in Business see you have got to go and do Level 6 if you do Level 5 in Business and then you decide you want to do Childcare they won’t allow you to do that they won’t pay you while you are doing it no some people start the course initially discover very early on they can’t do the course that’s for mature students I am talking about the mature students for people coming back like that some of the reasons would be a lot of the reasons would be outside their control they come back very keen very enthusiastic then they start the course and in some case they are trying to

Teacher enters office to speak to Director Interview resumed after 2 minutes

They come in they are very enthusiastic and then they don’t realise how difficult it’s going to be balancing family commitments with doing the course they are able
for coming in during the day but when it comes to you know being given assignments where they actually have to work at home they just haven’t got the time at home because of the family so if a child is sick and they miss a couple of weeks and if they are sick and they miss a couple of weeks any kind of a critical incident in their family you know bereavement or anything like that then they end up staying out they seem to drop out and they don’t come back now I would always say to them in September now a lot of people start courses sometimes things can happen and you will end up not being able to stay if that is the case do come and talk to us but if you do have to leave the door is always open so you can always come back so that some of the main reasons another thing would be the workload both on the course and in the home but the level of the courses for the people coming back they might be students who have left school early or who might have been out of school for a long time so in those cases sometimes when they come back the workload is just too much and since they start getting assignments and that you know they just leave and financial reasons as well if they have children and their children are at school and they have to get the children minded and then as the year goes on the financial pressures emerge or if the husband became unemployed or something like that they might have to leave for the students I for the ones that come straight from the Leaving Cert

**Researcher: Just to get back to the critical incident issue you were saying that in the event of a critical incident in the family the student may end up dropping out. Does that suggest that the commitment to the completion of the FE programme is weak at family level or among the people around the student? Very often in families where a critical incident occurs the commitment to education is preserved.**
**Director:** You are probably right, there isn’t that wider commitment within the family so they don’t actually get the supports so if there is a critical incident a bereavement or their parent becomes ill or something the education is the one that falls they have to compromise on that I would agree on that, it’s a very precarious balance between they want to do the course probably deep down they want to do it but maybe it is just in themselves and maybe when something else comes up they say I just can’t do it. They probably and that’s why I always say to people, that if anything happens during the year come to us and talk to us because often you might say to somebody come back in a few weeks the teacher will help you or maybe drop a few subjects and you can do them next year just kind of finish off part of the course but they don’t always do that they just leave yeah but em it’s a kind of a hard one with them a lot of people coming back are probably marginalised so they are probably not a lot of them might not have huge support they are probably single parents or if they do have family and their family is in the same situation and probably don’t put the value on education as the want that has to be got through, sometimes

**Researcher:** It does have to matter as much to your nearest and dearest that you succeed and complete the programme...

**Director:** It does it does, I would find that when I talk to people who have completed the course would say that the support of their families and their partners was crucial if you don’t have the support of you family it’s not going to happen and if you hit a crisis you may fall apart and leave the course and even in the general and
even as the work goes on during the year they have got to go home and do their work and unless their family or their partner is there to look after the children and give them the time to do the work that is really crucial

**Researcher:** At the recruitment and interview stage it may be difficult to ascertain the level of family support that the potential student has in terms of completing the FE course

**Director:** Yes it can it can I was actually researching that very issue I was reading a study I think it was done in the UK and one of the recommendations they made it was about women returning to education on a kind of an Access programme and one of the recommendations they made was that peoples’ partners be brought in to a kind of an induction at the beginning of the course so they would actually know what is expected of the person doing the course so they would know the supports that that person would need a support network but it’s just what I studied and then the younger students who come doing courses I think some them some of them don’t really know what it is they want to do I think so they start doing a course and they are not really interested some of them have plenty time on their hands but they don’t want to get up in the morning you know some are great but you know the ones who drop out they start of they start by coming in late in the morning and then they start missing days and if they are in bad form they take the day off and going back a few years sometimes people would have part-time jobs that is not as much the case anymore the first indication that the younger students the ones that drop the ones that have just done their Leaving Cert in a lot of cases they may not be that interested and are not very well motivated and they don’t know what to do and they tend to drop off
some are very good and they keep going but the ones who want to drop out there may not have been any definite reason for them not to be coming in before they drop out but they wouldn’t have any definite reason why they are doing the course.

they don’t really know what they want to do they think they want to do childcare but then they will realise they don’t like childcare or they will start nursing or they start nursing and then they realise they don’t like it yeah some of the courses like nursing are actually very difficult the content of them is very difficult same thing say some of the students who come to do PLC who have say done Leaving Cert Applied and they might go into something like nursing and they find the Science very difficult. Some of them just don’t have that level of motivation I suppose when you go in school there is more of you have to come to school and that but when you are at Third Level or PLC you are treated as an adult so it’s up to yourself you know and you really want to do a course and you are committed to doing it or its quiet easy for people to drop off and drift off

**Researcher:** *Do students on your FETAC programmes in your College feel they are in school or in college?*

**Director:** I think here they feel like they are in College this is a dual campus but the second level school is in another building at the other side of the carpark so there is actually no contact whatsoever so the second level students and the PLC are totally separate buildings we might as well be just a PLC college really but we share staffing some students stay in separate buildings but the staff go over and back*
Researcher: So the teachers that come across here would they have any specific qualifications in working with adults?

Director: No no they wouldn’t no they wouldn’t the teachers that teach ?only adult students they would have worked in areas outside of teaching like the teachers who teach nursing courses are ?nurses there are teachers teaching other courses that would have worked in Business or would have come ?back into teaching so they would have come from a different background nobody no has a specific qualification in teaching adults

Researcher: So the person coming across from the second level school to teach FETAC Level 5 or Level 6 students French or Business or Biology would they have a sense in themselves that they are teaching in two different contexts or would their approach to teaching be quite similar in both contexts?

Director: ?it depends I think you will always get some students some adult students saying that the teachers are treating them like second level students/ you know and I would have found that in my old school as well where we had a mixed ?not a lot there are occasions when they say the class would feel that teachers are treating them like second level when you are teaching a second level class and you go straight into ?adult level class it is probably not that easy to switch off so I think there would be ?that
Researcher: Are they, the teachers, in a sense perpetuating their dependency on teachers rather than facilitating them, the students moving towards becoming towards becoming an independent adult learner?

Director: ?no no I don’t think the learning would be affected no there are other FETAC courses that would there is a certain amount you have to do there is a lot of going off and doing your own research and that ?no I don’t think

Researcher: The notion of student experience is coming up particularly in relation to the quality of that experience as a factor that can contribute to or inhibit student retention in Further Education and linked to that quality of student experience is the quality of the learning in the classroom do you have any mechanism to evaluate the quality of the learning in the classroom particularly the quality of the teaching

Director: Well we are a member of what used to be County Dublin VEC and now CDETB there is a FETAC quality assurance that which this school and all of the schools in County Dublin VEC are signed up to there is a rotation where one year VTOS will be evaluated and one year PLC will be evaluated and last year it was PLC we had an evaluation done on all of the courses and the delivery and all of that that process is in place you have to do that all of the PLC and it was being done here before I came here and the QA officer is going to meet with the individual schools to go through the areas but Quality Assurance in FETAC and all that I think that is something that people in Further ED are always conscious of
Researcher: Would you have students who have come from second level for whom a range of educational supports had been in place for them such as individualised curricula, LCA, JCSP or SENs or other Learning Support strategies because they had particular difficulties that meant that they needed addition or special supports to support their education and now they are in FE and they still have those difficulties and they need additional support, without which they will struggle

Director: You see there are supports there are supports under a Disability no I can’t remember the name of it there are supports you can apply for and the applications are supposed to be in on the 1st of October I think the scheme is called ‘ahead actually it may be changed, I am not sure it’s the exact same system that is used in Third Level College the exact same system for Disability Assessment in Third Level they are using that at schools the only thing is the at it only applies to people that are on certain courses like we have a girl this year she did LEVEL 5 last year and she is doing LEVEL 6 this year and I think she has Cerebral Palsy and she is in a wheelchair and I mean she has the full access pay so if they had the supports at second level school we can apply for the resources and if they have had the assessment now they might not get the same level say if somebody had Dyslexia they might only get an hour a week or so on oh yeah there are supports yeah there are

Researcher: What about people with low levels of literacy?

Director: People with low levels of? literacy there isn’t really supports no no there is nothing at national level put in place it would really be at local level if there was
resources in the school I know we have two students from here who would be quite weak there is a teacher going to take them for an hour a week there are some resource hours available and she asked could she take them rather than doing them in the second level you know what I mean there is a little bit of leeway if a teacher isn’t on their full hours you know that way but there isn’t any other scheme it is a local arrangement but there is an issue with students with low literacy you see there is another reason why they drop out because with low levels of literacy when it comes to doing the work it is too difficult for them but I know sometimes when somebody comes to do a fulltime course we would recommend that they do a part time one or that they would be referred somewhere else to do before they would actually come back

**Researcher:** And for students for whom English is not their first language and who may have deficits in the proficiency of the English language are there supports for those students?

**Director:** We don’t have that many here but in my last school we a huge number of foreign national students and a lot of them wouldn’t have good English for the people doing full-time courses we put in English as another subject along with Communications and they did that as an option say to Marketing so people for whom English wouldn’t be great ..say they would do English and Communications instead of Communications and marketing, the English would be a part of their subjects so in our old school we did that for all of the courses we did that option so that helped them we also did English and Computer Course so people who would come when they would come looking for courses and we would realise that their English wasn’t that
good but in my old school we offer them an English language test and then we could offer them LEVEL 4 if they needed it because of the language but it’s not really an issue here

Researcher: The mismatch between the student and the course is coming up as an issue that may be contributing to attrition among FE students in other word students enrol on a course that they soon discover that does not meet their needs or expectations, Colleges are trying to refine pre-selection processes in order to diminish the mismatch factor? What recruitment processes do you engage in and what is you experience of and what are your views on the importance of the fit between student and the course?

Director: Some of the students don’t get a course in third level and some of them look and see what they can do you know and then they come on a FETAC course we do interviews here in and people are given places based on their in interviews so it’s kind of a good opportunity for the teachers that are teaching the course to see do they know anything about the course we have had some pre-university courses that are hugely popular we also got a very popular engineering course but we also have two students who are in it and have said to us that they course is not what they thought it was going to be so it gives us the opportunity to find out what each person knows about the course and we also do a sheet an information sheet on each course we did it in our old school as well so we can use it for to find out what the course is about and show them what the course can be used for so at open days people could be given the information so they would have a look
Researcher: What are you looking for during the interview stage?

Director: Just to find out really to see if people are interested in the courses particularly for courses that are hugely popular to see if they are really interested in the course and to see if they know what the course is about their language skills you know and I suppose to see like the courses like the nursing we have two nursing courses and the two nursing teachers would say that they know within minutes whether the people at interview stage are suitable or not and in the same way as when you are doing something like nursing and in the same way if you are doing something like engineering you have got know what you want you do yeah you can’t just drift into those course no but you might be able to drift into something like a computer course and stick with it yeah yeah

Researcher: When students are doing a FETAC course as part of a progression to HE does that impact on levels of retention?

Director: Em yeah I would think so yeah for people who know that is what they want to do and sometimes when some people come to do a course they don’t even know they want to go on but they then they start thinking particularly the mature students they think I have done one course and I want to go on they realise that early on when they come in and they start then they start thinking about going on and there are other people who want to go to third level yeah and the retention rate is very good here in the health courses
Researcher: The notion that retention is influenced by both academic and social integration is well established in the literature would students have opportunities here for social integration I mean are there concerted efforts made at institutional level to support students social integration similarly to clubs and societies in HE?

Director: Do you know there is a students’ council here and because I am new I am not exactly sure what social activities take place for the adult students and what takes place during the ?year in my old school they would have done something in the Communication on the lines of a multi-cultural event like an ?morning coffee morning to raise money and that would have brought a lot of people together you know at Christmas we would do tea and coffee and that kind of social event but in terms of clubs and societies that you would have at third level I would say that I don’t know if there is anything here and I would say there probably isn’t and in my own school ?no the thing is that PLC and Adult courses are one year ?only now there are some Art exhibitions the Art course does have some ?Art exhibitions yeah the Art department pit them on but in terms of others no I know my old school had say class groups they would go out at Christmas it’s something they do for themselves they would arrange that ?themselves

Researcher: Another issue that has emerged in the course of interviews with other Directors is mental health and there is a view that students experiencing mental health issues are at high risk of dropping out but that with appropriate supports within the College in particular students with mental health issues can be supported sufficiently to enable them to continue with their course
**Director:** Yeah yeah we would have encountered issues with mental Health certainly in my old school we did have and we do have a Guidance Counsellor here

*Staff member came to Directors office to get her signature on a document*

Right in this school there is a full time Guidance Counsellor so they have very little teaching so that the Principal simply just left her out of teaching she just has three classes a week for teaching and she is actually doing the adult counselling and I know in my own school I know we had a part-time counsellor who did some Guidance but she did some counselling yeah with the adults yeah there would be mental health issues yeah but that is one of the things you see with disability there is something you can apply for help but with mental health what exactly you can apply for I don’t really know how you could get counselling or referral onto something else

**Researcher:** But there would be supports of some kind?

**Director:** Oh yeah yeah

**Researcher:** As Director of Further Education in this College if you were to direct you efforts in one particular area that would raise the retention level among Further Ed students what would that be?

**Director:** I think one very basic thing is when they come in we do an induction with our students and I used to do it in my old school, is quite short a couple of hours
went through everything with them the rules and all the different things and showed
them around the school and there is induction done here as well which the teachers do
and it’s the same thing but I think there is a ?need and I don’t know whether this is
getting at when students first come in even the ones coming straight from Leaving
Cert they need some kind of even the ones who come from Leaving Cert don’t even
know how to do an assignment they don’t know anything about an assignment or
anything else so really there needs to be something for all of them coming in because
when they hear about assignments it scares them a bit and if they know what’s
involved in it and they know and I think that ?would certainly help ?some people if
there was an induction in the first day or two all the general induction things when
they are told what an assignment is what a project is how you do it the way you
approach it what you do with the referencing just it would kind of take the scariness
thing out of it this is something I am thinking of this year actually because other
students come in and they cannot even use a computer this year at induction we asked
people if they knew how to use a computer and USB and if they didn’t they were
asked to come in and 3 different groups came in about 40 people came in and 3
teachers took them just for about an hour each just the basic in WORD that is where I
would start I think in terms of supports during the year it’s kind of a pastoral care
system that each class has a class tutor and then I am here as well and there are 3 A
Post Holder three Assistant Principals who have the courses between them so each of
them we say to them in September if there are any difficulties or any issues talk to
your tutor talk to ?me I would always encourage people to come and come early
because often you can ?do something for them but if they drop off you can’t catch
them you can’t contact people there is an automatic swipe thing here for people it’s
not up and running yet and the attendance we will be able to check people we will be
able to keep an eye on who is not attending and then be able to contact them and see say if they have been out for about a week and we haven’t heard from them and certainly at the end of two weeks to contact them and see where are they at and they say oh and you say come up and have a chat and you may be able to get them back in you know there is a lot of follow up you can do

Researcher: So you would see a more developed system of induction would help students to integrate better in the courses and would ultimately lead to improved completion rates!

Director: Yeah I think the system we have class tutors and that they would look after the class and they they would link it’s like at second level where the tutor would have that pastoral link with the tutor in terms of other supports I mean I’m sure there are a lot of other supports that could be put in for people helping them but the Government aren’t going to fund anything else do you know it would be ideal to have it would be ideal to have if you could have teachers available to help students who had issues with computers and assignments and they could go and get some support but that’s not available you only have the resources that you are given

Researcher: Would students here have any stake in the governance of the College are they on the Board of Management or are they represented on the Board of Management or is there a structure to facilitate student in bringing forward their ideas or issues or to allow for their input in the decision making processes in the College?
Director: Yeah there is a student Council an Adult students Council but we haven’t set it up yet for this year but normally in September people are coming and going yeah there is a Student Council and in my old school there is an Adult Student Council and they would bring and there would be a representative from each class and they would bring they would meet a few times and they would bring issues

Researcher: They wouldn’t be on the Board of Management

Director: no no in this school there are two representatives of the Teachers because we are a second level school we have a Board of management for the second level school I am not sure whether Further Ed Colleges that are stand alone have students on their Board of Management but we definitely don’t no no

Researcher: So the FE students who are essentially adults of varying ages would not have any official role in the Board of Management which is the school’s supreme governance structure

Director: No no they don’t

Researcher: Do they ever look for a role or representation on the BOM or do they just accept the structures as they are currently constructed?

Director: No they have never looked for that the thing is with adult students is that they come straight out with it and say things with issues or anything they will always come to you as The Coordinator they would always come to me and they tend to deal
with issues individually yeah? individually or if there was a class issue one or two
would come up with a class issue and say I am here on behalf of the class for
whatever reason? and so I don’t even think the students would even think about the
governance they just think that they are coming to do a course and they don’t even
think about the governance

Researcher: It is not on their radar!

Director: To be honest with you they wouldn’t even know we have a Board of
Management

Researcher: So they tend to deal with issues individually rather than collectively!
Say if a class had an issue with a teacher would there be a mechanism whereby
they could meet with management to have their issues dealt with?

Director: Normally what would happen in my old school if students had an issue with
a teacher they would come to see myself as Coordinator some of the issues would be
things that I could deal with myself but if it was more serious I would just refer it to
the principal say for example they would come to you and say we are due to have a
Computer exam tomorrow and I would talk to the teacher and the teacher would say
that they are well able for it so we would agree to leave for another few days some of
the things they come about teachers I could deal with myself but if it was something
?serious in the same way as a second level school it would be referred to the principal
Researcher: Are there any other insights that you have regarding the causes of attrition among your FE students?

Director: Yea? let me just think the main thing I found when I was in the other school that the family support was crucial and like we said about the commitment and if something comes up like the critical incident just one thing I would say which actually came up if a woman’s husband loses his job I had one woman whose husband became unemployed she had a child in a crèche and she was doing a course her husband lost his job so they could not afford to pay the crèche when she started her husband wouldn’t mind the child a husband loses his and he is at home and that can often happen even if the husband hasn’t lost his job and is at home you will find that the woman is doing everything minding the children and everything and you might say the husband and if the husband is not working they just won’t go there

Researcher: So even when a husband is not engaged in employment he won’t necessarily support his wife or partner with her studies by going that extra mile to share or do some extra work in the home or with children?

Director: Exactly? exactly yeah

Researcher: What about the other way around

Director: I think you would find the women will because I think women are very adaptable and women will take on big work loads I think it’s the nature of women I have never come across a man who said they have difficulties finding time to do
work or anything like that we would have had very few cases of where we would have had men doing courses who were single parents or lone parents so you don’t come across an an who has to drop out for those kind of reasons.

But you will always find that the women will another thing you find with men and the partners it’s fine when the women are starting off first the early support is there and its grand when the workload hits and the women are coming home and they have got to spend the evenings doing the work the support diminishes as the time goes on its grand in the beginning but when it affects them but as time goes on then when I think of another girl last year she had her child in a creche and she had to pay a certain amount towards it and her partner had row with and he wouldn’t pay towards the crèche and she just had to drop out of the course you know terrible lovely girl you know

Researcher: So there are gender issues!

Director: There is definitely gender issues there is definitely family issues difficult financial issues as well but in a lot of cases these courses PLCs and there is mainly an administration charge but they are not hugely expensive the teachers tend to photocopy and give a lot of handouts you know they wouldn’t be a big expenses there wouldn’t be a lot of expenses incurred during the year no no there wouldn’t not as much as third level where you might have to buy a lot of books or whatever you know
So the group that comes in straight from Leaving Cert and the group that comes in having spent a number of years away from formal education and spent time in the workplace and or in the home would you see much differences between the two groups?

The group that have been away for ten years or so and come back are probably more focussed ?initially but then as we said if things come up but they are probably more tuned in they are much quicker to come and say that is not the course I want I want to do this do you know the way

**Researcher: They know what they want!**

**Director:** They do they do know what they want they come and they say if they have a difficulty with something I think Leaving Cert Students just come in I don’t know I think they just start courses they probably just drift along and they don’t really maybe it’s because they are young they don’t really kind of say this like the older ones come along and tell you if something is not what they wanted while the younger ones just tend to bear with it

They have been through second level and they have gone through subjects that they don’t really like they have endured subjects that they may not have liked it it that there is more a sense of urgency with adults the more mature students they don’t have the endless sense of time to get their lives together like their counterparts who have just completed the Leaving Cert
They do they do yeah particularly if the older people are on Social Welfare payments it is there one chance because if they come on a Level 5 and they say that is not what they want well Social Welfare will just say and they won’t I think if you have just done a course say if you do Level 5 in Nursing and that is say if you got in to IT Tallaght and you want to do say Finance even at a higher level they won’t allow you to do it because it wasn’t the same subject area so they are very specific so if you start doing something you better be very careful about what you start doing

Staff member came to speak to Director

Oh yeah what was I saying if you start and you do a Nursing Course at Level 5 and you go to Tallaght It to do Level 6 in some other area Social Welfare will not let you do it unless it is the same area

Researcher: That’s very restrictive!

Director: Its very restrictive and I think there should be a situation where you are allowed a second chance the Department of Education will allow you into do say if you are a Leaving Cert student and you do Level 5 Nursing this year and then you come back next year and you want to do Level 5 in something else the Department of Education will allow that because you have no welfare issues you can come back another year and you can change around each year but if you are on the Social Welfare you only get one shot at each Level and if you go outside the subject area they won’t let you they won’t let you progress if you want to progress to a higher level each year, they will allow you which is in the same area which is very unfair I
think people should even be allowed to do a second FETAC LEVEL 5 if somebody comes in doing Nursing and half-way during the course of the year they

**Researcher:** Would FETAC Level students have a national body negotiating on their behalf? If you were in Third Level you would have the Students Union

**Director:** No they don’t no no they don’t with it comes down to the second level with the numbers and all that there is nobody really except the Unions like the TUI the TUI would speak upon behalf but more on behalf of the teachers on the grants and the pupil teacher ratio and all of that

**Researcher:** You were and still under the aegis of a VEC and there are 16 FE Colleges under the aegis of that VEC do you work together in a connected way or do you all run your own little republic and is there a case for greater rationalisation and specialisation?

**Director:** Well I suppose there is a network there is a Further Education network in the VEC which meets every half-term so I was representing my old school on it so in that sense schools work together for like things like exhibitions at higher options the VEC would have a stand between us in terms of courses within the VEC say if somebody came looking to do a course we didn’t have well we would say that College do that so there is that link and say if we had a teacher who was teaching a subject for the first time we would link with a College where there were teachers who had experience of teaching that subject say if it was Law at Level 5 we would link our teacher with a teacher who had experience of teaching that subject each college has to
apply for their own courses and we think in the future especially since we will be
linked to the FÁS Centres we will be doing different courses and there will be greater
specialisations yeah yeah but there will be some courses available in all or most
Colleges because there is the demand for them but there will also be Colleges moving
in the direction of specialising yeah yeah

Researcher: Thank you very much for your excellent interview and for sharing
your expertise with me on this topic, really appreciated thank you again.
Appendix 6

List of questions used to guide the Focus Group Interview with FE Directors
Focus Group

Questions for semi-structured interviews with focus Group

Introduction with regard to the purpose of the study.
- Broadly speaking what are the causes of attrition among FE students?
- What could the FE College do to raise the levels of persistence among FE students?
- How are students with learning difficulties supported in FE?
- How are students who have low levels of proficiency in the English language supported in FE?
- How are students with difficulties with literacy and numeracy supported in FE?
- How are LCA students supported to make the transition into FE successful?

Social Integration
- How are students FE students support to socially integrate in College?
- What facilities are available to students to develop social structures and activities etc?
- What structures are in place to facilitate social engagement?
- Are there clubs and societies?
- Are students represented on the BOM or governance structures in the Colleges?
- How are student grievances dealt with?
- What links are there with other FE Colleges?
- Does the FE student feel they are in College in the third level sense of college?
- Are there supports available for students to help with issues of mental health?
- Are there supports available for career and vocational counselling for students?

Dual campus Colleges
- How is a sense of College created for the FE student?
- Is there a tension between the two schools on the same campus?
• Is there competition for resources between the two schools?

**Government policies**
• What government policies impact on attrition?
• What would you like to see changed in terms of government policy that you believe would lead to improved retention rates in FE?

**Progression**
• Progression to HE is a very important aspect of FE, how could it be operated in a more consistent and transparent way in the best interest of the student?

**Strategies that work**
• What strategies work in terms of improved student retention when you consider, curriculum, teaching methodologies, learning supports and student supports?