

# ENABLING TRANSITIONS: Insights from Learners' Transitional Experiences on a Further Education to Higher Education Bridging Programme

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**KEYWORDS:** Further Education/FE, Higher Education/HE, Bridging, Access, Foundation, Widening Participation, Transition/al, Belonging, Learner Identity, Community of Practice (CoP).

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research was to explore the transitional experiences of a group of learners on a unique bridging programme between a further education (FE) and higher education (HE) college. The 'NAVET programme', is a unique initiative which provides an alternative route into HE, and as such has a role to play in the widening participation agenda. The main objective was to examine if this bridging programme enabled a successful transition to HE for these learners. This article provides a brief insight into a larger study that was conducted as part of a Master of Arts in Learning and Teaching.

The Foundation Programme in Education and Training (also known as Non-Award Visitor in Education and Training) or the 'NAVET programme' is considered a bridging programme because learners attend an FE college and study a full level 5 (EQF 4) Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) award while simultaneously studying two modules leading to a level 8 degree (EQF 6) at a neighbouring university. Learners on the programme come from a variety of backgrounds including urban, rural and DEIS schools. Some are early school leavers and/or mature learners while some have just finished their Leaving Certificate (LC) and struggled to get the required points for their chosen course. Upon successful completion of both courses, they have direct access to the level 8 Bachelor of Science in Education with exemptions in the two modules. It also opens other pathways into teaching at all levels in the Irish education system.

This research will present central elements of 'transitioning' through the formal education process. Practices that support transition, a 'sense of belonging' and learner identity emerged as the main themes which formed the basis for this qualitative research study. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews which was analysed using a deductive reasoning approach which is based on using the possible themes identified in the literature and exploring the raw data provided by participants in relation to these themes. While all participants appreciate the support provided by the FE college, the findings suggest that there are significant differences between the transitional experiences for the mature learners and the school leavers including: their ability to cope with the different approaches to teaching at HE and the effect of being labelled 'level 5 learners' in the HE college.

## CONTEXT

Higher education in Ireland consists of universities, institutes of technology (IoTs) and colleges of education, along with some private colleges (Euroguidance Ireland, 2019). Over the last five years full-time new entrants to undergraduate HE has increased by 5% and now exceeds 43,000 learners (HEA, 2018). Approximately 75% of those undergraduates gain access through the typical matriculation route, the CAO/Leaving Certificate while the other 25% progress through non-typical routes such as further education and access programmes (Denny, 2015).

The White Paper '*Charting our Educational Future*' was one of the first policies that encouraged the universities to develop new progression routes and set targets for widening participation to "promote equality of access, participation and benefit for all in accordance with their needs and abilities" (DES, 1995). Non-typical progression routes are usually associated with the 'non-traditional undergraduates' who are generally categorised as access students,

mature students, students with disabilities, international students, travellers and students with external commitments such as parents/carers (TCD, 2018). In other words, those that did not follow the typical progression route.

Several factors have influenced the expansion of these non-typical routes. The Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Programme was introduced in 1985 and comes under the umbrella of Further Education and Training which is targeted at “those sectors of the population who are otherwise poorly served by mainstream education” (Murray, et al., 2014, p. 1). However, it was the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELs) in 1996 which first facilitated the allocation of places in Institutes of Technologies (IoTs) on ‘selected’ courses based on achieving a full FET award. In 1999 the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act standardised certification under the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training (FET) Awards Council (FETAC) bodies. This provided clear progression paths for FET learners and ‘widened’ the door into HE (Murray, Grummell, & Ryan, 2014). In 2014 the Common Awards System (CAS) expanded this process by standardising the FET/QQI awards to the National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) Levels 1 to 6 (QQI, 2014).

The more recent NAP (2015-2019) has targeted six key groups currently underrepresented in HE who may also be considered ‘non-traditional’. These include those from socio-economic groups with low participation in HE, part-time/flexible students and FE award holders (HEA, 2015, p. 38). The NAVET programme is an example of a college-led collaboration between an FE and a HE college which seeks to provide these ‘non-traditional’ learners with the key skills and ‘bridges’ the gap between the two colleges. It aims to support the transition from school to college or for a lot of the learners the transition back into education. As a teacher on this programme for the last number of years the researcher was interested in knowing if or how this bridging programme assisted the learners in their transition to Higher Education.

The research was framed by a socio-cultural perspective for understanding transition in education. Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice (CoPs) identifies learning as encompassed by community, practice, meaning and identity. Wenger suggests that by participating in a community, interacting with members and learning their practices, the participant becomes a competent member of that community, which shapes their identity and gives them a sense of belonging to the community. The research on the NAVET programme therefore focused on these three concepts which Wenger identified: the practices within the community, a sense of belonging and learner identity. These concepts are interlinked and influenced by the overall experience of the learner during their transition to college.

Learning, according to Wenger (2010), is not just about knowledge and acquiring the necessary skills, it is about becoming a ‘knower’ within the community and understanding what is expected by the community (p. 181). To become a ‘knower’, students entering university must get the appropriate level of support to help them acquire the relevant knowledge and develop the necessary skills which in turn supports the development of a positive learner identity (Rocks & Lavender, 2018). Briggs, Clarke and Hall (2012) emphasise the importance of support “on both sides of the transition bridge” to help students adjust to university life while similarly, Fleming (2010) advocates institutional involvement for “creating, supporting and sustaining communities of learners” as an intervention which will support the learner and increase retention (p. 5).

Wenger (1998) emphasises the importance of social participation in the chosen community for learning to occur. He suggests that participation “shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (p. 4). Becoming a full participant involves recognizing and interpreting a range of practices and actions embedded in the chosen field of study. This helps foster a ‘sense of belonging’ to the community of peers in their field of study. Rather than thinking of themselves as someone who is studying engineering or philosophy, they see themselves as engineers and philosophers (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Similarly, Thomas (2012) identifies the development of “meaningful interactions between staff and students” alongside “peer relations” and “relevant HE experiences” as key to nurturing a sense of belonging to the HE environment (p. 12-15).

Bliuc, Ellis and Goodyear (2011) argue that how “students perceive themselves in the context of learning” and their ‘social identity’ as a university student has an impact on how they learn. A positive student social identity indicates deeper approaches to learning which results in higher academic achievement and a greater sense of belonging (p. 421). Similarly, Huon and Sankey (2002) suggest that students need to “reorganise the way they think about themselves, as learners, and as social beings” and found that a positive learner or student identity contributed substantially to the successful transition for a student (p. 1).

The research shows how these three concepts are interlinked. The experiences of each learner as they start out in college will influence the sense of belonging they have to the college and their learner identity as a student. A strong sense of belonging and a positive learner identity will result in a successful transition to higher education and college life.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The main concern of this research was to ‘hear’ the voices of the NAVET learners. This objective determined the methodological approach adopted in the study which was a qualitative approach based on the post-positivist interpretative paradigm. The method selected was a semi-structured one-to-one interview approach. This method was based on maximising opportunities to listen and record the respondents, in relation to their experiences in both the FE and HE colleges. This enabled participants to tell their stories, to “discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live”, the world on the NAVET programme, and to ‘voice’ their experiences from their own point of view (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 368).

The next part of the process was to consider the ethical and integrity of the research. Approval was sought and received from the institution’s Ethics Committee. The researcher was a teacher on the programme and as such was in a ‘position of power’ over the participants, therefore, a gatekeeper was used to approach the learners. Providing transparency and ensuring any interpretations of data were not impacted by personal opinions and experiences was of key importance to ensure credibility for the research. To ensure reliability all aspects of the research was documented and referenced. The available time and the low response rate from past learners limited the scope of the research which may also impact the generalizability of the study.

The selection criteria was that each participant had to be currently studying on the NAVET programme or to have studied on the course in the last two years. All current learners and two past learners volunteered to participate in the study. Stratified sampling was used based on; gender and mature/school leavers (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 113). The final sample consisted of nine learners, four of whom were school leavers (3 female, 1 male) and five mature students (1 female, 4 male). The school leavers were all 18 years old and coming directly from completing the Leaving Certificate. The mature students were anyone over 21 in FE (Hardiman, 2012) and all of them had additional educational experiences either in an IoT, a HE college or specific training programmes for employment.

The interview questions were based on the key concepts outlined in the secondary research and as such a deductive reasoning approach was chosen to thematically analyse the data. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach as outlined in Table 1 below was employed (p. 16-24).

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Phase One   | Getting to know the data – immersion by repeatedly reading and listening, identifying items for further analysis  |
| Phase Two   | Identifying initial codes - systematically working through each data set to 'identify interesting aspects' and 'repeated patterns' to assist the organisation of the data into meaningful groups.                                 |
| Phase Three | Searching for themes - examining the relationships between the codes to see if they could be combined into a smaller set of main or 'candidate' themes or sub-themes, identify 'outliers' and theme as miscellaneous              |
| Phase Four  | Reviewing themes - ensuring the transcript extract was themed correctly based on the question, the context and the response and deciding on an appropriate name for the theme, creating a thematic map                            |
| Phase Five  | Defining and naming themes - organising the items in such a way so they would form a 'coherent' account relative to the theme and including an appropriate narrative, produce a detailed written analysis relating to each theme. |
| Phase Six   | Producing the report - within the 'story' each theme should include enough supporting transcript extracts to validate the existence of that theme throughout the data set.  |

*Table 1 - Braun and Clarke (2006, p16-24) - 6 Phase Thematic Analysis*

This six-phase approach ensured dependability and credibility in the research as each data item was taken in context and used to tell the story accurately.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The main study found several notable points that are relevant for learners transitioning to HE. This article will focus on two key findings that highlight how different practices impacted the learners' sense of belonging and their learner identity. These findings: the support provided in FE and the impact of being labelled as 'level 5 learners' will examine how the different cohorts of learners; school leavers and mature learners were impacted in different ways by these practices.

For the purposes of the analysis Table 2 identifies the participants, cohort, gender, age and their reasons for choosing the NAVET bridging programme. This is to facilitate the reader's understanding of the analysis.



| Participant             | Mature/<br>School<br>Leaver | Gender | Age | Reason for joining bridging programme   |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|--------|-----|---|
| <b>Current Students</b> |                             |        |     |   |
| Participant 1           | School leaver               | Female | 18  | “steppingstone” – too young for college   |
| Participant 2           | School leaver               | Female | 18  | Failed Maths in LC - “bitter” about having to do the bridging programme                                       |
| Participant 3           | School leaver               | Male   | 18  | Missed out on place through CAO – saw it as the “best option”   |
| Participant 4           | School leaver               | Female | 18  | Missed out on place through CAO – always expected to do PLC course.   |
| Participant 5           | Mature                      | Male   | 28  | Saw it as “first step on my road into teaching” but was “really, really afraid” that would not see it through |
| Participant 6           | Mature                      | Male   | 27  | “Negative” feelings about the course - wanted to go “straight to level 8”.                                    |
| Participant 7           | Mature                      | Male   | 22  | “I want to teach”. The chance to go to HE was the “cherry on the cake”.                                       |
| <b>Past Students</b>    |                             |        |     |   |
| Participant 8           | Mature                      | Female | 36  | Saw the course as a “steppingstone into education”  |
| Participant 9           | Mature                      | Male   | 26  | “Terrified to come back after dropping out twice” and afraid that he would not be able to see it through.     |

*Table 2 - Biography of Participants*

## SCAFFOLDING THE LEARNERS

The key finding from all participants was that they felt supported in the FE college and this support was necessary for their successful transition to HE. Participant 5 identified this as the “scaffolding” for building his new career in education which reflects Vygotsky’s (1934) and Bruner’s (1978) learning theory. Of the nine participants, six started the programme feeling anxious about their ability to succeed on the course and being able for university. Three of the school leavers felt they might have “run out” (Participant 1), “dropped out” (Participant 4) and would not “have survived” (Participant 2) had it not been for the support of their peers and staff in FE.

Participants compared the different teaching and learning styles employed by FE teachers and some lecturers in the HE college. Several of the school leavers highlighted the “do your own thing approach” in HE and identified the ‘two extremes’ between FE where it’s ‘really supportive’ and HE where it is ‘sink or swim’. The different approach to teaching in HE is something that has been identified in various studies as challenging for new learners transitioning to HE (Palmer et al., 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Other studies (Fleming, 2010; Briggs et al., 2012; Rocks &

Lavender, 2018) have identified the importance of the appropriate level of support for learners as they start in college.

Responses from the school leavers suggest they were most affected. Perhaps this is because they were still maturing as learners and had also just completed the Leaving Certificate. They may be used to the rote learning and 'teaching to the exam' that is prevalent in the senior cycle. Hyland (2011) identified the ongoing criticisms of the Leaving Certificate in her paper and suggests it "left students ill-equipped to meet the challenges of third level".

In contrast the mature learners, while appreciating the extra support in FE, did not appear unduly affected which may be due to their previous experience in college or employment. They were also more likely to seek professional support in the HE college and this support helped them in their transition. They attended the library regularly and various workshops such as essay writing skills which they found beneficial:

...it's definitely worth my while going there...a real practical approach to actually writing essays...you can bring your essays to them and you can get, you know, a lot of feedback and help (Participant 5)

The support provided by the FE college helped all the learners' confidence however for the school leavers it was essential for their successful transition to Higher Education.

#### LABELLING – THE LEVEL 5 LEARNERS

A key formative event for participants was the first lecture in HE when they were singled out and labelled 'level 5 learners' by the lecturer. During this lecture the class were asked "where are the FE level 5 students?" (Participant 5) and requested to raise their hands. Participant 2 described the scene: '*...we were all sitting in the back like with our hands up and everyone turning around and looking at us and it was a real feeling of like us and them*'. This incidental remark caused significant problems for the group, both academically and socially, but also to the learners individually. From an academic perspective, the practice of singling out the FE group meant they felt alienated in the class which prevented them from engaging with the traditional undergraduates:

One of the weeks after that we had to kind of like engage with other people, they weren't really having any of it because they were like 'Oh they're the FE people at the back, leave them to them'. (Participant 1)

Wenger (2010) suggests that the trajectory of each individual student incorporates the "memories, competencies, key formative events, stories, and relationships to people and places" and this will influence how they participate and how they learn (p. 5). The stigma of being a 'level



5' learner is mentioned by all the school leavers and for most this appeared to have a significant impact on their academic and social integration and the development of their identity as HE learners. They did not join any clubs or societies in the HE college and relied heavily on the 'net' (Participant 4) of support from their FE colleagues.

Mallman and Lee (2016) contend that "school leavers have an unwritten but widely shared mode of participation in the classroom". When the school leavers from the FE college entered the HE college they may have expected to merge with the traditional undergraduates and participate in the same way. They may not have seen themselves as 'non-traditional' learners so when they were asked to raise their hands 'if you are a level 5 student' they were 'embarrassed' and upset with being singled out. Mallman and Lee suggest this stigmatisation serves "to label, explain and socially position the offending individual" which in this case was to suggest the participants were not real undergraduates. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) identified the "impact of careless words and deeds" in their study of 'non-traditional' learners which reflects what happened in this case (p. 12).

In contrast, the mature learners did not seem to be similarly affected, with Participant 5 suggesting he would have said it "*in casual conversation to someone anyway*". Other mature learners did not appear to be aware of the divide with Participant 6 saying he felt he had also integrated well: "*...it feels pretty natural, and I do all my studying on my extra assignment work in [HE college] library so I feel pretty comfortable there at this stage...*".

All mature learners reporting a sense of belonging to the HE college. This may have been aided by their participation in both social and academic events such as societies and workshops. This sense of belonging is reflected in the mature learners' enthusiasm and confidence going forward into their studies. Participant 5 identified the NAVET programme as having "*skin in the game*" because it has helped him get into the "mindset of becoming a teacher" and making it a "*real thing*". Participant 6, who had switched careers after two years studying Business, also showed a positive attitude: "*... I'm studying what I want to study and I'm good at what I want to study as well, so like it's not about should I be there? it's I want to be there...I just want to be in HE next year...*"

The school leavers felt they had "*grown a lot in this year*" (Participant 1) and were "*far more determined*" (Participant 2). They were quite positive overall having felt they had progressed academically and were more prepared for higher education. They were "*hopeful*" (Participants 3 and 4) about getting the course they wanted next year. The practices outlined above and covered in more detail in the full study show the importance of providing support and opportunities for integration and inclusion for new learners in HE. There was a significant difference as to how the

school leavers and the mature students reacted to some of the practices within HE that may have impacted their sense of belonging to the college and their learner identity as HE students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this research was to investigate the transitional experiences of a group of learners on a unique bridging programme between an FE and HE college. FE courses and bridging programmes like the NAVET programme have a role to play in the widening participation agenda. They provide an alternative route into HE for a diverse range of learners including mature learners and those who do not have the formal entry requirements for their chosen undergraduate degree course.

The study found that all participants valued the support provided in FE and felt it provided them with the 'foundation' for HE and a better understanding of what was expected in university. While the school leavers struggled with the more independent teaching and learning styles in HE and relied more heavily on the support in FE, the mature learners sought professional support when needed in HE and this aided their transition to university.

A significant difference between the two cohorts was the effect of being labelled as 'level 5 learners' in the HE college. While the school leavers were upset and annoyed, it appeared to have had less of an impact on the mature learners. This upset may have contributed to the school leavers' decision not to join any clubs or societies and to not seek support which ultimately may have impacted their sense of belonging and learner identity.

As identified in this research, practices that scaffold learners as they transition to higher education still need to be addressed to "create fully inclusive and genuinely open third level institutions" (Fleming & Finnegan, 2011). A critical self-examination by both colleges would help identify the practices that enable or constrain learners and how they engage with the programme.

The findings suggest that school leavers experience the transition from FE to HE differently to mature learners possibly because they do not see themselves as 'non-traditional' learners. While there is an abundance of research available on 'non-traditional' learners (Christie et al., 2008; Fleming & Finnegan, 2011; MacFarlane, 2018 are some examples) there is a dearth of literature which focuses specifically on school leaver access students such as those participating in the NAVET programme. This warrants further study given that further education is now a viable route into higher education.

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