Why Are You Here? A Case Study of Persistence in Higher Education

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this is entirely my own work and it has not been submitted as an exercise for the award of a degree at this or any other University. I agree that the library may lend or copy this dissertation on request.

Marie Moran

2023

Abstract

The Irish Higher Education system has undergone significant structural change in the past three years, culminating in the re-designation of the majority of the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) as Technological Universities (TUs). Following a process of amalgamation, a pre-cursor to re-designation, only two of the fourteen IoTs remain, alongside five TUs. This change, which erased the binary divide in Irish HE, reflects the most recent policy developments. In May 2022, a vision proposed by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (FHERIS), Simon Harris, for the creation of a unified but diverse system, along with the new HEA Bill, signalled further change in the structure and governance of the sector.

The Performance Compacts are an integral part of the Irish HE system, and progression and retention statistics are a barometer by which Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) are assessed. The HEA retention headline figures for level six and seven programmes in the IoT sector have been a cause for concern, as they are relatively poor in comparison with level eight programmes, and in comparison with programmes in the traditional University sector. The proposed new unified system will continue to offer programmes at level six and seven, and they remain an integral part of the new TUs, which retain much of the DNA of the IoTs. Therefore, an improved understanding of the causes of poor retention on these programmes is of value to the HEIs in which they are provided and to the students who embark on such programmes.

This D.Ed. sought to improve my understanding of this issue in practice, by trying to identify the factors that contributed to persistence in HE, focussing on students who had stayed on their programmes rather than those who had left. The research was conducted using a single case study approach, employing mixed methods to investigate the expectations and experiences of students registered on level six and seven programmes, and a level eight apprenticeship. The programmes selected were representative of the IoT sector and included

on campus as well as online provision. Group and individual interviews were conducted with twenty one participants, and the data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019, 2021). A questionnaire provided additional context for the interview data.

The findings are presented under three broad themes – Getting the Degree, Navigating the Higher Education Environment and Learning Inside and Outside the Classroom. I have been able to identify a hierarchy of factors, linked to the student and the Institute, that contribute to persistence in HE. The classroom, whether on campus or online, was found to be the nucleus for connection and support. The case amalgamates the theoretical perspectives of Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012) and Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988; Grenfell, 2014; Grenfell and James, 1998), providing a comprehensive framework for considering the findings, and their implications, for practice and policy.

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List of Abbreviations

AAU	Association of American Universities
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BBS	Bachelor of Business
CAO	Central Applications Office
CDVEC	City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education Training and Awards Council
FHERIS	Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
HC	Higher Certificate
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HETAC	Higher Education Training and Awards Council
HEI	Higher Education Institute
HoD	Head of Department
IoT	Institute of Technology
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ISSE	Irish Survey of Student Engagement
LERU	League of European Research Universities
NCEA	National Council for Educational Awards
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NIHE	National Institute of Higher Education
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
NVivo	QDA Software (QSR)

OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
RTC	Regional Technical College
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences/Statistical Product and Service Solutions
TA	Thematic Analysis
THEA	Technological Higher Education Association
TU	Technological University
TURN	Technological University Research Network
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

1.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the rationale for this study and describes its importance in the context of contemporary Irish and European Higher Education (HE) policy. As a HE practitioner and senior manager for over twenty years, I have a keen interest in HE policy, programme design and provision, classroom practices, and outcomes for students. This chapter sets out the rationale and context for the research, as well as defining the scope of the work. It describes the overall research objectives and states the research questions. A summary of the research approach that was adopted for this study is also provided. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the competing perspectives on Higher Education.

1.1 Higher Education as Commodity, Qualification or Display Cabinet

There are varying perspectives about the role and status of education, and Higher Education in particular, but there is consensus that a high standard of educational attainment or a high participation rate is linked to positive outcomes, for individuals, society, and the economy (Marginson, 2016a; OECD, 2018, 2021, 2022; Becker, 1964). Higher education can be considered as emancipation (Seery, in Loxley, Seery and Walsh, 2014; Fleming, 2016), knowledge generator, economic building block, employment pre-cursor (Teichler, 2007) and societal resource (Quinn, 2020; Holborow, 2012, 2017). HE has become commodified to some extent (Rhoades and Slaughter, 1997; Bleiklie, 2005; Marginson, 2016a), an 'adjunct of the economy' (Quinn, 2020, p.174), and an end product of economic value in the workplace (Scott, 1995; Holborow, 2017; Marginson, ibid.). It is a means and an end, providing alternative sources of HE funding from research income, fee-paying international students and part-time student enrolments (Rhoades and Slaughter, 1997; Grenfell, in Loxley, Seery and Walsh, 2014; Quinn, 2020). However, HE also has a moral and civic dimension, contributing to the formation of self, or *bildung* (Seery, ibid.). Perhaps *bildung* is in the eye of the beholder because even in this context, Seery (ibid. p.92) cautions against the view of HE as a 'display

cabinet of possibilities of knowledge and self-creation' to be selected by learners, as they would a product. For me, this analogy indicates the influence of the commodification of HE in the broadest sense.

1.2 Personal Context for the Research

From a personal perspective, this D.Ed. research was inspired and informed by my experiences as a lecturer and senior manager in the Irish Institute of Technology (IoT) sector since the year 2000. On the academic teaching side of the house, I always had an interest in where my responsibility as a lecturer ended and the responsibility of the student became more important in achieving successful outcomes – usually considered as programme completion. In terms of timeframe, this could be the last day of the semester, lectures complete and exams on the horizon. By this stage in the academic year, I would have fulfilled my side of the 'moral contract' (Tinto, 2012) by showing up to all my classes, with journal articles, case studies, tutorial work, PowerPoint slides uploaded to a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or photocopied, ready for notes to be made by students. This is one view of the student-lecturer interaction timeframe, but in practice, that is not really how things work. While my fundamental approach to lecture preparation and teaching remained the same, my modus operandi might change, depending on the programme, level and mode of provision. For example, online classrooms are different to face-to-face classrooms, evening classes are different to those delivered during the day. Within classes there are varied student profiles and reasons for study, but ultimately, the goal for most students is programme completion and graduation. A recurring question for me, and one which I would have posed to students at times, was 'why are you here?' I would sometimes have asked this in the classroom - why are you here if you are talking all the time/reading the newspaper/asleep/not doing the work you are supposed to do? A different slant on that question would be why are some of my students talking/reading/asleep/not engaging? It is to be expected that students are never going to be engaged all the time or be interested in every aspect of a subject or lecture, so that question in the context of an isolated incident in the classroom is less serious than that question arising

for students who fundamentally are perhaps unclear about their reasons for study, especially when they face challenges and difficulties with their programme.

My observations as a lecturer, and subsequently in senior management positions, led me to wonder more about the question of reasons for study, and the respective roles of the institute and the student in achieving successful outcomes – for students, normally passing exams, programme completion and graduation. While the majority of students would have graduated, this was not the case for everyone. They all had the same learning environment and opportunity, but it was apparent that they did not all experience this in the same way. I could identify some issues that resulted in non-progression[1] and programme withdrawal and would have spoken to a broad range of students who experienced challenges and difficulties. Some students left the Institute with a very definite purpose, others drifted away without anyone in the Institute knowing, or ever finding out why they had left or what they had subsequently done. As a lecturer, the biggest impact for me of non-progression would have been preparing multiple repeat examination papers and helping students to see how they could achieve better outcomes on an individual level. This usually involved nothing more complicated than meeting with them, advising them to do more work and attend class. In a smaller number of cases, I would have been aware of difficult personal circumstances of students and, like my colleagues, would have made provision for that and assisted where possible. In management positions, as Head of Department and Assistant Registrar, non-progression has taken on a new focus, one in which metrics play an important role in determining not just individual student performance, but where the Department, Faculty and Institute comes under scrutiny, and are held to account about actions being taken to improve statistics that compare unfavourably with the sector as a whole, or across the Institute. The Institute is accountable to the HEA (Hazelkorn and Gibson, 2019), and Institutional Profiles are created under the

[1] HEA: Using data from the Student Record System, non-progression is recorded when a full-time new entrant's student ID from an individual institution is not linked across the second academic year of study in that institution.

Performance Compacts[2]. These profiles provide information about system and Institute performance to the Government and the public. Metrics are an important component of the Institutional profile and are used to inform the strategic direction of the HE system, as well as determining national priorities for HE. While I always want to see students doing well and achieving their goals, their performance is now partially linked to mine, on a wider scale than at the level of a module. If they fail to persist, they appear as 'poor metrics', for which I, and senior management colleagues, are responsible. This, along with my interactions with students who have very nearly 'dropped out' but who have managed to continue to completion, has reinforced the need for me to improve my understanding of the factors that lead to persistence in Higher Education.

1.3 Irish HE Context for the Research

Around the time that I commenced my D.Ed. programme in 2017, the Irish HE landscape was heading towards a period of significant structural change, which was manifested in the creation of the first Irish Technological University (TU) in January 2019 and has continued with the creation of a further four TUs as I complete my research in 2022. Prior to these changes, the Irish HE system comprised seven Universities, fourteen Institutes of Technology (IoT) and a small number of other public and private colleges (Walsh, Flannery and Cullinan, 2018). The Higher Education sector in Ireland in 2022 is comprised of seven traditional Universities, five Technological Universities, two Institutes of Technology and a small number of other public and private colleges. The traditional University sector accounts for approximately 50% of full-time undergraduate provision, while the IoT and TU sector accounts for 38%; other colleges account for 12%. In terms of degree provision, the existing traditional University sector in 2018 provided Honours Bachelor degrees (level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications, NFQ[3]), while the IoT sector provided Ordinary (Level 7 NFQ) and Honours degrees, as well

[2] Higher Education System Performance Institutional and System Profiles 2018/19 A report by the Higher Education Authority October 2021

[3] https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications

as level 6 Higher Certificates. IoTs (and TUs) account for a higher proportion of flexible and part-time provision, with a higher proportion of mature and disadvantaged students[4]. The designation of the majority of IoTs as TUs following a process of amalgamation has created a new HE system, which builds on the DNA of the IoTs. The Technological University Research Network report[5] described the nature of future TUs as follows:

> *'…establishing high-quality higher education institutions (HEIs) of scale that build an international profile for technological higher education, intensify the mission, purpose and values of Institutes of Technology (IoTs) to achieve sufficient scale, quality and impact to drive regional economic, social and cultural development' (HEA, TURN, 2019, p.4).*

Of course, the changes that led to the establishment of TUs did not happen overnight, or indeed in the space of five years. They are the result of policy and legislative changes, research, consultant reports, debates and differences of opinion about how the HE system should be structured for maximum benefit to the economy, industry, society, individuals, usually all of these. While the amount of funding that is received varies by year and sector, Higher Education in Ireland receives significant funding from the State, which uses student progression and retention figures (HEA, 2019) as one of the key indicators of system and institute performance. Retention figures are typically used as a barometer against which to consider HEI and country performance in relation to higher education (Gabi and Sharpe, 2021). What constitutes good or poor retention depends on comparators. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data (2016) shows that Ireland in general has favourable retention and completion rates[6] in comparison to other countries such

[4] HEA, 2022

[5] Technological Universities - CONNECTEDNESS & COLLABORATION through CONNECTIVITY. Report of the Technological Universities Research Network to the Department of Education and Skills October 2019

[6] **Completion rates** describe 'the percentage of students who enter a tertiary programme for the first time and who graduate from it a given number of years after they entered' (OECD, 2016, p. 167). This calculation takes into account the number of years usually allocated for completing the programme (the theoretical duration), and an additional three years.

as Australia and the USA, but there are 'problem' areas within the Irish system. By 2021, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) had completed six studies on the progression of undergraduate new entrants between their first and second year of study (between the two March census dates each year). While it is improving (HEA, 2022), the problem of relatively poor retention and non-completion on level 6 and 7 programmes is challenging (HEA, 2021, 2019, 2017, 2016a, 2010) and worthy of further investigation, as these programmes will be offered in the new TUs. Continued policy and governance changes are afoot in the Irish HE sector in 2022, with a new vision proposed for the HE system[7], as well as legislation being progressed to repeal the Higher Education Authority Act, 1971. These changes reflect a recognition by the current Government and Minister for FHERIS, of the need for reform to serve the needs of all stakeholders in the HE system. The new vision set out by Minister Simon Harris is for a more unified but diverse HE system that:

> *'…can meet the wide-ranging and distinct educational needs of individuals whereby every opportunity and pathway is valued equally in terms of the opportunity for learning and development that it offers' (Policy Platform: Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, May 2022 p.10).*

The HEA Bill 2022 was signed into law as the HEA Act by the President of Ireland in October 2022. It purportedly aims to ensure good governance of HEIs, whilst maintaining their autonomy and flexibility, using a 'co-regulation' governance[8] model. The proposed reforms take account of the changing student numbers in HE in Ireland, increasing from 20,000 in 1971 to close to 250,000[9] in a more diverse system, in 2022. While there have been legislative

[7] Policy Platform: Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge. Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, May 2022
[8] National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030
[9] Key Facts and Figures 2020/2021 | Statistics | Higher Education Authority (hea.ie)

changes[10] in the intervening period, the new HEA Bill and Act covered a legislative review of the HEA itself and institutional governance across the sector. The HEA allocates and oversees substantial funding of the HE system, and the System Performance Framework and Performance Compacts (HEA, 2021, 2022) are an integral part of objective setting for HEIs in line with Government objectives. While demand for level 8 Honours degrees continues to grow in Ireland among the full-time undergraduate student population, demand among this same population for level 6 and 7 programmes is declining year on year (HEA, 2022), but programmes at this level will still be offered in the TU sector.

1.4 Research Objectives and Questions

Despite an extensive amount of literature (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997, 2012, 2017; Yorke, 1999; Yorke and Longden, 2004), published reports (HEA, 2010, HEA, 2016a; HEA, 2019; HEA, 2021) and ongoing research regarding retention and persistence in higher education, I felt that I still had questions about this, and my curiosity had not been satisfied in terms of a more comprehensive understanding of this area specifically within my own sector, institute and department. I decided to look at this issue from the perspective of persistence, exploring the reasons why students had stayed or intended to stay on their programmes, rather than why they left. The overall objective of my research was to try to identify the role of the student and the role of the institute in programme completion. It aimed to explore identifiable factors that lead to persistence among a student body typical of the IoT sector, and that would reflect the type of student to be served in the new TU sector. This led to the development of four main research questions which are listed below.

1. What identifiable factors contribute to persistence in higher education? And to what extent does programme choice, if at all, influence persistence and programme completion?

[10] For example, the Universities Act 1997, Technological Universities Act 2018, the Institutes of Technology Acts 1992-2006

2. How and under what conditions (e.g. institutional, cultural, socio-personal, programmatic etc) do these factors become manifest within the context of Irish Higher Education and specifically within the context of programmes that are typical of the Institutes of Technology?
3. How do students stated intentions to study, goals and objectives influence their persistence throughout the duration of a programme of study in an Institute of Technology? To what extent, if at all, do these objectives change or become modified during their engagement with the Institute?
4. From a student perspective, how does, if at all, motivation and expectations of 1) themselves and 2) the Institute change over the course of the programme of study?

1.5 Approach to the Research

A case study approach employing mixed methods was adopted and the research was carried out in one IoT, which is my place of employment. This use of mixed methods was done with the intention of generating data from a large sample using a questionnaire and from a smaller sample using interviews. Similar dimensions of the phenomenon of persistence were explored using both research instruments, and as such, the findings are not presented according to research instrument, but as an overall picture of factors contributing to persistence across the research sample (Bazeley, 2009; Yin, 2006, 2018). The case study includes full-time on campus, part-time online and degree based apprenticeship students. The research was approached with the intention of studying persistence across a heterogeneous student body, rather than with the intention of dis-aggregating the findings by a particular student type. James (2015) refers to the 'species' approach to the study of students, for example, mature students, online students. While I acknowledge that in fact, many of the students who participated in the research were mature students, and online provision is a core element of the study, my intention was to be able to search for common themes or differences among a student body that was representative of programmes in the IoT sector and consider these findings in the context of a wider student body.

1.6 Significance of the Research

The Technological Higher Education sector accounts for almost 70,000 full time enrolments and 25,000 part-time and remote enrolments[11], representing approximately 38% of students in Irish Higher Education. The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA[12]) notes that the total number of students enrolled in THEA member institutions increased by 23.7% from 2014/15 to 2020/21, which is substantially higher than for other institutions[13]. Therefore, an improved understanding of persistence in this sector is of value. Persistence in HE is not a new area of study, but it is less prevalent in Ireland than it is in other countries. There is an established body of international literature from which to draw, which looks at the likely persistence decisions of students, based on their pre-entry attributes and their subsequent interactions with their HEI. The transition to higher education and the first-year experience feature prominently. My research focuses on the student and the Institute, but within the context of HE policy and the changing Irish HE landscape. Therefore, a policy and systems level perspective was also required, again for which there is a significant body of international literature. The significance of this research is that it adds to the existing body of knowledge about persistence by providing an insight into the factors that contribute to persistence among students who are typical (THEA, 2018) of the Irish IoT or Technological Higher education sector. It has focussed on the overall student experience rather than only dealing with one aspect of teaching or learning, and it has not focussed solely on one type of student or classroom setting. This does not mean that it is too broad or general to tell us anything significant or meaningful. By adopting this approach, I have been able to identify factors that can provide an insight into persistence for any student, and I have identified these at the level of the individual, the programme, and the Institute. Implications and considerations for HE policy have also been identified. The case uses the theoretical perspectives of Tinto (1975,

[11] Facts & Stats - The Technological Higher Education Association (thea.ie) https://www.thea.ie/facts-and-stats/ (2022)
[12] https://www.thea.ie/role-of-thea/
[13]THEA Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science Future Funding for Higher Education February 2022

1993, 1997, 2012) and Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988; Grenfell, 2014; Grenfell and James, 1998), which provided me with a more comprehensive theoretical perspective from which to study the complex issue of persistence. Tinto (ibid.) and Bourdieu (ibid.) have both been described as paradigmatic in their contributions to Higher Education (Braxton, 2000; Marginson, 2008), but their respective contributions also have limitations, which are discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3. For example, the interactionalist model of Tinto (1975, 1993) cannot be used to gain an insight into HE at systems level (Yorke, 1999) and the field theory of Bourdieu is of value at systems level but has a strong focus on the reproduction of social inequalities in education and access to HE. By incorporating the thinking tools of Bourdieu onto the model of Tinto, I have been able to create a framework for analysis of the Irish HE field as well as the institute and the student. I have also demonstrated that these theories can be used to study different types of student, programme and classroom and that they are of value in so doing. I expect that my findings will have resonance for the Technological Higher education sector in Ireland and for policy and practice in the Technological Universities.

1.7 Scope of the Research

Higher education research is multi-faceted (Teichler, 2005; Tight, 2004, 2007, 2021; Marginson, 2017) with many research possibilities, and in this section, I will define the scope of my case study. Boundaries were drawn to provide focus and to ensure that the research was feasible and could be completed within the requirements and timeframe of the D.Ed. This case study is based in the Irish IoT sector, examining the phenomenon of persistence in one case institute within that sector. The case is focussed on a sample of students that are typical of the institute and the sector. Therefore, the work draws on the concepts of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988, Grenfell, 2014; Grenfell and James, 1998) to provide a framework for thinking about the policy perspective, using his definitions of field, capital and habitus. While the work of Bourdieu is used in the case study, my research does not explore in detail issues of socio-economic class and access to HE, nor exclusion from elite HE on the basis of socio-

economic class (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Reay, David, Davies and Ball, 2001; Reay, 2022). This type of analysis is not relevant to my research and a detailed discussion about access to elite providers is outside the scope of my work. Therefore, while using the thinking tools of Bourdieu, the research is not intended to provide an in-depth consideration of Bourdieu's theory of the reproduction of inequalities in the education system, but to use these thinking tools to get an insight into the relative importance of capital and habitus in the Technological Higher Education sector. While the implications for policy are considered, my case study does not deal in detail with the economic aspects of the provision of HE at a policy level. In terms of literature, Chapter 2 sets out the policy context for the case study, which has focussed on reviewing the evolution of HE in Ireland in order to provide detail on the Technological Higher Education sector. This is important for the consideration of the research findings. In presenting the evolution of HE in Ireland, specific details of some individual institutions were intentionally excluded, for example, the independent colleges, and some of the detail regarding early providers of technical education in Dublin, as well as reviews of teacher education. The exclusion of detailed discussions on each of these areas has not detracted from the overall documenting of key events that have shaped the Irish HE landscape. International HE developments are included in this chapter but they are limited to those that are most relevant in the context of my case study. In introducing the field theory of Bourdieu (Grenfell and James, 1998, 2004), the Irish HE field is mapped out in this chapter in order to situate the case institute relative to other providers of HE. The literature review in Chapter 3 continues to weave Bourdieu (ibid.) into the discussion of persistence at institute level. There is not scope or space within chapter 2 to include some of the wider policy literature and it is for reasons of relevance and focus, that some aspects of policy theory and literature are only given relatively brief coverage. Finally, the impact of external factors that would 'pull' a student from the Institute (Bean, 1981; THEA, 2019, 2021), while important, is outside the scope of this research. The focus of the research is on those factors that are considered to be more within the control of the Institute and those that relate to the actions of the student in relation to their studies – the 'push' factors.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1 introduces the research topic and explains the rationale for the research. It states the research questions and provides some context for the research. It explains my position as the researcher and my rationale for developing the research questions, and their link to practice. This is an important aspect of the professional Doctorate programme and it is important to me that I can identify tangible benefits from this study for students and the case Institute.

Chapter 2 provides the policy context for the study. The main focus of the study is on students at the level of the institute, but this policy chapter is important in presenting the changing HE landscape in which the study has been conducted. This context has been set by tracing the development of the Irish Institute of Technology sector, from Regional Technical Colleges to IoTs to TUs. Furthermore, the policy chapter describes and critiques the role of Technical Higher Education in the provision of Higher Education in Ireland. The international context of HE is included in this chapter, but a detailed discussion is limited to those systems of HE that are most relevant to this study. The concepts of field and system as they apply to HE, and to this study, are explained.

Chapter 3 critically reviews a selected body of literature relating to persistence and retention in Higher Education. Much of this work originated in the US in the 1970s, and continues to the present day, where the focus has shifted somewhat from ‘student integration’ (Tinto, 1975) to institutional action. The work of Bourdieu is carried on into this chapter, focussed at the level of the Institute and student. The contribution of the literature presented is critiqued and its relevance is considered in an Irish context, particularly for the IoT sector. The way in which the literature is employed in this study is explained.

Chapter 4 describes the research design, explaining the rationale for the adoption of a case study approach. The research instruments are described, as well as the analysis strategy for this mixed methods study. Issues of ethics and reflexivity are discussed.

Chapter 5 is a short chapter that presents the case institute and the research participants, along with selected data from the questionnaire that provides additional information about the institute.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 present the findings of the study by theme.

Chapter 9 discusses the findings in the context of the literature and compares different aspects of the factors that contribute to persistence among a diverse student body in the case institute.

Chapter 10 contains the conclusion of the study, implications for practice and the Institute, as well as for policy. Limitations of this research and opportunities for future research are presented.

1.9 Chapter Summary

This brief chapter has introduced the purpose, scope and context for the research, as well as describing the research approach. The structure of the thesis is presented.

Chapter 2: The Policy Context of Irish Higher Education

2.0 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I identified policy as a driver of change in the Irish HE system. An appreciation of HE policy, and it's relationship with practice, is essential in providing context (Gunn, 2015) for this case study. Gunn and Mintrom (2021) have studied the relationship between policy and practice, and in particular, the relationship between academic research and evidence-based policy making. The use of policy in this research is two-fold; firstly, as stated, to set out the research context, and secondly, to be re-visited to consider the implication of the research findings for HE policy. Policy, therefore, is presented as a contextual backdrop (Gunn, 2015) rather than being the focus of the research. The extent to which the policy analysis presented in this chapter is used in data analysis and consideration of the research findings, is explained in Chapters 4 and 9 respectively.

In order to explore the relationship between policy and practice, I will begin the chapter with a brief discussion of the role of policy and then move on to discuss HE policy, using the field theory of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984,1988) to define the boundaries of the Irish HE field. I will discuss the systems perspective of HE, and I will discuss the factors that influence system diversity and homogeneity. Having set the scene for the relationship between policy and practice, I will move to the main focus of this chapter, which is to provide an overview of the evolution of the Irish system of HE, tracing its roots from a University dominated system to a binary system, with reference to key policies and events (Coolahan, 2017; Clancy, 2015; White, 2001; Walsh, 2011, 2018; Walsh and Loxley, 2015; Loxley, Seery and Walsh, 2014; Marginson, 2011, 2017; Highman, 2015, 2020). The chapter concludes with a future focus, the binary system having been dismantled to make way for a unified system that responds to the individual talents, ambitions and motivations of students[14], while creating better alignment

[14] www.gov.ie/en/press-release. Minister-harris-publishes-policy-on-the-development-of-a-unified-third-level-education-system. May 2022.

between Further and Higher Education. In discussing HE I use the term 'higher' with the same meaning as the term third level, and 'tertiary', as is most often used by UNESCO and the OECD (Teichler, 2004).

2.1 International Policy Context of HE

Higher Education is awash with policies. (Marginson, 2008, p. 303) describes HE as a 'relational environment that is simultaneously global, national and local', where national policy is derived in an international context (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002; Gunn and Mintrom, 2016). International HE policies frequently establish broad targets and objectives for HE participation, linked to social mobility, opportunities for employment, national competitiveness, lifelong learning and the creation of a moral and civic society (Vaccari and Gardinier, 2019). The United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030) comprises seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aimed at reducing poverty and increasing quality of life. Education is a key driver of achieving these goals, and SDG 4 specifically focuses on providing accessible quality education and ensuring opportunities for lifelong learning. The Incheon Declaration (2015)[15] states that education is a public good (Fisher, 2006; Hazelkorn and Gibson, 2019), of which the State is the duty bearer (Education 2030 p.28), but it is also considered a driver of economic growth (OECD, 2021). Vaccari and Gardinier (2019) examined the policy discourses of the OECD and UNESCO in the field of education and while they found areas of convergence, they also found areas of divergence. Most notably, UNESCO placed a higher emphasis on global citizenship, and the OECD had a greater focus on global competence as an outcome of education. In the 1960s, the OECD identified the development of education and scientific research as essential elements in the achievement of economic growth and promoted commitment to investment in human capital among the developed countries of the West (Walsh, 2011; Becker, 1964; Tinto and Cullen, 1973; Tinto, 1975). Human capital theory (Becker, 1964) held that investment in people

[15] Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all – UNESCO IITE

produced a greater return on investment than investment in physical capital. Indeed, national policy documents (HEA, 2012, 2016, 2019) and the international academic literature (Bleiklie,2005; Pinheiro, Geschwind and Aarevaara, 2016; Loxley et al, 2014; Walsh, 2018; Clancy, 2015; Coolahan, 2017; White, 2001) still reflect a human capital perspective on the role of higher education and its' links to economic development. HE can create or advance the knowledge society, aligned to the needs of the labour market and industry (OECD, 2018; Teichler, 2008; Marginson, 2016a, 2019; Walsh, 2018; Pinheiroa et al, 2016). Education policy and investment is also linked to the international competitiveness of nations (Marginson, 2016a), in terms of economic development, and in terms of education itself. Tight (2021), in his exploration of research into the influence of globalisation and internationalisation on national HE systems, highlights factors such as competition for international students, and the desire for research status and prestige typified by the 'world-leading universities' label and budget (Tight, 2021, p.62). The US HE system exhibits strength and competitiveness in terms of research concentration, its ability to attract talented staff and students, the global role of the English language and the status of US providers as exemplars of ideal practice (Tight, 2021). Despite being considered inward looking (Tight, ibid.), it's hegemony and influence (Marginson, 2008) mean that researchers look to America to build up a body of research in HE systems and policy. In a European context, there have been several notable policies aimed at enhancing competitiveness by creating a more co-ordinated approach to HE. The most notable of these is the Bologna Process[16], which resulted in the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (Marginson, 2008; OECD, 2018). A key outcome of the Bologna process has been it's enduring influence on programme design, in the use of credits (ECTS[17])

[16] The Bologna Process – starting with the Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) Declarations – was the response of national governments to the problems arising from the EU-driven mobility of European students and graduates: many higher education ministers agreed to pursue the convergence of their systems in order to facilitate institutional student exchanges and the mutual recognition of degrees and periods of study in Europe. In 2022, the Bologna Process is being implemented in 48 countries, which together make up the European Higher Education Area. https://op.europa.eu

[17] European Credits Transfer System European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a tool of the EHEA European Education Area (europa.eu) https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf (accessed 2022)

to build undergraduate degree programmes of 180 or 240 credits, achieved over three or four-years; the 48 countries that are included in the Bologna process align with a three phase provision of HE which is based on Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral awards[18]. Neave (2002, 2003, 2005) highlighted the extent to which European nations governed their own HE systems, noting the growth of the superordinate community alongside monolithic nation states. There is scope and flexibility at national level to interpret the European policy frameworks, and unlike the US, the EU is perhaps more disparate in its approach to education systems. Tight (2021) notes that, despite the conformance to much of the European Higher Education model by member countries (Gunn, 2015), its longer term impact is yet to be fully assessed. Even so, it's impact is greater than that of The Lisbon Strategy 2000, which aimed to rethink the European Educational space (Lawn, in Lawn and Novoa, 2013; Gunn et al, 2016), making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. However, it achieved very few of its intended goals in that timeframe. While there are different perspectives on the reasons for this, Corbett, in Lawn and Novoa (2013), suggests that it is indicative of the challenges of implementing international policy where there is no specific mandate to do so, and where informal networks and linkages can take the place of a formal policy document or strategy (Lawn, in Lawn and Novoa, 2013).

2.2 Policy, Power and Field

Policy is often thought of as a 'top-down' activity by those in power to be implemented in practice by others (Khalaf, 2020; Marginson, 2018); these others who are charged with implementation will have had varying degrees of input into the policy itself. Alongside policy formation, mechanisms are usually established to try to ensure that the rules or the intention of policy is implemented as intended (Khalaf, 2020; Marginson, 2008). Depending on the HE system, the State, the market (Clark, 1986; Scott, 1988, 1995, 2019) and the HEI play a role in governance in education systems. The relative role and influence of each varies by country

[18] www.ehea.info (accessed 2022)

and system (OECD, 2018), and for the purposes of this chapter, the market is not included to any great extent; the focus is on the relationship between the State and the HE system. Where the State is the main source of funding for HE, Government policy has the power to change the structure of systems, and this can from be instigated by factors within and outside the system. The enactment of HE policy in practice is the responsibility of HEIs, who in turn, interpret national HE policy in the context of institutional ambition and strategy. Maton (2005) considers that HEIs, if left to their own devices and are completely autonomous, would be unlikely to respond to the needs of society and the knowledge economy in a global context; it could be argued that they do not need to do this. However, given that many Governments play a significant role in the funding of HE, the institutions who are the beneficiaries of this funding are expected to align with Government policy, vision and objectives; but it is not all one-way traffic. HEIs, either individually or *en masse*, will lobby Governments in the context of policy goals that have been set for them, with a view to securing funding to achieve their objectives. For example, THEA, in a statement[19] to the Joint Oireachtas Committee (FHERIS) in February 2022, noted that an enhanced funding model was required for the newly created Technological Universities, and signalled potential problems in its absence:

> *'Failure to make that investment will inevitably impact the ability of the sector to satisfy the ambitions laid out for it by government and will hinder the capacity to contribute to the pipeline of skills talent that the country requires', THEA, Joint Oireachtas Statement, 2022, p.1.*

In HE, there is a balancing act between heteronomy and autonomy (Maton, 2005; Hilgers and Mangez, 2014), and HEI governance and institutional ambition is manifest in the power relations between Government and HEIs. The field theory of Bourdieu (Bourdieu; 1984, 1988; Marginson, 2008; Naidoo, 2004; Grenfell, 2014; Robbins, 1993; Mangez and Hilgers, 2012;

[19] THEA Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science Future Funding for Higher Education February 2022https://www.thea.ie/contentFiles/JCEFHERIS_submission_-_Future_HE_funding.pdf

Hilgers and Mangez, 2014) provides a lens through which to study Higher Education policy. Higher education as Field stems from Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and the development of his thinking tools of field, capital and habitus (Grenfell and James, 1998, 2004; Grenfell, 2014). For Bourdieu, field describes a social space in which interactions and events take place, and to be fully researched or understood, the context in which previous knowledge about the field was generated, must be taken into consideration. Bourdieu's concept of field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) provides a framework for considering different types of provision of HE in an overall HE system. Grenfell and James (1998) point to the work of Bourdieu in his analysis of field, noting the need to consider a field in relation to other fields, particularly the field of power. In Higher Education, the field of power is associated with Government and the actors that govern the HE system. Government policy can act as a key driver of the way in which HE operates and how it is perceived by those who seek to participate in the field of HE (Maton, 2005; Hilgers et al, 2014; Santoalha, Biscaia and Teixeira, 2018). Higher education can be defined as a distinct field, governed by its own doxa and rules (Thomson, in Grenfell, 2014; Hilgers et al, 2014). The field is occupied by agents who understand its rules and practices and behave accordingly; agents within a field adopt different positions and hold different amounts of capital or power, and they can act to maintain the field doxa in advancing their own interests and reproducing the social order. Bourdieu (1984, 1988) notes that agents can be individuals, institutions or groups. Habitus describes a way of being and the relationships that exist between agents in a field (Maton, 2005); this interaction produces (and can reproduce) the social world and underpins the culture and practice that develops within the field. Marginson (2008) and Grenfell (2014) highlight the relevance of the work of Bourdieu (1984, 1988,1996) in mapping out the relationship between the field of HE and the field of power. While much of Bourdieu's work, with Jean-Claude Passeron (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1988; Wacquant, 1990), was developed and based in the context of the French system of education of the 1960s and 1970s, it has been applied extensively in different national, cultural and sociological contexts, becoming almost paradigmatic in the study of higher education. Marginson (2008, 2017) and Robbins (2008) note that despite the

nation-bound nature and timeframe of his empirical work (1960s), as well as its obscure and inaccessible nature, Bourdieu's concept of the field of power with agents positioned and position-taking are useful for analysing the field of HE. It is of value in assessing educational practices and the links between the various actors within related fields and the field itself (Nash, 1990, 1999; Naidoo, 2004; Hilgers et al, 2014; Webb, Burke, Nichols, Roberts, Stahl, Threadgold and Wilkinson, 2017).

2.3 The Use of Field in an Irish Context

In this case study, the Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities can be considered to be a sub-field within the overall HE field, from the perspective of their history, profile and mission. Similarly sub-degree HE programmes can be considered as a sub-field of HE, and perhaps even ordinary degree programmes as distinct from Honours degrees. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below; this diagram is intended as a simple representation of the differences in provision of programmes and does not intend to represent all the complexities of the HE field.

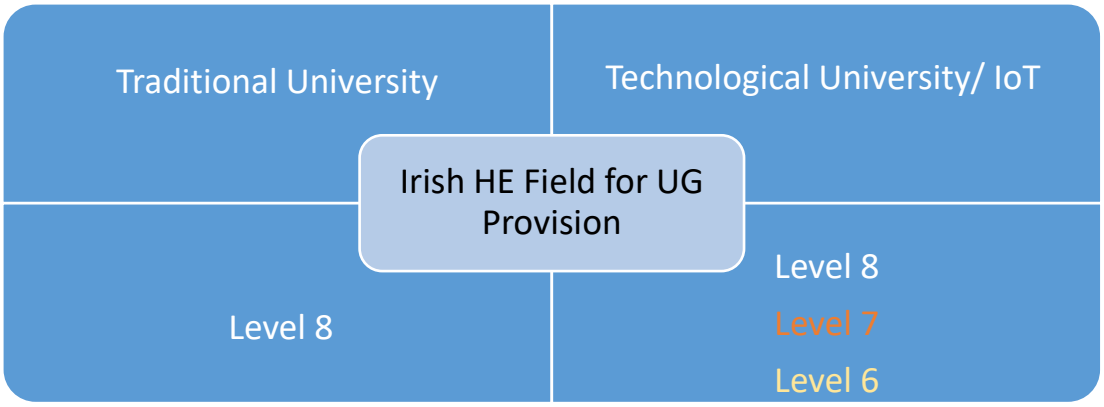


Figure 1: Irish HE Field

Thomson (in Grenfell, 2014) highlights key concerns in using field theory for analysis, and I will address these here. The first point is that I am using field as a descriptor as part of the thinking tools of Bourdieu and not field theory as a methodology. I am studying the field of Higher Education in Ireland and as such, the 'border' for my field is specifically aligned to the

HEIs that comprise the system of Higher Education in Ireland. I am not equating the field of Higher Education and the system of HE; Thomson (2014, p.72) draws attention to the distinction made by Bourdieu about a field and a system, field being a 'scholastic device' to help make sense of the world. This is how I am using the concept of field in my research. Thomson (ibid.) also notes the potential problem of too many fields when conducting analysis. I am limiting my analysis and representation of fields for education to the field of Higher Education (the field itself) and the field of power (DFHERIS, DES and the HEA). Agents in the field of Irish Higher Education are the institutes that provide programmes from level 6 (Higher Certificate and above) on the NFQ, the academic staff who teach on those programmes and the students who enter the system. In Irish HE, field and institutional autonomy is determined largely by the role of Government, DFHERIS and the HEA, as part of the Irish HE system structure and governance.

2.4 Policy and Systems

Higher Education is provided in a system. A system is defined as that which encompasses actors and providers of education that can be distinguished from other types of education provider, a distinct bounded entity or 'macro-structure' (Teichler, 2004 p.3), with particular characteristics (Kyvik, 2004). Systems of HE can be categorised using five typologies (Kyvik, 2004) - university dominated, dual, binary, unified and stratified. American HE was the first high participation system (Marginson, 2017), and it is most closely aligned within a stratified system (Kyvik, 2004), consisting of Universities, liberal arts colleges and community colleges, arranged in a hierarchy. In the US, the Carnegie Commission developed a classification for denoting diversity among providers of HE; originally published in 1973, it has been updated several times, most recently in 2021.[20] Of the approximately 4,500 HEIs in the US, 8 of them make up the elite Ivy League[21] and 63 are members of the Association of American

[20] https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu (accessed 2022)

[21] Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Harvard University, Princeton University, Yale University, Dartmouth College, University of Pennsylvania

Universities (AAU)[22] and about 1,000 are community colleges (Hermanowicz, 2021). In between, the four-year liberal arts colleges offer the same type of education as undergraduate colleges within the Universities. Two-year community colleges focus on vocational education and also offer the first two-years of a Bachelor degree (Tinto, 2012; Marginson, 2016b).

In Europe, HE was typically provided in University dominated systems until the late 1960s. In common with the USA, albeit at a slower pace (Trow, 1973), some of these University dominated systems diversified as a result of Government policy (Trow, 1996; Clancy, 2015; Scott, 2019), which according to Trow (1996) corresponded to:

> *'…the existence of different forms of post-secondary education with distinct and diverse missions, educating and training for different professional careers, organized and financed in different ways, and operating under diverse relationships with governments'.*

Authors such as Clark (1986), Birnbaum (1983), Teichler (1988, 2008), Van Vught (2007, 2008) and Tight (2015) advocate for greater degrees of institutional diversity and differentiation to accommodate the varying needs of students, as well as those of industry, and the economic system. Institutional diversification created systems that were comprised of different types of HE institution (Trow, 1973, 1996; Codling and Meek, 2009; Neave, 2000, 2002; Kyvik, 2004; Walsh 2018). These non-University HEIs were providing a varied range of programmes (Barr, 2014; Kyvik, 2004; Neave, 2002; Trow, 2006; Scott, 2019) serving the needs of a broader range of students, opening up access to HE outside of the elite University sector. They were often focussed on shorter cycle programmes with a more applied vocational focus and technical training, and less research activity in comparison to the traditional Universities. Examples of these are polytechnics in the UK (Tight, 2006), colleges of advanced education and technical and further education training in Australia (Neave, 2000) and the Regional Technical Colleges in Ireland (Walsh, 2018; Thorn 2018). The arrival of these new HEIs

[22] Founded in 1900 and membership by invitation only.

resulted in the creation of binary systems, which encompassed University and non-University education and training.

HE systems can be compared to living organisms or ecosystems that evolve over time (Bleiklie, 2005; Highman, 2015, 2020). Changes in HE systems are frequently described as a form of 'drift' (Neave, 1979, 2002), which has become '*a kind of endemic shorthand explanation for the tendency of institutions to aspire to and work towards higher status'* (Tight, 2015 p.94). Neave (2002), in referring to Kerr (2001), considers that most HE reform originates outside of the University sector, which may arise from a perception that anything other than University is lesser or inferior. (Marginson, 2016b; Codling and Meek, 2006; Huisman, 2015; Douglass, 2005). This is a form of academic drift (Neave, 1979) and can occur at institute or sector level (Kyvik, 2007; Tight, 2015; Bloch and Mitterle, 2017), where all of the institutes in a sectoral hierarchy aspire to a higher level, based on a belief that this might bring greater autonomy and prestige. Codling and Meek (2006) and Neave (2002) highlighted vocational drift whereby universities have gravitated towards more applied research and applied programmes, in line with the needs of the knowledge economy (Tight, 2015). HEIs respond to attractive opportunities (Clancy, 1996; Goglio and Regini, 2017) and changes in demand such as student drift (Kyvik, 2007) where students aspire to achieve qualifications that are at a higher level. Policy drift (Kyvik, ibid.) describes the extent to which Governments can either encourage or restrict academic drift. Drift of any sort has implications for system diversity in terms of the provision of different types and levels of programme. In the USA, it was found that, when those outside of the University emulated their University counterparts, this increased their internal diversity, but reduced external diversity (Huisman, Meek and Wood, 2007; Huisman, Lepori, Seeber, Frølich and Scordato, 2015; Morphew, 2000; Morphew and Huisman, 2002; Marginson, 2017). Some binary models of HE have become blurred at the boundaries as those Institutes without the University 'label' change tack to become more like them (Marginson, 2016a). For example, all of the polytechnics in the UK were re-designated as Universities in 1992 (Mayhew, Deer, and Dua, 2004; Deer and de Meulemeester, 2004). In

Australia the Dawkins Reforms,[23] led to the abolishment of the binary system in 1988 (Bessant, 2002; Mahony, 1992, 1993) by merging traditional Universities and polytechnics. While different means were used to achieve change, both Australia and the UK have all of their undergraduate education provided in a university. This leads to some challenges for such systems. Competition among HEIs in a unified system can lead to the development of a hierarchical system where HEIs are ranked in terms of prestige and research activity (Deer, 2003; Kyvik, 2004). When it becomes more challenging to differentiate an HEI on the basis of a University title, other forms of classification can provide a point of difference. Examples of a type of 'self' classification that is intended to signal prestige (Bathmaker, 2015; Marginson, 2017) are Russell Group Universities in the UK, and LERU, the League of European Research Universities. The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK Universities, out of a total of 130 Universities (Fernando and Kenny, 2021). Established in 2007, the Heads of the Russell Group Universities began collaboration and meeting in 1994. They are research intensive and focussed on ensuring optimum conditions for their member universities to flourish and contribute to social, economic and cultural impacts in the UK and across the globe. LERU is an association of leading European research-intensive universities that share the values of high-quality teaching within an environment of internationally competitive research. Founded in 2002, LERU advocates education through an awareness of the frontiers of human understanding; the creation of new knowledge through basic research, which is the ultimate source of innovation in society; and the promotion of research across a broad front in partnership with industry and society at large.

The 'Global Super League'[24] of Universities command prominent global status and resources and are set apart from others as being in a different league from others. Tight (2021), in his exploration of the influence of globalisation and internationalisation on national HE systems,

[23] Higher Education: A Policy Statement 1988 (The Dawkins Reforms) reshaped the Australian HE landscape. This was followed by the Dawkins' discussion paper of 1990, Nelson's policy document of 2003, the Bradley Review of 2008 and the Lomax-Smith Review of 2011.

[24] American doctoral universities led by Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Yale, Princeton, Berkeley and others, plus Cambridge, Oxford and a handful of the Russell group.

highlights factors such as competition for international students, and the desire for research status and prestige typified by the 'world-leading universities' label and budget (Tight, 2021, p.62). Given that educational policymaking is on a global basis (Vaccari and Gardinier, 2019), changes in systems are likely to continue, in line with national and institutional ambitions. In the following section, I will discuss the key changes that have occurred in the Irish HE system since its establishment to its present contemporary structure.

2.5 The Development of Higher Education in Ireland

In the early 1970s, HE in Ireland changed from a dual (Kyvik, 2004) or embryonic binary (Clancy, 1989) system to one that has undergone significant expansion and changes. There are four key documents that have informed such developments– Investment in Education (OECD, Government of Ireland, 1965), the 1967 Commission into HE, the OECD Report of 2004 (OECD, 2004) and the National Strategy for Higher Education 2013 to 2030 (DES, 2011), commonly referred to as the Hunt Report. The first of these was instrumental in establishing a 'non-University' sector in HE, the last instrumental in triggering changes in HE that have resulted in the current changed HE landscape. Contemporary Irish HE is a heterogeneous landscape of provision, with many routes into HE and a wide array of programmes on offer to a broad and diverse range of learners. It was not always thus. The origins of Higher Education in Ireland are linked to University education. In 1592, the oldest University in Ireland, Trinity College Dublin, was established under charter from Queen Elizabeth (Share and O'Farrell, 2017; Walsh, 2018). The purpose of a University education, and the role of religion (particularly Catholicism) in a university education, have been the subject of debate (Walsh, 2018). Different Universities adopted different stances on such matters, with divisions along the 'utilitarian' objectives linked to employment in an increasingly industrialised society and training for the professions, or intellectual formation for the cultivation of knowledge. The Queens Colleges (Galway, Cork and Belfast), established in Ireland in the 1840s, had a secular focus and ethos of applied learning for an industrialised society. Cardinal Newman, on the other hand, in the 1850s, conceived the University as a place of learning with 'scholarly'

objectives and the cultivation of knowledge, where religion (Catholicism) was a core value of the University. A University with a Catholic ethos, the Catholic University of Ireland, known today as University College Dublin (UCD) was established in 1854.

There was an emphasis on the provision of programmes by the Universities aimed at the professions such as law, and medicine, as well as arts and humanities, and there was a level of conservatism in Ireland that continued to drive the demand for high-status careers in the professions (Walsh, 2018). The relatively low perceived value of technical disciplines and associated education provision remained in place up until the 1960s in Ireland, until changes in Government led to significant changes in economic and social policy. The intervention of the State had been minimal in the operation and management of Irish Higher Education institutions, up to and beyond the point of the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. Access to a University education in Ireland was determined more by 'means' than 'merit', according to President Éamon De Valera in a Seanad address in 1940, where he noted that the essential role of the University was training for a professional career (Walsh, 2018; Coolahan, 2017; Clancy, 2015). As a consequence of the elitist nature of HE, the State, at that time, provided minimal financial investment. (Clancy, 2015; Walsh, 2018; White, 2001). Changes in Government lead to a recognition that the provision of HE in Ireland needed to be expanded, accompanied by an increase in demand for progression to higher education. A review of the Irish education system under the auspices of the OECD was commissioned in 1962 by the Minister for Education Dr Patrick Hillery. The subsequent seminal report 'Investment in Education' was to have a profound impact on the development of education, particularly Higher Education, in Ireland. It is discussed below.

2.5.1 The 1965 'Investment in Education' Report

The recommendations of the 1965 'Investment in Education' report are considered to be some of the most influential in creating a binary structure in Irish HE. Walsh (2011, 2014, 2018) notes that the OECD review of education in Ireland between 1962-1965 (OECD, 1965), highlighted the elitist nature of access to higher education, with a tiny percentage of 15-19 and

20-24 year olds registered in higher education in 1961, with a strong correlation between University registration and the social grouping of upper middle class. The report also highlighted significant deficiencies in the provision of technical education, with only 660 students registered nationally on higher level technical or vocational courses in 1964, the vast majority of which were run by the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC). There was no provision of technical education in rural areas and a lack of opportunity for students to progress from vocational education to university education. One of the recommendations to be addressed by Government in the 'Investment in Education' Report was this gap in higher technical education, between degree (technologist) and apprenticeship (craftsman), and the provision of a more complete educational ladder for students. It was noted that the role of a technician, that between craftsman and technologist, required more specialist knowledge than that of a craftsman and that there was no formal qualification available at this level. This led to the inclusion of vocational education within the HE sector in Ireland, which ultimately led to the foundation of 'Regional Technical Colleges' (Walsh, 2014; Thorn 2018). These were intended to bridge the gap in technical education and were positioned to exist outside of the University sector. A steering committee on Technical Education was set up in 1966 by Donogh O'Malley, which was to brief the Minister generally on technical education; in particular, on behalf of the Minister, it was to provide the Department of Education Building Consortium, with a brief for the technical colleges. The steering committee noted that it had been advised that a decision had been made to establish eight RTCs in Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Galway, Sligo, Dundalk, Athlone and Carlow. A ninth was proposed in Letterkenny, Co Donegal, about which, the committee was asked for advice. This was subsequently established as a 'regional base' after political discussions. The steering committee established by Donogh O'Malley, and chaired by Noel Mulcahy, had a strong business focus and a remit to consider the type of programmes that should be offered by these new colleges and concluded that the RTCs should:

'…educate for trade and industry over a broad spectrum of occupations ranging from craft to professional level, notably in engineering and science, but also in commercial, linguistic and other specialities. They will, however, be more immediately concerned with providing courses aimed at filling gaps in the industrial manpower structure particularly in the technician area'. (Steering Committee on Technical Education. Report to the Minister for Education on Regional Technical Colleges. 1967, DUBLIN. Published by the Stationery Office, p.11).

The steering committee did not advance a definition of technician, believing that there was a good deal of 'common understanding' of the term. However, interestingly they stated that they saw him as occupying an 'intermediate position between the craftsman and the professional man'.

The steering committee also noted that in relation to the role of the RTC:

'We do not foresee any final fixed pattern of courses in the colleges. If they are to make the most effective contribution to the needs of society and the economy, they must be capable of continuing adaptation to social, economic and technological change. Initiatives at local and national level will largely determine how far this vital characteristic is developed. We are concerned that the progress of these colleges should not be deterred by any artificial limitation of either scope or the level of their educational achievements.' (Report to the Minister for Education on Regional Technical Colleges. 1967, DUBLIN. Published by the Stationery Office, p.11).

The committee had reviewed the report of the Commission on Higher Education, which had proposed a 'binary' system of HE in Ireland, consisting of University and technological systems. While the Committee did not specifically disagree with this approach, it did disagree with the 'dichotomy'

that it considered would be created in HE by having entry requirements for the New Colleges set at a lower level than would be considered acceptable in the Universities for equivalent degrees. It also disagreed with any limitation on the level of qualifications that the New Colleges could award.

The long-term role of the RTCs was set out as education for trade and industry across a broad range of occupations from craft to professional level. The disciplines of engineering and science were considered as key areas for study, but commercial, linguistic and other specialities would be included as areas of study, and a priority was filling gaps in skilled technicians to assist with manpower shortages. In 1978, the six higher level colleges (College of Technology, Kevin Street, College of Technology, Bolton St, College of Music, Chatham Row, College of Catering, Cathal Brugha Street, College of Marketing and Design, Mountjoy Square, College of Commerce, Rathmines) under the Dublin VEC were brought together as the Dublin Institute of Technology, whose degrees were awarded by TCD, making DIT distinct from the RTCs[25].

2.5.2 National Institutes for Higher Education (NIHE) – a Hybrid Institute

The 1967 Commission report (Government of Ireland, 1967) had proposed a new type of third level institution, the New College, to be established in Limerick and Dublin, providing pass degrees for three-year courses and diplomas for shorter courses (Walsh, 2014 in Loxley et al, 2014). These were proposed as a solution to the increasing demand for higher education and were reflective of the concerns of the Commission regarding the maintenance of academic standards with limited State resources. The newly established Higher Education Authority (HEA) explored the need for further enhancement of higher technical education and concluded that there was no need (Walsh, 2014; Coolahan, 2017; Clancy, 2015) for an additional University in the Irish HE system. As an alternative, and to meet the need for higher technical education, a National Institute for Higher Education (NIHE) was established in Limerick in

[25] Dublin Institute of Technology Act, 1992 (irishstatutebook.ie)

1972, following acceptance of the HEA proposal by the Irish Government. An additional NIHE was established in Dublin in 1980. Both NIHEs (NIHE Limerick and NIHE Dublin) were established to provide HEIs that were able to provide programmes that were less restricted than the RTCs and contributed further towards the enhancements in the provision of higher technical education, offering technical programmes at diploma and certificate level, alongside degree courses in arts, humanities and science. Both NIHEs reported to the HEA rather than the VECs, putting them on a similar footing to the Universities; the Limerick NIHE was innovative in that it was the first institution in Ireland to introduce modularisation and it included work placement as part of its full-time programmes (White, 2001). Both NIHEs achieved University status in 1989 (Walsh, 2018). The RTC sector was supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) from 1975, allowing increased access to HE across the country (O'Hara, 2010; Walsh, 2018). All students on one and two-year programmes became eligible for ESF grants from the academic year 1984-85, with national diploma courses becoming eligible from1989/90. This was means tested for new students from 1992, but the ESF grants led to increased access and participation in HE (O'Hara, 1993, 2010). There were 12,000 students registered on ESF funded programmes by 1984-85. During the 1980s, the RTCs expanded their programme offerings and 'found their voice' (Thorn, 2018 p. 107), seeking greater autonomy from the VECs to govern their own affairs and development. The RTCs were ultimately to become IoTs, achieving greater autonomy and freedom to pursue their strategic vision. The profile of students enrolled in Universities and IoTs tended to be distinct, with a higher proportion of students enrolled on sub-degree programmes in the IoTs and a higher percentage of students engaged in degree programmes and research in the Universities. There was a tendency towards a higher level of part-time provision in the IoTs than in the Universities. There is evidence to support the role that IoTs have played in widening access and participation in higher education, particularly among first generation students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Thorn, 2018; HEA, 2019). By the 1990s, the RTCs were offering qualifications that were similar to those offered in the University sector, and there was a stated ambition to achieve University status (Thorn, 2018). From the time that they were

established in the 1970s, the RTC label became a less accurate reflection of the extent and level of the activity in this sector. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, degree level programmes were being offered, as well as Masters programmes in the areas of Business, Science and Engineering. These Masters qualifications could be achieved by research and thesis or coursework and dissertation (Thorn, 2018, p.85). The first PhD was awarded by NCEA to an RTC student in 1990. The RTCs were ground-breaking in the Irish HE education system at the time in which they were first established in 1970 (Thorn, 2018), but they were ambitious and wanted a change in status to reflect the way in which they had developed, and to achieve more control over their legal and academic structures, such as programme development, validation, and conferring (Coolahan, 2017; Walsh, 2018). The Irish government passed a number of Acts, described below, in the 1990s that related to the provision of higher education, and the associated awards, signalling a re-structuring and reform in the HE sector. The RTC Act and DIT Act were passed at approximately the same time in 1992, and the DIT Act very much cemented the position of DIT as an Institute 'apart' from the RTCs in terms of education provision and status, locating it closer to the University sector.

2.5.3 The RTC Act

Greater autonomy and a loosening of the grip of the VECs on the governance of the RTCs was achieved with the passing of the RTC Act 1992. This legislation emphasised the role of the RTCs in providing vocational and technical education in a regional context:

> *Functions of colleges. 5.—(1) The principal function of a college shall, subject to the provisions of this Act, be to provide vocational and technical education and training for the economic, technological, scientific, commercial, industrial, social and cultural development of the State with particular reference to the region served by the college, and, without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, a college shall have the following functions —*

(a) to provide such courses of study as the governing body of the college considers appropriate; (RTC Act, 1992)

The RTCs could also engage in and exploit research, development and consultancy work, and enter into arrangements with other institutions inside or outside the State for the purposes of joint programmes in teaching and research. In 1995, the HEA recommended the re-naming of RTCs as regional Institutes of Technology (Thorn, 2018), and a White Paper on Education recommended extending the remit of the HEA to the RTCs. Waterford and Cork RTCs were re-named as Institutes of Technology in 1997, followed by the remainder of the RTCs in 1998. One exception was Dun Laoghaire, which was re-named as Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT). Between 1997 and 2003, reviews were conducted in relation to the role of the RTCs and IoTs in Irish HE, which included their role and mission, as well as the level of autonomy in awarding their own degrees. The Minister for Education at the time (1997) Niamh Breathnach, established a High Level Group to advise on the Technological sector in HE, which recommended delegation of awarding powers for sub-degree programmes to WIT, CIT, GMIT and IT Sligo. In 1996, the Council of Directors had agreed on the position for arguing for an Irish Technological University and proved to be ambitious in terms of their mission and programme provision (Thorn 2018).

2.5.4 The Influence of the OECD Review 2004

Higher education developed along binary lines in the 1970s and into the early 1980s, as a result of the inclusion of technical education and the addition of new providers of HE. While these developments had addressed some of the issues relating to a requirement for increased access, The Irish Government (Department of Education and Science) requested that the OECD conduct a review of HE in 2004, to consider the continuing relevance of the binary divide and to consider how best to manage research in higher education. There was a focus on the knowledge economy and the contribution that HE would make to such an economy. Following a visit from an international team, the OECD report (OECD, 2004) advocated

retaining a differentiated tertiary education system (Walsh, 2018; Thorn, 2018), with no further transfers into the University sector, and encouraged the Irish Government to resist pressure from the IoTs for University status. The OECD review team noted they were impressed by the distinction of the IoTs from the Universities, as expressed by the Institutes themselves (Thorn, 2018), but the recommendation to stop any further transfers into the University sector, as well as removing PhD awarding powers, was not well received by the IoTs, because this could give rise to a perception of the IoTs as being second class citizens (Thorn, 2018). The OECD review team recommended a more strategic approach to HE in Ireland, and a loosening of some of the very tight controls applied to the IoTs, and a common system of governance for HEIs.

The IoT Act of 2006 was passed as a result of the OECD (2004) recommendations and brought the IoTs and DIT under the remit of the HEA, rather than the Department of Education and Skills (Science). The Act set out a legal framework that amended the RTC Act of 1992 and the DIT Act of 1992 to bring the Institute of Technology sector closer to the University sector by allowing a greater level of autonomy in their strategic management, financial management and operation; however, the IoTs enjoyed less autonomy than the Universities in making decisions about programmes and their strategic direction. Thorn (2018) and Walsh (2011) explain the early distinctions made between 'technical' and 'professional' education as far back as the 1960s and describe the objective of allowing students of technical education or the 'talented and determined vocational education student' to progress to professional education or a degree in the then National University of Ireland. There was a desire to address a 'missing rung' on the educational ladder in Ireland at that time.

2.5.5 Oversight and Awarding Powers of the RTCs

When the RTCs were established in the early 1970s, they reported through the local Vocational Education Committees to the Department of Education, prior to becoming independent of the VECs as a result of the RTC Act 1992. The RTCs originally awarded Higher Education certificates and diplomas, but not degrees. There was a progression route for

students from certificate to diploma, while each award was recognised as a qualification in its own right. The NCEA (National Council for Educational Awards) was established in 1972 to oversee the approval of programmes and to certify awards from the RTCs, following challenges for certification and recognition of their qualifications in the first two-years of existence. The HEA had consulted with the Universities in establishing the NCEA to ensure that the degrees that it awarded were not 'in any way inferior to those of the Universities' (Thorn, 2018, p. 42). In 1974, there was some controversy surrounding the power of NCEA to award degrees, as the Coalition Government withdrew its degree awarding powers. This had the effect of suggesting that degrees awarded under the NCEA were somehow different to those awarded by the Universities (Thorn, 2018), and that the Universities should have oversight of degrees awarded in RTCs. The degree awarding function of the NCEA was re-instated in 1977, with the return of the Fianna Fáil Government (Coolahan, 2017), and subsequently the NCEA was granted statutory status in 1979. Degree awarding powers can be considered to be synonymous with prestige and a level of trust in the quality of the degrees being conferred, and the Institute in which they have been achieved. In HE, awards could be made by Universities, or in the case of technical education, by an awarding body, or under delegated authority from an awarding body. Throughout the lifetime of the RTCs and IoTs, awarding authority was transferred from the NCEA to the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) before this body was dissolved in 2012 on foot of the establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)[26]. The transition to HETAC was not without differences of opinion about autonomy and oversight, with the Council of Directors pointing out that the function of HETAC was as an awarding body, and not an examining body of the IoTs (Thorn, 2018). This highlights the desire for autonomy and a recognition of the confidence in the operation and management of the IoTs. Greater autonomy came about with a further legislative change, commencement of Section 36 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act in 2019, which conferred designated awarding

[26] https://www.qqi.ie/

body status on all IoTs, giving them the authority to award their own degrees and qualifications up to level 9, as well as scope to create their own award standards. This is a further action that brings closer the powers of Universities and IoTs, where IoTs were to some extent the 'poor relation' (Thorn, 2018) in award granting status, again creating more of a 'blurring of the boundaries' in the Irish HE sector.

2.5.6 Provision of Programmes - The National Framework of Qualifications

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was established by the Irish Government in 2003, two-years after the establishment of HETAC. It was informed by the European Commission and Bologna process and set out 10 levels of Irish qualification, which are governed by nationally agreed standards. It sets out a clear educational roadmap or pathway through the levels, and the IoT sector has been very much focussed on ensuring that there is provision via a 'ladder' system. The HEA (2012) stated that 'no higher education institution can or should attempt to provide the full range of entrance and pathway opportunities for the full range of general, specialist, or labour market-oriented programmes of study'. The same report notes that 'much of the provision of short and full cycle programmes at Levels 6 and 7, most of which is career and labour market oriented, is provided by the Institutes of Technology'. Levels 6 and 7 will be key entry points for people in the workforce seeking part-time and flexible opportunities for up-skilling or re-skilling (HEA, 2012). This is a very definitive/specific purpose set for such programmes; many of the IoTs offered flexible learning access routes by offering programmes on a part-time basis.

2.6 Life After the RTC

A recurring theme in policy documents, consultant reports (Skilbeck, 2003; DES, 2011) and Irish Government publications, is the role of the Institute of Technology sector, as distinct from the University sector. While there were advocates of a more 'integrated' HE system in Ireland (Skilbeck, 2003), there were some who did not favour this approach and considered that bringing more IoTs into the Irish university sector was not desirable (OECD, 2004), considering

the differentiation between University and IoT to be advantageous. In contrast, Thorn (2018) considered this differentiation to amount to 'artificial limits', that potentially could be viewed as a first tier university sector and a second tier IoT sector (McCoy and Smyth, 2011). Scott (1988, 1995) cautions against a binary division as it stifles institutional ambition and discourages entrepreneurial behaviour. Neave (1979, 1995, 2002) considers that greater homogenisation occurs when lower-level status institutes strive to emulate the top-level ones. Prior to the TU developments, there was already a 'blurring of the lines' (Thorn, 2018; Walsh, 2018) between the Irish University sector and the Institute of Technology sector, where a degree of mission or 'academic drift' was evident in the Institute of Technology sector, as many of them offered programmes that were considered to be more within the remit/realm of the University sector e.g. Humanities and Arts (Highman, 2015). Academic drift (Neave, 1979; Kyvik and Skodvin, 2003; Kyvik, 2007) can be considered a feature of the IoT sector, whose programmes are now more closely aligned with some of the university sector offerings (Highman, 2020). The focus on research as a core activity has historically been a distinguishing factor between the University and non-University sectors, whereby research was considered to be an activity most appropriately carried out in the University setting, while the emphasis was predominantly on teaching in the non-University sector. This has changed over time as there is an increasing emphasis on research outside of the University sector, in line with the Irish Government strategy to create fewer and larger HEIs (DES, 2011), and to enhance the national research capacity. The extent to which this academic drift is 'allowed' is partly attributable to the Institute itself in terms of mission and ambition, and partly attributable to Government policy and regulation of the sector. The combination of Institutional ambition and Government policy is discussed in the following section.

2.7 The Impact of Austerity and Institutional Ambition – A convenient Confluence of Events?

The context of economic crisis has been considered as a suitable backdrop for the introduction of neoliberal policies, and increased efficiencies (Deer, 2003: Mercille and Murphy, 2017;

Holborow, 2012, 2017). Quinn (2020) has charted and analysed the development of HE policy in an Irish context, which shows the dimensions along which it has developed, and the key external events that had an influence on policy. These are:

- Celtic Tiger – Window of Opportunity
- Fiscal Crisis – Critical Juncture
- Emergence from International Bailout – Window of Opportunity

These reflect affluence, austerity and ambition respectively. Her analysis, based on a blended approach to policy analysis, provides a perspective on the various factors that have contributed to some of the policy shifts in Irish HE in relatively recent times. Quinn (ibid.) identifies the period from 1998-2007 as one of 'affluence and influence' as the Celtic tiger era heralded new opportunities for employment and ultimately, skills shortages. External expertise was valued by the HEA, with analysis of Irish HE policy by the OECD (2004) and analysis of the external factors having an impact on the University sector (Skilbeck, 2001). The economic recession which started in 2008 signalled turbulence in the HE sector, with scrutiny on efficiencies in the system, as well as the overall structure. Economic cutbacks and increasing student numbers combined to make for significant challenges in the sector, which was considered out of step with the needs of a modern HE system. Quinn (2020) identifies 2008-2013 as a period of 'austerity and retrenchment'. The fiscal crisis let to a focus on reform in education, as part of a review of public sector performance. While funding for HE was reduced, and restrictions on staff recruitment were imposed via an employment control framework (Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017), there was an approximately 18% increase in student enrolments between 2008-2013 (Hazelkorn, 2014; Clancy, 2015). During the recession, policy development continued apace and the Government set ambitious targets for Ireland to become a world class education system with a focus on the knowledge economy and job creation (Quinn, 2020).

2.8 The National Strategy for Higher Education 2013 to 2030: The Hunt Report

It is arguable that one of the most significant and influential reports regarding HE re-structuring was the National Strategy for Higher Education 2013 to 2030 (DES, 2011), more commonly known as the Hunt Report. A catalyst for change, the 'Hunt Report' (DES, 2011) identified the need for an Irish higher education system to be created that would 'go beyond the simple binary system to one that would be more coherent, diverse and able to meet the needs of society and the economy'. The group that produced the report was chaired by Colin Hunt, an economist with previous roles in political advising. The composition of the group has been highlighted as not being representative of people who had significant 'on the ground' academic experience of HE (Walsh and Loxley, 2015; Quinn, 2020), with in fact two thirds of the group drawn from outside HE, thereby broadening the viewpoints of the group. The Hunt report, which expressed HE challenges in economic terms, was published at a time of significant economic challenge. It was proposed as a basis for higher educational reform and re-structuring, from the period 2011 to 2030, and Walsh and Loxley (2015) suggest that it was used as a 'base camp' for such reform and future HE policy. The Hunt Report recommendations were presented in the context of human capital investment to advance a knowledge economy (Valiente, 2014), while achieving efficiencies in the HE system through a concentration of resources. Critical mass in research was identified as an important driver of improved competitiveness of Irish HEIs on a global stage, and this research activity was to be focussed predominantly on the University sector. A more coherent HE landscape was suggested, based on the creation of Technological Universities as a result of IoT mergers; fewer and larger HEIs would be preferred. The Hunt Report recommendations are aligned with utilitarian objectives and labour market needs, and it reflects the 'well established human capital paradigm' (Walsh and Loxley, 2015). Authors such as Clancy (2015), Walsh (2018), Walsh and Loxley (2015) have pointed to the fact that the Hunt Report was influenced by previous reports such as the OECD Report of 2004 and lacked the depth of analysis and research of previous HE reviews (Walsh, 2018). These authors note that it advocated for

continued diversity in HE, and supported the binary system in place at that time, recognising the differences in the roles played by the Universities and Institutes of Technology. In response to the proposals for changes in status for IoTs, it was noted that 'any such change would have major implications for the system'. It stated explicitly that there was no case for any new University in the Irish HE system on the basis set out in the Universities Act 1997 (Section 9) and recommended that 'no application to convert any institute of technology into a university should be considered' (DES, 2011, p.101). A regional focus with regional 'clusters' made up of HEIs from across the binary divide was recommended. The report dismissed a proposal from some IoTs to create a single federal national technological university, as it ran counter to the regional focus. The committee guarded against the mistaken notion that there was any perceived distinction in value placed on the name 'university' or 'institute of technology' either nationally or internationally. It also cautioned against a simple name change in naming the IoTs as universities (DES, 2011, p.102):

> *'More generally, title changes are often seen as inevitable precursors to changes of mission, and this carries the risk that important parts of the particular mission of the institutes of technology will be lost. For example, institutes of technology currently provide the overwhelming majority of Level 6 and 7 courses; they have an important role in key disciplines such as science and technology; and they enrol a very diverse student base. Any loss of this mission would be detrimental to the breadth of Irish higher education provision and would not serve our longer-term societal needs'. (DES, 2011, p.102)*

A key aspect of the quote above is less about the perceptions of a name change, but more the acknowledgement that IoTs provide the majority of level 6 and 7 courses, which are not normally delivered in the University sector, and that they enrol a very diverse student base. In relation to the perceptions of 'titles' there are differing views on 'university' in a title, with some suggesting that a university is more attractive to domestic and international students, as well as external stakeholders such as industry partners and philanthropists (Hazelkorn and

Moynihan, 2010). Clancy (2015) notes the 'mixed messages' in the Hunt Report, which emphasises the importance of maintaining the binary divide to ensure differentiation and diversity, but which requires IoTs who wish to pursue their ambition of re-designation as a TU to increase provision at higher levels on the NFQ. O'hAnnracháin (2018) concluded that there were questions remaining regarding the acceptance of the recommendations in the Hunt report, with at times no clear rationale for the proposed changes to the non-University sector in particular, other than rationalisation and doing 'more with less'. He claims that there was insufficient contextual analysis of the non-University sector by the Hunt committee and interestingly points to other Government commissioned reports that have not received the same attention for implementation. Despite the assertion that there was no scope to create a new university, the Hunt report contained a proposal that was intended to retain diversity and the binary divide by creating Technological Universities. These new Technological Universities would have a mission that would be distinct from the existing universities, in order to ensure that regional needs and the needs of a diverse set of learners would be met. The incentive of re-designation as a Technological University (TU) was set alongside criteria to be achieved by existing IoTs (Marginson, 2011; HEA, 2012) in order to be considered for this new status.

2.9 The Acceptance of Hunt as a Blueprint for Reform

The Hunt report became an accepted blueprint for the reform of HE in Ireland and was swiftly followed by a number of policy documents that were designed to implement new HE policy and advancing the structural reform agenda. A key document was the 2012 HEA report 'Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape' (HEA, 2012)**,** the purpose of which was to link high level strategy objectives set out in the Hunt report with implementation in terms of the structure of the HE system, over a time period of approximately 5 years. The document noted the challenges facing HE and stated that:

> *'Our output of qualifications at NFQ Levels 6 & 7 is a strength, but we are average in terms of the overall attainment at Levels 8-10 and below average in terms of the output of PhDs' (HEA, 2012, p.2).*

The HEA noted that past policies, in responding to growing demand for HE, had

> *'resulted in a crowded and unstructured landscape. . .along with 'a proliferation of under-graduate programmes within many institutions, resulting in fragmentation of offerings and a loss of focus on core missions and strengths' (HEA, 2012, p.3).*

HEIs were invited to submit their vision by means of a strategic plan, of where they were positioned within this landscape within six months of the date of publication of the 'Landscape' document. The document contained the criteria for TU designation along with criteria for establishing regional clusters. Suggestions for such clusters were appended to the report. Subsequent to this, they were required to set objectives under key headings, and have their performance measured against these objectives. These were 'Performance Compacts' (HEA, 2016b; 2021) where individual Institution objectives were aligned with national objectives as set out in the Higher Education System Performance Framework. Funding for HEIs was based on their performance, as measured against agreed objectives, as a mechanism for enhancing system accountability, managing risk and improving institutional performance. The HEA had a strong oversight and accountability function.

2.10 The Emergence and Evolution of the Technological University in Ireland

More than ten years on from the publication of the Hunt Report, the traditional IoTs have all but been consumed into new TUs, as they met the criteria for re-designation. The passing of the TU Bill in 2018 (Government of Ireland, 2018) created the legislation to set in motion the creation of these TUs. In comparing the functions of an IoT as set out in the IoT Act 2006 (Government of Ireland, 2006), there is still a regional emphasis for a TU, and some changes to the language of the education provision expected of a TU. The main functions are listed below, which indicate that much of the original fabric of the IoT ethos should remain intact, albeit in a new structure. Some of the functions of a Technological University, having particular

regard to the needs of the region in which the campuses of the Technological University are located, shall be to:

> ‘(a) provide teaching and facilitate learning that— (i) is informed by research, and (ii) promotes excellence at all levels of higher education within the Framework.
>
> (b) provide programmes of education and training that reflect the needs of individuals, business, enterprise, the professions, the community, local interests and other stakeholders in the region in which the campuses of the technological university are located and facilitate learning by flexible means
>
> (c) provide for the broad education, intellectual and personal development of students, for the purpose of enabling them, as graduates, to excel in their chosen careers and to contribute responsibly to social, civic and economic life in innovative and adaptable ways’. (Technological Universities Act, 2018, Government of Ireland, p.14)

The criteria, includes an increasing focus on research and research output, while maintaining a regional focus and allowing access across programmes from level 6 up to level 10 on the NFQ. There is an emphasis on applied research and graduates who are ready for the workforce and whose skills and competencies align with regional needs. This is a tall order for any institution, and open to interpretation on what exactly regional needs are, and if these only relate to industry and the economy, or to adapt to the needs and wants of learners within the regions in which they live, by providing a broader range of programmes that might only be typically available in the traditional University sector.

Marginson (2011) cautioned against a simplistic perspective of amalgamation of IoTs to create TUs, and noted the true value of the creation of TUs would only be realised if they embraced the new possibilities open to them which were distinct from the traditional University sector. The TURN report (2019, p.11) states:

> *The status of TUs as multi-spectrum, (by level, field of learning and mode of learning) autonomous, self-awarding bodies across Levels 6 – 10 on the NFQ*

> *will mean that they can create meaningful and useful credential and qualification pathways for learners and employers. Though of interest to established universities too, the prioritised pursuit by TUs of connectedness with their communities and regions means that this is a strength for which they can build a recognised leadership position.*

Highman (2015, 2020) has examined the Irish HE landscape and considered the impact of the Hunt report and the changes that would occur as a result of more IoTs taking up the 'carrot' of re-designation as a TU (Hinfelaar, 2012; Clancy, 2015). He concluded that there was evidence of erosion of the binary divide in Irish HE as a result of various forms of mission drift (Neave, 1979), which was evident at policy, institutional and academic levels. The TU Act (2018) triggered significant changes in the Irish HE landscape, reducing the number of IoTs to two, and creating five new Technological Universities by 2022. Highman (2020) noted that any uncertainty regarding the mission and role of a technological university will lead to a vacuum that will allow for a broad interpretation of its role (Highman, 2020, p.654):

> *'It is important to offer clarity as to the future of the institute sector, to reassure institutes that they must not necessarily seek to amalgamate in an attempt to halt the centrifugal forces of institutional isomorphism currently at play and to provide stability to a sector that has contributed so much to Irish economic and societal development'.*

The re-designations of additional IoTs as TUs in 2021-22 suggest that those centrifugal forces have firmly taken root and that the road to institutional isomorphism is well and truly mapped out.

2.11 The Binary is Dead, Long Live the Binary?

Thirty years after its publication, Clancy (1996) described 'Investment' as ''the' foundation document of education', acting as a significant stimulus for change (Walsh, 2018; Fleming et al., 2017). Much of this was as a result of the acceptance of the link between human capital

development and economic salvation (Loxley et al, 2014; Walsh and Loxley, 2015). In considering a contemporary perspective on 'Investment', Loxley et al (ibid.) believe that it is now somewhat limited as there is a need to develop skills in wider areas that are related to the needs of a modern Ireland, and that education needs to be re-imagined as something that is beyond the requirements of the labour market. The need for change in the Irish HE system and its governance has been acknowledged by Minister Simon Harris, who has proposed a new Strategy for Tertiary Education, as set out in the Higher Education Authority Bill (2022). This Bill was signed into law in October 2022. It proposed amendments to many of the existing Acts that have been enacted in the course of changes to the HE system, setting the stage for a more unified higher education system, which will be flexible and responsive to the needs of a diverse student body.[27] The strategy has a vision for greater connectedness between the existing sectors in the HE system, while maintaining diversity. The overall purpose and vision for the Irish Technological Universities emphasises labour market objectives alongside a regional focus and provision of programmes from levels 6 to 10 on the NFQ. There is therefore much of the DNA of the RTCs and IoTs expressed in the objectives of the TU. Given the Irish Government ambition to move towards a unified but diverse system of HE, the role of two different types of university will be brought into sharp focus, and begs the question – will this be a new binary? HEIs tend to mimic each other and to gravitate towards whatever is perceived to be the highest status provider, or most lucrative position, in the system. Irish Government objectives for a new unified system, where HEIs have diverse missions, will no doubt take account of institutional ambition in determining the mechanisms by which diversity of provision will be maintained. From the perspective of the learner, diversity in the HE system provides different points of access and progression through the system, but I would suggest that institutional culture and practice will contribute to the extent to which true diversity is encountered, in terms of programme provision and pedagogy.

[27] Policy Platform: Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge, DFHERIS, May2022

2.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of changes in the Irish HE landscape, which have come about as a result of policy implementation which aims to meet the needs of society, employers and individuals. Neave (1995, 1998, 2003) described as a never ending and ongoing saga, the changes and developments that characterised the Western European higher education sector from 1985 to 1995, and which continue to evolve. Irish HE policy could be considered as part of the never-ending saga, but perhaps ongoing change is inevitable. Irish HE is no longer the preserve of an elite few or school-leaver but is accessible to every sector of society[28]. The overall culture and structure of HE remains largely intact with changes in place to accommodate diverse student profiles, part-time study, remote learning and flexible modes of study. The new Irish HE policy signals further and more significant changes to the system, and the Technological University sector will be required to align with regional and employer needs, while providing an appropriately structured learning environment. The following chapter discusses HE culture and practice, the student-institute relationship and persistence decisions.

[28] Higher Education Authority Bill (Gov.ie)

Chapter 3: Perspectives on Persistence and Retention

3.0 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 2, opportunities for participation are provided in a system of HE (Trow, in Burrage, 2010; Teichler, 2008), which can also be considered as a field (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988, 1996) with its own boundaries, culture and practices that are known to the agents who occupy the field (Naidoo, 2004; Maton, 2005). Having allowed students to enter the system or field of HE (McCoy and Byrne, 2010; Fleming, Loxley, Kenny and Finnegan, 2010), there is a need for the institute in which they are enrolled to provide an environment in which they can meet the requirements of their programme and complete their qualification (Tinto, 2012). Those who leave early are considered as a retention problem for the institute and the system, even if leaving might have been the correct outcome for the student (Yorke, 1999; HEA, 2019; Quinn and Moore-Cherry, 2015; Reason, 2009; Tinto, 2018). Retention is a complex and multidimensional issue, which commands significant amounts of attention and debate from scholars and HE practitioners (Tinto, 1975, 1997, 2007; Tight, 2020; Yorke, 1999; Aljohani, 2016; HEA, 2010, 2019). Retention can be considered as the outcome of students' decisions to complete their programme of study, or to leave early. Those students who complete their programmes can be considered to have persisted in their studies. Aligned to, but distinct from retention, an understanding of persistence has the potential to provide insight into the student journey from outset to completion, including challenges and the way in which those challenges were addressed. In this chapter I will review and critique selected academic literature that deals with retention and persistence, beginning with the definition of both concepts, and the relationship between them. Tinto (1975) is one of the most prolific academic scholars in the persistence literature, and his model of persistence is a core element of the theoretical framework that I am using for this research. Rather than using the model of Tinto (1975, 1993) in isolation, I have incorporated the thinking tools of Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2014), as a means by which to elaborate on some of the aspects of Tinto's (1975, 1993) model. The model of Tinto is the dominant theoretical lens for the research and analysis and therefore is

given greater prominence throughout the thesis. The use of Bourdieu (1984, 1988) continues from chapter 2, where field theory was used to describe the relationship between the field of power and the field of HE (Grenfell and James, 1998; Grenfell, 2014). The focus of this chapter is the field itself, which is the case institute. The relationship between an institute and its' students is central to the model of Tinto (1975, 1993). The role of the thinking tools of Bourdieu (1984, 1988) in this chapter is to enhance some aspects of the model of Tinto (1975, 1998). This is achieved by providing a more comprehensive analytical framework for understanding how the practices and culture of the institute are perceived by students, and the associated role of social and cultural capital.

The international academic literature dealing with improving persistence, and its corollary, improved rates of retention, is vast and varied (Tinto, 2006; Reason, 2009; Aljohani, 2016; Black and Jamieson Proctor, 2018). Prior attainment, motivation (Tinto, 1975; Bean, 1981; Belch, Gabel & Maas, 2001; Chambers and Paull, 2008; Clancy, 1996; Kerby 2015), and expectations (Dewberry and Jackson, 2018; Tinto, 2012) will all play a role in student persistence, and ultimately, persistence and programme completion. In order to review the literature that is considered most relevant for this research, the criteria for inclusion in the chapter were:

- the extent to which persistence models found in the literature have gained near universal acceptance or 'paradigmatic' status; that most frequently described as paradigmatic is the 1975 model of Tinto (Berger and Milem, 1999; Longden, 2004, Aljohani, 2016).
- HE literature (Reay, 2002, 2021, 2022; Thomas, 2002; Robbins, 1993, 2005; Bathmaker, 2015; Longden, 2004; Grenfell and James, 1998, 2004; Kenny, 2018; Barrett, 2015) that employed the field theory and thinking tools of Bourdieu (1984, 1988), predominantly focussed on Irish and UK HE systems.

The chapter is structured as follows:

- Definitions used in the literature and the case study

- Persistence by Adaptation or Accommodation - The Student – Institute Relationship with reference to Tinto and Bourdieu
- The Anatomy of Persistence Models – the Student-Institute Relationship as Diagram
- Critical Review of the Development of Tinto's Model of Persistence and relevance in a contemporary context
- The alignment of Tinto and Bourdieu and the framework to be used in this case study

3.1 Definitions of Persistence and Related Concepts

The starting point for this chapter is an explanation of the definitions that I am using in my case study. Reason (2009) and Yorke (2004) contend that there is confusion in the literature regarding the terminology in the student retention, departure and persistence literature. The use of the terms persistence and retention are often used interchangeably, but it is important that there is a clear distinction between these terms, as they are not the same (Reason, 2009). These will be explored in more detail throughout this chapter, but a distinction that I am making, in agreement with Reason (ibid.) is that persistence is considered from the perspective of individuals, retention from the perspective of HEIs. The research is focussed on persistence, seeking insight into the perspective of individuals. The findings are considered from the perspective of the Institute, thereby providing an enhanced understanding of Institute practices and actions that might lead to improved rates of retention.

3.1.1 Persistence

Tinto and Pusser (2006) describe persistence as student enrolment over a period of time, that may or may not be continuous, and that may not result in graduation. Reason (2009) notes that students may persist without graduating, depending on their individual goals and agrees that persistence as an ongoing part of the student environment rather than only an outcome (usually graduation). The specific definition of persistence that I am adopting for my case study is continuation of study on a single programme in a single Institution within a specified timeframe, all the way through to graduation, or with the intention of continuing through to graduation. The specified timeframe is that which the Institute allows students to remain active

in their programme, even if this extends beyond the minimum time required to complete the programme.

3.1.2 Retention

A very simplistic link between persistence and retention is that if students persist, institutions retain. Retention is a 'supply side' issue (Yorke, 2004). It is defined as the continued enrolment of a student from year one to year two on a programme of study (Tinto, 2006; Black et al, 2018) and is also used to describe the continued enrolment all the way through to graduation. Retention is used in this study to describe the retention of students to programme end and graduation, rather than only from year one to year two.

3.1.3 Dropout

Dropout (Tinto, 1975) is used in early literature to describe students leaving their programmes without completing them. It has largely been erased from contemporary literature and replaced with more neutral descriptions (Yorke, 1999) of the decision or requirement to leave HE early. It is not used as a definition or description in this case study except in instances where it already exists in the literature.

3.1.4 Attrition

Attrition is often used to describe students who have withdrawn from an Institute, but levels of attrition can be measured at programme and institute level. A student may leave a programme but remain in the Institute. Non-progression (defined in Chapter 1) is used in this case study with the same meaning as attrition.

3.1.5 Student Success

The language of retention has changed to reflect the role of the HEI in ensuring student success. It is not a new term, having been used by Tinto (1975, 1982) and Bean (1980). More contemporary interpretations of student success (Braxton, McKinney and Reynolds, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek, 2007; Lane, Moore, Hooper, Menzies, Cooper,

Shaw and Rueckert, 2019; Tinto, 2012; HEA, 2019) point to a wider definition which includes the achievement of personal and professional skills and competencies, personal achievement and preparation for adulthood and citizenship. Student success is not the subject of this case study, but I use the term success or successful outcome to describe programme completion and graduation from a single programme, acknowledging that there are other outcomes associated with student success.

3.1.6 Retention or Persistence?

I have approached the literature in the knowledge that an understanding of the reasons why students leave their programmes early does not necessarily provide an insight into what makes them stay (Tinto and Pusser, 2006). Tinto and Pusser (ibid.) note that persistence is not the mirror image of leaving (Tinto and Pusser, 2006). Students who persist will likely have experienced similar challenges to those who leave their programmes early (Yorke, 1999, 2004; McInnis, Hartley, Polesel and Teese, 2000; Reason, 2009); the difference in outcome can be as a result of different responses to a situation rather than the situation itself. I have used the literature from the perspective of interpreting its contribution to providing an understanding of the conditions under which students will persist in their studies, even where I refer to literature that deals with students leaving early (Yorke, 1999).

3.2 Persistence by Adaptation or Accommodation - The Student-Institute Relationship

Underpinning and woven through much of the HE literature about retention and persistence is the relationship between the student and the Higher Education Institute (Tinto, 2012; Godor, 2017; Reason, 2009). Relations between staff and students in the field of HE are key in gaining an insight into how students and academic staff perceive institutional culture, practices and norms. Individuals, groups and institutions in HE exist in structural relations to each other (Grenfell and James, 1998, 2004; Thomas, 2002). Interactions between individuals and HEIs (and the subsequent outcomes) will be influenced by the characteristics and behaviours of individuals, and by the actions and culture of institutes (Longden, 2006). Much of the

persistence literature has its roots in the early 1970s North American HE systems (Longden, 2002; Marginson, 2008), which is linked to their earlier move to mass HE than their European counterparts (Trow, 1973, 1974; Longden, 2000, 2002, 2006; Tight, 2007). While Trow (1972, 1973, 1974) was developing his elite – mass - universal triptych (Scott, 2019), US scholars (Spady, 1970, 1971; Flanagan, 1975; Tinto and Cullen, 1973; Tinto, 1975) were researching and producing models about persistence in the American HE system. These predominantly focussed on the need for the individual to adapt to their learning environment. From a Bourdieusian perspective of the late 1960s (Grenfell and James, 1998), this aligns with the need for individuals to possess the necessary social and cultural capital to access and thrive in the elite HE environment that existed in France at that time. Social capital relates to the advantages that arise as a result of valuable social connections; cultural capital relates to the embodiment of cultural tastes and practices, knowledge and academic credentials. Without the requisite capital to access and adapt to HE, individuals were less likely to benefit from educational advantages and so social disadvantage and inequalities were reproduced.

3.2.1 Alignment of Bourdieu and Tinto

While Bourdieu did not specifically study persistence, there are interesting parallels between his research into the HE field and the models of persistence that were developed in the USA. Bourdieu and the US scholars (sometimes with other authors) studied the impact of the attributes and backgrounds of individual students on their ability to adapt to the HE environment. Bourdieu (1984, 1988) was focussed on the social and cultural capital aspects of the HE field, noting that pedagogy was designed to favour those who were more familiar with the culture and practices of HE. US scholars such as Tinto (1975) studied the impact of the social and academic structures of the institute on the likely persistence decisions of students. Both authors early work in the late 1960s and early 1970s emphasised the need for students to adapt to HE culture and practices, in order to be successful. From a Bourdieusian perspective, social and cultural capital are of value in the HE field (Grenfell,2014;

Robbins,2005; Bathmaker, 2015; Reay, 2021, 2022), and they align with pre-college schooling, family background and individual attributes in the model of Tinto (1975, 1993).

3.2.2 The Role of Capital and the Link to Habitus in HE

The massification of higher education (Marginson, 2017; Trow, in Burrage, 2010), widening access agendas (HEA, 2015; Loxley et al, 2014) and high participation rates have given rise to diverse providers within the HE system (Trow, 1973, 2005; Scott, 2014, 2019). These different HEIs display different characteristics, based on their individual and collective missions, history and culture (Hazelkorn et al, 2019; Astin, 1984; 1993; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Pike, Kuh and Gonyea, 2003). Individuals entering the HE system and field are also reflective of their background and experiences (Naidoo, 2004; Li and Carroll, 2019). This is what Bourdieu would describe as 'habitus'. The term 'habitus' (Grenfell and James, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984, 1988) describes the characteristics of individuals or groups. Habitus is a critical component (Robbins, 1993) of the thinking and research of Bourdieu (1984, 1988), and is an interesting approach to thinking about the importance of fit between students and the institutes to which they gain access for study. Nash (1999) notes that habitus is also a form of capital, referring to it as embodied capital, and appearing as innate. Habitus is used to describe the norms and practices of social groups; these are acquired from an early age from family, for example, and shape the experiences and actions of individuals. For individuals, habitus represents the disposition to act based on early socialisation, and informing life choices, such as education (Robbins, 1993; Thomas, 2002; Reay, 2002, 2021), which in themselves can consolidate ways of acting and thinking, guiding sub-conscious everyday actions. The use of the term 'institutional habitus' (Thomas, 2002; Reay, David and Ball, 2001) as a means of description of habitus as it relates to an institute is disputed in the literature. Atkinson (2011) and Burke, Emmerich and Ingram (2013) note that Bourdieu himself did not use this term. Atkinson (2011) is particularly critical of the proliferation of the use of the terms institutional and family habitus in the literature, believing that it is not appropriate to consider habitus at the collective level. I agree with Atkinson's (2011) perspective about

habitus at the level of the institute. Habitus as it would relate to an institute is more accurately described as the doxa (Grenfell, 2014; Atkinson, 2011) or accepted norms, practices or culture. While the term institutional habitus has been used by other authors to describe the culture and practices of an institute, I have not adopted it in my research, other than where other authors might have used it. Bourdieu makes a distinction between familial domestic culture and that which is acquired 'artificially' (Robbins, 2005), the ontology of knowing and the epistemology of socially acquired knowing. Robbins (ibid.) notes the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, 1990) in studying the ongoing process of one's own domestic culture continually interacting with the acquired culture of others and vice versa. Robbins (in Grenfell and James, 1998) suggests that Bourdieu himself knew that he had been able to achieve upward mobility in the French educational system by virtue of being able to suppress his indigenous culture, moving from a remote provincial region of France to Paris. While this is reflective of a particular time and context for Bourdieu, this description of having to suppress one's own domestic culture is indicative of the extent to which students in HE might perceive a sense of discomfort or misfit between themselves, academic staff and their peers in the HE environment (Webb et al, 2017). They are akin to a fish out of water (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In the US, the early work of Spady (1971) focussed on a similar proposition, which was the benefit of congruence and compatibility between an individual and their HE environment. Spady's (ibid.) work was adapted from the theory of suicide developed by Durkheim (1953). Spady (ibid.) identified two systems in the academic environment (academic and social) and at least two factors in each system that influence a student's decision to withdraw: grades and intellectual development in the academic system and normative congruence and friendship support in the social system. The concept of 'normative congruence' is defined by Spady (1971) as:

> *'…the general degree of compatibility between the dispositions, interests, attitudes, and expectations of the student and the set of behaviours, expectations, and demands to which he may be exposed as the result of*

interaction with a variety of individuals in the college environment'. (Spady, 1971, p.39)

His belief was that the better the degree of normative congruence, the less strain would be placed on the student in interactions with faculty, peers and administrators. Similar to the assertion of Bourdieu (1984, 1988), this was about fitting in. Spady (1971) noted the challenges of operationalisation and measurement of this concept because it:

'…represents not only all of the student goals, orientations, interests, and personality dispositions…but the consequences of the interaction between these attributes and various subsystems of the college environment as well'. (Spady, 1971, p.39)

Individual capital and habitus can be assessed in the context of the practices and culture of the institute (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988; Grenfell, 2014). Habitus varies within the HE system and this will give rise to different practices and norms; the extent to which students perceive a good fit between their individual capital and habitus and the culture of the institute will depend on their pre-entry expectations and subsequent experiences. While described in different terms, Spady (1971) and later Tinto (1975), and Bourdieu (1984, 1988) consider the student's possession of capital that is valued by the field as a mechanism by which they will make an easier transition to HE and be more likely to stay than to leave early.

3.2.3 Integration – Meaning, Misinterpretation and Contemporary Relevance

Tinto (2018) notes that the concept of integration was developed in his original model of student departure in the context of 1970s American racial and economic inequality. It was intended to mean the opposite of segregation in Institutes of HE; Tinto did not mean it to be the case that to be successful, all students had to become the same, or had to abandon their own cultures. The concept of integration is disputed in the literature (Tinto, 2012; Godor, 2017) as shifting the emphasis from the role of the Institute to create the right 'conditions' for persistence, to the need for the student to adapt to the Institute and 'fit in'. Later work (Tinto,

2012) places more emphasis on institutional action to improve retention, but Godor (2017) believes that much of the institutional attempt at taking responsibility for retention still puts the emphasis back on the individual student to conform and integrate. With these points in mind, in the following section, I will review the models of persistence, which represent the student-institute relationship. There is a deliberate focus on the model of Tinto (1975, 1993), with the incorporation of the thinking tools of Bourdieu (1984, 1988).

3.3 The Anatomy of Persistence Models – the Student-Institute Relationship as Diagram

I made the observation in Chapter 2 that HE is awash with policies. I could make a similar observation in this chapter about theories and models of persistence and their contribution to our understanding of retention, but a more accurate reflection of that might be that that the literature is awash with variations on a theme of persistence and retention, which can be traced back to the model of Tinto (1975), and prior to that, Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto and Cullen(1973). Models have been categorised (Bank, Biddle and Slavings, 1992) as descriptive (Pascarella, 1980), causal (Bean, 1980), empirical (Tinto, 1975), conceptual (Tinto, 1975) and theoretical (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1981); sometimes the same model might be found into two categories. They have been based on psychology (Reason, 2003), emphasising student characteristics and attributes, and sociology, emphasising social and institutional factors, and the interaction between the two (Terenzini and Pascarella, 1980, 1990; Yorke, 2004). They do however, have some common traits – stages in the educational process and a number of variables. Kuh et al (2008, p.541) state that most models have five broad variables, which are based on:

- Student background characteristics
- Structural characteristics of institutions (mission, size, selectivity)
- Student interaction with faculty, staff members, peers
- Student perceptions of learning environment
- Quality of effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities

My own observation on the variables identified by Kuh et al (ibid.) is that the structural characteristics of mission, size and selectivity appear less explicitly in models, than the other variables. The stages identified in the models are usually pre-college, college experience and outcome. Rather like a well-defined process, the stages are generally set out in flow chart type diagram, with arrows illustrating inputs and outputs, like the education factors of production. These processes, when combined with the variables that make up the model, will result in a series of outcomes or actions (Tinto, 1975; Spady, 1970; Metz, 2002; Bean, 1980, 1981). Bean (1981, p.23) lamented the 'forest of interaction terms' that appeared in early models which made it challenging to identify which were of most importance, particularly when a seemingly inconsequential variable could become important when combined with another variable. Tinto (1975) also noted that many of the existing models in the early 1970s contained a combination of input and process variables that did not allow for a determination of the impact of any specific one on dropout decisions. These variables can be categorised as 'input' variables and 'process' variables. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) described Astin's (1984) model as one of the first and most durable impact models, which specifically incorporated inputs, environment and outcomes (I-E-O). Inputs can be aligned with pre-HE characteristics (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005), and outcomes are the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours exhibited by students after their programme completion. According to Astin (1971, 1972(b),1984, 1993) outcomes are influenced by students' perceptions of the college environment. Tinto (1975) had attempted to provide a mechanism for separating out the variables that would influence persistence, considering that it would be correlated to the strength of the goals of programme completion and commitment to the institution. Metz (2002) and Reason (2009) consider that this is one of the reasons for the popularity of his model, because it provided the basis for empirical research.

3.4 The Development of Tinto's Model of Persistence

US scholar Tinto was influenced by the work of Spady (1971) and built upon this work further with Cullen (Tinto and Cullen, 1973) to identify how rates of dropout in US Higher Education

were changing in the mid1960s. They found that social status was moderated by individual ability in predicting the likelihood of persistence. Tinto and Cullen (1973) developed a longitudinal model, which was more valuable than a contextual description of the factors that might contribute to persistence or dropout. Noting the diverse student body entering HE, with varying abilities, interests, levels of motivation and commitment to the goal of completing college, Tinto and Cullen (ibid.) proposed the following categories for determining the likelihood of persistence:

(a) pre-entry attributes (prior schooling and family background)

(b) goals/commitment (student aspirations and institutional goals)

(c) institutional experiences (academics, faculty interaction, co-curricular involvement, and peer group interaction)

(d) integration (academic and social)

(e) goals/commitment (intentions and external commitments)

(f) outcome (departure decision, graduate, transfer, dropout)

Tinto (1975) built on this work to develop his model depicting the process of dropout. The original 1975 model, shown in the figure below, was also a longitudinal model of the process of dropout. It included institutional and individual variables, and the model represents the interaction between the variables. Yorke (2004) explains that the basis of Tinto's model is that students arrive in HE with a particular set of attributes, intentions and goals for HE. Interaction with the academic and social systems of the Institute will influence their level of integration into those systems, which in turn will influence their goals and level of commitment, ultimately leading to a decision to persist or leave early. Tinto's model (1975) shows a dropout decision, actively made by the student to separate themselves from the academic community where they did not perceive a good fit between themselves and the Institute, based on their interactions. This was in his view, similar to the decision of an individual to separate

themselves from society, as in the case of egoistic suicide. The elements and stages of the model are discussed in the sections that follow.

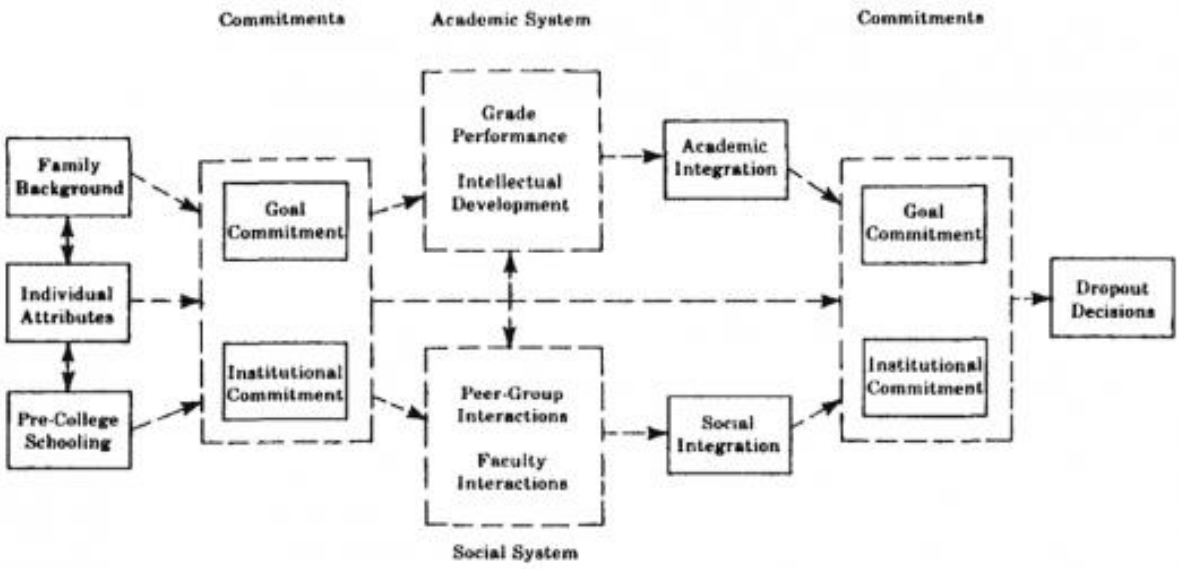


Figure 2: A Conceptual Schema for Dropout from College (Tinto, 1975)

3.4.1 Pre-Enrolment Characteristics

Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) explains that pre-college characteristics play an important role in influencing the goal commitment of a student. Individual attributes that he considers most relevant in the persistence decision are family background, prior educational attainment and expectations about future educational attainment (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Low levels of goal or institutional commitment are more likely to see a student decide to leave their studies prematurely. An assessment of cost-benefit analysis will also influence the decision of a student to leave college early, if they decide that their time and energy is better spent on an alternative activity. Family history of participation in HE, prior achievement and individual attributes such as self-efficacy (Tinto, 1987; Bandura, 1995) have an impact on goal commitment. Studies show that students who are first in their family to attend HE are at a higher risk of dropping out in their first year (Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 1987, 1993; Black et al, 2018). Bourdieu refers to the important role that cultural capital plays in accounting for

individual performance in academic environments (Grenfell, 2014 in Loxley et al, 2014). Tinto (1975, 1987), and Tinto and Pusser (2006) note the insurmountable difficulties caused for some students on entering HE where they have different backgrounds to faculty and other students in HE, particularly pointing to the challenges for disadvantaged students. Fleming and Finnegan (2011) also noted challenges for mature students in entering HE environments where they are perceived as different to a traditional age cohort. The 'accumulated history' described by Bourdieu (1984) and Grenfell (2014) differs between traditional and non-traditional students, and Bourdieu (ibid.) cites this as a reason why non-traditional students may find the culture or habitus of higher education more challenging than traditional students, who are able to navigate their way through a programme with relative ease. This is quite the generalisation in a contemporary HE context, with a varied student body. For traditional age students, Tinto (1987,1993, 2004) notes that the transition from school to college can result in a period of 'normlessness' (derived from Durkheim, 1897) where there is a risk that a student may withdraw prior to incorporation in their new community (HE). The challenges facing 'first generation' students in higher education particularly in the first year can be described as 'bewildering' (Meeuwisse et al, 2010), 'alien and unsettling' (Read, Archer and Leatherwood, 2003). In some cases, students might not feel supported by the culture and practices of the institute; they may feel unable to conform and may ultimately drop out. The highest rate of non-retention (or attrition) tends to be in the first year of study (DesJardins, Kim, and Rzonca, 2003), which is why there has been such emphasis on this year, as well as the transition to higher education (Tinto, 1987, 1993; Black et al, 2018; Schaeper, 2020; Yorke and Longden, 2008). There is a rich tapestry of institutional factors that have been identified that, if implemented, will lead to better outcomes for first year students, and an implied belief that, if students make it through the first year, they are likely to complete the remainder of the programme. The use of first year as a time to embed the academic as well as other skills needed in HE is widely researched (Black et al, 2018; De Clercq, Galand, Dupont and Frenay, 2013; Rhodes and Nevill, 2004) and largely in agreement that the use of first year seminars, and modules to develop academic skills, does have a positive influence on graduation rates

(Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2003). The provision of other supports such as maths and writing has a bigger impact on semester to semester retention or year to year, than all the way through to graduation. However, if a student does not persist from semester to semester, this will have a more likely negative consequence for overall likelihood to graduate. Tinto (1993) and Reason (2009) identified a positive correlation between pedagogy and persistence, citing instructor organisation, appropriate provision of education and student feedback. Good teaching practice results in higher levels of satisfaction among students (Tinto, 1975, 1997; Pascarella, 1980; Reason, 2009; Dwyer, 2012, 2015), making them more likely to persist.

However, attrition continues beyond first year (Black et al, 2018), and it is important to get an insight into how students meet new challenges as they progress through their programmes. Regardless of other factors such as family background, prior attainment in an educational setting is a predictor of persistence, perhaps not surprisingly, as it demonstrates an ability to perform to a particular standard in a structured educational setting (Tinto, 1975; HEA, 2019). Bourdieu (1984, 1988) would consider this an understanding of the rules of the game.

3.4.2 Expectations of Self, the Institute and Important Others

Expectations are important in determining the strength of the educational goal, and any expectations that are linked specifically to the HE Institute where the student is studying. For traditional age students, parental expectations can play a role in creating the expectations of the student and can lead to advantages for students where those expectations are high (Tinto, 1975); this might be less relevant for mature students, but family expectations and influence can be of importance for students of any age. Family influence can be considered from a Bourdieusian perspective in terms of reproduction and the perpetuation of social class and social status (Grenfell, 2014; Wacquant, 1990), but also from the perspective of expectations, which aligns with Tinto's model (1975). Expectations are informed by pre-enrolment attributes, or social and cultural capital. Thomas (2002) refers to academic preparedness in this regard and compares this to student's academic experience. She examined students' institute expectations and commitment and academic and social 'fit' with reference to the work of

Berger and Braxton (1998), Tinto (1975, 1993) and Astin (1984), linking this to the concept of habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The culture and practices of the institute can lead to changes in the individual habitus, and the extent to which this happens will vary for each student (Thomas, 2002).

3.4.3 Goal and Institute Commitment

Tinto (1975, 1993) measures goal commitment and Institute commitment twice, before and after interaction with the institute, which makes them input and process variables. Bean (1981) considered this as conceptually problematic and proposes that goal commitment and institutional commitment are transient and will be different at given points in time. He proposes that experience alters attitudes and that the pre-matriculation goals (the first set in the Tinto model) can be considered as educational plans, whereas the second set are likely to be a more accurate reflection of the commitment to carry out those plans, based on the institutional experiences of the student. The reason for the conceptual difficulty cited by Bean (ibid.) is that Tinto uses the first set of commitments to predict likely dropout decisions, and these will change over time (Yorke, 2004). Bean (ibid.) questioned the value of assessing or knowing the goals of students in advance of registration or matriculation (pre-matriculation) and posits that facts such as high school grades would be of more value in predicting dropout than attitudes and plans. In a contemporary context, Institutes do not tend to gather information about student goals, but only facts, usually at the point of registration, because up to that point, there is no guarantee that the intention to register will translate into registration. Tinto (2012) deals with the uncertainty of student goals prior to, and during the college experience, by noting that in his model, it is assumed that students enter colleges with clearly defined goals, but that this is often not the case, and that some degree of uncertainty is normal in student careers. The real issue that Tinto identifies is ongoing uncertainty and unresolved doubts about goal clarity, and this will lead to a reduction in the likely persistence and willingness to engage in the demands of college life. He states that having the goal of completing college is not sufficient in itself to ensure that the goal will be achieved because goals vary in strength

and change over time (Yorke, 2004; Tinto 2012, 2018). I agree with this assessment of changing goal commitment and that the student's interaction with different people, for example academic staff and peers, is likely to change their perceptions of their goals, to either strengthen or weaken them.

Tinto (1975) and Bean (1981) considered that the decision to persist in HE was very dependent on the strength of institutional commitment and both authors (ibid.) identified factors that they considered would have the greatest influence on dropout; these encompassed institutional and individual variables. Institutional commitment is influenced by the characteristics of the institution as well as the nature of the engagement with the institute, as experienced by the student. Reason (2009) points to the importance of what an institution does, rather than what it is and this is a key factor in determining student outcomes. Reason (ibid.) makes a useful distinction between the influence of the academic environment on behaviours that are believed to be linked to persistence, as opposed to linking the academic environment itself to persistence. Reason (2009), Tinto (1987) and Astin (1977, 1984) compared the differences and outcomes in residential and commuter institutions in the US. Typically, residential institutions are universities with an emphasis on four-year bachelor degrees. Commuter institutions offer two-year degrees, which can be used to progress to four-year degrees. Astin (1977, 1984), Flanagan (1975) and Tinto (1987) highlighted the challenges of providing opportunities for meaningful student involvement in a commuter institution, where there is limited time in the classroom or campus. Community college students have been categorised as 'goal attainers' by Bonham and Luckie (1993) and these are typical of students who would fall into the category of part-time students or those who might not complete (or wish to complete) a full degree in a two-year college, but who would complete partial credits and leave, or return at a later date.

While residential and commuter and two-year and four-year colleges are US descriptions, there are comparisons that can be drawn in an Irish context. Dwyer (2015, 2017) has used the description 'commuter institution' to describe an Irish Institute of Technology in his

research into teaching satisfaction and persistence. Dwyer (2017), Reason (2009), Tinto (1987), Astin (1977, 1984) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) emphasised the importance of the possible influence of institutional actions and interactions among students whose only real interaction with the Institution is in the classroom, if they do not or cannot engage in extra-curricular activities and so on. Studies of persistence in two-year colleges, and some focusing on minority students (Cabrera et al, 1992) showed that Tinto's model could be applied in a two-year setting with non-residential students (Bers and Smith, 1991; Halpin, 1990). The factors that influence academic and social integration are linked to the student's engagement with the institute and these are discussed in the following section.

3.4.4 Academic and Social Integration

Academic and social integration appear throughout the persistence literature as either outcomes (based on a variety of factors) or mediating variables (Metz, 2005). Tinto (1975) posits that integration into the academic system aligns with goal commitment, whereas that of the social system has a greater impact on institutional commitment. Tinto (1975, 2012) identifies two types of student – those who 'stick it out' and those who 'get by' whereby academic integration and social integration play different roles in the persistence decision. For example, students with low institutional commitment but high goal commitment may 'stick it out' in order to complete their qualification.

Factors affecting academic integration are grades or measured ability (Spady, 1970) and intellectual development (Tinto, 1975). Grades are relatively straightforward to measure because they are a form of external validation of the performance in assessments as required by the Institution and are an extrinsic form of reward for effort on the part of the student. Intellectual development is a more complex issue as it is related to the extent to which a student 'feels' that they have had an opportunity to develop not only their knowledge, but also their thinking and capacity for independent thought. This is partly related to perception as each student will interpret a situation in their own way and the perception of an individual becomes their reality. It is incumbent of the institution to make opportunities available for intellectual

development as this is an integral part of education. Academic integration is influenced by the classroom experience (Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 1997; Braxton, Milem and Sullivan, 2000; Reason, 2009), and by the level of rigour and assessment (Braxton, McKinney and Reynolds, 2006; Culver, Braxton and Pascarella, 2019). Pascarella (1980) and Terenzini and Pascarella (1990) emphasised the role of student-faculty interactions in persistence decisions, and this component of Pascarella's model has been emphasised by other researchers (Berger, 2001: Dwyer, 2015; Dwyer, 2017, Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon, 2004; Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 1997). Tinto (1997) noted the extensive research that had been conducted on the role of the classroom setting, but that it had not been linked to a great extent to persistence. He presented a revised model of persistence showing the role of the classroom setting superimposed on his original 1975 model. This also now included student effort and educational outcomes (learning) as determinants of goal commitments at T2. It also included external commitments over a timeline, which are absent from the 1975 model. The revised model is shown in the following figure.

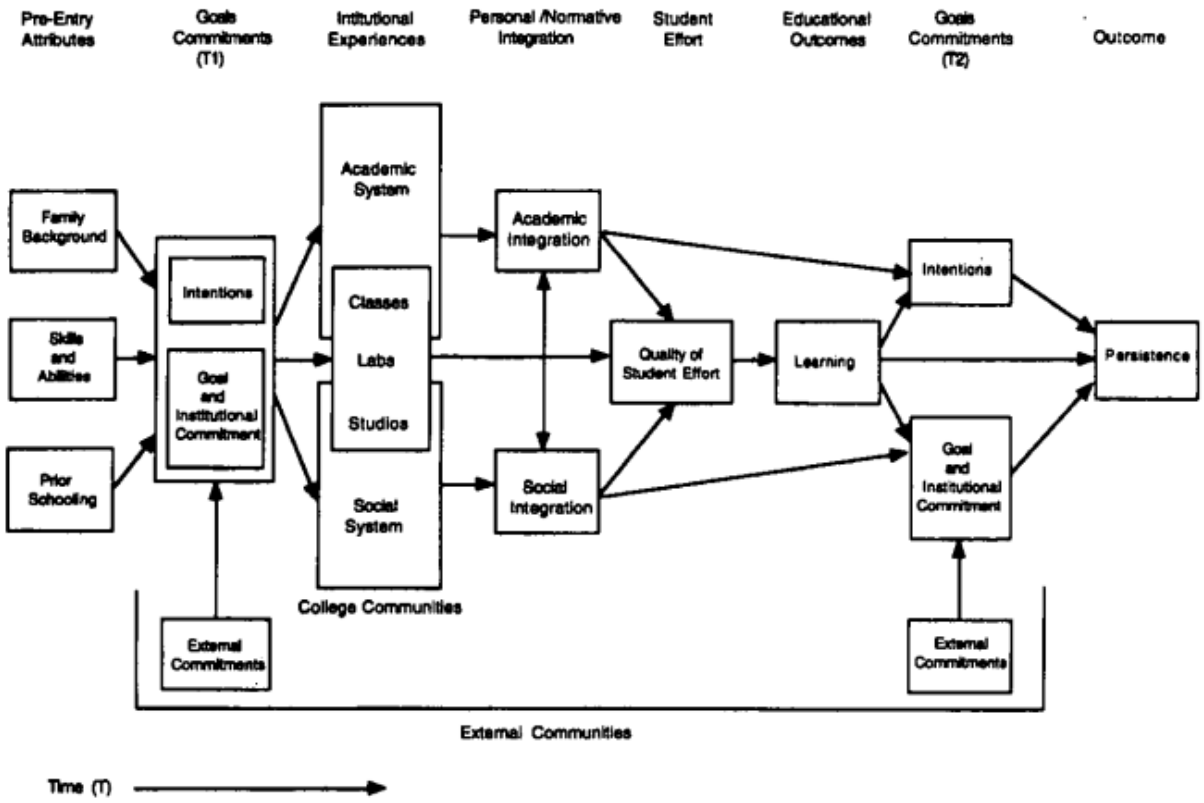


Figure 3: Tinto (1997) Suggested Model Linking classrooms, learning and persistence

Tinto (1997, p.619) proposed that a more accurate representation would show academic and social systems as 'two nested spheres' where the academic sphere is set within a broader campus wide social system. As well as the 'constructed' social activities that are available to students, this would also demonstrate how social communities can also emerge from academic activities that take place in the 'more limited academic sphere of the classroom' (Tinto, ibid. p.619). The classroom is social in nature and the extent to which that classroom social potential is exploited will be dependent on faculty decisions regarding pedagogy and curriculum. I would suggest that it will also be dependent on the mission and culture of the HEI, and the mode of programme provision. In presenting classroom as a community, Tinto (1997) explains the key role that that the classroom plays in academic integration for commuter students in particular. Noting contributions to the debate on the role of the classroom and faculty interactions, he cites the assertion of Astin (1987) that there was a growing recognition that student learning is enhanced when students are actively involved in learning and when they are placed in situations in which they have to share learning in some positive, connected manner, with less of what was termed a 'spectator sport' (after Fischer and Grant, 1983). Astin (1984) presented the theory of student involvement as a result of his 'exasperation at the tendency of many academicians to treat the student as a kind of "black box"' (Astin, 1984, p. 519). Astin (1984) proposed that more time spent by educators and policymakers on how students can become more involved in learning and/or non-academic activities, will lead to better outcomes for students and higher levels of persistence. Astin (1993) also found that the amount of time taken by students to prepare for class and effort expended (Pace, 1998) was positively related to persistence. Tinto (1997) points out that there is not a direct relationship between effort and learning and persistence and makes a comment on the two-dimensional linear representation of persistence in such models. Könings, Brand-Gruwel, van Merriënboer and Broers (2008) consider that a culmination of personal factors will determine the expectations that students have in relation to investment of effort in learning in higher education. It is possible that if students believe that there is a weak link between the effort they invest, or that they see no benefit in investing effort, the outcomes will be less likely

to be positive for them. There is agreement that the extent to which students are involved (Astin, 1984, 1999), integrated (Tinto, 1975, 1993) or engaged (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates, 2005; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea, 2008) will have an impact on persistence.

Factors affecting social integration are peer group interactions and faculty interactions (Tinto, 1975; Dwyer, 2015; Webb and Cotton, 2018). Taking peer group interactions first, this is a result of interactions with ones' peers in the academic environment, and in social and extra-curricular settings. Again, perception is key. While Tinto (1975) advocates in his early model, the need for congruency between the institution and the individual, 'social deviants' can still choose to persist in an institution if they have sufficient friendship supports or networks. There are sub-cultures within a higher education environment (Terenzini and Pascarella, 1990) both in terms of discipline and other activities and this provides opportunities for social integration. It has been suggested that social integration has the ability to influence academic integration (Tinto, 1975; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1985), but as previously noted in this chapter, social integration is considered less applicable to non-traditional and commuter students in a traditional educational setting. I do agree that it would be challenging to achieve high levels of social integration for commuter and non-traditional students if they were in the minority, where the majority of students were residential and able to be involved in extra-curricular activities, but I do not necessarily agree with this perspective, if social involvement can be achieved in a manner other than participation in extra-curricular activities. Social integration will affect academic experiences and persistence (Black et al, 2018, Tinto, 1975, Tinto et al, 2006, Bean, 1980, 1981), and begs the question as to how, or if, social integration is sufficient to achieve or support academic integration, if there are other factors that may determine academic performance. Student-faculty interactions occur predominantly in the classroom and in a less formal way, outside the classroom. Tinto (1975) linked the importance of informal student-faculty contact to the student's choice of major, gender and the perceived importance of these informal contacts for future mobility.

There continues to be a growing recognition of the role of student involvement (Astin, 1984, 1987, 1993, 1999; Braxton, 2014; Ivanova and Moretti, 2018; Kuh et al, 2007) in active learning such as service learning and Problem Based Learning (Braxton, Milem and Sullivan, 2000; Tinto and Pusser, 2006; Tinto, 2012; Dwyer, 2010, 2015). This relates, where there are opportunities, to out of class experiences as much as in class experience. Astin (1975, 1984) found that involvement, more frequently now referred to as engagement (Tinto and Pusser, 2006), was linked to positive aspects of student retention, lack of involvement linked to more negative outcomes. Astin's theory is based on five hypotheses: Involvement requires a combination of physical and psychological energy to be invested in different objects. Students vary in the amount of both types of energy that they will invest, and involvement can be measured quantitatively (eg amount of time) and qualitatively (eg level of interest). Greater levels of involvement are linked to higher amounts of student learning and personal development (Astin, 1984). Education is likely to be more effective when educational programmes are designed to 'engage' students rather than simply expose them to learning materials or courses (Astin, 1984). This reinforces the stance of Tinto (1975), Bean (1981) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1980, 1991, 2005) in relation to social and academic integration. From a recent study of psychology students, Gebre and Taylor (2022) found that student involvement, and subsequent academic and social integration could be enabled by social media use, specifically Facebook. This highlights the potential positive impact of social media on student involvement and engagement. Some studies have focussed on the impact of one specific factor on integration and persistence, for example, academic advising, engagement in class discussions (Braxton, 2000), involvement in decision-making, support systems (Davidson, Beck and Milligan, 2009 p.4), teaching satisfaction (Dwyer, 2015, 2017) and student-faculty interactions (Pascarella, 1980). Dwyer (2015) found that students have a preference for active learning, which is of benefit in encouraging social integration among students (Braxton, 2000; Braxton et al, 2008; Chrysikos, Ahmed and Ward, 2017; Tinto and Pusser, 2006; Tinto, 2018). It also points to the role that an individual educator can play in influencing student intentions and persistence.

3.5 Institutional Action – The Shift in Emphasis from Student to Institution

Different institutes each have their own cultures, which reflect their own values and practices (Thomas, 2002). These values and practices, or norms, will have an impact on the academic and social experiences of students, and their decisions to persist, or not, in their studies. Practices relating to teaching, learning and assessment are derived from relationships between staff and students, and these practices will have an impact on the type of relationship that is possible. Thomas (2002) describes the importance of students feeling valued and respected and 'known' by their lecturers in contributing to their likely persistence in HE. Ultimately, in the field of HE, those who teach hold the power in relation to those who are taught. Legitimacy is derived from the knowledge of the teacher as being the accepted or the correct way of doing things, or saying things, for example, in adhering to academic language and conventions (Grenfell and James, 1998; Grenfell, 2014). Active learning can encompass workplace or work-based learning, which can give rise to tension in the perceived value and validity of academic knowledge and the role of the academic (Fisher, 2006; Bourdieu, 1984, 1988).

The ethos, culture and traditions of the higher education institution, which has an impact on the extent of 'integration' as experienced by students (Oseguera and Rhee, 2009; Marrero et al, 2018; Tinto, 1975, 2012). The culture and practice of the institute (Bourdieu 1984, 1988; HEA, 2019) is in fact, at the root of tackling retention (Leone and Tian, 2009; Tinto, 2012). There is support for the view that students need to feel valued and a part of a supportive learning community and experience high quality interactions with academic staff (Noble and Henderson, 2011; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980; Dwyer, 2015) if they are to succeed in the completion of their studies. Davidson et al (2009) agree with the view of Tinto (2006) and Metz (2005) that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to retention and that institutions need to take an individualised approach, at the level of the institute and the student. This is a perhaps a tall order, as student profile and Institute environment change continuously, and there are limited resources available for tailor made solutions. On the flip side, if as advocated by Black et al

(2018) practices that are designed to improve rates of retention and persistence become embedded in programme design and development, and the subsequent educational experience, this may go some way towards a shift in considering retention as a bolt on separate initiative, but as part of the fabric and culture of Institute life. However, pragmatism may dominate over rational decision making (Longden, 2006) as Institute management make decisions to reduce the risk of poor retention by investing in specific areas such as mentoring, enhancements to teaching and learning practices and early warning systems. These may work but if, behind the scenes, there is not a clear understanding of the root cause of poor retention, longer term effectiveness of such actions are likely to be poor. Tinto (1987) proposes pursuing the lead of Braxton by considering the role of pedagogy and curriculum structure in persistence as these will invariably shape both learning and persistence on campus. Teaching approach is a key component of influencing a diverse student body to persist (Tinto and Pusser, 2006; Dwyer, 2015) and this is relevant in an Irish HE context as the student body becomes increasingly diverse in terms of age, familiarity with the HE habitus and mode of study. Dwyer (2015, 2017) found that satisfaction with teaching experience will contribute to a stronger educational commitment, which in turn should increase the likelihood of persistence.

If the root cause of retention problems is linked to something that cannot easily be changed such as teaching practice, pedagogy, assessment (Braxton, 2018; Share et al, 2017) or student-faculty relations, all the initiatives (Black et al, 2018) that are designed to address retention and persistence will not be as effective as they could be. Tinto and Pusser (2006) explain that student supports and feedback, particularly related to assessment, is of value to students, and the Institution. These are most beneficial when the feedback is timely and can be acted upon, giving the student an insight into their own learning. It can also be considered to be a means of reducing the gap between the power of the teacher and the student in that it reveals some of the rules of the game about the correct way of answering academic questions (Grenfell, 2014). A further consideration is the extent to which the rules of the game can be changed to accommodate different methods of answering a question that might not fit within

the established HE habitus (Godor, 2017). Godor (ibid.) considers that there is a tension between individualism and regulation in the field of HE. Higher education environments are heavily regulated (Khala, 2020) and while there is room for individualism, there is also a need to conform to the expectations of the Institution (Thomas, 2002; Kember, Leung and Prosser, 2019). This includes understanding the language of regulation and academic staff, and this results in an imbalance of power between student and Institution (Godor, 2017; Robbins, 1993). What is missing in some of the debate about institutional action and responsibility is the impact of external constraints such as quality systems (Khala, ibid.) which may mean that institutions are required to become even more creative in the way in which they accommodate a diverse student body. Linked to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), it provides a compelling argument that Institutions are important actors in the student departure decision.

Students' intentions and actions to persist during the college experience are determined by their perception of interactions and relationships with peers and faculty (Reason, 2009). Students' intentions to continue with registration, their stated confidence in achieving their qualification, and personal commitment to earning the qualification have all been used to assess the likelihood of a student persisting in their studies (Davidson et al, 2009; Reason 2009; Bean, 1981). Davidson et al (2009), drawing on the work of Tinto (1975, 1993), have concentrated on developing tools such as the college persistence questionnaire (CPQ) to identify 'at risk' students in advance of a possible decision by them to leave their studies early. In a sense, this 'future focus' can be of benefit to Institutions who are trying to determine why students may be considering discontinuing their studies, with a view to understanding the reasons why, and understanding how that decision is made. This type of questionnaire could be helpful in identifying any patterns of variables that distinguish a student who is likely to persist, from a student who is not likely to persist, but there is no guarantee that it will stop students from leaving their programme, even if they can be identified.

Students leave their studies for a variety of individual and institutional reasons (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Yorke, 1999, 2004; Longden, 2006, 2012; Kuh et al, 2008; Godor, 2017; McInnis et al, 2000). De Clercq and Verboven (2018) draw attention to the myriad of factors and potential interplay between all of these in trying to predict outcomes. Of note is the fact that models such as that of Tinto (1975,1993), while they identify the factors that contribute to persistence decisions, also try to identify why students react in the way that they do in a particular situation, for example, why they decide that withdrawal from a programme is the best way to deal with a situation. Yorke (2004) notes that this is a difficult decision-making process to untangle and that students do not typically re-calibrate their decisions to stay or leave on a daily basis. However, they may decide rather hastily to leave their programme based on an isolated incident that ultimately proves to be a deciding moment in their experience. Students may cite the same reason for withdrawal or transfer, but their reasons for doing so might be very different (Yorke, 2004; Aljohani, 2016; HEA, 2019). Two UK studies (Yorke, 1999; Davies and Elias, 2003) of undergraduate students who left their programmes early identified similar reasons for leaving, which included wrong choice of study discipline, academic difficulties, dissatisfaction with the Institute or academic experience, personal and financial problems.

Despite evidence in the literature to suggest an improved understanding of the conditions under which students are more likely to persist in their studies, this has not necessarily translated into gains in retention in practice (Tinto et al, 2006; Black et al, 2018; HEA, 2019). Tinto (1987) notes with perhaps some irony that the secrets of retention programmes or efforts hold no ‘great secrets’ and contain no ‘mystery which requires unravelling’, but they do require resources and significant effort if they are to be implemented successfully Tinto (1998) notes that all conversations about persistence, to be meaningful, need to keep in mind that educational experience, a core mission of HE, is influenced by educational practice. To ignore educational practice is likely to lead only to a shallow conversation about persistence. To dig into educational practice in a field with established cultures and norms is perhaps also likely

to lead back to a shallow conversation about persistence, or changes in practice that are peripheral and short term, or fundamental and more challenging to implement.

3.6 Criticisms of Tinto's Model

There are, unsurprisingly, limitations and criticisms levelled at the model of Tinto, in that it is not readily applicable to non-residential students, adult learners (Pascarella, 1986; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Metz, 2002; Braxton, 2004; Berger and Milem, 1999), minority students (Tierney, 1992) and those students studying on short cycle programmes. Bean and Metzner (1985) posited that external environmental variables were more influential in determining persistence than academic variables for the non-traditional student, but they did acknowledge that academic difficulties can lead to early departure from study. In fact, Bean and Metzner (ibid.) rejected the importance placed on social integration in the models of Spady (1970), Tinto (1975) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) for non-traditional or part-time students, who would be more impacted by external environmental variables rather than those relating to social integration (Yorke, 2004; Bean & Metzner, 1985). This assertion reflects the time period of a residential educational environment of on campus social life but is still relevant in a contemporary context for students who study remotely, as well as those who commute. In a contemporary HE environment, I believe that social integration should be interpreted more broadly than only the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular on campus activities. Tinto's (1975) model was also criticised for placing an undue emphasis on the need for an individual to conform to the academic environment, taking insufficient account of a diverse student body, and the need for the institute to take account of diversity and to accommodate non-traditional students. Tinto (2006, 2012, 2018) has responded to these criticisms, acknowledging the need for a change in emphasis from student conformance to institutional action and responsibility. In my opinion, the models can do little more than provide a basis on which to identify and study the variables; the models in themselves are open to interpretation and different researchers working in different contexts will correctly attach different weightings to each of the variables, depending on the specific institute and student profiles.

3.7 The Value of Tinto's Model and the Thinking Tools of Bourdieu in Contemporary Irish HE

Contemporary literature (Tinto, 2012; Aljohani, 2016; Nicoletti et al, 2019; Black et al, 2018; Dwyer, 2012, 2015; Li et al, 2019) still makes reference to the challenges of separating out and identifying the contribution of the broad spectrum of variables to persistence. The models that originated in the US system have been critiqued, adapted and tested in different HE systems (McInnis et al, 2000; Aljohani, 2016; Tinto, 2012), but fundamentally, they have not changed significantly in their structure and composition. After all, there are a limited number of variables that can be incorporated in considering the interaction between the student and the institution, and the need for institutional action. I note the limitations cited in the literature about the lack of focus on external factors that will lead to students leaving their programmes early, particularly non-traditional and part-time students who have many competing demands on their time and resources. I fully acknowledge the challenges of external factors in the student departure decision, but my focus is those factors that are within the control of the institute, the 'push' factors, rather than the 'pull' factors (Bean, 1981; THEA, 2021).

Despite its' limitations, some of which have been acknowledged by Tinto himself (Tinto, 1997, 2004, 2017), the model of Tinto (1975, 1997) remains central to the persistence and student departure (Braxton, 2000, 2012) literature. Aljohani (2016) highlights the work of Tinto (1975, 1993), Astin (1984) and Berger, Ramirez and Lyon (2012), noting that the factors that result in early departure are unique to each individual institution and should be interpreted accordingly. Developing an understanding of the interaction between all of the different factors that influence persistence decisions is of value in itself, but a comprehensive knowledge of the institute in which the model is to be used is required for it to be of any real value. While some of the terminology would be considered outdated, such as dropout, the lenses of academic and social integration are relevant in researching the factors that affect students' decisions about whether to stay (persist) or leave (depart). It is possible to use these lenses as a basis for examining student intentions, experience and outcomes (persistence/success

or not). The concepts of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988) enhance the insights that are possible by using these lenses.

The transferability of the thinking tools of Bourdieu from their French (and somewhat dated) origins linked to the elite system in Frances's Grandes Ecoles[29] for example, to other cultures and time periods has been questioned (Holm, 2020), but I believe that there is sufficient evidence (Longden, 2004; Thomas, 2002; Grenfell and James, 1998; Grenfell, 2014; Robbins, 1993; James, 2015) of their relevance and value in other HE systems to justify their application in the Irish HE field context that I have described in Chapter 2. Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron,1990), describes the environment in Higher Education where there is an imbalance of power between the student and the teacher and that this imbalance is accepted because it is considered legitimate and is linked to the value of the qualification being awarded. Sanctions can be imposed without question for a variety of reasons such as failing to meet academic standards, working in the way that is expected, not attending classes, not passing examinations (Grenfell, 2014). Students who have a greater familiarity with how the field works, and the interactions that occur make sense to them, the more likely they are to succeed in that field. I believe that individual habitus and capital can be applied to HE to study any level of familiarity and 'fit', which can be considered in a wider context than studying non-elite students in the academic world of the elite.

3.7.1 Theoretical Framework Based on the Amalgamation of Tinto and Bourdieu

I have re-visited the fundamental foundations of Tinto's (1975) model to consider his assertions about congruence. Even though these concepts have been updated to reflect contemporary thinking and environments, I believe that they are similar to Bourdieu's views about habitus, capital and the benefits of feeling like a fish in water (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). I have tried to avoid their improper use, for example, selectivity using one aspect of his theory, as pick and mix (Webb et al, 2017), Bourdieu 'light', intellectual hairspray (James,

[29] Considered as elite in the French HE system, focussed on teaching and research in specialist academic fields such as business administration, public policy, engineering, architecture.

2015), and the habitual use of habitus (Reay, 2004). Robbins (2004) explores the transferability of the term 'cultural capital' and the work of Bourdieu on the sociology of education to other cultures and contexts and cautions against using the term 'cultural capital' in a manner in which it might reinforce the social inequalities that it originally exposed. The use of the term in this research is as a metaphor for the extent to which prospective students in HE might believe that they possess the required attributes to successfully participate in HE, which are not only confined to academic skills or competence. I am also using Bourdieu's concept of social capital in the same way, to allow me to consider how both capitals align with Tinto's (1975, 1993) concept of pre-entry attributes and the subsequent academic and social integration.

Wacquant (1990) describes the work of Bourdieu, in particular, Homo Academicus (1984), as paradigmatic, and explains the value of using the concepts and frameworks for analysis in contexts beyond its French origins. He refers to the potential reluctance of the 'American intellectual field' (Wacquant, 1990, p.687) to embrace the thinking and tools of Bourdieu in an examination of their own structures and capitals. As noted in Chapter 2, there is a perception that US HE is inward looking, yet globally powerful and competitive, an exemplar of good practice. This, coupled with a view that the culture and class system described by Bourdieu is somewhat outdated and irrelevant in an American context (Holm, 2020) might explain the less frequent use of Bourdieu in an American context. However, I have found it valuable to amalgamate his thinking tools with an influential American model of persistence in HE for this case study.

A similar approach has been adopted by other authors such as Kenny (2018), Barrett (2015) and Pather and Chetty (2016) in different contexts. The framework that is being used does not specifically employ a Bourdieusian methodology (Grenfell, 2014), that is based on construction of the research object, field analysis and participant objectification. However, all three aspects are given consideration in the use of Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital and habitus. Field analysis, according to Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2014) needs to be conducted on three

levels – the field in relation to the field of power, the field itself and the habitus of those holding positions within the field. The research object, if defined as the case institute, has been studied with reference to its socio-historical environment within the context of the HE field, predominantly in Chapter 2. The use of Bourdieu in the field itself has been the subject of this chapter.

Field	IoT Sector within the Irish HE System	Chapter 2
Field Itself	Case Institute	Chapter 3
Habitus and capital of those holding power (mainly in the classroom)	Academic Staff	Chapter 3

Table 1: Use of Bourdieu's Field and Thinking Tools in the Case Institute

The overall theoretical framework for the research is shown below, with Bourdieu mapping onto levels 1,2 and 3, and Tinto and Bourdieu being amalgamated at levels 2 and 3.

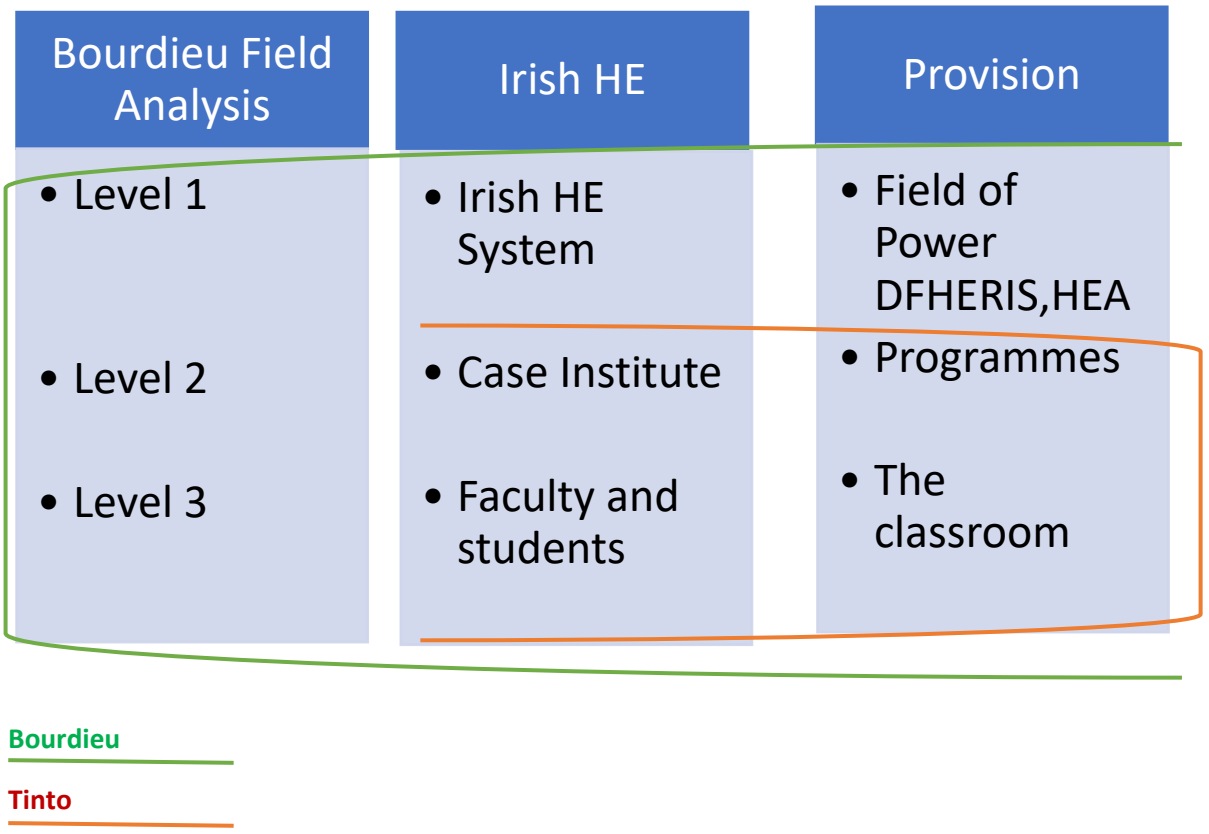


Figure 4: Tinto and Bourdieu Theoretical Framework

3.8 Chapter Summary

In referring to persistence literature, Bean (1981, p.23) pointed to the need for further exploration of the 'forest of interaction terms'. Bean's 1981 paper contains a two page bibliography, covering many of the major theories and theorists whose work continues to inform retention and persistence literature and practice. The 'forest' of variables and interaction terms described by Bean (ibid.) may have become thicker, and the terminology has changed, but there is an abundance of the 1975 model of persistence of Tinto (Bean,1981; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Astin, 1984; Godor, 2017) evident in contemporary contexts. The growing refence lists indicate the ongoing research and complexity in this field, and the greater complications which have arisen with a more diverse student body, changes in HE systems and more challenges and questions regarding who or what can influence persistence. Bean and Eaton (2000), Braxton (2014), Tinto (2012) and Kalsbeek and Zucker (2013) refer to the need to reframe the thinking about persistence. When authors such as Tinto (ibid.) whose models are described as paradigmatic (Longden, 2004; Braxton et al, 2014) are rethinking and reframing, it indicates that this is an ever changing and evolving story. This literature review has brought together the work of two scholars who have made significant contributions to HE, and in so doing, provides a framework that identifies alignment in their thinking at the level of an institute of HE.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.0 Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the factors that contribute to persistence in an IoT, by investigating how persistence decisions were made by students, and how these decisions were informed by their HE expectations and experiences. This chapter critically discusses the research design and presents the research approach and methodology adopted to answer the research questions, which are set out in the following section. Data was generated from interviews with twenty one participants, and a questionnaire with a response rate of 11.4% (n=355); the research instruments are described and the subsequent approach to data analysis is explained, which provides context for the research findings chapters. Considerations of ethics and reflexivity are presented on the basis of their relative importance to my role as an insider researcher, and in my approach to data analysis.

4.1 The Research Questions

As discussed in Chapter One the research questions stemmed from my own observations and experience in practice in HE in Ireland, as a lecturer and in HE management positions. The questions were formulated to explore the factors that contribute to persistence among students who were typical of an Institute of an Irish Technology (IoT). They were refined over the course of engagement with the academic literature and during the research and analysis. There were originally six questions, and these were subsequently reduced to five, and finally four research questions. The final revised research questions were:

1. What identifiable factors contribute to persistence in higher education? And to what extent does programme choice, if at all, influence persistence and programme completion?
2. How and under what conditions (e.g. institutional, cultural, socio-personal, programmatic etc) do these factors become manifest within the context of Irish Higher Education and specifically within the context of programmes that are typical of the Institutes of Technology?

3. How do students stated intentions to study, goals and objectives influence their persistence throughout the duration of a programme of study in an Institute of Technology? To what extent, if at all, do these objectives change or become modified during their engagement with the Institute?
4. From a student perspective, how does, if at all, motivation and expectations of 1) themselves and 2) the Institute change over the course of the programme of study?

4.2 The Research Paradigm

As a means of exploring these research questions, I considered epistemological and ontological stances, which informed the research approach and methodology. This required consideration of my assumptions about reality and the nature of human knowledge, and the kind of knowledge that could be produced by this research (Crotty, 1998; della Porta and Keating, 2012). Within the research, I sought an insight into the worldview of students, who are likely to perceive the same situation in different ways, based on their own experiences. I did not consider it feasible that there would be one objective reality that would apply to all students equally, and they all were likely to attach or construct meaning about their experiences in the same way. An objectivist epistemology was excluded on the basis that it would be inappropriate for this research design, and as a theoretical perspective from which to consider the knowledge that could be produced in this study. The research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which is associated with an interpretivist perspective (Crotty, 1998; Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Punch, 2014). This research sought to understand persistence by examining the lived experiences of students with a view to identifying common factors and any points of difference across different modes of study.

Constructivism aligns with the requirement to seek an understanding of human behaviour and the lived experience (Thomas, 2021; Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Mertens (1998), Crotty (1998), Guba and Lincoln (2005) contend that multiple realities are possible and that meaning is socially constructed by individuals. I considered the assertions of Crotty (1998) regarding ‘meaning making’ and interpretivism in comparison to positivism. A positivist paradigm reflects the view that knowledge can be measured and observed scientifically and objectively (Crotty,

1998; Punch, 2014; Thomas, 2010), often seeking a relationship between variables. The assertion that positivism is therefore superior to interpretivism has been debated extensively in the literature (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1985, 2005, 2016; Blaikie, 2009; Punch, 2014) and arguments presented as to the equally valid interpretivist stance.

From the positivist perspective, the researcher is a 'disinterested observer' outside of the site of enquiry; in an interpretivist and constructivist context, the researcher becomes a participant in the research, by using their own understanding and interests to interpret the views of the research participants or informants (Crotty, 1998; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Subjectivity is acceptable in constructivist research and allows for close engagement with research participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Punch, 2014). As an insider researcher (Blaikie, 2009; Greene, 2014; Pillow, 2003, 2010: Clegg and Stevenson, 2013), the research was informed by my own experience of practice in HE. Therefore, subjectivity and the potential for personal bias needed to be managed in the research design and implementation. Personal bias was possible insofar as I have my own experiences of the HE environment, which are inevitably different to those of the research participants, and I potentially would have less of an insight into the realities of student life and some of the challenges that they might face. One of the ways in which this was managed by me was the use of a reflexive approach (Pillow, 2003, 2010). For example, my use of journals and fieldwork notes, and discussions with my supervisor, helped me to ensure that any personal bias was recognised and set aside at different stages in the research design and implementation, and this is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

4.3 The Research Design

The criteria that I used for making a decision about the research design were the research questions, my own experience of the research topic, and the purpose of the research, which as a D.Ed., was completed in the context of its application to practice. The research design was initially influenced by a pragmatic approach (Punch, 2014) insofar as the research questions informed the research approach and methods, with a view to seeking a possible

solution to the problem of early student departure from a programme of study. As the research design developed, it became clear to me that an insight into the worldview (Crotty, 1998) of the potential research participants would be required, to gain an insight into how they had perceived their experiences in higher education. This was to be done by conducting research with students who had experienced at least one year of HE. In the early stages of research design, I considered the possibility of being able to identify independent variables that could explain a dependent variable, persistence. Engagement with the literature (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2012, 2016; Reason, 2009; Braxton et al, 2004; Black et al, 2018; HEA, 2019) in the context of my objectives changed my view of what was of value and what could likely be achieved. The literature (Tinto, 2012; Black et al, 2018; HEA, 2019) frequently cited the advantages of a large-scale study involving surveys and their limitations. A key limitation of a large-scale survey from my perspective was the inability to gain an insight into the individual experiences of students. During the research design, I was careful to avoid categorising the study as either qualitative or quantitative, as this would have potentially led to a limited perspective on how to conduct the research at an early stage. Based on the research questions, and the previously cited literature, the use of qualitative methods was required, but not to the exclusion of quantitative methods. The final design employed mixed methods (Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017), and was aligned with a constructivist worldview, rather than a pragmatic worldview (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2007). Creswell et al (ibid.) note that pragmatism is not 'committed to any one system of philosophy and reality'. Rather it seeks a solution to a problem, and researchers are free to use mixed methods to find the answers to their questions; it therefore provides a philosophical basis for mixed methods research. While this description of seeking a solution to a problem could be applied to my research, I align with a constructivist paradigm, in the belief that this does not preclude the use of mixed methods in a research study. Schoonenboom et al (ibid.) cite the use of mixed methods for the purposes of triangulation and complementarity and both of these were objectives of the use of mixed methods in this research.

As a means of answering the research questions, several approaches were considered before deciding on a case study. Alternative approaches would have had merit in answering the research questions, but they had limitations in the context of the research; these approaches and limitations are outlined briefly. Life history would provide a very deep but too narrow a perspective for my research as I was seeking to study and compare a number of students across several programmes. A longitudinal study would have required a longer time period in which to generate data and would likely have employed questionnaires as the predominant research instrument; limitations identified (Black et al, 2018) in relation to the use of questionnaires alone meant that this approach was not selected, nor would it align with a constructivist paradigm. Ethnography in the form of participant observation would potentially provide rich data about the lived experience, but difficult to achieve in this context because of my position in the organisation and the difficulty of the inclusion of students studying online.

4.4 The Research Approach - Case Study

Having considered the research questions and all aspects of the research design, a case study was selected as being the most appropriate for this study, with the potential (Hamilton and Corbett- Whittier, 2013) to deepen the understanding of students who persist in HE, in a real context. A key factor in this decision was that the research sought to explore an issue in a real-life context, aiming to answer a number of 'how' and 'why' questions. The case study allowed these 'how' and 'why' questions to be investigated (Yin, 1994, 2016, 2018; Stake, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), in the contemporary environment (Seawright and Gerring, 2008; Merriam, 1998) of an Irish Institute of Technology. Furthermore, it allowed for the development of context-dependent knowledge, by employing my contextual knowledge of this particular environment. Thomas (2019) refers to this as understanding within one's 'horizon of meaning' (after Gadamer, 1975, p.269) and asserts that understanding and interpretation in the context of one's own experience is both 'legitimate and valid'. Tight (2010) examines the case study as a social science research approach, with an emphasis on its value in educational research.

Thomas (2019) emphasises the value of the case study approach and the influential and transformative knowledge that is created as a result of such research in education.

Case studies can take many forms and encompass different designs (Merriam, 2009; Seawright et al, 2008; Yin, 2018, 2018; Stake, 1995). Using Bassey's (1999) typology, this case study is theory testing, but also aligned with Stake's (1995) instrumental case typology. An instrumental case has a more focused aim than an intrinsic case, and the phenomenon in question, in this case, persistence, is more important than the case study site. Yin (2018) argues that the boundary between a phenomenon and it's context is blurred because context is important and the case is set within its context. In designing the case study, the research questions informed the specific design and the boundaries of the case, which are described in the following sections.

4.4.1 A Single Case

A single case in one Institute of Technology was selected. Yorke (1999) and Reason (2009) point to the need for more meaningful research on persistence to encompass multiple sites rather than one single site for comparison of the multitude of factors that influence persistence. This point is also made by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Kuh et al (2008). Multi-site research can contribute to an enhanced understanding of factors that influence retention. However, this research aligned with the alternative viewpoint (Black et al, 2018; Tinto, 2012, 2018) that there is a need to move away from the general to the specific in relation to HEIs understanding of their own specific circumstances and student profiles, in order to tailor their actions accordingly. In the early stages of the research design, multiple sites or case studies were considered as they tend to be more closely associated with 'generalisability' (Thomas, 2011, 2021; Flyvbjerg, 2006) and 'confidence' in the research findings. It is not essential, however, that case study research findings are generalizable, but rather they may be considered to be of value if they are 'transferable'. While Stake (1995) also proposes collective cases for comparability across different sites, this was not implemented for three key reasons:

1. The IoT selected provided access to a student body registered across all the programme types that are of interest in the research. It would not be feasible to conduct collective cases within resource and time constraints across multiple IoTs. An attempt to conduct collective cases would have jeopardised the likely ability to complete the research process and would have introduced different institutional contexts to the research.

2. The IoT selected is my place of work, and as such, provides a valuable opportunity to address questions about student persistence in a natural setting, with the benefit of 'insider knowledge' of the Institute context (Bassey, 1999, Yin, 2018). Ethical considerations and the potential constraints and advantages of being an insider researcher are dealt with elsewhere in this chapter.

3. I believe that the findings from this case will have resonance for IoTs, TUs, or other HEIs by providing an insight into the factors that lead to persistence among different student groups. Bassey's (1999) suggestion of 'fuzzy generalisations' is an appropriate description of what may be possible.

4.4.2 The Case Study Selection – Defining the Case Boundaries

Probability and non-probability sampling are used in research (Creswell and Creswell, 2018); sampling refers to the selection of the case as well as data sources (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013, Flyvbjerg, 2006) and this defined the case boundaries. The case was selected on the basis described above and for the reasons stated. The case study site and details of the research participants is described in Chapter 5. In relation to programme boundaries and selection, purposeful (purposive) sampling (Yin, 1994, 2011; Stake, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was employed to include programmes of interest. The initial programme boundaries and criteria for inclusion for participants in qualitative research were those shown in Table 2.

Type of Programme	Undergraduate	Undergraduate
NFQ Level	6,7	8
Entry to Institute	CAO/Direct Entry	Apprenticeship
Number of ECTS per year	60 (Full time or full time equivalent)	60
Mode of Teaching	On campus and online	Online and workplace
Discipline	Business	Business
ISCED	Business and Law	Business and Law

Table 2: Criteria for Inclusion in Case Study Interviews

4.4.3 The Sample Frame and the Sampling Process

An objective of this case study was analytic generalisability to the model of Tinto (1975, 1993). Analytical generalisability was therefore theoretical generalisability based on the research findings rather than the specific context or population. This requires a smaller sample size than that which would be required for statistical generalisability, which is more commonly associated with large scale quantitative research (Hammersley, 2001). The sample size for the interviews was small to facilitate in-depth study. Any student registered on programmes meeting the criteria for programmes was eligible to participate in the research. Random sampling was used for students, meaning that every registered student registered on a programme meeting the required criteria could participate. The inclusion of students who left their programmes early was considered. However, difficulties in contacting such students, due to the case Institute GDPR policy and the likely low number who might participate, meant that these students were not included. Coincidentally, some of the research participants had in fact left early from their programmes elsewhere, and while it would have been interesting to explore their reasons for leaving in detail, it was outside the scope of this case study.

In stage 1, students were invited by email from me to participate in individual interviews or a focus group. Participant information and consent forms were provided at the time of invitation, as an attachment to the email. The participant information leaflet and consent forms are contained in Appendix One. The interview schedule was provided when students returned their consent forms. As the research progressed and the numbers participating in the original format of focus groups was lower than anticipated, this terminology was replaced with group interview as it is a more accurate reflection of the format and number of students participating. In stage 2, students again were sent an email invitation to participate. Lastly in stage 3, reminder emails were sent to the students to ask them to complete the questionnaire and inviting interview participants. As an insider researcher, I acknowledge that I was in a privileged position in being able to use my contact with colleagues in the case institute to request their assistance in drawing attention to the research among student groups who had

been invited to participate. Colleagues assisted with the recruitment of interview participants by speaking briefly about the research to students in class, or by sending emails to some class groups; at no time was any colleague coerced by me to do so, but everyone who was involved in this type of support did so voluntarily. In terms of the balance of power, I understand that in my position as a line manager, there is the possibility that staff might have believed that they needed to accommodate my requests. However, I have a long-standing working relationship with the staff who were approached to assist, and I have a good understanding of the institute culture. This was advantageous in that I was aware that staff would not accommodate my request if they believed that it was inappropriate for any reason, or they simply did not want to be involved. As the recruitment of participants progressed, I tried to ensure balanced representation from the relevant programme types. This proved to be challenging after the first set of interviews were conducted, and this was a cause for concern to me. With the co-operation of colleagues in the case institute, I attempted to increase the number of interview participants by speaking briefly to students in class to draw their attention to the email request, and to offer potential research participants an opportunity to ask me any questions about the research. In almost all instances, at least one student contacted me via email requesting to participate in an individual or group interview. Again, this was an opportunity afforded to me as an insider researcher that would be very difficult to achieve as an external researcher. I also sent reminder emails to student group email addresses at appropriate intervals. My concerns were reduced as the research progressed, and the interviews were being transcribed and analysed. I could see that there was a rich data set and this was enhanced by the addition of each new research participant. The number of interview research participants is therefore considered appropriate for this case study. The composition of the group and individual interviews is shown in Table 3, with the original confirmed and actual numbers who participated. In cases where the number of participants was lower than the number confirmed, interviews proceeded with those participants who had attended, with their agreement.

Participant Recruitment Stage	Programmes represented	Number of Participants Invited and Confirmed	Number of Participants Who Attended	Year of Study
1	Apprenticeship	1	1	Final year
1	Level 7 Business online	3	2	Final Year
1	Apprenticeship	5	2	Second year
1	Level 7 Business on campus	3	2	End of first year
2	Apprenticeship	4	1	Final year
2	Level 7 Business online	3	3	Final year
2	Level 7 Business on campus	1	1	Final year
2	Level 6 Science online	1	1	Final Year
2	Apprenticeship Level 6 Business Level 7 Engineering	4	3	Final year End of first year End of first year
2	Apprenticeship	5	2	Final year Second year
3	Level 7 Business on campus	1	1	Second year
3	Level 7 Business on campus	1	1	Second year
3	Level 7 Business on campus	1	1	Final year

Table 3: Composition of Group and Individual Interviews

Questionnaire Sample Size and Distribution

The questionnaire was distributed by email to full-time and full-time equivalent online programme groups in the Faculties of Business and Social Sciences, Science and Engineering. Student group email addresses were used from the internal email system of the case institute, with permission from the case institute Registrar; this was a requirement for any questionnaire that was to be distributed to students, even where the distribution was part of a previously approved research project. Access to the Registrar for this type of approval to allow

distribution and increase the sample size was also an advantage afforded to me as an insider researcher.

For the questionnaire, an acceptable response rate was important to make the data meaningful in providing context for the qualitative interviews. The number of students who received and completed the questionnaire is shown in Table 4, followed by details of numbers who stated a willingness to participate in interviews.

Programme Type	Number of Registered Students who Received the Questionnaire and were invited to participate in interviews	Discipline	Number of Registered Students who Received the Questionnaire and were invited to participate in interviews
Apprenticeship	163	Business & Social Sciences	1504
Online	887	Science	741
Campus	2068	Engineering	873
TOTAL	*3118*		*3118*

Table 4: Composition of Questionnaire Distribution and Responses

The total number of respondents who stated in the questionnaire that they would be willing to participate in an interview or focus group was 54; the number who actually made contact was 24, with 11 of these ultimately participating in group or individual interviews.

4.4.4 Research Project Sequencing and Timeline

The initial mixed methods timeline had elements of simultaneity and dependence (Schoonenboom et al, ibid.) in that it was originally intended to distribute an institute-wide questionnaire and use the findings to inform the interview schedule for individual and group interviews. This was intended to guide me in the direction of areas that were of importance to research participants, based on their input, rather than on my researcher assumptions, based on literature and what I considered to be important from practice. Therefore, there was an

element of dependence of the composition of one research instrument, based on the other; in terms of sequencing, the qualitative research was initially intended to follow the quantitative research rather than both the qualitative and quantitative research being conducted concurrently. Ultimately, the timing of the distribution of the questionnaire had to be postponed due to the pandemic (this is discussed in some more detail later in the chapter) and this meant that some of the qualitative research was conducted prior to the questionnaire being designed and distributed. The sequencing of the use of the research instruments meant that three initial group interviews and one individual interview were conducted with students from three different programmes, and these initial findings informed the questions that were included in the preparation of the questionnaire. The findings from these initial interviews were included as research findings for analysis as they provided rich data. Pilot studies to test the research instruments had already been conducted online in July 2020, which meant that these initial interviews, while they were the first to be conducted in the case institute, were considered valid for inclusion in the findings and analysis. The timeline for research was based on the academic calendar of the Institute. After the initial interviews, questionnaire distribution and interviews took place concurrently. The timeline of key activities is shown in the following table; the impact of the Covid19 pandemic can be seen in the delays that occurred from the initial work in 2019, and in some of the delays in progressing the research instruments. The questionnaire was left open for almost a full calendar year in order to try to improve the response rate, during a challenging time period when students were off campus, and were being asked to complete multiple questionnaires.

Time Period	Activity
July – September 19	First draft of interview questions and questionnaire topics.
February 2020 (interrupted due to Covid 19 pandemic)	Stage 1 Participant Recruitment (Faculty of Business & Social Sciences) Level 6 on campus and online Level 7 on campus and online Level 8 Apprentices
March 20 – June 20	Initial draft of questionnaire questions. Preparation of topics sheets for interviews
June 20 – August 20	Continuation of Participant Recruitment Stage 1 (Faculty of Business & Social Sciences) Level 6 on campus and online Level 7 on campus and online Level 8 Apprentices
July - August 20	Group interviews: Level 7 on campus/Level 7 online/Apprentices One individual interview
September 20 – December 20	Transcription of interviews Summary and review of initial findings and points of interest and relevance
March 21	Distribution of questionnaire
March – May 21	Stage 2 Participant Recruitment – all questionnaire recipients
June 21 – December 21	Re-distribution of questionnaire to previous recipients (no new students invited to complete it)
January - February 22	In class questionnaire completion requested
February 22	Questionnaire closed
September –February 22	Stage 3 Participant Recruitment - all questionnaire recipients
April 21 – February 22	Individual and group interviews
June 21 – March 22	Transcription of interviews

Table 5: Research Project Timeline

4.5 Research Methods for Data Generation

Data was generated using two research instruments and in line with the case study approach (Yin, 1994, 2011, 2018; Sohn, Thomas, Greenberg and Pollio, 2017; Whitaker and Atkinson, 2019), neither research instrument required control over behavioural events, and could generate data for exploration and study. This case study adopted a predominantly qualitative methodology, with a quantitative dimension included in the form of a questionnaire. Crotty (1998), Bazeley (2009) and Blaikie (2007) caution against the 'blunt' distinction of qualitative and quantitative methods as an appropriate distinction for research methodology. The

methods employed were individual and small group interviews, with additional context provided by the use of a questionnaire. While quantitative methods are often aligned with a survey approach, they can also be incorporated into case studies (Yin, 1994) as an acceptable form of data generation. Each research instrument was used to generate data for all of the research questions. Table 6 shows the relative importance of each instrument for the research questions. Question 2 was more specifically addressed using the questionnaire as this allowed for more detail to be gathered about different aspects of student life. The individual and group interviews were given equal importance in terms of answering the research questions.

Research Question	Research Method
1 What identifiable factors contribute to persistence in higher education? And to what extent does programme choice, if at all, influence persistence and programme completion?	Individual interviews Group interviews Questionnaire
2 How and under what conditions (e.g. institutional, cultural, socio-personal, programmatic etc) do these factors become manifest within the context of Irish Higher Education and specifically within the context of Institutes of Technology?	Questionnaire Individual interviews Group interviews
3 How do students' stated intentions to study, goals and objectives influence their persistence throughout the duration of a programme of study in an Institute of Technology? To what extent, if at all, do these objectives change or become modified during their engagement with the Institute?	Individual interviews Group interviews Questionnaire
4 From a student perspective, how does, if at all, motivation and expectations of 1) themselves and 2) the Institute change over the course of the programme of study?	Individual interviews Group interviews Questionnaire

Table 6: Research Methods and Research Questions

4.5.1 Designing and Conducting the Interviews

Interviews are considered a valid research instrument in case studies (Yin, 1994; Merriam, 2009; Thomas, 2021) and in social science research (Blaikie, 2007), and were used to gain an insight into the 'how' and 'why' questions of the case. While there are no specific 'why' research questions, I used the research questions as a means of understanding why students

had remained on their programmes of study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the value of the structured interview, with advance preparation of procedure and contents. Thomas (2021) discusses the advantages of all interview types and particularly the unstructured interview in interpretive inquiry. For this study, a fully structured interview would have been too limiting and risked generating data that would be akin to that of a questionnaire (Thomas, 2021). I considered that an unstructured interview would have been challenging from the perspective of research participants in knowing what was required of them, and for myself in trying to make comparisons across areas of interest to me. Therefore, a semi-structured interview was selected, and a schedule developed to guide the discussion (Whitaker and Atkinson, 2019). While semi-structured interviews often list issues to be discussed and not questions, I did develop the interview schedule as a list of questions, perhaps to reinforce the fact that I was looking for the participants 'answers' to these and not just a general discussion of topics. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for a deeper exploration of topics and issues as they arose (Hammersley, 2017; Bogdan and Biklen, 2007), which allowed for fluidity and development of interesting ideas, without straying from the overarching research questions. The interview schedule was informed by areas of interest from the literature, particularly the model of Tinto (1975, 1993, 2016). Questions were developed to seek the research participants views about their engagement with the Institute, reasons for study, future intentions, as well as exploring their expectations and experiences. The questions were devised to explore aspects of Tinto's model such as academic and social integration in a format and language that was suitable for discussion and therefore, there was an element of my 'translation' of theory into some of the questions. I also developed the questions with the specific context of the Institute in mind (Clegg & Stevenson, 2013). The schedule, comprising 12 questions, some with imagery, was emailed to research participants in advance of the interviews. This was to allow time for reflection on their experiences, or decisions in the hope that their answers would provide as much insight as possible (Kvale, 2006) about their experiences. The same questions were used for all participants to allow comparison across programmes; the individual and group interviews were based on the same schedule of

questions because they were intended to explore the same issues, albeit that the group interviews could allow for participants to compare their experiences and exchange views on the topics under discussion.

The interview questions are contained in Appendix Two, and participants had an opportunity to make additional points at the end of the interview. Interviews were conducted with individuals and groups. The initial research design was based on focus groups, but as the research progressed, these were amended to small group interviews, as there were insufficient numbers of participants to conduct meaningful focus groups. Where the number of participants who attended the group interviews was lower than expected, attempts were made to contact those participants who had not cancelled prior to the scheduled interview time in case of any technical difficulties in accessing the meeting link.

During each interview, I had permission from the participants to take written notes, as well as making audio recordings. I also made notes as soon as the interviews ended, which made it easier to recall significant points or areas that were considered important, as well as for ethics and reflexivity.

4.5.2 Questionnaire Design

In considering the use of a questionnaire as a data collection instrument, advantages and limitations were considered from a social sciences research perspective and from a specific educational research perspective (Tinto, 2016; Black et al, 2018; Yorke, 2016; HEA, 2019, 2010). Tinto (2016) emphasised the need for a clear understanding of student motivations to persist by gaining insight into their perceptions and experiences and specifically notes that a questionnaire alone will not do this. The use of the questionnaire in this case study was to gain an insight into perceptions of students about their experience and engagement with the Institute. Quantitative methods such as large-scale surveys lack individual ‘story telling’ and a more comprehensive view of the student experience is likely by the inclusion of qualitative research methods (Black et al, 2018). Despite the limitations of the questionnaire as a

research instrument, it was used to provide a wider context of the case Institute. The scales and items in the questionnaire were determined following a review of similar research instruments, including the ISSE[30], NSSE (Australia)[31], and the US College Persistence questionnaire (Johnston et al, 2009) and the literature (Reason, 2009; Dwyer, 2015; Tinto, 2012). The questionnaire design was also informed (Schoonenboom et al, ibid.) by initial findings from four interviews with research participants in the case Institute. These interviews highlighted factors that were important to students, and that were less obvious from the literature or from my perspective as the researcher. I recognise that data from the questionnaire regarding behaviours does not provide an insight into the reasons for those behaviours, but this data was sought in individual and group interviews. The questionnaire had 6 scales and a total of 39 questions, in line with other questionnaires used for this type of research (Yorke, 1999; Johnston et al, 2009). The questionnaire is attached in Appendix Three. The section headings and questions were intended to be meaningful to students, and for the purposes of the research, mapped onto aspects of the research such as institute commitment and programme commitment. They are described briefly below.

Section 1 – Your Student Profile – 8 questions

Questions seeking demographic and prior academic attainment information, and reasons for study.

Section 2 – About your programme – 4 questions

This section was designed using the ISCED codes and Institute programmes. Some programmes were amalgamated to avoid programmes with low numbers of students being identifiable.

Section 3 – Your Qualification – 4 questions

[30] Irish Survey of Student Engagement
[31] National Survey of Student Engagement

Scales and items that were drawn from the literature to assess the extent to which perceptions of a programme had changed since study had commenced.

Section 4 – Studying in the Case Institute – 7 questions

Questions that mapped onto the concept of Institute commitment, seeking student perceptions about the institute as distinct from their programme.

Section 5 – Curriculum and Learning – 8 questions

Questions about students' perceptions of the relevance of the curriculum, study behaviour and classroom experience. A specific question was included about participation in informal peer networks, as well as availability of teaching materials, based on the initial interviews.

Section 6 –Student Life – 5 questions

This section mapped onto elements of social Integration and self-efficacy, as well as the availability of family and peer support.

Section 7 – Information, Resources, Supports – 3 questions

This section sought information about the use of case institute supports and was structured based on data from the initial interviews. Matrix questions about information and regulations were included, as students can dis-engage as a result of either a series of small things (Black et al, 2018) or lack of knowledge about institute regulations (Johnston et al, 2009). A free text question was included at the end of the questionnaire, followed by an invitation to participate in a focus group or interview.

The questionnaire was constructed using Qualtrics XM software under license from TCD. This was used as it met with the requirements of TCD ethics approval and was in line with GDPR requirements. It also allowed for online distribution of the questionnaire to a large number of students and data storage was in line with the GDPR policy of the case institute. No personal information was stored or collected and all responses were anonymous.

4.5.3 Piloting of the Research Instruments

Piloting is an important aspect of research instrument design (Punch, 2014; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The interview questions and the questionnaire were piloted on a number of occasions. The MS Teams platform was also piloted prior to being used for interviews. A small group of HE students (PG1) from outside of the case Institute was formed for the purposes of initial piloting of the research instruments; the reason for forming this group of students from outside the case institute was to be able to identify any major issues or flaws in the research instruments so that when they were piloted in the case institute, that they would be easier to use and that more fine-grained feedback would be possible, to improve the quality of the research instruments rather than also identifying any errors. At the time of initial piloting, they were second year students; two of the group were in Irish Universities, one was in an Irish IoT and one in University in Northern Ireland. The timing and process of piloting is shown in Table 7.

Research Instrument	Time period	Pilot Group	Purpose	Changes Made
Interview Questions first draft	Jul – Sep 2019	PG1, Questions sent by email and feedback returned from all students.	Topic review and question check for clarity and ability to answer questions.	Added questions about continuing with studies. Noted some questions may be difficult to answer & all questions should be sent to participants before interviews.
Interview Questions second draft	Nov 2019	PG1, Questions sent by email and feedback returned from 3 students.	Review of final proposed interview questions.	No further changes made.
MS Teams Interview	July 2020	Three members of PG1, Masters student from outside case Institute	Technical and operational check for interviews, including group dynamics and answering of questions	Decide on how the order of speakers will be determined. Clarify the purpose of the research. State no compulsory questions.
Questionnaire	Mar 2020	PG1, Questions emailed as Word document and feedback returned from all students.	Feedback on topics and question types.	No major problems with the topics. Students might not want to disclose LC points.
	Feb 2021	PG1, Qualtrics questionnaire link emailed and feedback returned from 3 students.	Look and feel of the questionnaire. Technical issues or areas that should be omitted, added or amended.	
	Feb 2021	Institute SU president, 3 members of peer group of D.Ed. students, one ETB representative (disinterested professional peers). Feedback received from all.	Identification of sensitive or problematic questions, readability, time taken to complete.	Reversal of some of the likert scales, inclusion of additional categories of learner (QQI/HELS), technical issues regarding response selection resolved.
	Feb 2021	Students who had participated in group and individual interviews in the case Institute.	Final check of the questionnaire.	No further changes suggested.
	Feb 2021	Everyone who participated in the pilot studies. Research Supervisor.	Final version circulated for information and checking.	No further changes. Cover page added with participant information and invitation to contact researcher to participate in interview or focus group.

Table 7: Piloting Timeline and Process

4.5.4 Impact of Covid-19 on Research

The impact of Covid-19 on the research was considered from the perspective of research practicalities as well as the way in which it might influence the perceptions or responses of participants. While the impact of the pandemic on the quality and timing of my research was of concern to me, this alone would be a narrow and self-centred viewpoint. I was mindful of the potential impact of the pandemic on the research participants and did not want to 'gloss over' it. In interviews, I did this by acknowledging the pandemic at the beginning and allowing time to discuss it at the end. I asked participants, as far as possible, to remove it from their responses about their experiences. The timing of the questionnaire distribution meant that the pandemic had been going on for at least a year and had become 'normal' life to some extent, perhaps making it easier to isolate from the overall student experience. In the questionnaire, I specifically asked that respondents would try to disregard the impact of the pandemic from their responses. Having conducted the interviews, reviewed the transcripts and the questionnaire data, I do not think that the pandemic skewed the responses of participants. However, I did keep this in mind when analysing the data, particularly any findings that could have been the result of emergency remote teaching. One such example was social media and MS Teams use by students who were normally on campus.

4.6 The Data Analysis Process

The data for analysis consisted of one questionnaire (n=355) and 13 interview transcripts, representing a total of 21 participants from 7 individual and 6 small group interviews. The data was analysed at the level of the institute and the student, and the theoretical framework using the model of Tinto and the thinking tools of Bourdieu acted as a backdrop to theme construction. The critical policy analysis presented in Chapter 2 did not form part of the data analysis process or the theme construction. This was not considered appropriate, given that the detailed focus of the research was the student-institute relationship. During the data analysis, questionnaire findings were reviewed separately from the interview transcripts, but not in isolation. They were reviewed alongside interview data, during the construction of the

themes and when themes were complete. Data generation ended at approximately the same time for both research instruments, but analysis of the interview transcripts took place over a longer period of time due to the nature of the data availability and the analysis process. This is discussed in the following section. I will commence with a brief description of my analysis strategy and then set out each phase in detail.

4.6.1 Analysis of The Interview Data

Data analysis commenced in 2020 following the first set of interviews and continued as further data was generated from additional interviews. Thematic analysis (TA) was employed in the interpretation of interview data. Several approaches to analysis were considered before deciding to adopt reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), based on the approach used by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). In deciding to adopt this approach, criticisms of the approach were considered, along with the authors responses to these criticisms. Their approach has been criticised for being too simplistic, too formulaic and lacking rigour (Byrne, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021) have revised their original 2006 TA model (Braun and Clarke, 2006), to address some of the misconceptions associated with it. They have noted that, despite this, researchers tend to refer to the 2006 model and do not implement TA in a reflexive manner. Two key considerations that Braun and Clarke (2019) highlighted were kept in mind while conducting analysis using RTA that:

- Their original intention was not for their six phase approach to be employed as a ‘recipe’ to be slavishly and unthinkingly followed by researchers. I used the approach in a way that I considered appropriate for this research, and in a way that would allow me to address the research questions.
- Themes do not and should not be considered to ‘emerge’ from the data. Themes need to be constructed by the researcher, who plays a pivotal role in the interpretation of data. Themes do not lie in wait, only for someone to ‘find’ them. This aligns with my research approach and constructivist epistemology.

Therefore, the codes and subsequent themes constructed are based on my interpretation of patterns of meaning across the dataset. The approach adopted to coding and the identification

of themes was not based solely on the prevalence or recurrence of information, as this was considered more closely aligned with a scientific approach requiring a ‘quantity’ of data to lend credibility to the findings. I tended towards an inductive, data driven approach, rather than deductive and theory driven. This does not mean an absence of theory during this process, but the purpose of theory for me was to heighten awareness of what the data could tell me without enforcing a narrow perspective on the codes or themes that were developed. The model of Tinto (1975, 1993) was used in this process.

Coding and the construction of themes was completed using a manual written process and NVivo software. Both had strengths and weaknesses and their use is described in the phases of analysis that follow. Both of these techniques acted as an audit trail, providing transparency in the analysis process. My initial intention in using NVivo was as a means of storing, organising and retrieving a large amount of data, but as I became more familiar with it, I used it as another means of viewing and checking my coding labels and categories, and the development of themes. At no time was it intended that the task of coding or interpretation would be consigned to the software or computer, and the manual coding and grouping of codes prior to the use of any software, provided me with a sense of ownership and control over the codes and developing themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019). I agree that qualitative researchers are not ‘algorithmic automatons’ (Saldana, 2021, p.19) and researcher led analysis informed all stages of this process. Analysis was a lengthy process with many iterations and possibilities, before the final themes were decided upon and the thematic analysis stopped. I found that I was continually reviewing and amending themes and was concerned that I might never be satisfied with them, even though I had a rationale for changes that I made as I worked and wrote. However, I learned that theme construction and refinement was a significant and essential part of the writing of the findings. The route that I took to developing the themes is described below; as emphasised by Braun and Clarke (2019), while I describe six phases, this process was iterative and did not conform to six neat linear steps.

4.6.1.1 Phase One – Data Immersion

The first step in the data analysis was interview transcription from the interview audio recording. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by myself or a professional transcriber as soon as possible after completion. I transcribed the first sets of interviews manually, which was very time consuming, but useful in that it provided an opportunity for data immersion and familiarity. As the research progressed, in the interests of expediency and making progress with the analysis, a professional transcriber was employed to generate transcripts of some of the recordings. I checked each transcript, when complete, for accuracy against the recorded interview, in advance of sending it to research participants for review and to seek their approval for its use in the findings. All participants agreed to let me use all of the transcripts without restriction. As part of the data immersion phase, recordings of the interviews were played many times, sometimes as part of the transcription process, to the point where I could 'hear' the voices of each of the research participants in reading the transcript. The spoken word augmented the written word and was useful in determining context for particular comments or phrases that appeared in the transcripts. I wrote memos to record patterns of repetition or anything that stood out as important, surprising or significant. This form of 'pre-coding' (Layder, 1998) was useful in identifying notable passages of text, commentary or points made by participants. I highlighted these in the transcripts as I read them.

4.6.1.2 Phase Two – Active Coding

Active/systematic data coding was conducted in phase 2, where I tried to be guided by the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019; Byrne, 2022), which meant that I tried as far as possible to read the transcripts with an open mind and not with a narrow lens of theory or models, and without seeking immediate answers to the research questions. It was important that the possibilities in the data were not closed off or lost at an early stage (Braun and Clarke, 2021). I found that this was in equal measure difficult and easy, as it soon became clear to me that there were no immediate answers to the research questions, but rather a lot of interesting points being made by the participants. Where something was considered important or meaningful in the context of answering the research questions, or even just seemed significant

on any level related to the research, it was coded. For example, several research participants described what they had given up in order to complete their qualification and how much this had meant to them. This was not part of my initial thoughts about what might be important, but it was apparent to me that this was important to the research participants because of the way that they described it, and the significance that they attached to it. As an insider researcher (Clegg and Stevenson (2015), I discovered that I could have a narrower perspective of what might be important than did the research participants. Coding was done 'manually' in two ways – using the soft copies of transcripts and highlighter function in MS Word and on printed copies using a highlighter and pen, writing on notes, underlining and placing asterisks at key points in the text. Each data item was given equal attention, regardless of the amount or nature of its contents. A crude system for linking common points across transcripts was used by assigning different colours and number of asterisks on the transcripts. As the volume of data increased, the transcripts also had post-it notes attached to find common coding labels. In some cases, where I had made a statement or clarified a statement from a research participant, I highlighted this in the transcript as part of the manual process of coding. This applied to instances where there were more significant interactions that resulted in 'jointly constructed meanings' (Saldana, 2021). In both phase one and phase two, comments made by me were highlighted if considered important. Inconsistencies or apparent contradictions that appeared were identified. For example, the research participants who had left programmes early in another HEI could be classed as persisting students and non-completers simultaneously. This was not a contradiction in the context of this research specifically, but a point that needed to be noted.

The initial list of codes taken from the transcripts was transferred to a separate Word document and this list was used to remove duplicate codes or codes that were simply two ways of labelling the same thing eg struggling, found it hard, where the context was the same. The number of times that a similar code was mentioned was noted as this provided some idea of recurring patterns in the data. The long list of codes was refined and put into a smaller number of groups containing similar codes. As more transcripts were generated and new codes were

created, these were added to the Word document and into a relevant code group if appropriate.

4.6.1.3 Phase Three - Searching for and Creating Themes

The initial and subsequent codes were reviewed in hard copy format and grouped to create possible themes. This was done where there were codes that appeared to me to have a commonality, or that could have a link, between them, and that told a story as part of a theme. Some codes fitted into more than one potential theme and the process of creating themes was kept very open at this stage. An initial thematic map is shown below. There were too many potential themes, and some themes are missing from this map which later became important. Further revision was done to try to create stronger themes, while trying to ensure that each potential theme had a central organising concept (Braun and Clarke,2019).

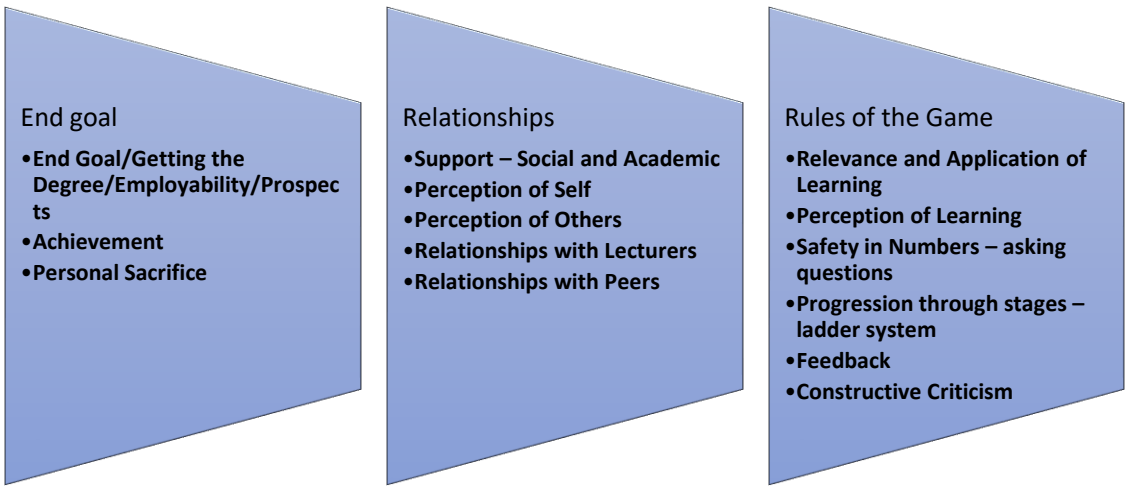


Figure 5: Phase Three Examples of Early Theme Construction

Anonymised transcripts were then transferred to NVivo and the coding exercise from paper and pen replicated in NVivo, with the intention of using the software as a tool for organising the data and retrieving quotes. I then used NVivo along with a paper and pen process in the development of themes, and found that this helped me in the review and development of themes. Folders were created in NVivo to follow phases 2-5 of the thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019); the use of NVivo provided a different perspective on the

coding labels and their organisation into parent and child nodes. The figures below show examples of work in progress in NVivo.

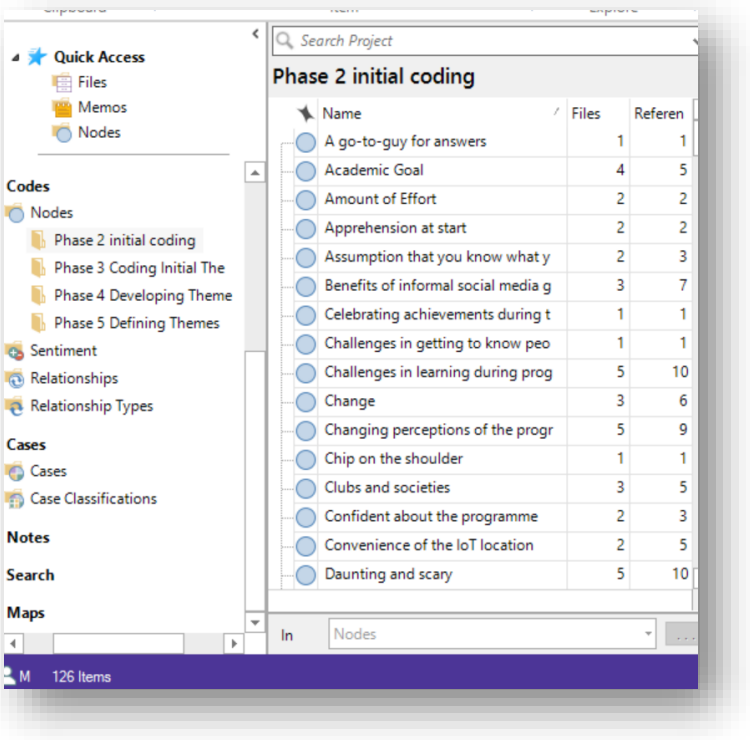


Figure 6: Phase Two Initial Coding in NVivo

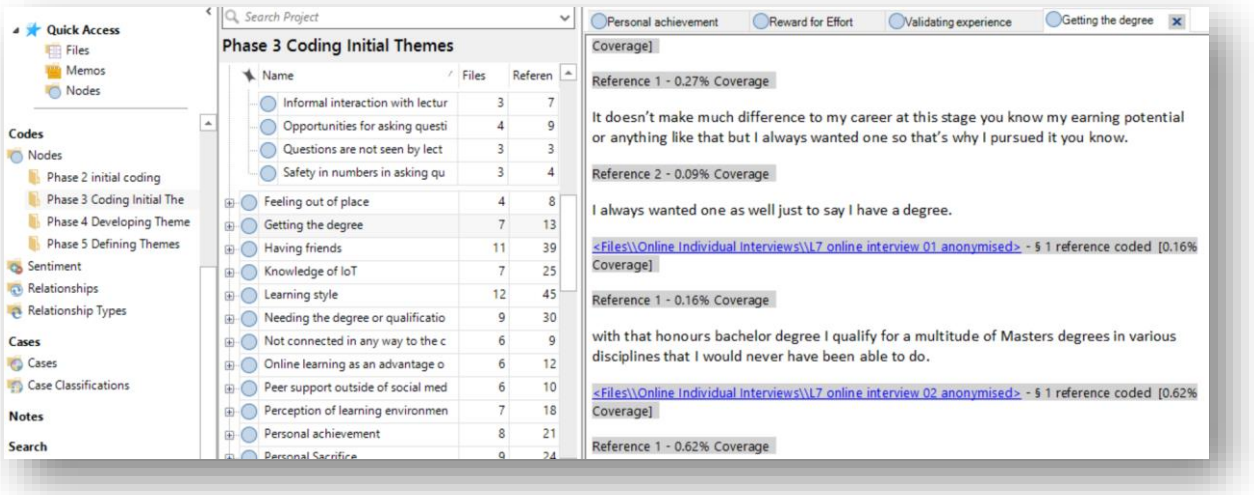


Figure 7: Phase Three Initial Coding and Theme Work in NVivo

An example of the codes as parent and child nodes from this stage of the analysis is contained in Appendix Four. Latent coding was used to ensure that interpretation went beyond the semantic descriptive surface level meanings attached to the data.

4.6.1.4 Phase Four – Developing Themes

The initial themes were reviewed and revised and compared with the dataset to ensure that they were an accurate representation of the dataset and represented the story of the dataset. The number of themes was reduced and they were refined. Each theme was reviewed alongside coded extracts for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, seeking to ensure that data was similar within themes and that each theme had a distinct meaning. Summaries of themes were written to check if the scope and content could be summarised in a few sentences. This stage of analysis involved a manual process of drawing out, refining and creating possible themes. More anonymised transcripts were transferred to NVivo 12, as they became available, for organising and further review. In NVivo 12, cases were created for all participants. NVivo was useful for checking for frequencies of coding labels and for checking my own assumptions about patterns in the data. Frequency was not considered as the dominant criteria in this analysis, but it was useful as a means of checking the number of coded extracts under each node. Nodes/codes were refined and reduced as the process of analysis progressed. An example of this from NVivo is shown below and this was done in conjunction with a paper and pen.

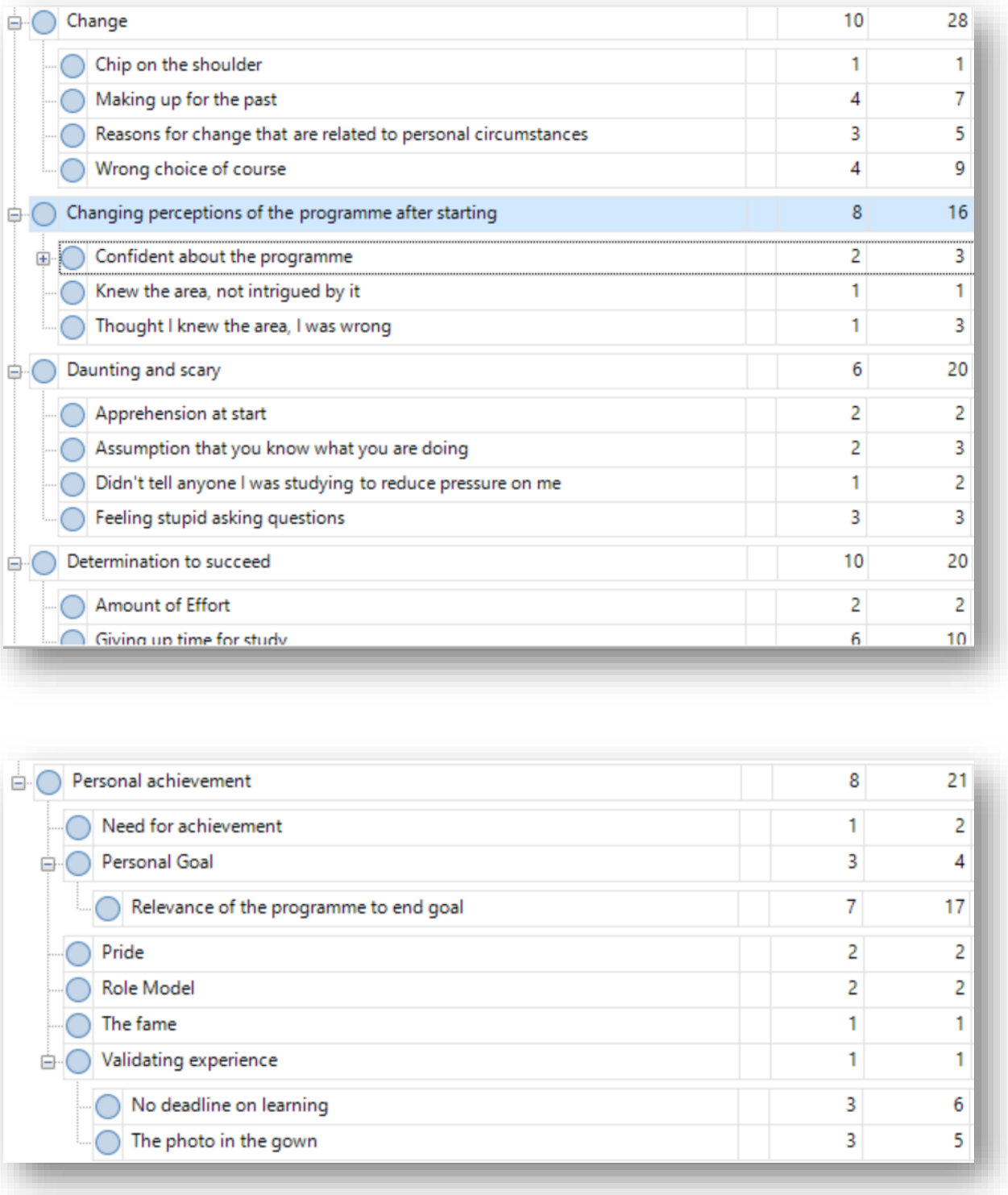


Figure 8: Phase Four NVivo Refinement of Codes

The paper and pen made it easier for me to consider the potential themes and sub-themes visually, and this was the dominant means by which the themes and sub-themes were constructed. A number of iterations of these themes were done as part of the writing process and the use of the paper meant that it was easy to move items around and to evaluate the criteria for a theme. Some of these diagrams are shown below; I used small A4 sheets and large pattern cutting paper to make it easier to visualise the complete picture.

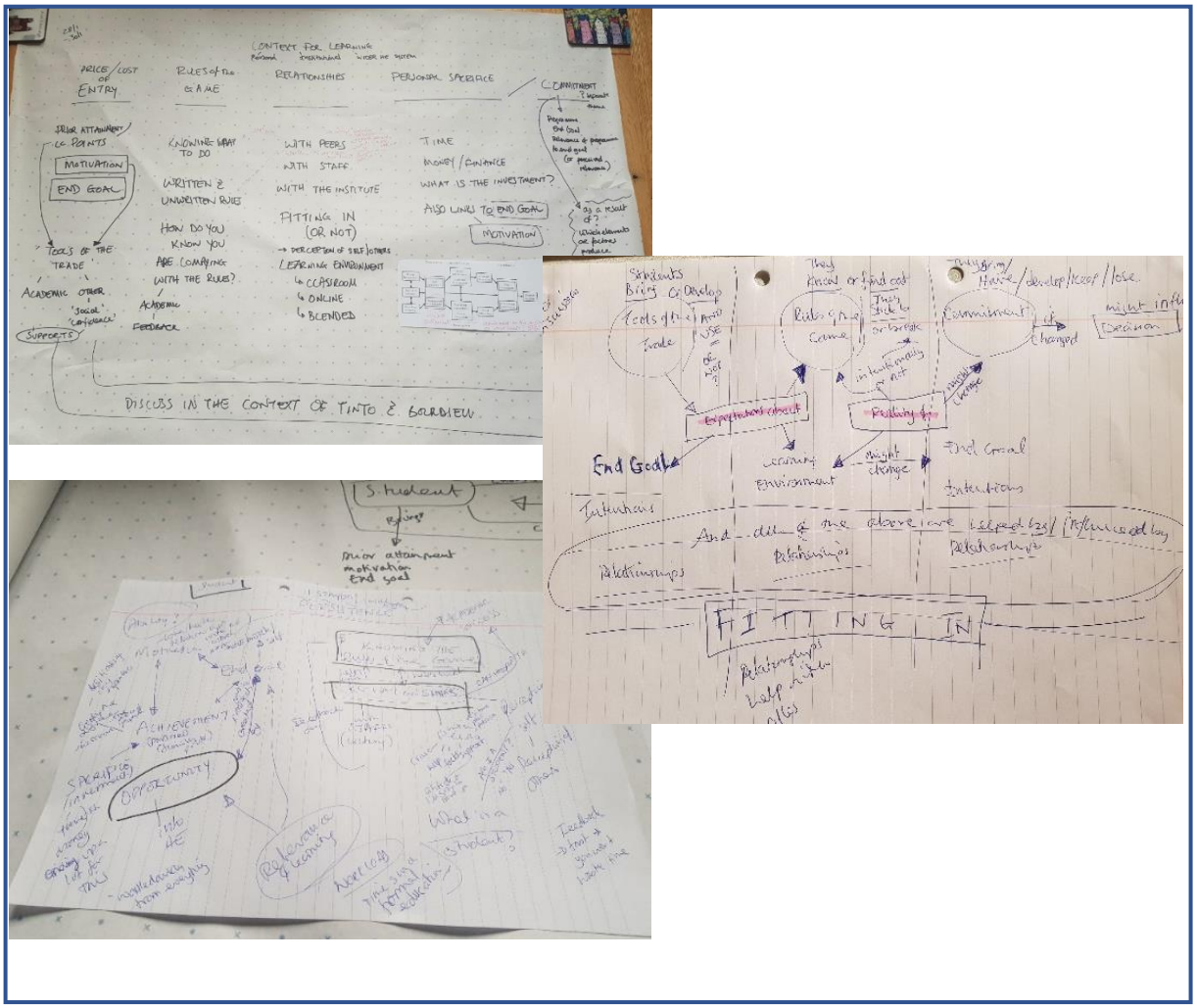


Figure 9: Paper and Pen Diagrams for Theme Development

A table, shown below, was produced with potential themes and sub-themes as part of the writing process. The 'thinking tools' of Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2014) became more

prominent in my thinking about pre-college entry attributes and how these change (or not) during engagement with the Institute at this stage.

Theme	Sub-themes
Tools of the Trade – what 'tools' are needed for HE and how are they acquired?	• Knowledge of HE, knowledge of Institute • Prior experience of formal learning/education • Leaving Certificate points • Requirements for entry to programme
Stated Intentions and End Goal	• Clarity of end goal • Getting the degree - personal achievement, professional achievement, future career • Relevance of programme in achieving end goal
Commitment	• Programme commitment at start and over time • Programme level on NFQ – ladder system in IoT • Personal sacrifice – time, finance, measure of investment is a measure of commitment • Don't lose what has already been done – I've come too far to let it go • Institute commitment – recommendation, choice, convenience or sole provider
Rules of the Game	• Knowing what is expected • Feedback on performance • Examinations and assessments • Supports – formal and informal • Overcoming challenges
Learning Environment	• Campus experience • Online learning advantages • Blended learning • Workplace learning
Relationships (Interactions?)	• Relationships/interactions with peers • Perception of self and others – fitting in • Relationships/interactions with lecturers • Perceived relationship/interaction with the Institute – is there a sense of belonging?

Table 8: Example of Themes and Sub-Themes in Progress

4.6.1.5 Phase Five – Defining the Themes

This phase involved detailed writing of the themes and naming each theme. Data extracts for each theme were identified and retrieved from NVivo as part of the writing process. Some of the sub-themes were combined and re-named. Examples of the way in which this process evolved are shown on the pictures of tables and notes that I used (Figure 10) when working

with the data and thinking about the themes in the context of answering the research questions. The items marked as themes did not all remain as themes during further iterations of writing and review.

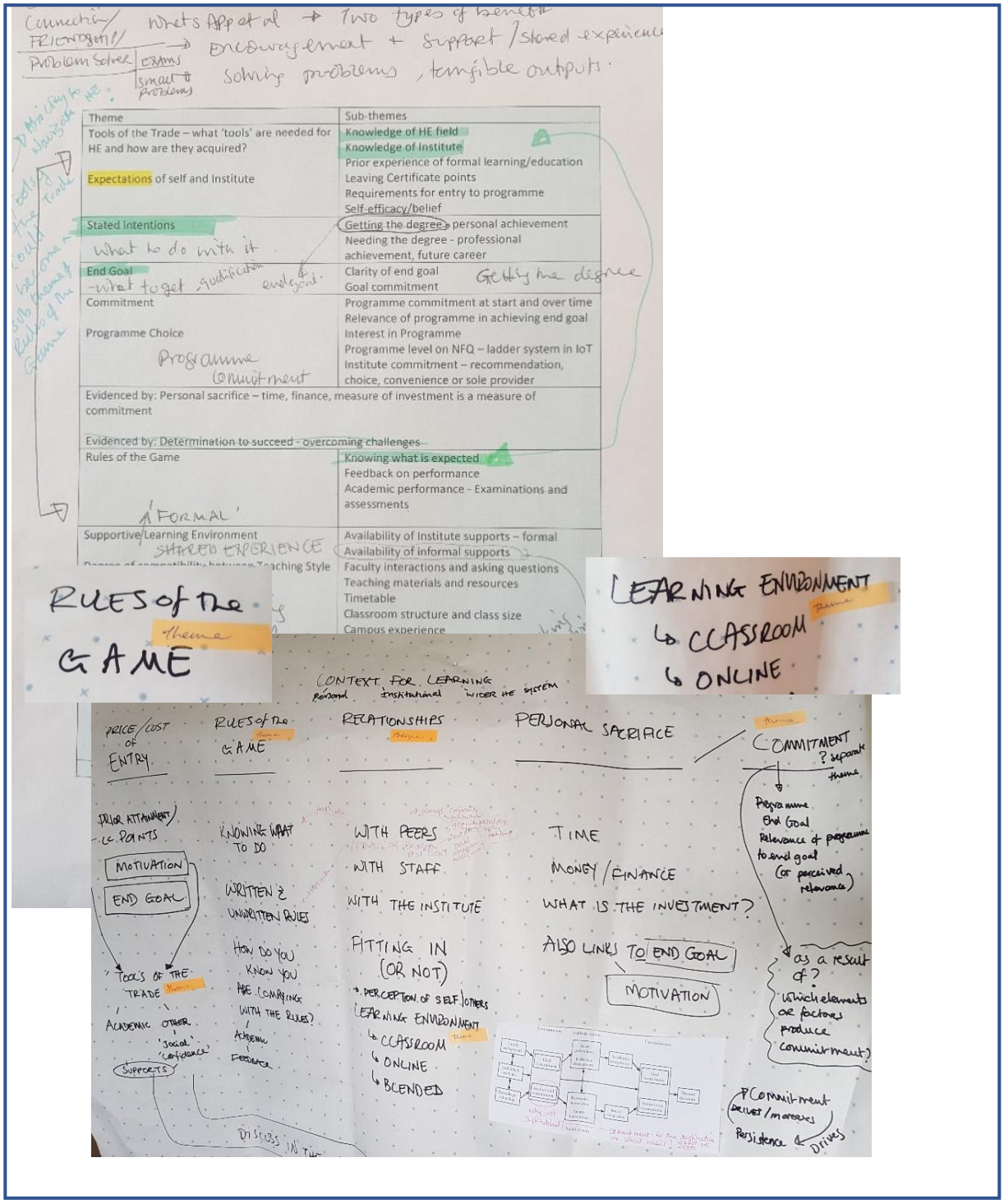


Figure 10: Defining Themes Using Pen and Paper

As I progressed with analysis, I used multiple printed copies of the Tinto model to draw out my thinking about the model and any limitations associated with it, based on what I had identified in thematic analysis. The thinking tools of Bourdieu were also included in this phase. An example of this is shown below in Figure 11.

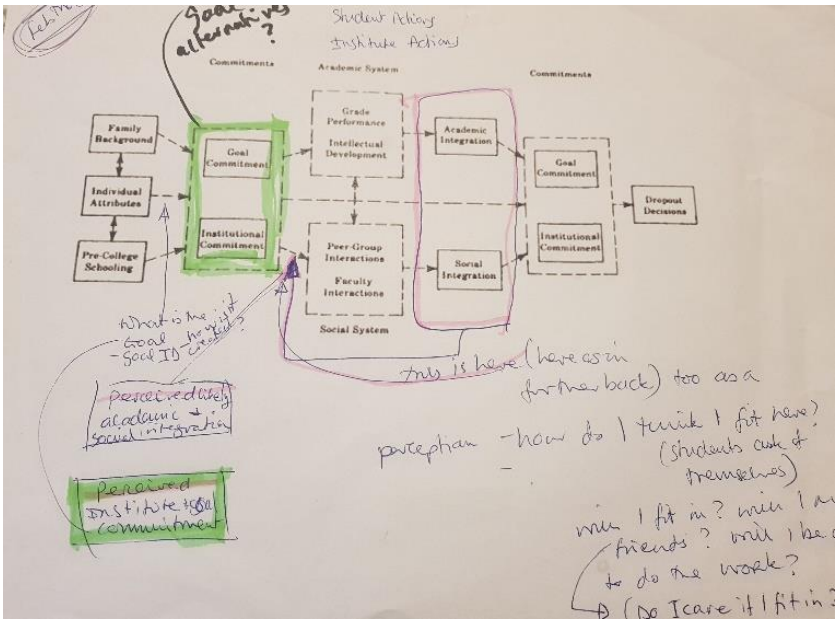


Figure 11: Example of the Use of Theory in Theme Development

4.6.1.6 Phase Six – Producing the Findings Chapters

The writing up of detailed themes was the final phase of thematic analysis, but the process of arriving at the themes took more than 18 months. In the final stages of writing, the number of themes was reduced from six to four, and then to three, as shown in the figures below.

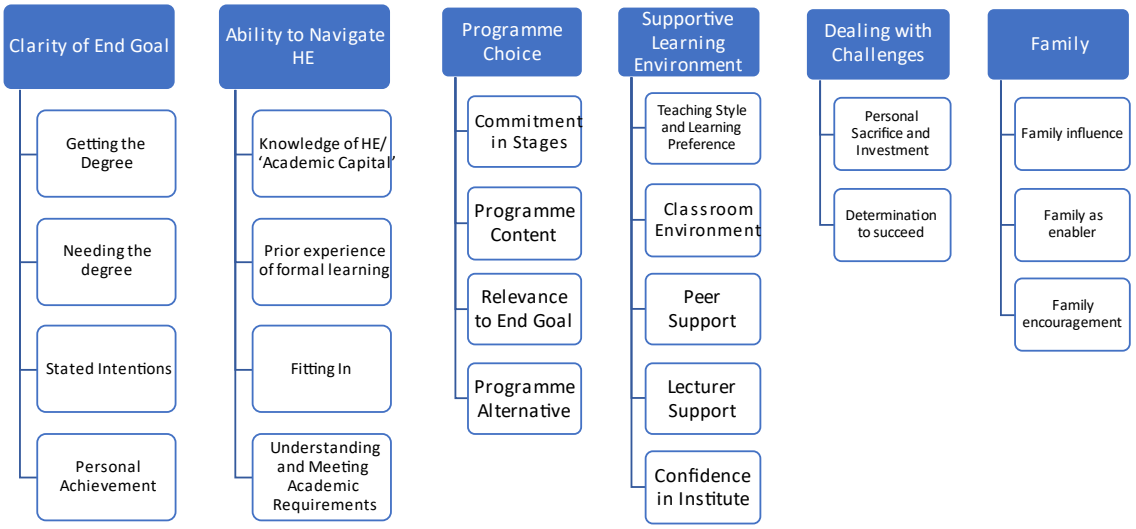


Figure 12: Initial List of Six Themes

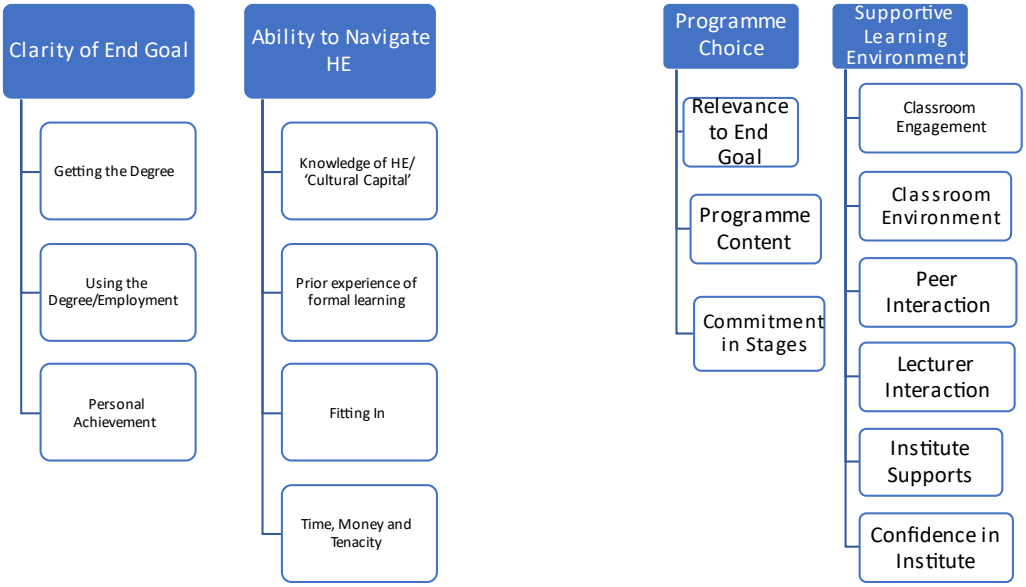


Figure 13: Refined List of Four Themes

The reason for reducing the themes from six to four was that the themes of 'Family' and 'Dealing with Challenges' were also partially included in the four other themes and to leave them as separate themes made them less meaningful in comparison to the overall themes and dataset. That particular account of the data in fact could be told by other themes (Byrne, 2022). The sub-themes of Family and Dealing with Challenges were incorporated into other relevant themes. Personal Sacrifice and Investment was included in Getting the Degree and Determination to Succeed was part of Understanding and Meeting Academic Requirements.

The theme of Family was included in Confidence in Institute, Getting the Degree and Personal Achievement. A final review of the four themes and sub-themes resulted in a more coherent set of three themes, and revised sub-themes, some of which were re-labelled; these are shown in the diagram below.

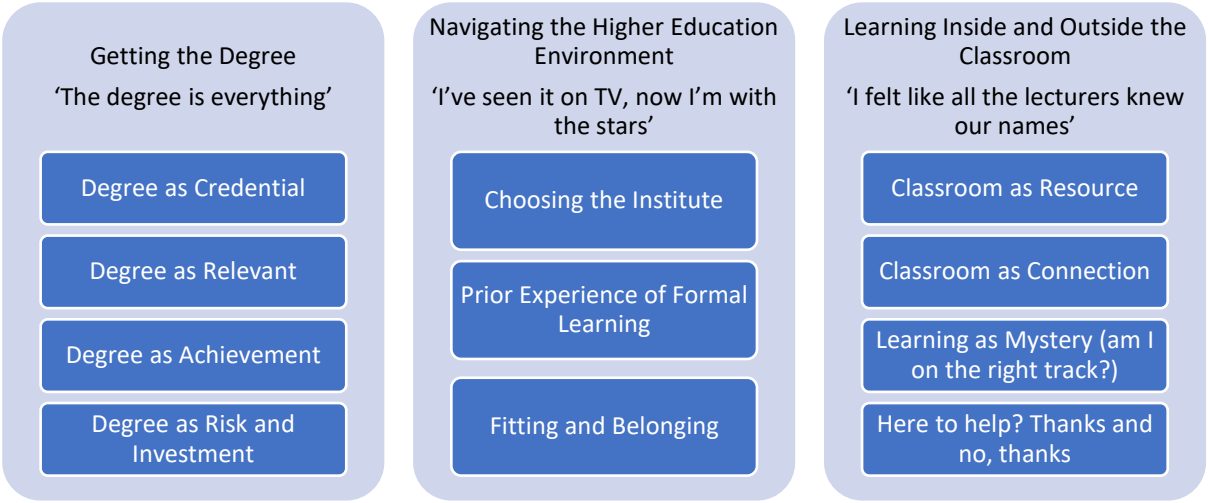


Figure 14: Final Themes and Sub-Themes

This completed the process for the purposes of producing the report. The report forms the basis of the Findings chapters, where the themes have been grouped into separate chapters for the purposes of presentation. These themes represent complex elements of a persistence 'whole' and that they impinge on and influence each other. They are presented as separate chapters for the purposes of describing and exploring them individually. The interactions and linkages between them, and their likely subsequent influence on student persistence, is presented in more detail in the Discussion chapter.

4.6.2 Questionnaire Data Analysis

The purpose of the questionnaire was to provide a snapshot of all full time or full time equivalent students of the Institute, to gain a broader institute perspective that was not possible with the interviews. The questionnaire was distributed to 3118 students, and achieved a total of 355 responses (n=355), a response rate of 11.4%. A higher response rate was recorded for on campus students than online students, at 82% and 18% respectively of the

total number of respondents. Based on the recipients, 13% (n=291) of on campus students responded, compared with 7% (n=64) of online students. As the responses were being collected, it was evident that some students had stopped at particular sections nearer the end. No changes were made to the questionnaire format as a result of the non-completion that was observed. Of the 355 responses recorded, 18% (n=64) were incomplete, but even those that were partially complete provided valuable data from the sections that were completed. The questionnaire was left open for almost one calendar year from April 2021 to February 2022, which meant that thematic analysis had commenced before the full dataset from the questionnaire was available. The questionnaire was reviewed initially in Qualtrics and then exported to SPSS to generate descriptive statistics. The questionnaire data was analysed in an iterative manner alongside the thematic analysis of interview data. Free text responses were included in thematic analysis. Iterative analysis was guided in part by the findings from the interviews and the subsequent thematic analysis. For example, in reviewing potential themes such as 'Tools of the Trade', questionnaire data about the level of preparedness for HE was examined to identify any patterns in the responses that could be aligned to this finding from thematic analysis.

Where it was considered relevant, questionnaire data was included alongside themes and sub-themes in the Findings chapters. Further future analysis would be possible using the questionnaire data, but the main emphasis in this case study was on thematic analysis, and this is reflected in the thesis.

4.7 Reflexivity and the Research Process

Reflexivity (Finlay, 2002, 2017) was important to me in the research design, in the use of the research instruments and in the subsequent interpretation of data generated. In advance of conducting the research, I took steps to ensure that I would be open and transparent with potential research participants, about my position in the organisation and the purpose of the research. Clegg and Stevenson (2013) highlight the challenge of the tertiary education insider researcher's need to engage in reflexivity, which is often considered a virtuous activity. Pillow (2010) by contrast, highlights authors who were critical of reflexivity, considering it 'self-indulgent, narcissistic and tiresome', without necessarily improving the quality of research. The purpose of reflexivity for me was to acknowledge my insider researcher status (Loxley & Seery, 2012) where I considered there to be a power imbalance between myself and the research participants. My position in the case study institute is as Head of Department (HoD); however I did not teach any of the research participants. My teaching role is limited to research supervision and I have no such role with any of the participants. The interaction between me and the research participants was during participant recruitment and in interviews. Clegg and Stevenson (2015), in referring to the use of interviews, note that the data that is produced by interpretation is often done with insider knowledge of the HE field and habitus (Bourdieu, 1988) and that this knowledge can be taken for granted. Pillow (2003, 2010) describes various forms of reflexivity and notes the increasing attention paid to researcher subjectivity in qualitative research. While practising a level of 'self-scrutiny', I considered my position as an insider to have been advantageous in conducting this research. From a practical perspective, in recognising the power imbalance (or perceived power imbalance) that existed between the research participants and myself in interviews (Clegg and Stevenson, 2015) I addressed this in communication as described earlier in this chapter, at the beginning of each interview. I set aside my HoD role and made it clear that I was a student in that situation. In any instance where the discussion was straying into my HoD role, I was able to stop the discussion by stating that it was for my other role. It happened very rarely. I gave a lot of consideration to

how the interview process would be perceived by research participants, particularly in group interviews where the discussion was visible to others and its contents difficult to predict. As an insider researcher, I found that I often worried about the impact that topics such as bereavement or personal circumstances raised by participants in group interviews might have had on the other participants. This concern was possibly exacerbated because of my position where I have a duty of care towards all students. While I believe that I would adopt the same approach to duty of care to research participants, even if they were outside of my Institute, I found it especially challenging to adopt the dual role of student and HoD initially, without considering my actions from the perspective of my work role. This became easier as interviews progressed. In three group interviews, some difficult personal experiences were openly shared by participants, usually in the context of challenges that they had faced as a student. I was initially taken aback by their willingness to share such experiences but also very grateful for their openness. During the discussion and at the end of these interviews, I drew attention to supports available and, in all cases, the research participants had used pastoral supports, either inside or outside of the institute.

4.7.1 Reflexive Practice in Interpretation and Analysis

Mertens (1998) considers the researcher's goal to be to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning expressed by participants. Crotty (1998) proposes that meaning is 'constructed' rather than discovered, with subject and object emerging as partners in the meaning making process. This aligns with the belief that the role of the researcher is not that of a passive reader, checking for emergent themes from research findings, as though they had been there all along, waiting for someone to discover them (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021). As part of the process of self-scrutiny, my objective was not to remove all subjectivity from the interpretation of interview data, but to try to ensure that I was fair to research participants and presented an authentic (Schwandt, 2007) research study and findings. As a practitioner in HE, I have developed my own perspective about higher education, but I cannot claim to appreciate it from the perspective of the students whose lived experiences I am

studying. This is not considered to be a weakness, and in fact, it was hoped that it would allow a richness in the interpretation of the data. For example, as an insider researcher, I have a greater understanding of what actions the Institute takes to enhance the student experience and improve retention. The research has given me an insight into how these interventions are perceived or valued by students. Merriam (2009) and Yin (2015) highlight the fact that differences in age, gender, race, ethnicity and pre-existing beliefs between researcher and participants, will influence what is considered important, worthy of inclusion in research findings, and how analysis is conducted. The use of a pre-existing set of categories or schema for analysis and assigning meaning is helpful but can result in a certain amount of selectivity, even unintentionally. Using transcripts, reviewing these with participants, and the use of thick descriptive data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, 2016; Yin, 2015) all help to reduce researcher selectivity in the construction of themes and inclusion of material in findings. Yin (2015) notes that regardless of all the attempts to reduce the gap between etic and emic perspectives, the researcher will always see the findings through their 'eyes'. I have acknowledged this, and I believe that I have managed it in a manner appropriate to the interpretation of the data and the findings. Citing Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2012), Saldana (2021) notes that at all stages of a project, it is of benefit to ask:

- What surprised me? (to track assumptions)
- What intrigued me? (to track positionality)
- What disturbed me? (to track the tensions within value, attitude and belief systems)

I used these types of questions in keeping memos and a journal as part of considering reflexivity.

4.8 Trustworthiness

The use of case studies in education is supported by Thomas (2021), Tight (2010) and Bassey, (1999). Stenhouse (1979, 1980) also supports case study research in education as a means of advancing understanding and in achieving 'personal professional insight' but

emphasises the importance of ensuring that the research findings are verifiable, supported by data, evidence and description. In advocating the use of interviews in case studies, Stenhouse (ibid.) acknowledges the balance between making interview transcripts fully available from fieldwork and protecting those with whom the transcripts have been generated. In an effort to demonstrate trustworthiness, making all transcripts fully available would in fact only partially address the issue of trustworthiness and verifiability because they are no more than 'raw data'. A major element of trustworthiness in this study concerns the manner in which these transcripts were generated (Yin, 2013) analysed and interpreted by me, and the way in which I subsequently constructed and presented the themes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the quest for rigour in research design, noting that this may be more closely associated with the scientific conventional paradigm that seeks internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity. Schwandt (2007) points to the value of two alternative criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) – trustworthiness and authenticity. These criteria are considered more appropriate as a means of demonstrating an appropriate form of rigour in this research. Pratt, Kaplan and Whittington (2020) also explain the pitfalls associated with equating transparency with replication, which is not always the objective of qualitative research, or something that is feasible. The following table lists the strategies employed by me in ensuring trustworthiness in the research design and implementation.

Rigour (Yin, 2003)	Trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)	Achieved by
Internal validity - truth	Credibility	Prolonged engagement Member checks Engagement with supervisor
External validity – external application	Transferability (Generalisability)	Thick description for others to consider.
Reliability – consistency	Dependability	Multiple methods of analysis and recording of stages of analysis. Communication with research supervisor.
Objectivity	Confirmability or Neutrality	Ability to demonstrate how the findings were constructed using descriptions and images of analysis in progress. Communication with research supervisor.

Table 9: Trustworthiness in Research

Authenticity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was applied to this research in the form of trying to ensure fairness and transparency in my interactions with research participants, and in trying to ensure that a balanced view of the realities described by participants was presented in findings. Educative authentication was attempted by sharing findings and information with research participants, as well as with gatekeepers and HE colleagues where appropriate. Catalytic authentication was considered in relation to what could be done with the findings, and that any actions taken as a result of this research should empower, rather than impoverish stakeholders. This is particularly true of the research participants, and this was considered as part of ethics and reflexivity.

Many attempts were made in the research design phase, and throughout the research process, to ensure that the research conformed to the criteria of trustworthiness. Braun and Clarke (2013) point to the contrasting considerations of trustworthiness, comparing the positivist paradigm with that of the constructivist paradigm. Reflexive thematic analysis does not depend on volume or amount of data, number of instances of a particular phenomenon, but is more akin to identifying points of value rather because of what they inherently tell us about a phenomenon instead of how many times something was said. Frequency does not equal value. The measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and authenticity include a recognition of my role as an insider researcher, and transparency in the process of data analysis and interpretation. There was no intention to prove or identify a single truth from this research. Triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, 2016; Yin, 2015) attempted to look for convergence of data sources, research methods, as well as theoretical triangulation.

4.9 Transferability and Generalisability of Case Study Findings

The aim of this case study was to gain an insight into a particular phenomenon without aiming for statistical generalisability. Analytic generalisability (Yin, 2016) to the theories of Tinto (1975, 1993, 1997, 2012, 2016) was considered possible, and this has been borne out in practice. Bassey (1999) provides an account of the ‘problem of generalisation’ of findings for researchers who use the case study approach. The sample size allowed in-depth investigation

(Hammersley, 2001) of the phenomenon of persistence in its real-life context. Stake (1995) provides clarification on the purpose of a case study, in describing it's real business as 'particularity' rather than generalisation (Tight, 2010). Arguments are found in the literature (Tinto, (2012; Reason, 2009; Black et al, 2018) for studying and understanding the specific characteristics of persistence and retention in individual HE institutes, rather than trying to import a generic solution for a specific situation. Stenhouse (1979) emphasises the importance of the particularity in comparative education and points to the challenges in trying to identify a set of principles or laws that can be applied in an educational setting, with a predictable outcome. Therefore, the notion of particularisation is appropriate in this research, and in considering the findings, Stake's view of 'assertions' or 'propositional generalisations' based on interpretation is appealing. He cautions against overstating findings, based on interpretation, and notes that case study research should not be rushed, and it should be reflective, and willing to consider other points of view. Bassey (1999) cites the criticisms of Atkinson and Delamont (1985) who noted concerns regarding the possibility of the use of the particular and the 'instance' as a means of distinguishing case study from other endeavours, which they believe is mistaken, and that the lack of generalisability would lead to innumerable 'isolated once-off affairs' without the sense of knowledge accumulation or developing theoretical insights. Simons (1996) in Bassey (1999) calls it the paradox of the unique and the universal and considers it an advantage in advancing understanding. A case is of value if we can learn something without always having to 'prove' something (Flyvbjerg, 2006). From the perspective of the case institute, I believe that this study provides an insight into the factors that contribute to persistence in different types of programme, with different types of student. I do not believe that this case study is so unique that other practitioners will not be able to find something that speaks to their own practice and HE environment; it will be for others to decide what they can learn from this case study and how that might apply in their own context. It is not possible to draw those conclusions here. In terms of methodology, I hope that this case study will provide a basis from which other researchers can study different types of student and HE environment without necessarily using a 'species' categorisation that would lend

weight to the argument (Metz, 2005; Tinto, 2006; Davidson et al, 2009) that it is not possible to apply our knowledge from one type of student to another, or one type of HEI to another. To use the analogy of Stake (1995), in relation to my case study findings, other readers will make their own 'naturalistic generalisations' based on what they read in this case study.

4.10 Limitations of the Case Study Approach

Tight (2010) notes that most researchers who use case study as an approach ensure that they recognise the limitations or criticisms associated with case study research at the outset, and then defend their use of it. This research is no different. The limitations of case study were taken into account before, during and after the research was complete. In the research design, I attempted to work within the philosophy of one of the case study aficionados such as Yin, Stake or Merriam, and found that they referred to other case study research, and that there were elements of each author's case study approaches that I found relevant for this study. Tight (2010) expresses an interesting view about the use of case study in educational research, which is that it perhaps could be re-labelled as a 'small scale in-depth study' rather than crafting something as a case study and including references to Stake and Yin. Tight (ibid.) notes that the advice that they provide is sensible but that some research is perhaps labelled as a case study to give small scale research an added air of respectability and that this is unnecessary. While there are references to Stake and Yin (Yin, 1994, 2013, 2015; Stake, 1995; Merriam, 2009), in my case study, as well as other authors, it is not done with the intention of added respectability, but because I believe that the research approach is within the parameters of what is considered a case study, as defined by these authors.

4.11 Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the TCD School of Education ethics committee in January 2020, and subsequent approval in March 2020 for amendments to allow remote interviews as a result of the Covid19 public health restrictions. The ethics submission is attached in Appendix Five. Approval was granted from the Executive and Ethics committee of the case

institute, as well as professional bodies where required. Ethical considerations centred on the impact that the research may have on the participants, as the primary research involved human subjects. While the research was designed to be of no risk to the participants, and all were adults who participated voluntarily and with their consent, I was mindful of the potential unseen and unknown consequences of participation for them. For example, they may not have wished to discuss difficulties or challenges during their studies. I stated at the outset of all interviews that no questions were compulsory, and students received a copy of the transcript for their review and approval prior to it being anonymised by me. They were under no obligation to allow me to use any of what they had said. I am mindful of the fact that beyond that point, students while giving consent, do not know how I have interpreted what they have said and how I have presented it. Their words are not attributed to them as the participants have been anonymised, but I hope that I have been fair in my interpretation. My knowledge of HE and experience in this field (Clegg et al, 2013) will influence my interpretation of the research data, and this has been considered in the research methodology. On a practical note, the research was conducted during the Covid19 pandemic, a difficult time for students of the Institute. While I tried to take this difficulty into consideration in not wanting to add any additional activities to student workload and change, I also wanted to complete the research. I was conflicted at times in managing students and thinking about research data possibilities, but at all times ensured that the research requirements did not interfere with any of my professional actions or decisions. Finally, the Institute in which the research was conducted provided financial support for this research under its policy for further study for staff members. This did not influence any aspect of the research.

4.11.1 Data Security

Data was anonymised when approval was granted for use by participants. All data was stored securely and in accordance with GDPR requirements. The data will be retained for 5 years after which time, it will be destroyed. Data was stored in soft copy format on a laptop that is used solely by me and that is password encrypted, at start-up and to access any files on the

system. All printed transcripts had personal identifiable information removed and kept at the home of the researcher. They were not made available to anyone else.

4.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter has described the research design, data generation and analysis strategies that were employed to investigate the phenomenon of persistence in the case institute. There are limitations associated with the research and some of these can be addressed in future research endeavours. Suggestions for these are described in the final chapter. The need for qualitative research alongside large scale surveys (Black et al, 2018; Tinto, 2012) is often proposed as a means of addressing the gap between existing knowledge and retention in practice (HEA, 2019). This case study has provided me with an opportunity to assess the relative value and insights available from a questionnaire and interviews. They both have merits in generating data, but I would not have been able to gain the insight into the students' experiences of HE without the interviews. In terms of seeking answers to my research questions, this was by far the better research instrument. However, it was extremely time consuming and if this was to be replicated, it would require significant resources in order to repeat this type of study. The following short chapter presents an overview of the case institute and the research participants.

Chapter 5: Profile of Research Participants

5.0 Introduction

This is a short chapter that describes the case institute and the interview participants, as well as providing a snapshot of the questionnaire respondents.

5.1 Case Institute Overview

The case Institute is based in the West of Ireland and at the time of conducting the research, was an Institute of Technology, which enrolled approximately 8,500 students across undergraduate, postgraduate and apprenticeship programmes; this represented full-time and part-time provision across major and minor awards. Along with its strategic partners, it subsequently became part of a Technological University. As an IoT, it served a wide geographical area and had a teaching focus on full time and part time HE provision in Business and Social Sciences, Science and Engineering. The Institute provides taught and research Masters degrees and PhD by research. There are a number of strategic research centres in the case Institute. The Institute provides undergraduate programmes via the ladder system (NFQ 6-8) on campus (full time) and online (part time, evening). In addition to full time or full-time equivalent programmes, the institute also offers a wide range of Special Purpose Awards online, some of which can be combined to create a major award. The focus of this case study is full time and full time equivalent undergraduate programmes. The types of undergraduate programme available in the Institute, with an illustration of the ladder system, ordinary degree and Honours degree routes, are shown in Table 10.

Programme Level	Study Mode	Award	Years to Complete Programme
6	Full time campus	Higher Certificate	2
6	Online Evening	Higher Certificate	2
7	Full time campus	Degree (Ordinary)	3
7	Online Add-on	Degree (Add-on)	1
8	Apprenticeship	BA Degree (Hons)	3
8	Full time campus	Degree (Hons)	4
8	Full time campus	BA Degree (Hons)	3

Ladder System Progression Routes (On Campus and Online)

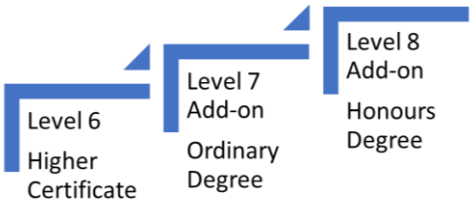


Table 10: Undergraduate Programme Types in the Case Institute

The section below provides a thumbnail sketch of the typical student on each of the programme types, as well as the way in which those programmes are taught.

5.1.1 The Online Students

The majority of students who study online are mature students who are returning to or entering Higher Education for a variety of reasons. These reasons include gaining a formal HE qualification for the first time, upskilling to advance career prospects or changing career direction. Online classes are normally held live online in the evenings and these classes are also recorded and made available to students after the class has finished. For the purposes of this research, only those students who were completing a major award were invited to participate.

5.1.2 The Apprentices

Apprenticeship students are combining work with study, spending four days per week in the workplace and spending one day per week in the online classroom. Apprentices must be in employment while studying. Their classes are delivered live online and are available as recorded classes after the live classes are complete. Attendance is closely monitored for this programme. Apprentices complete professional body exams as part of their academic programme and the programme is very much tailored to their 'occupational profile[32]' and future work role. Apprenticeship students are varied and can be school leavers, career changers and include graduates who have HE degrees in different or related areas.

5.1.3 The Campus Students

On campus students are those who are registered on full time undergraduate programmes that are delivered on campus and require on campus attendance. Lectures are delivered in the classroom and are not normally recorded or made available after the live class has occurred. These students are completing major awards from levels 6-8. The student body is varied and includes mature as well as traditional age students.

5.2 Questionnaire Respondents

A total of 355 responses (n=355) were recorded in the questionnaire. The profile of the questionnaire respondents is shown in Figures 1-8 below. These show a slightly higher proportion of females than males responded to the questionnaire, with 70% of respondents in the age category of 18-24. This is in contrast to the interview participants, the majority of whom were mature students. Twenty three is the age at which a student is categorised as mature in HE, and in hindsight, it would have been beneficial to have an age category of 18-22, with the next band beginning at 23, to reflect this distinction of mature vs traditional age students.

[32] An occupational profile is defined and approved by SOLAS under statute. For every apprenticeship, there is only one occupational profile and only one specific programme that is designed to align with the occupational profile.

Approximately half of the respondents had completed Junior/Leaving Certificate, with a further 25% having completed a level 6 Higher Certificate or level 7 Ordinary degree. Close to 15% had completed a PLC course prior to attending the Institute. 11% stated that they had completed an Honours degree, and this is likely indicative of final year students who were completing the questionnaire at the end of the academic year. Almost two thirds of students came to the Institute via the CAO route, with over one quarter entering via direct entry and mature student routes. Almost 75% of respondents were in Higher Education for the first time, and this was the option selected (as instructed in the questionnaire) by students who were registered on Add-on programmes.

Interestingly, at 62%, the majority of questionnaire respondents were not first in their families to attend HE. This is in contrast to the often-cited high proportion of 'first in family' students in IoTs. A word of caution about that data is that it is a snapshot of a particular group of respondents and, interestingly, some of the people who are not first in their families could be the parents of children who are in or who have completed HE, or whose siblings could have participated in HE. As the age profile of respondents is predominantly those students of traditional age, this factor will not significantly skew the data. Over half of all respondents stated progression from second level education to gain a qualification as their reason for participation in HE. Personal interest and career change made up a third of the reasons for study. Data is illustrated in the following charts.

Chart 1: Gender of Questionnaire Respondents n=349

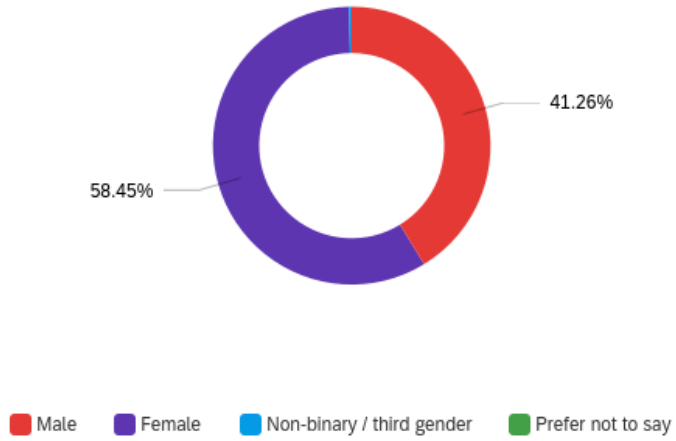


Chart 2: Age Profile of Questionnaire Respondents n= 343

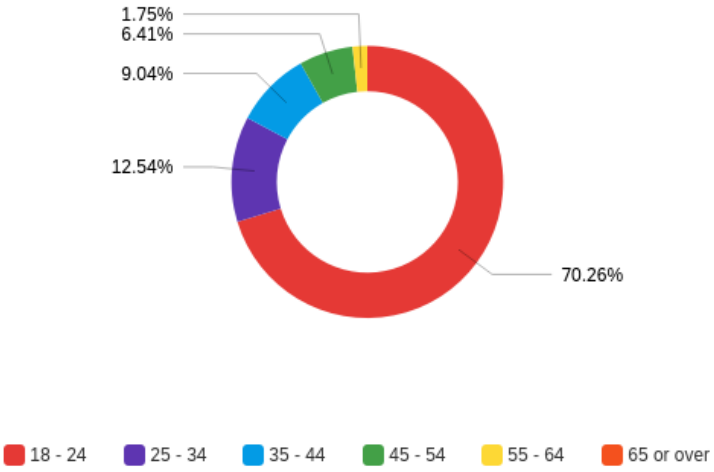


Chart 3: Prior Attainment Profile of Questionnaire Respondents n=348

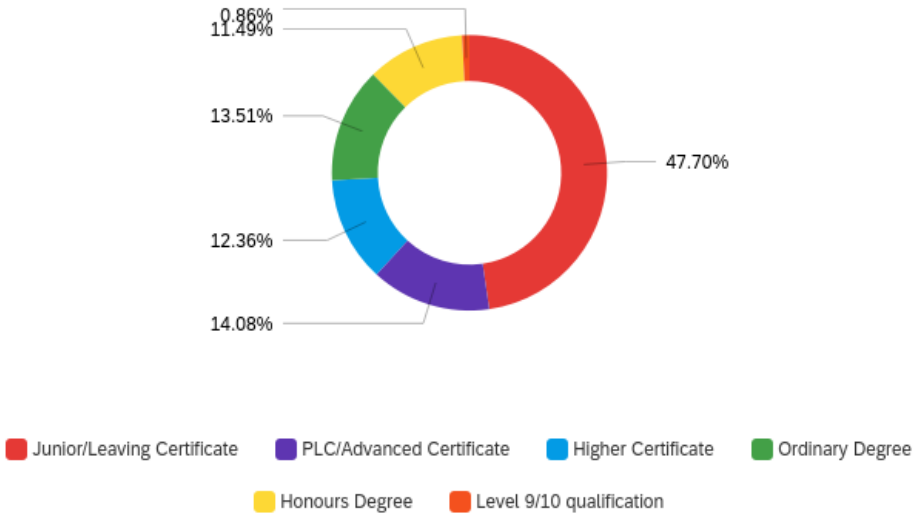


Chart 4: Leaving Certificate Points of Questionnaire Respondents n=306

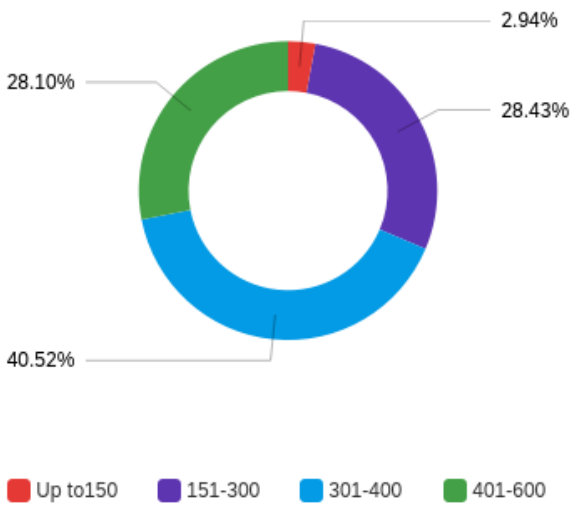


Chart 5: Entry Route to Institute of Questionnaire Respondents n=343

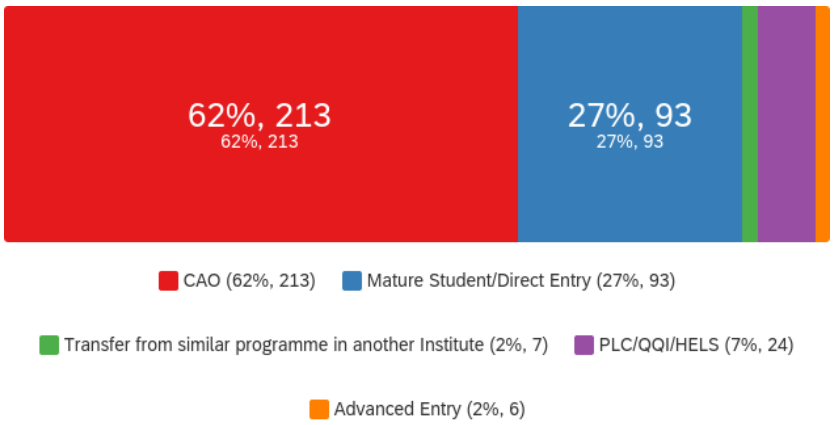


Chart 6: Full Time Students Respondents by Programme n=268

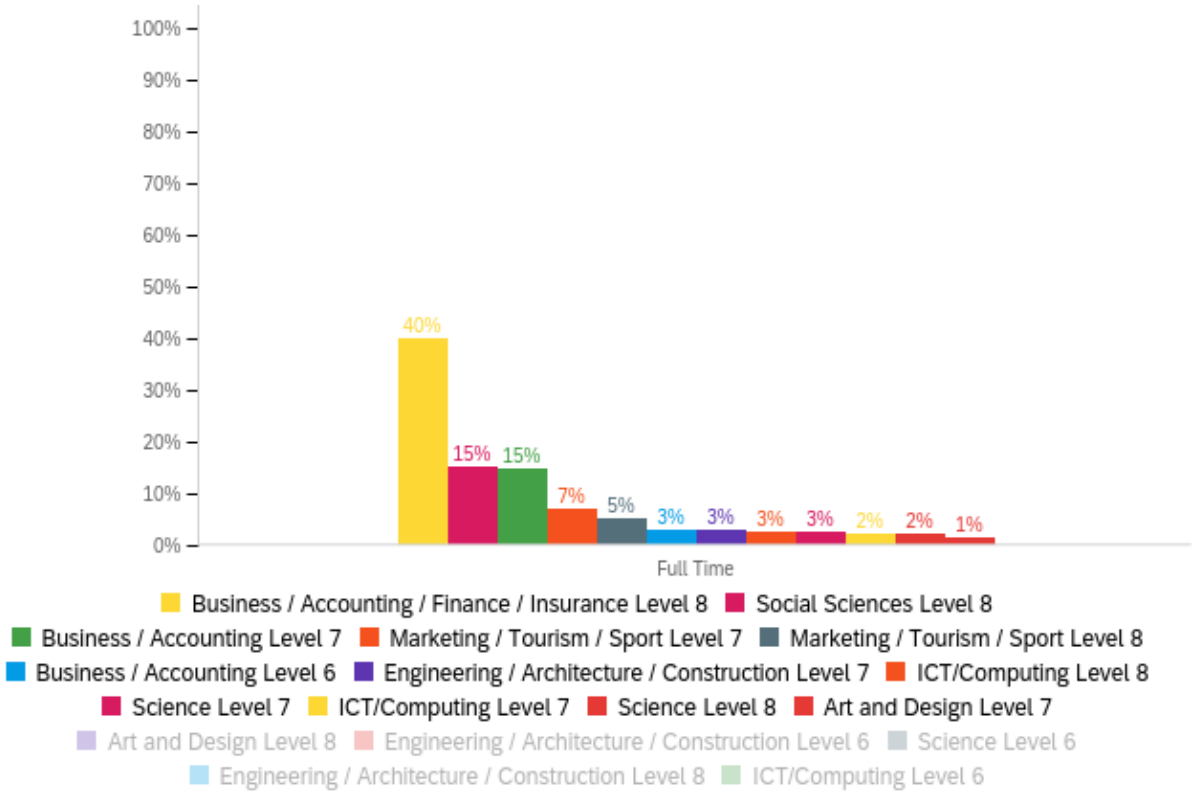


Chart 7: Online Students Programme and Level n=64

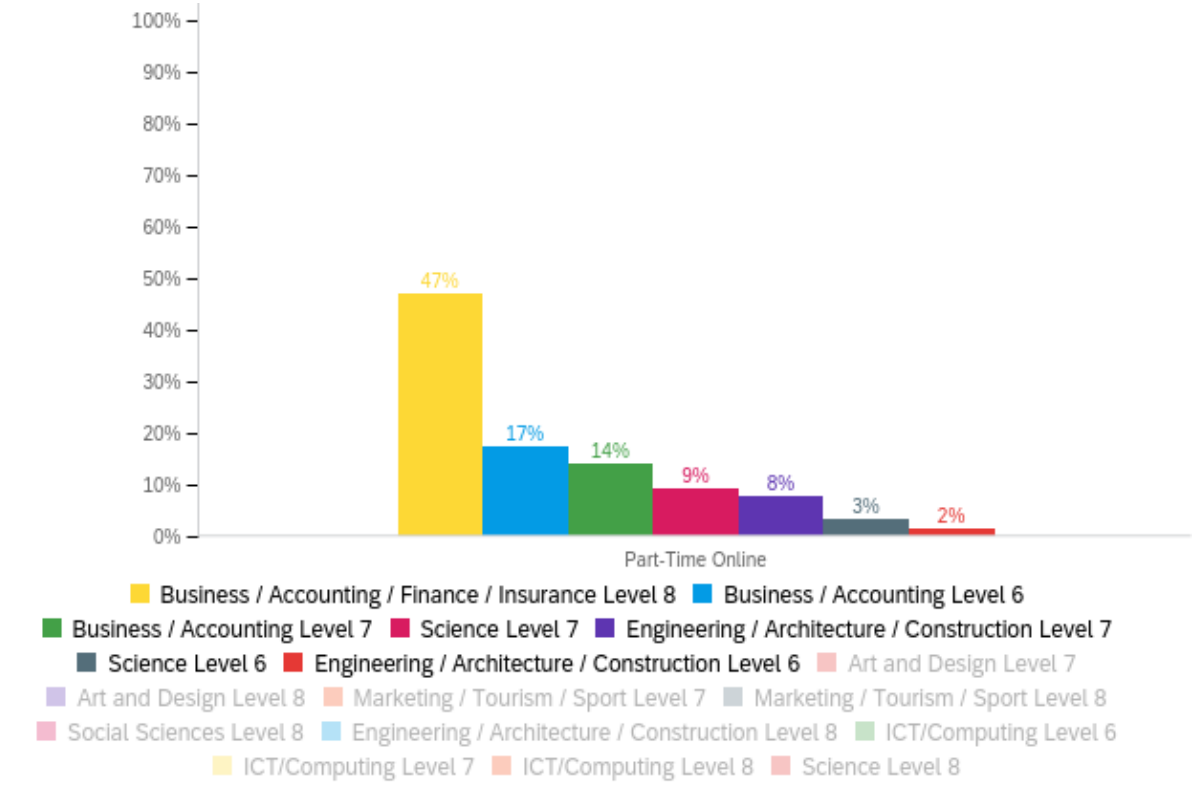


Chart 8: Reasons for Study of Questionnaire Respondents n=348

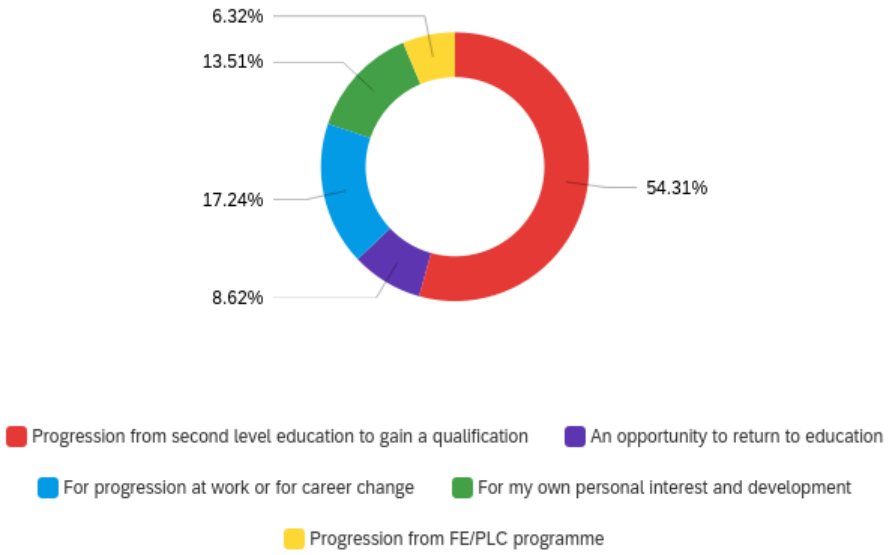


Chart 9: Previous Participation in HE (First Time in Higher Education) n=348

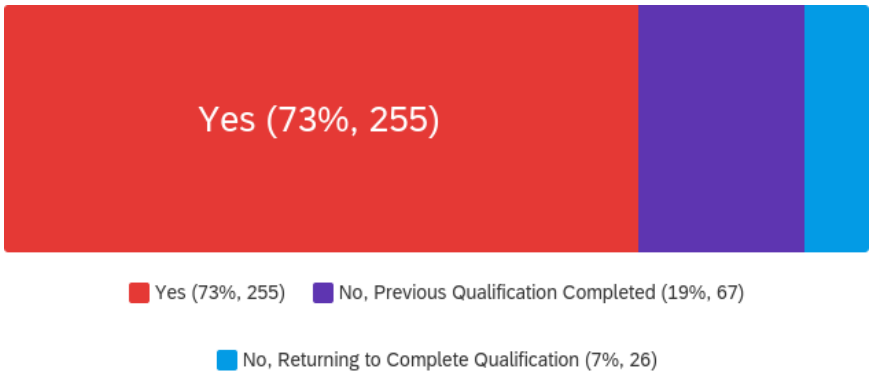
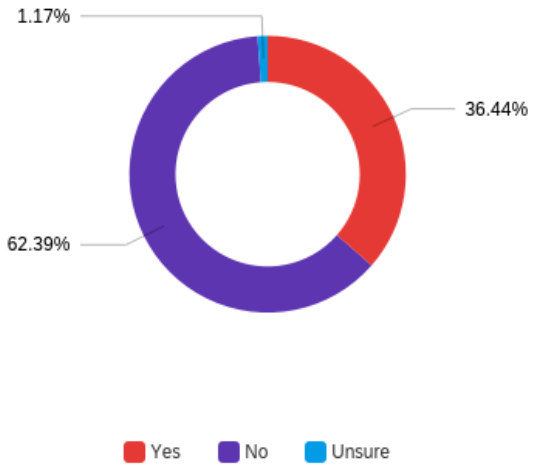


Chart 10: Family Participation in HE (First in Family to Attend HE) n=343



5.2 Profile of Interview Participants

The profile of the twenty one interview participants is shown in the table below, with pseudonyms, which are used in the findings chapters.

Participant	NFQ Level	Study Mode	Discipline	Year of Study	Gender	Age	Code
1	7	Online	Business	3 (AO)	M	Mature	Conor BOL7
2	7	Online	Business	3 (AO)	M	Mature	Tom BOL7
3	7	Online	Business	3 (AO)	F	Mature	Olive BOL7
4	7	Online	Business	3 (AO)	F	Mature	Nora BOL7
5	7	Online	Business	3 (AO)	F	Mature	Eileen BOL7
6	6	Online	Science	2	M	Mature	John SOL6
7	6	Campus	Business	1	F	Mature	Zoe BC6
8	7	Campus	Business	1	M	Traditional age	Peter BC7
9	7	Campus	Business	1	F	Mature	Alice BC7
10	7	Campus	Business	3 (AO)	F	Mature	Sarah BC7
11	7	Campus	Business	2	M	Mature	Ronan BC7
12	7	Campus	Business	2	F	Mature	Maeve BC7
13	7	Campus	Business	3	F	Mature	Orla BC7
14	7	Campus	Engineering	1	M	Mature	Alex EC7
15	8	Apprenticeship	Business	3	F	Mature	Hannah APP8
16	8	Apprenticeship	Business	2	F	Traditional age	Jane APP8
17	8	Apprenticeship	Business	2	F	Mature	Emma APP8
18	8	Apprenticeship	Business	1	F	Mature	Mary APP8
19	8	Apprenticeship	Business	3	F	Mature	Claire APP8
20	8	Apprenticeship	Business	3	M	Mature	James APP8
21	8	Apprenticeship	Business	3	M	Traditional age	David APP8

Table 11: Profile of Interview Participants

The following table illustrates the codes used for research participants in the findings.

Interview Participants Codes	
Student Type	
APP	*Apprenticeship*
OL	*Online student*
C	*Campus student*
Discipline	
B	*Business*
S	*Science*
E	*Engineering*
Year of Study (Has completed year)	
1	*1*
2	*2*
3	*3*
AO	*Denotes Add-on year*

Table 12: Codes Denoting Research Participant Types

5.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the case institute and the research participants. Further questionnaire data will be presented in the Findings chapters, where relevant, alongside the themes that were constructed from thematic analysis.

Chapter 6: Findings Part One – Theme 1 – Getting the Degree

6.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the first of three themes, 'Getting the Degree'. This theme was constructed to capture participants' views of the value and purpose of their HE qualification. Getting the Degree relates to all levels of programme, including the Higher Certificate. The reason for this is that students who were registered on the Higher Certificate programmes also spoke about progressing to a degree, so the degree is used as both the actual qualification and as a metaphor for all types of HE qualification. This theme was constructed primarily from the interview data, with some contextual data provided by the questionnaire. The interviews provided an opportunity to get a deeper insight into the students stated reasons for study. The theme captures the role of their programme in achieving their personal and professional goals. This is important from the perspective of the model of Tinto (1975, 1993), who highlighted the significance of goal and programme commitment in persistence decisions. The findings from my research demonstrate that an understanding of the reasons behind goal formation and goal setting provide an insight into the likely subsequent goal and programme commitment. The chapter begins with an overview of the theme and its sub-themes.

6.1 Theme – Getting the Degree

This theme was constructed to try and capture the clarity expressed by students about their reasons for studying and their stated end goals. Research participants were able to articulate clear and unambiguous career and personal objectives relating to achieving their qualification. This applied to the achievement of their qualification as an end goal in itself and the qualification linked to a further end goal such as enhanced employment opportunities. The perception among participants of the need for an HE qualification was a recurring feature in individual and group interviews, which was related to more utilitarian objectives such as employment – in essence, a need for the credential. Participants also frequently spoke about their qualification as a source of personal achievement, pride, and being a role model. In

summary, the majority of students who had stayed or intended to stay on their programme had a clearly defined end goal, many believing that employment and improved employment prospects would be assisted or facilitated by achieving a Higher Education qualification. Alongside this belief, they expressed confidence that the programme on which they were registered was relevant in achieving their end goal, and their mode of study was allowing them to complete their qualification in a manner that was manageable for them. Making the decision to pursue an HE qualification represented an element of risk for some students and this is captured in this theme. This theme is comprised of four sub-themes, which are described in the table below.

Sub-Theme	Description of Sub-Theme
Degree as Credential	Degree as credential describes the HE qualification as a means to an end and students linking their HE qualification to employment. This includes the goal of improved employment opportunities for mature students already in full time employment.
Degree as Achievement	Students associated sense of personal achievement on achieving the HE qualification.
Degree as Relevant	Students' perceptions of programme relevance to their end goals. This sub-theme captures expectations and experiences and the influence of tacit knowledge and seemingly un-important aspects of the programme on relevance.
Degree as Risk and Investment	Degree as risk represents the value of the ladder system in building up an HE qualification in stages. Investment represents the personal and financial investment made by students in the pursuit of their qualification; it can also be linked to risk.

Table 13: Getting the Degree Sub Themes

6.2 Sub-Theme 1: Degree as Credential

A common finding in interviews was that the qualification would lead to opportunities for employment and/or advancement in the workplace. Several mature students who were studying online did so to upskill and make sure that they had a good level of knowledge in their field, or a related field. Their reasons for study were linked to their employment. The resulting qualification was not necessarily considered by them to be essential for progression

or their careers, but would give advantages to them in the workplace, as described by the participant below, who was studying online.

> *'I'm not really in the business field as such but even though I'm not because I'm a manager in my department, it still looks very good that you know I undertake some courses and keep up to date in the field of business as well as (my role) so yeah, so that's why I did it. So I didn't have to do it but I wanted to do it'. (Nora BOL7)*

This student went on to explain that even though there was no specific need to complete the qualification, it would provide advantages in the workplace, both in terms of improving credibility and by demonstrating commitment to continuously learning for the role.

> *'…my company does look very favourably on the managers that do you know take it upon themselves to do extra work and to keep up to date and it gives you a little bit of an edge over other people'. (Nora BOL7)*

One of the participants who was studying on campus had aspirations that were related to a family business, where the qualification would be of direct benefit in that context, and the quote below illustrates how the degree could be used in practice. This demonstrates a clearly expressed end goal that is linked to the achievement of the qualification, as an enabler of another personal goal.

> *'I would like to take over my Dad's business eventually and I think that having a business degree will kind of prepare me for that and, I don't know, give me a better understanding maybe of kind of the business world and how to deal with certain situations and things'. (Alice BC7)*

A mature student who had not had an opportunity to attend Higher Education as a school leaver, described the importance of 'getting a degree' and the approach that, as a parent without a formal academic qualification, she had adopted with her own children.

'We don't care what you do with your degree, just get it and then do whatever you want after that. But just have a degree behind you…and I mean you can always do things with it and you can add to it. But it's just having it. I don't know, it's good'. (Claire APP8)

The idea of having the degree is interesting as it indicates possibilities for the holder of the qualification, in using the degree as a signalling mechanism and credential, even if they do not pursue those opportunities. Knowing that they could pursue those opportunities was considered beneficial and removed a perceived barrier associated with the absence of a formal HE qualification.

A mature student studying online summed up the challenges of a changing employment landscape in describing reasons for study.

'the degree is everything' (Eileen BOL7).

The interview data revealed that participants who did not have a formal qualification to show on their CV or job application, found that it was becoming increasingly difficult to compete in the labour market and make it past the shortlisting stage, even if a degree was not an essential requirement for the role. An increase in the number of people applying for jobs who had degrees or any type of formal qualification pushed up the entry barriers significantly and made it less likely for someone with experience but no formal qualification to be considered for the role. A final year apprentice who had just completed his programme and had secured continuation of employment described his original motivation for studying as wanting to change career and improve employment prospects.

'….age and circumstances, which is one of the reasons why I wanted to join the programme…it was kind of more getting the degree and getting the job sorted…I didn't have a degree at the time, job opportunities, and career path, that was limited'. (James APP8)

Recounting similar challenges, another apprentice noted that an extensive amount of work experience was of no value when it came to applying for jobs and that the formal educational requirement took precedence.

> *'I was made redundant, and I found it very, very difficult to get an interview and get back on the ladder again, because I didn't have a degree. Experience counted for nothing – nothing at all, I couldn't even get my foot in the door for the first interview. So that was the root of my reasons why I actually decided to go back to education and get my degree. So, here I am, almost done'. (Hannah APP8)*

As well as the experiences of trying to secure employment or even an interview with a new organisation, it was also cited as a challenge to career progression for existing employees within their organisations. It was stated that it was increasingly difficult for staff who had a lot of experience in a role or in a sector to compete with other staff members who had experience and a formal academic qualification. This may have been linked to age in some cases, where more mature employees had significant work experience, but not the formal qualifications.

> *'..people that were getting promotions and stuff had a basis or a background like a formal education to back up their management experience..' (Tom BOL7)*

> *'If I didn't go back to college I wasn't going to move on, I was going to limit myself as to what possible future prospects'. (Conor BOL7)*

Another online student faced similar challenges, also noting that the degree was required to be able to be considered for a role, even if it was not specifically required for the role itself, in that it was a source of competitive advantage during shortlisting. This was described as the 'piece of paper' that was of value and provided security; this sentiment was common among those mature students who were already established in their work roles.

'I was looking to try and get promoted from a support staff role to a management role and to do that, I had to have a degree….a bit of security, yeah because that piece of paper is so valued in the employment circles, whether or not it's actually required for you to do the job…but the piece of paper in and of itself has value, as a qualification that opens doors to me and opens opportunities to me that without it, I wouldn't have'. (Eileen BOL7)

A mature on campus student who left employment to pursue full time study indicated the need to have a degree and refers to the ladder system in his description of getting the degree.

'I was involved in sales and that, but I had no actual formal education in it. So, any kind of progression prospects would have been quite limited for me...I just I thought maybe I was capable of bigger and better things and that as well, so I thought maybe getting a degree behind me and maybe an honours degree afterwards would kind of you know, kind of increase my prospects'. (Alex EC7)

As well as increasing their prospects of employment or advancement in the workplace, some research participants also described their ambition to pursue for postgraduate study when their undergraduate qualification was complete. There are several examples of students who were ambitious and confident in their abilities to achieve qualifications at higher levels on the NFQ. A mature online student explained the new possibilities that would be open for further study and the possibilities for career changes that would become available on completing the degree:

'…with that Honours bachelor degree I qualify for a multitude of Masters degrees in various disciplines that I would never have been able to do….even if I hadn't taken it in a field that I'm in, being able to say I have an honours degree could qualify me for a jump in my paygrade'. (Eileen BOL7)

Having completed a level 8 qualification, an apprenticeship student indicated an interest in pursuing further study, as did an on campus student who was planning to progress to a level 8 add-on year on completion of her level 7 programme.

> *'I would like to go for a Masters or something like that'. (James APP8)*

> *'I want my level 8 because please God down the line If I want I'll go back and do a Masters so I think its just the logical thing to do, just get the full Honours degree'. (Orla BC7)*

Questionnaire data provided context for the interview findings. Over 60% of full time students cited progression from second level education to gain a qualification as one of the main reasons for their participation in HE. Almost 75% of the fulltime students stated that their qualification was important to them for getting a job. In addition to getting a job, improved employment prospects, career progression and personal achievement were specified in almost equal measure by approximately half of the full time students. This data is represented in the charts below.

Chart 11: Full Time Students Reason for Participation in HE n=271

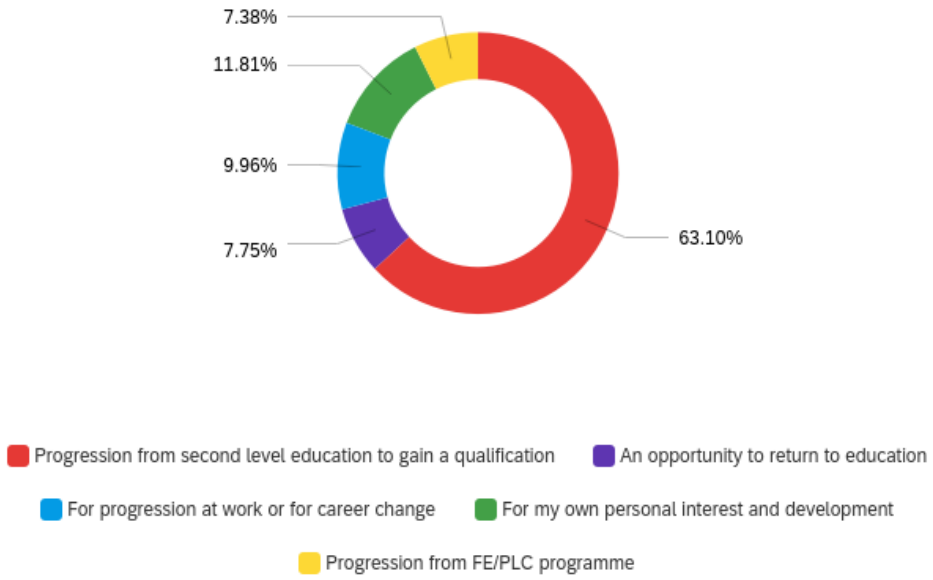
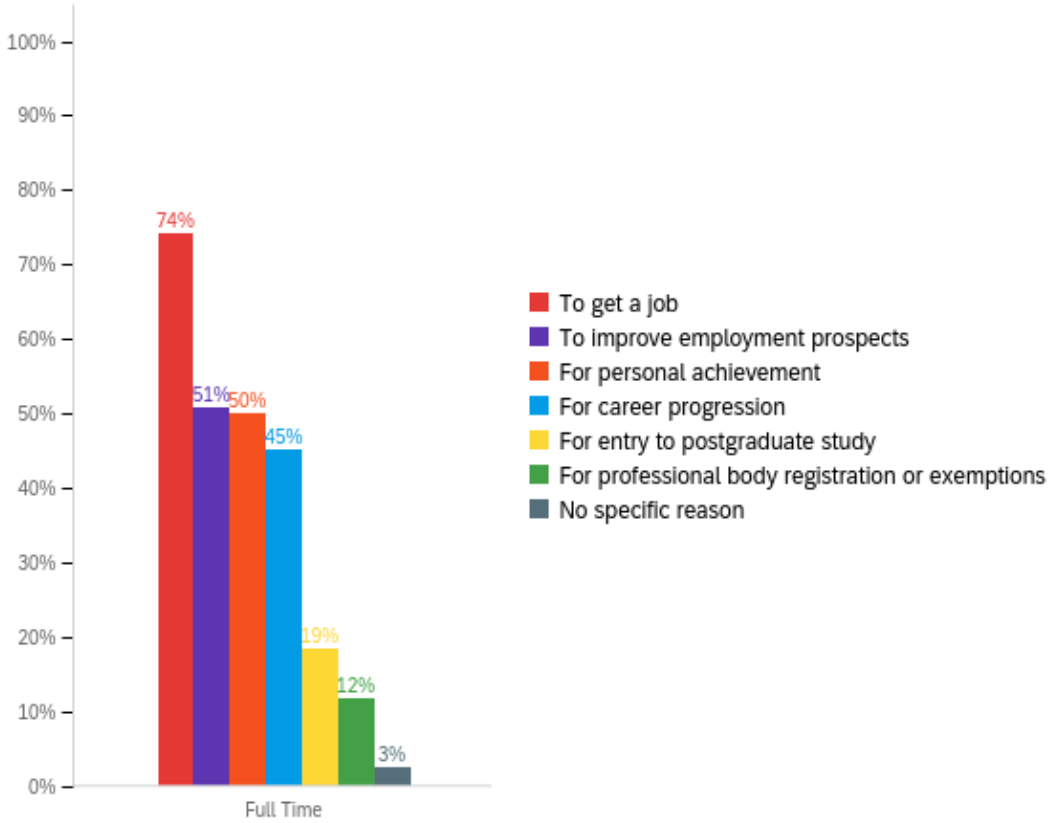


Chart 12: Fulltime Students Reasons for Gaining their Qualification n=271



A higher proportion of students who were studying online cited progression at work or career change as their reason for participation, with 71% stating career progression and only 22% stating that they were using the qualification to get a job. However, close to 60% of the online students also cited improved career prospects, suggesting that they were in employment but wanted to progress or change roles. This reflects the typical online student profile and is similar to reasons cited for study by interview participants. Interview data provided an insight into personal reasons for study, as well as those linked to employment and further study. Getting the degree was also very much linked to personal achievement, family pride and sometimes addressing a perceived personal shortcoming on the part of the student. The sub-theme of Degree as Achievement is presented in the following section.

6.3 Sub-Theme 2: Degree as Achievement

While 'getting' the degree suggests something akin to a product, completing an academic qualification degree was recognised as a challenging process and one for which there would be a sense of personal achievement. The quotes below from two participants who were studying online capture their expression of wanting the HE qualification, as distinct from needing it as a credential. The data is from a group interview where they were comparing reasons for studying.

> *'It doesn't make much difference to my career at this stage you know my earning potential or anything like that but I always wanted one so that's why I pursued it you know…but it's much easier to go to Dubai or Saudi or anything like that if you have a degree'. (Tom BOL7)*

> *'I always wanted one as well just to say I have a degree'. (Conor BOL7)*

Nine of the mature student interviewees either did not have the opportunity to participate in HE when they left second level education, or chose not to pursue that path, and the personal achievement associated with the getting the degree was important to them. Two students enthusiastically described the manifestation of this personal achievement by speaking about the image that they had of themselves as a successful graduate. This was portrayed as the familiar graduation scene and is a powerful depiction of the symbolism of the gown and the graduation ceremony in marking the achievement.

> *'I was looking forward to the photo with my mother and father and the oul hat'. (James APP8)*

> *'I want to go to (the college) and get a picture in my gown'. (Conor BOL7)*

One of the students had graduated from an IoT with a previous qualification on the ladder system and described the collective camaraderie among students and their families in general. In getting the picture in the gown, he describes his 'temporary mammy'.

I was there getting my photo taken and somebody else's mammy was like, fixing my stuff and I was like, oh my God, I'm nearly 40. Your son is about 22. I had a temporary mammy looking after me. (Conor BOL7)

An online student who returned to HE through choice, having already completed a degree as a full time student, noted a difference in her approach to study this time as a mature student, and referred to making up for a perceived lack of effort the first time around. This demonstrates that for some students, the relative importance that they place on education and achievement could be determined by their personal circumstances and context for learning at a point in time.

'I do enjoy learning because there's a lot of personal satisfaction involved in it for me as well and I just like to do it and in recent years I've done really good in academic work and courses that I've taken on and that's definitely different to what I was like when I was younger, and I suppose I've always kind of carried a little inferiority complex because like you know when I was younger I'd just scrape a pass and be happy with it because my mind wasn't in it properly, and I suppose I probably have something that I carry around with me that I feel like validated if I do a course and do well in it, probably not the healthiest but..'(Nora BOL7)

Their sense of achievement and pride in their academic performance was described as reward for effort and a factor in their continued commitment to their studies.

'…we are incredibly competitive. Now not so much competitive against each other, nearly against the grades if you know what I mean. Do not give me 50, do not give me 60, if you don't give me a first I don't want anything at all. The higher the grade the better, and it's not good enough, a pass is just not good enough, I hate that word 'I just want to pass' no you just don't want to pass'. (Olive BOL7)

'I got my award classification, I got a distinction…I was kind of pleased with that'. (John SOL6)

'If things are too easy it would be like, this is stupid, why am I doing this, that type of thing but I think it was a good balance because I did well but at the same time I didn't do too well either you know I had to put the work in. Yeah, I felt that my work paid off, put it like that, yeah'. (Nora BOL7)

Students who encountered challenges noted their sense of achievement when these were overcome. For example, a mature student who had completed the apprenticeship programme credited 'stubbornness' as a means of overcoming challenges and having a sense of achievement, as a result of a new way of thinking about taking on new challenges:

*'Maths was always a stickler when I was younger, but only because I never put the time to actually have a go...Probably well capable if I tried, but when you're younger it's different…my stubbornness got me through it..I've changed my way of thinking from doing the apprenticeship programme. I used to, I used to think in ways of this is something that I can't do and now it's this is something that I just can't do **yet**' (emphasis added) (James APP8)*

An online student noted personal satisfaction in achieving a goal, having overcome challenges with one module during the programme:

'I hated a lot of it, doing it but once it was coming together at the end, I actually was really pleased I did it.' (Conor BOL7)

The interview participants expressed a belief in the value of their participation in HE, and the associated benefits that it would bring for them, giving a high level of commitment to their end goals. As well as their own sense of achievement, interview participants spoke about the wider impact of that achievement on their families. One mature student, on completing final year,

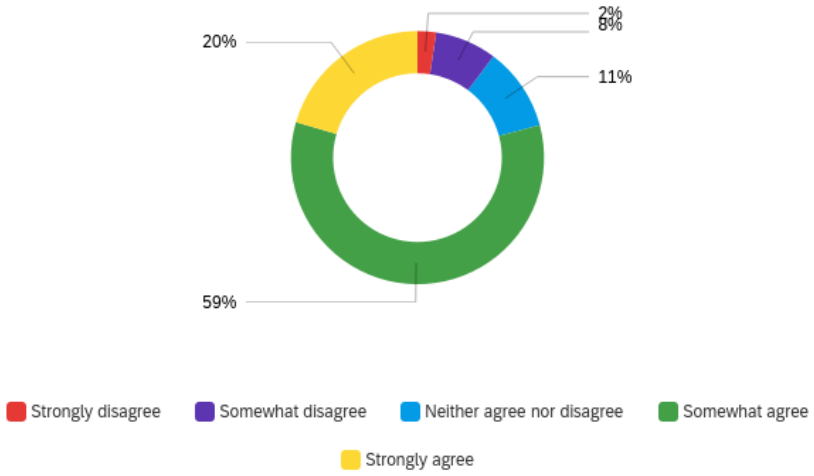
referred to being a role model for her family and children in achieving the degree. This quote demonstrates the wider perceived positive benefits of participation in Higher Education.

> *'I hadn't got a degree at the time, so I was trying to be the proof of the pudding, more so, to show that it can be done, it doesn't matter what age you are, you can go and get your degree and your education'. (Hannah APP8)*

6.4 Sub-Theme 3: Degree as Relevant

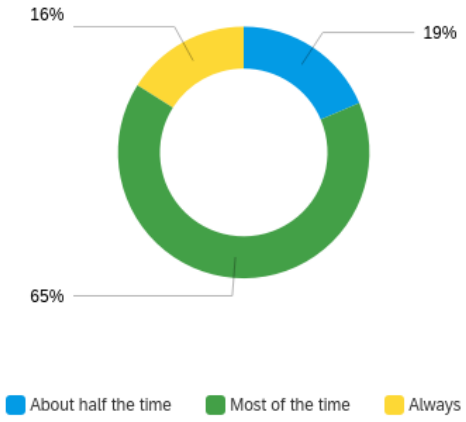
Degree as relevant represents the importance of perceived relevance of the programme in achieving the students' end goal. The influence of programme expectations is also captured in this sub-theme. It was found that perception of the value of the programme is a key influencer in decisions about persistence. The classroom was where the majority of student engagement with the Institute takes place, regardless of programme type. While students did not always perceive their programme as perfect, they often accepted this as part of the learning process and student experience. An important aspect of students' tolerance for what they considered to be any apparent shortcomings was the belief that the programme would serve their needs relating to their end goal. A substantial amount of research about programmes was conducted by some students, down to the level of detail of individual module content. Almost 80% of full-time students strongly or somewhat agreed that the content of their programme was close to their expectations.

Chart 13: Fulltime Students Programme Content Close to Expectations n=254



The majority of fulltime questionnaire respondents reported being interested in programme content most of the time or all of the time, as shown in the chart below.

Chart 14: Fulltime Students Interest in Topics Being Presented n=254



There were instances of programmes being perceived differently after students had commenced study, but this did not deter them from completing their programmes. A point of interest is that some of the interview research participants had left early from their programmes in other HE Institutes, which emphasises the importance of belief in having made the correct choice of programme as well as Institute. The majority of interview participants stated that they were studying to gain employment or to enhance employment prospects, and so they had

career-oriented end goals linked to the achievement of academic qualifications. Perceived programme relevance to future career was considered to be important to them.

Students who had clear ideas about what they wanted to do with their qualifications could identify that their programme was relevant to their end goals. Some of the full time on campus students articulated this very clearly, and were happy with their programme choice.

> *'Yeah, I'm loving it...' (Alex EC7)*

> *'…it's been a fantastic three years….the programme suited me perfectly…even if you do at the end of your level eight want to go in different areas, that you are suited for that. (David APP8)*

> *'I'm loving it so far, I'm delighted with my choice.' (Zoe BC6)*

For some of them, an element of choice was identified as important from the perspective of not being put into a specialism too early in the programme.

> *'I may as well have a little taste of these and just to get a little flavour of what all my options were and then I could kind of at the end of first year pick my stream. I actually ended up sticking with my original choice, but I was seriously drawn to one or two others. But the things I learned in it are I think invaluable….for me to plan projects and everything now has just been, it made everything probably twice as easy for me like having the experience in the other modules that I wouldn't have got if I'd gone to a different college'. (Alex EC7)*

During engagement with their programme and lecturers, some students found that they changed their views of what area they might specialise in, as explained by a full time student who was taking a broader view of her programme choices than she initially had intended.

'…it's funny because when I started, I was kind of thinking I'm doing this but I'm going to progress to the accounting course…But actually, since I've started doing some of the other modules like the management course, and speaking to some of the tutors who have actually worked in that field, I see myself being drawn to those areas'. (Zoe BC6)

Another full time student was considering a more specialised approach to her final year stream, with the encouragement of one of her lecturers.

'I was going to stick with general (Business) but I spoke to (lecturer)….he actually said to me I should look into the finance side because he said it looks like I'm really good on that as well. So, yeah, I was quite surprised before because I'm not really good with numbers but he actually said I did really well'. (Sarah BC7)

The apprenticeship students were already in employment and combining this with study. One of the apprentices explained the advantage of this type of programme from his perspective.

'I'm obviously working and studying at that same time; when I do have the degree then I'm not going into the workforce with no experience. And I think that is one of the most daunting things to people nowadays'. (David APP8)

For an online student, who wanted to upskill for work, there was a direct link between what she was learning on the programme and enhanced credibility in the workplace, and she explained it with a comment that was made by her employer about this.

'Okay well you're managing three or four people now, so you do have a team so I think you know the fact that you're doing modules such as (module X) and things like that, it does bring more credibility to you as a manager.' (Nora BOL7)

From the students own perspective, she confirmed that she was

'…coming away from the course with like a good baseline in economics and also a good baseline in management. 'So, I definitely think the course did its job for me, you know'. (Nora BOL7)

A final year apprenticeship student could also see a tangible difference in employment, based on having completed her qualification.

'I'm more involved in the actual business because of having the qualification. So, I'm signing off on products and things like that. So, you know, it has made a difference'. (Claire APP8)

Similarly, an online student who was not a finance specialist, but who needed an appreciation of finance, explained how programme content would enhance her skills and give her a better appreciation of information that was being reviewed for decision-making:

'Most people that are in my situation sort of learn on the job and they'd have a very kind of superficial level of understanding of accounts and they'd just be looking at the bottom line figures and going, 'Okay that figure looks positive so that's fine, I'll approve these accounts', whereas one of the modules on the level 7 was the one of financial management with (lecturer) and that actually – I will actually be able to apply the stuff I did with (lecturer) to the accounts'. (Nora BOL7)

In contrast, another online student found some aspects of his programme challenging, and parts of it seemed to lack relevance initially. This could be considered as a type of 'peripheral content' – designed to develop and enhance academic skills - for example, academic writing, report writing, presentations. Although they were not specifically related to the 'core' components of the programme, the student acknowledged that it took time for the relevance of that module to become apparent.

'Oh whoa, I didn't count on this' and I think four other members on the course with us on our first lectures, on our first lectures with… oh gosh, communications, we thought 'Jesus, are we here as reporters?....I wasn't on my own to question myself. A number of us did and we thought 'We'll give it a little bit more and just see if things change up a bit, or are we all of the time going to be looking at communications?' and we thought 'It's got to change. This can't be it. It ***really*** *can't be it.' And things did start to change a little bit. Some things started to be getting more interesting'. (John SOL6)*

There is a lot encapsulated in this interview extract; it provides an insight into the importance of students 'giving time' to a programme and not making judgements too quickly about whether or not it will be of interest or relevant. His response indicates that there is probably a window of opportunity for first year students in particular to make a decision about the value of their programme. Some Final year students also found aspects of their programme lacking in relevance. A student who had to complete reflective diaries, expressed the collective frustrations of several students.

'I think reflective work is so important and I really, really like that about the course. But when it turns from being reflective to a copy and paste kind of arbitrary task then it's kind of null and void anyway…I do appreciate their purpose I suppose but the frequency of them being every week was challenging and I think unnecessary'. (Mary APP8)

Another final year student spoke about time spent on tasks that had no clear relevance to him, but acknowledged that these may have been more relevant for other students on the programme.

'I suppose there is a few kind of parts of the course, maybe some of the content which... maybe felt like more like a filler type of content'. (James APP8)

While acknowledging the value of what they were required to do, the way in which they had to complete the work was considered a challenge and shows that they had given consideration to the purpose of the coursework, but that it had not fully achieved its purpose in the way that they would have expected. Despite some aspects of their programmes being considered irrelevant or of little perceived value, this did not deter students from completing their programmes, as this was minor in comparison to the overall programme experience. An interesting aspect of the findings regarding programme content was the experience of the online students who had significant amounts of workplace learning and knowledge in a particular area. For some of them, they noted that the theoretical components of the modules that they studied were more difficult than expected because they thought that they already had a good understanding of their area of expertise and that the qualification would 'legitimise that experience'. Challenges were reported by some who could not envisage using some of the programme content, because they already had significant work experience and business knowledge.

> *'….the age I am and where I've got, I've never needed to know this. And now I have to learn all this off that I will never use. That kind of thing, I think, that used to frustrate me more than anything. Whereas the younger ones were probably thinking 'Oh, this is great and I'm going to need this…I just thought 'This is such a waste of time….that's only because I've been in the business so long'. (Hannah APP8)*

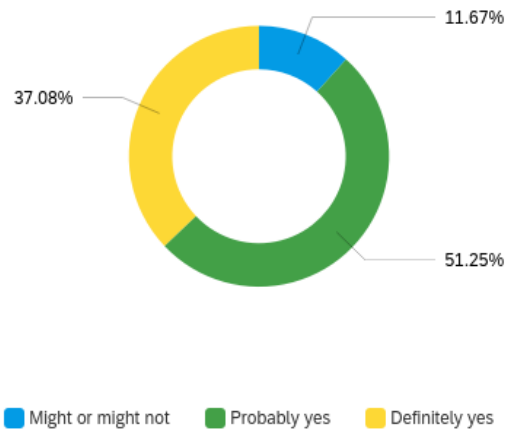
In contrast an online student who also had significant work experience noted that the formal qualification would be a form of external validation of his expertise, but that it had also enhanced his knowledge and that he had learned something new in the process. This point was echoed by another online student who drew attention to the difference between tacit knowledge and academic knowledge, noting that academic knowledge was a means of confirming tacit knowledge.

'…it's really legitimising my experience, it's the way I look at it…to be honest I have learned stuff as well you know I've learnt a bit on the financial side and a lot on the economics side you know, which I had overviews of but I never really officially learned it you know. (Tom BOL7)

'You might think you know it all but like you know you have to kind of prove it and not even you know it all but you know you have the experience and the knowhow but it's always good to back it up'. (Conor BOL7)

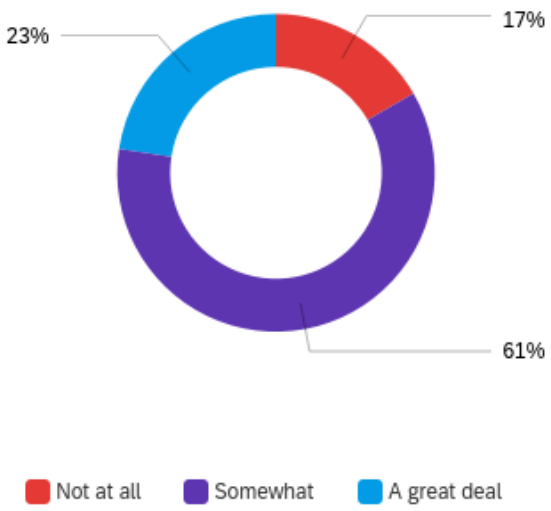
More than two thirds of the fulltime questionnaire respondents stated that they believed that what they were learning as part of their programmes was likely relevant to their future career plans, as shown in the chart below.

Chart 15: Relevance of What is Learned to Future Career (Full time students) n=253



As shown in the following chart, almost 80% of fulltime students stated that their perception of their qualification had changed somewhat or a great deal since beginning their programme, but it is not possible to identify definitive reasons for this, or in what way it changed, from the questionnaire data alone; 49% of online students perceptions of their qualification had changed somewhat since commencing study, with 19% of total respondents stating that perception of their qualification had not changed at all.

Chart 16: Fulltime Students Perceptions of Qualification n=270



6.5 Sub-Theme 4: Degree as Risk and Investment

Embarking on a degree is not without risk and it requires finance and time to be invested. This sub-theme captures aspects of the 'ladder' of progression through stages of qualification of the NFQ, and the features of this manner of progression that were considered to be important to students. These findings are from interview data and are most relevant for the student types to which this feature was most applicable, namely:

- Level 6 and 7 Online students (some of whom were intending to progress to Level 8)
- Level 6 and 7 Campus students (some of whom were intending to progress to Level 8)

For on campus students a Higher Certificate, Ordinary Degree and the option of Add-on programmes provided an alternative way of completing their qualification, and provided a level of comfort in completing their programme in stages rather than having been faced with a 'full degree' from the outset. This approach to study is described by an on campus student who had just completed the level 7 ordinary degree qualification.

'I started at the level 6 first and then I did the add on which is now the level 7, just finished it and I've applied for the add on level 8 now…the only break you had was the Summer holidays but I felt it was easier that way because then you're not going straight into it in one big bundle so you're preparing yourself slowly and I felt that was helpful, that was much more better'. (Sarah BC7)

There was perceived to be less risk involved with this approach as well as advantages associated with the flexibility of achieving an ordinary level degree, with optional Honours add-on. Similar points were made by level 7 campus and online students. This approach provides scope for employment opportunities to be pursued without losing out on an academic qualification if this were to happen before the final year of study.

'…getting a degree behind me and maybe an honours degree afterwards…originally, I was going to do a level eight from the beginning but I decided on the level seven because one, if I do okay in it and I pass I automatically get offered the level eight. It will give me that option maybe with a level seven if I got the job offer and if not, I can always keep going with my level eight as well'. (Alex EC7)

This was echoed by another level 7 on campus student.

'I chose level 7 is because I wasn't sure really what I want to do after the three years. I think I'll probably do the level 8, do the add on year, but we'll see after I finish the three years where I am'. (Peter BC7)

'…there's like several exit points where if you don't want to continue at the moment maybe you don't have the time, maybe your energy is spent but you can still exit with a certificate or a diploma or even like you know the ordinary degree so that's great as well because like I mean if you're in University X and you drop out after year three well that's it, I mean you've nothing to show'. (Nora BOL7)

An interesting point was made by a level 7 on campus student about the perceptions of the ladder system in comparison to opting for a level 8 programme from the outset, based on relatively recent school experiences. This highlights a potential issue relating to credentialism where the route to a qualification might be taken into account.

> *'…(in my school) it's all about level 8s, level 8s, level 8s….only when I was applying like to do this course two-years ago was when I realised a level 7 is basically, like nearly the same….like if you're someone who is unsure I just don't see what the difference is between doing your three years and having an option to leave if you want rather than people doing the four-years and they're sick of it after three years and they have no choice but to do the last year….I think that is kind of a whole, like an Irish thing where you just feel like, it's like the one path to do well, you know when there's so many other options out there you know?... there's a couple in my class that this year they won't bother doing the add on but like at least now they'll still leave with some sort of a degree'. (Orla BC7)*

An online student combining work with part-time study noted advantages of the staged approach rather than committing to four-years of full-time study (which would also mean leaving work), and a similar point was made by another online student, in the quote below.

> *'It was good that it could be broken down into a two-year Higher Certificate and then you could go on and do a level 7 and then go on and do a level 8, it's nice to have the choice because going back to college full time, I didn't know if I was going to really gel to it and I said, there's no way I feel like committing to four-years you know where I could do two and come out with nothing you know that way, so I feel this gave me that qualification, the standalone one which I can have on my CV, you know as well, Higher Certificate, a degree (in X) at level 7…you know'. (Conor BOL7)*

'..they didn't specify whether I needed an ordinary or an honours degree. So, I thought, well I'll start with this one (Level 7) and see how it goes'. (Olive BOL7).

This meant that the student would not be doing more than was necessary in order to achieve a career goal. An additional advantage of the ladder system was described as the flexibility offered by transferability of qualifications in the IoT structure, particularly where students had completed discrete qualifications such as a Higher Certificate or Ordinary degree. An online student who had completed the level 6 and 7 programme and was progressing to the level 8 online programme noted that some peers had adopted this approach.

'…not all of the students had come through (the case Institute) for all the steps. There were actually quite a few of my classmates that had done their level 6 and level 7 at other institutions. And so, they were piecing their degree together from the different ITs'. (Olive BOL7)

Nora, who had previously studied in the case Institute and who had returned to complete another qualification online, had completed her original qualification in stages in two IoTs, explaining that she had transferred to a different IoT because of re-location for employment.

'…it was a night time course and it just suited me better because I'd been offered a job at that time in Dublin and I was able to start the job as well as finish off that honours degree in business studies'. (Nora BOL7)

The ability to transfer from one IoT to another, and to take advantage of online provision, minimises the risk of losing the benefit of credits already earned and still allows students to build on their qualifications by progressing through the stages of the NFQ. The investment of time and financial resources is presented in the following section.

6.5.1 Investment of Time

Workload was cited as a significant challenge of getting the degree, particularly for students who were combining work and study, either as apprentices or online learners. Interview data

revealed that students on all programmes reported having an understanding of their own role in the learning process prior to registration, and that they knew that they would need to devote time to study inside and outside of the classroom. While they were aware of the need to give up their own time and that their programme would require effort, in some cases, the workload was greater than what they had anticipated, requiring more time to be spent on study. Despite the fact that the apprentices can apply their learning in the workplace, and part of their qualification comes from work-based learning, there was still a significant amount of time required for private study and coursework completion. This was considered a challenge by some, but it was evident that they were prepared to invest the time necessary for study.

> *'you're kind of catching up on it at the weekends, in the evenings, whatever. And obviously when there's times of case studies and stuff like that or assignments, it's quite challenging'. (David APP8)*

> *'My main challenge was procrastinating too much. The age old problem of, you know, I'll get it later on. I'm kind of a binge worker, I suppose. I can't do little bits. I have to sit and properly have a go at something'. (James APP8)*

Two contrasting views of time commitment and sacrifice were presented by online students.

> *'I personally need to dedicate a lot of time to make sure that I reach the levels that I want, you know that way. So it might come easier to some people but I couldn't just wing it and assume everything will be okay…you had to put the time in you know I guarantee a minimum of like at least 10 hours a week, 10 like maybe not so much at the start you know once you're in and running it like you know between project work, revision'. (Conor BOL7)*

This comment illustrates a desire to do well and in the context of the interview, this student expressed a desire to reach the highest possible standard for himself, something that had surprised him after he had commenced the programme. He noted giving up time for socialising

and spending large amounts of time at weekends on coursework. In contrast, another online student explained a different approach.

> *'I find out what is the minimum requirement because I said in my head, I wanted a degree but I said there's no point in killing myself because I'm coming what, I'm [older] so where's it going to get me, so I was a bit of a minimalist on what I needed to do'. (Tom BOL7)*

Interestingly, this student subsequently commented that he perhaps would have put in more effort if he had thought about the award classification, but that as he was progressing on to a Level 8 programme, there was time to make up for this with the Level 8 award. It is important to note that while this student had said he could have put in more effort, he still described a significant amount of personal time invested in study, coursework and attendance at classes. This demanding workload was described by other online students who were combining work and study.

> *'I was sort of warned that even though you know it's a course that's done online that it was still going to be fairly rigorous in terms of assessment and that you know I have done other online courses since I did the Leaving Cert and that was one thing that kind of stayed with me from doing other online courses is that even if you do something online, or even at night time sometimes the same amount of work has to go into it that a full time student would do'. (Nora BOL7)*

> *'I would sacrifice any God's amount of social activity to get it [the degree]..I hadn't a Christmas since I started in the IoT. I take Christmas day off, I take Stephen's Days off but that's it, that's it and sorry, Christmas Eve'. (Eileen BOL7)*

John highlighted the challenges posed in working and studying, describing the transition from work to study that many of the online students have to make for lectures that are delivered in

the evenings. The student described a typical day, and the importance of family support in providing dinner while in online classes.

> *'you're running and switching off and switching on at the same time, you know? 'I leave home, it could be five, five o'clock in the morning, and I'm trying to get back in then, I come in then at 6:30 in the evening and I get a quick wash and just straight down in front of the computer, and then I'm getting my books and I'm trying to write…it's my wife, she's so patient, and she'd give me something. I'd be eating here at the table, and I'm trying to write and read a book...' (John SOL6)*

Another online student adopted a different approach to dinner while logging into classes.

> *'…now I didn't know that this was going to work out so well, you know when you're coming home here you can put on, even if you're rushing a bit late, put on your lecture, throw the dinner on, you know what I mean, it's the little things but like I know you shouldn't be cooking your dinner while you're at class'. (Conor BOL7)*

6.5.2 Financial Investment

Online students, who are categorised as part-time students, very often pay full fees for their programme, even in cases where the total programme credits are equivalent to a full-time on campus programme i.e. 60 credits over an academic year. There is no State grant for this type of study. Some students are sponsored by their employers who pay their fees, others are not. While many students face financial pressures during study, the online students often expressed this in terms of investment, and as something that required a return, which created its own pressures.

> *'….some of us, myself included, are self-funded, and there's nothing out there for us apart from lodging our receipts back to the taxman and we'll get I think*

about 10% of it back or something like that, but so you've invested, this is a massive investment, you know on ***yourself*** *(emphasis added)…you've already got your own pressures to try and get something, a return for this…'(John SOL6)*

A similar sentiment regarding educational financial investment was expressed by another online student.

'I'm paying a couple of thousand for this out of my own pocket for this course…education and your house, are the two, I suppose biggest things in your life...'. (Eileen BOL7)

Another linked financial investment and time away from family.

'we're paying our hard-earned dollars for this and giving you (The Institute) the time that we could have been giving our family'. (Olive BOL7)

An on campus mature student coming into HE for the first time also cited financial investment and challenges, having left full time employment to pursue full time study.

'The finance was a shock to the system too. I went from being in full-time employment to being a student with no income and watching the balance kind of quickly going down and down. You know, that was a bit of a worry. But in the beginning, but after that you're kind of like, well you know what, you just start thinking bigger picture….I don't care if I'm living out of tins of beans for the next three years because I have my goal and that's what's kind of important to me now…'. (Alex EC7)

This illustrates the student's commitment to the longer-term goal and a recognition of the fact that while there will be difficulties in the short term, the reward will be in achieving the degree in the longer term, and allow a career change for him. All of these comments highlight the

importance that students placed on ensuring that the investment of fees was not wasted, and that these fees represented a significant investment for the students.

6.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the factors that were found to be important to students in making decisions about pursuing their HE qualification. Students are likely to persist to continue with their programme where they can see that it is relevant to their end goals, which can be personal, professional or both. The degree represents a significant investment and students will make judgements about where and how to study, as well as what to study. They will be faced with varying options and the extent to which they can make choices about where to study will depend on their personal circumstances and end goals. The following chapter presents the findings about their choices and experiences in the case institute under the theme Navigating the Higher Education Environment.

Chapter 7: Findings Part Two – Theme 2 – Navigating the Higher Education Environment

7.0 Introduction

This theme, the second of three, captures the skills required to successfully operate in and navigate through the Higher Education (HE) environment, as expressed by participants in the case institute. This theme draws predominantly on the interview data, which provided an insight into participants' pre-entry perceptions about their level of preparedness for HE, as well as their stated views about the ease with which they believed they fitted into the HE environment. Students' research about the institute and factors that were important to them are included in this theme. This theme includes perceived fit and relationships with peers in HE and the ability to manage academic work. The chapter begins with a brief description of the theme and sub-themes. This is followed by a vignette that encapsulates a 'fish out of water' scenario in navigating HE, and the presentation of the different aspects of the sub-themes.

7.1 Theme: Navigating the Higher Education Environment

Tinto (1975, 1993) believes that to persist in higher education and to succeed to programme completion[33] or to have the belief that this is possible, requires academic ability and certain personal attributes[34], which include social skills. Bourdieu (1984, 1988) links these attributes and background to cultural and social capital and habitus, which will influence ambitions and access to the HE field. Therefore, a students' attributes, skills and ability, or capital and habitus, determines to some extent, their familiarity with how the HE system operates, how easily they might adapt to the culture and practices in HE, while developing and understanding of what is required of them to succeed. This theme specifically looks at students' decisions about studying in the case institute, and their perceptions, knowledge, and expectations about

[33] Persisting or intending to persist to the end of a programme of study and complete the qualification.
[34] Individual attributes are a component of Tinto's model and linked to Bourdieu's capital and habitus. Attributes of interest in this case study include age, self-efficacy, family participation in HE and educational attainment prior to entering HE.

the HE environment in general and the case institute in particular. It includes the attributes, skills and attainment of students prior to registering in HE, and the impact that these had on their perceived and actual ability to navigate the HE environment. The attributes discussed are age, family background, prior attainment and self-efficacy. Interview findings suggest that age, prior attainment and time elapsed since being in a formal learning environment will influence students' perceptions of their HE journey, and their own perceived level of preparedness for student life. In terms of commitment to the Institute, a number of factors were found to be important to students in considering their persistence decisions. The findings from interviews revealed that, for some students who had completed at least one year of their programme, they had considered transferring to an alternative Institute, while others had never considered leaving early. Interview data that showed that different factors influenced participants perceptions of the extent to which they felt prepared for the HE environment and student life. Interviews provided more detailed insight into perceptions of preparedness, with an emphasis on the mature students. In considering these findings, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of student life, and preparedness for this, could mean different things to different people. Student life was interpreted by interview participants in terms of academic work, assessments, social interactions, understanding academic requirements and so on. Interview findings have shown that different types[35] of student (those studying in different modes) have different perceptions of what student life means, and indeed whether or not they even considered themselves as students. However, the concept of student life is considered to be appropriate for comparison because it encapsulates what this means to the student and is considered to be a reflection on ***their*** student life; it therefore does allow for variation in interpretation of what student life is.

This theme is comprised of 3 sub-themes, which are described in the following table.

[35] Student types as per description of research participants in Chapters 4 and 5.

Sub-Theme	Description of Sub Theme
Choosing the Institute	Describes factors taken into account by participants prior to registering in the case institute, their subsequent experiences in navigating the HE environment, and making decisions about remaining in the institute.
Prior Experience of Formal Learning	The influence of attainment of academic qualifications in any formal learning environment at any level and the length of time since the participant had been in a formal learning environment for example, school, PLC, another HEI. Participants stated views about how well prepared they believed they were for student life and the HE environment.
Fitting and Belonging	Perceptions regarding how well students believed they would fit into the academic environment, and whether or not they believed that there was a need to fit in. Predominantly a 'social' fitting in and perception of the need or opportunity for social interaction. It also captures students' sense of belonging or identification with any aspect of Institute life.

Table 14: Navigating the Higher Education Environment Sub Themes

7.2 Sub-Theme 1: Choosing the Institute

Making decisions about where to study will have an impact on the potential relationship that a student perceives with their institute of study. Knowledge about the Institute could be considered to be a form of capital in navigating the HE environment. Some students acquired knowledge of the case institute from having spoken to other students or family members about their experiences and felt confident that they would succeed in that environment. This created a level of confidence and self-efficacy that meant that the student was coming in with a positive view of their ability to succeed in that environment and this helped them to bring a level of assurance and confidence in their own abilities, even though they had not yet experienced the Institute for themselves. Approximately half of interview participants had prior knowledge of the case institute and were influenced by the positive experiences that other students reported. Many of these influencers were family or extended family members; sometimes the student experience was 'observed' in the family environment and in some cases, information was sought specifically from someone whose opinion the student valued. The type of information that was most valued by students, based on the opinions of knowledgeable others, was about

the approachability of lecturers, class size and teaching, supports and general facilities and resources.

'I know people that have gone to the Institute and especially my family as well, and they rate the college, and they just recommended it to me'. (Alex EC7)

'I did my research, I knew about it and I was planning to go there because of the location but I still asked other people who had studied there what it was like and I found out about the course as well. It was important to me to do that'. (Maeve BC7)

'…my (relative), had great reviews about the (Discipline X) course and how good it was and how much he was learning and how much it applied to his job'. (Peter BC7)

' A family member was a student of the institute and he couldn't praise them enough…he had a great experience of the Institute, he loved it, absolutely loved it, the supports and the lecturers and everything, he said it's just an amazing college so I agree with him. So, no regrets, thankfully' (Eileen BOL7)

'…a lot of my friends actually went there for college, and things like that. And I have been to open days and things like that, in school when you go in fifth year and leaving cert. So, I had been in the college and everything, I always thought it was a really nice college. But yeah, both my parents actually studied there as well' (Jane APP8)

'…a lot of people that I went to school with and even beyond because and they went the IT and I would have, you know, talked with them and basically they would always have highly praised it and I've only ever heard good things about it. It is a very reputable Institute' (James APP8)

One participant was returning to the Institute to complete an additional qualification after some time away and cited previous positive experiences as one of the factors influencing the selection of the case institute for online study.

> *'I actually studied in the Institute many, many years ago as a full time student…I always had fond memories of my time in the Institute and you know, I always enjoyed the courses that I'd done and yeah so I think it was because I was familiar with the college that I decided yes, I'll do this online level 7 degree with the Institute again'. (Nora BOL7)*

7.2.1 Geographical Proximity and Cost

On campus students often elected to study in the case institute because of geographical proximity and convenience, where there was a suitable programme of study available to them. All else being equal, it made sense to attend an institute that was close to them and that allowed them to stay at home and commute daily, or to allow them to take or keep part-time work, or because they had family commitments. Cost was also cited as a factor in decision making.

> *'…it was like a second home to me and my home-home is only half an hour away' (Alex EC7)*

> *'I live in Town X so it is convenient for me' (Maeve BC7)*

> *'I did not see the point in going somewhere else do to a similar course when I could do it in Town X. It is cheaper and it is convenient for me' (Orla BC7)*

7.2.2 Because it was an IoT..or not

Some on campus participants had specifically opted for the features that they considered important in an IoT, such as work placement and alignment of programmes with the world of work, whereas for another, the IoT status was not a factor in decision making.

'..the reason I chose, I think, an Institute of Technology instead of a University was because of a lot of the subjects are practical and it's more personal' (Peter BC7)

I looked at the facilities at (the case institute), it looked fantastic and the course, I looked at all the modules, everything it offered and I thought that's fantastic business fundamentals that I need as a…manager. I then thought everything else, I could pick up practically but the theory was what I really needed, so that was what made me choose the case institute. (Ronan BC7)

'…the fact that it was an IT wasn't so much a factor' (Alex EC7)

The opportunity to gain access to the case institute on the basis of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) was found to be beneficial for part -time online students who wanted to achieve a degree (Ordinary level or Honours). One student gained advanced entry at level 7, which mean that there was no requirement to complete the level 6 programme, and the student subsequently decided to continue to progress to the level 8 programme:

'I went straight into level 7. I'll be honest I did chance my arm at level 8 first you know, but I didn't, I got the level 7 instead you know…mine was just for personal achievement you know, and I said all along… I'm just doing level 7 that's it, I'll have a degree, feck it and then I was thinking the last few weeks, ah Jesus I'll just be bored, I'll just do it (Level 8)…. (Tom BOL7)

Some of the interview participants were registered on programmes that were unique to the case institute, and in some cases, selected the case institute by default as there was no other option for them to pursue their particular programme, for example, participants from the degree based apprenticeship. Some of these participants had no prior knowledge of the case institute, whereas others did.

'…the brochure there saying it's not a big college….I remember driving up the first time and I was like oh my God, this is massive' (Emma APP8)

'…I knew (the institute) was an IT, and its stature, yeah definitely, I knew what it was' (Hannah APP8)

Some of the online programmes are unique because of their mode of delivery. The same qualifications may be available in a different mode of delivery in other HEIs, but they would often (pre Covid19 pandemic) require on campus attendance. The benefits of online provision in the case institute in comparison to face-to-face classes in the evening were explained by Conor.

'For me to travel there in the evening time from work was (town X) and it would have been the most awkward, like just really awkward, I'd have to pay for parking when I got there, do the couple of hours and then make my way all the way home, getting in at 10:00 or 10:30…(Conor BOL7).

While the number of questionnaire respondents was small for online students, 47% of the 64 respondents stated that their programme was unique to the case institute. The questionnaire data revealed that the case institute was the first choice of 74% of fulltime students. Over half of those respondents stated that they were confident (agreed or somewhat agreed) that they had made the right choice in registering in the IoT.

There is evidence in the interview data in particular, to suggest that convenience, whether in terms of physical proximity, or online provision, will influence the choice of institute. Gaining information about the experiences of others and doing their own research was important, even in scenarios where geographical location and personal circumstances meant that a student more than likely would opt for the case institute as a place of study, having decided to pursue an HE qualification.

7.2.3 Considering alternative study options

All of the interview participants who were not in their final year of study stated that they were committed to continuing and completing their qualification in the case institute. Similarly, questionnaire data revealed that 95% of all respondents stated that they were committed to completing their qualification in the case Institute. This does not necessarily mean that they had not considered leaving or were fully satisfied with their experience in the case institute, but nonetheless they were committed to remaining in the case institute to complete their programmes. Where students had considered leaving the institute before completing their programme, reasons varied. Full time on campus students stated reasons for considering leaving without completing their qualification were financial reasons and employment opportunities. These factors may be linked as financial pressures will potentially force students to leave their studies to take up employment. 11% of fulltime students stated that they were committed to completing their qualification, but in another HEI. The reasons for this, and any subsequent decision that they may have made, cannot be determined from the questionnaire. Among the online questionnaire respondents, a smaller proportion of students said that they had considered leaving the Institute, and while the sample is relatively small, the most often cited reason was personal and family reasons. Having an insight into the pressures of family life and study from the interviews, this is perhaps not surprising.

Once registered in the institute, interview data revealed that several fulltime and online students actively researched alternative Institutes for study but made the decision to remain in the case institute to complete their programme, thereby committing to the institute. In doing so, they acknowledged that no institute is perfect, and that one element of dissatisfaction could simply be replaced with another if they were to transfer elsewhere. Reasons for considering transferring to another HEI were based on dissatisfaction with academic and social aspects of the case institute. One of the online students, on expressing a level of dissatisfaction about some aspects of teaching, chose to stay to continue with an add-on year, believing that an alternative Institute would not necessarily be better. His rationale was summed up as follows.

'…our final engagement I suppose was, moving forward to level seven, was we might as well stick with the Devil we know than the Devil we don't, and that's not a great way either to go forward….one of the chaps that's doing the course with us, he said 'Look' you know, and he's done say University X or one of the universities and he said 'Look' he said, 'It's not always green on the other side either.' (John SOL6)

One on campus student explained that he had considered transferring to another HE Institute to complete a similar programme because he felt that he may have had a better opportunity for social interactions and had more in common with his peers. He noted that he was likely to stay in the Institute for final year as he had already completed two-years and was concerned about the transfer of his existing credits to another programme, even where it seemed very similar.

'it's an extra twenty minutes a day on the commute and they have the same course so its been something, something in the back of my mind but I haven't really committed to it… I'm just worried about complications about changing it and you know having the same knowledge with another course, so that would be, eh, that would be a big factor to it. It would be for academic reasons or just career ambition rather than the desire to stay in (the case institute)… I went from thinking maybe I could do a PhD in (the case institute) to thinking let me just get through this year, you know. '(Ronan BC7)

Where external pressures were not the reason for perhaps 'forcing' a student to leave the case institute, but that they considered it as a matter of their own choosing, it would appear that an element of Institute familiarity and existing investment of time and credits earned, could influence their decision to continue with their studies in the Institute, despite any perceived shortcomings. Familiarity provided a level of comfort and predictability, thereby lowering the risk of making the transition to another unknown or unfamiliar HEI, where a better experience

was not guaranteed. In other words, the grass was not proven to be sufficiently greener to make the move where the programme was still considered relevant, and the students perceived a risk of the unknown and a potential loss of their existing learning investment.

7.3 Sub-Theme 2:- Prior Experience of Formal Learning

This sub-theme is introduced with the vignette below.

> *'..my first exam, I held it in City X and I was completely blown away. I… I… I don't know how can I put it? It's, maybe it's not a great analogy and probably a wrong analogy, but I see myself as working class. So, I'm a working-class individual and I feel as if I'm after walking in on the royals…I just…I felt so out of my depth...and then one of the guys I was on the course with…he came in and I thought 'Oh thank God for that.' He is around the same age as me, so I felt OK... where are you sitting? I was overwhelmed and he was overwhelmed. It was very, very overwhelming….we were lost in the environment we were in, and in one sense it almost distracted us from what we were actually physically there for….I certainly lost my train of thought, and I spoke to (Name) afterwards and he had lost his train of thought…now we were focused, and the two of us actually stayed that night in a hotel near the exam hall. We wanted to switch off from everything and just focus…..it was the first time in my entire* ***lifetime*** *sitting to an exam. I'd seen an exam hall on a TV. So, I'm now meeting like the stars, which is funny… it sounds funny, but it was so daunting. It really was….there's a touch of fear creeps in and you're battling yourself'. (John SOL6)*

The above account of an exam hall experience was that of an online mature student who had not been in a formal learning environment for many years, and who had never sat an exam. While the student had competed a year of online study at the time of sitting the exam, this account of the exam hall experience demonstrates the fact that there are new challenges to

be faced in different scenarios for students, and some of these can arise in unexpected situations. The comparison with the Royals and the TV stars provides a very powerful analogy that perfectly sums up the level of 'mis-fit' that the student experienced in the HE context of the exam hall. It also highlights the extent to which a student can feel that they are in uncharted and unfamiliar territory, and their ability to overcome this challenge. Interview findings suggested that prior experience of formal learning was important to students in terms of their initial ability to navigate the HE environment. This was manifested in terms of time since having been in any formal educational environment and the level at which they had previously studied. Some of this is also linked to age, in that some students who were more mature had been away from a formal educational environment for longer, with no previous experience of HE. Interview participants who commenced their programmes with more recent formal academic qualifications were found to perceive a higher level of familiarity with the academic environment than those who had little or no direct or indirect experience of HE. A reported advantage for students who had more recently been in formal education, or who had prior knowledge of the HE environment, was found to be that they were familiar with academic language, rules, terminology and systems, and they acknowledged this. Students who had already participated in HE e.g. those who had recently completed a degree and were embarking on another, reported relatively few challenges in understanding the HE environment and language, and what was expected, compared to students who had not been in a formal educational environment for a long period of time, or who had no formal experience of HE.

> *'…we have done a degree…we would be kind of up to date with the Harvard referencing and the kind of you know, what's needed and stuff and we have that experience of you know doing maybe a big thesis or project at the end of our years or something'. (Emma APP8)*

This is in contrast to Conor, a mature student coming to HE after a long time of not being in formal learning environment and with no prior experience of HE. In this case, he/she

expressed the importance of the role of the Institute in helping students who are new to the HE environment in how to engage with the most fundamental aspects of study such as:

> *'…how to use the systems in (The Institute) like the library and these things …a one two-hour lecture at the start of the level 7 would be invaluable to a lot of people'. (Conor BOL7)*

Students who had previously been in HE, but who had returned after a significant period of time away also found challenges in navigating a new environment. As described by a questionnaire respondent (a mature student), who echoed the need for support in the transition to the Institute's systems. Their comment below also illustrates how doubt about a decision to participate in HE can manifest.

> *'I found the changed learning environment very challenging when I returned to (the IoT) in September. Although I sought support I really didn't get any. I had difficulties logging on to moodle and getting into lectures and at times wondered if I really had made the right decision to return. I would suggest that there should be a proper maybe two day induction for people who have been out of education for a long time (it is 33 since I graduated) and I felt after paying my fees that I was completely adrift'. (Questionnaire Respondent 1)*

A first year on campus student sums up the challenge facing her as a mature student who had been out of a formal education environment for longer than peers, and explained that the first year of the programme had provided some time to adjust to the HE environment and develop the required skills, despite it being all online during the Covid19 pandemic.

> *'..it has definitely given me the tools I needed anyway to get myself organised. So, I know now what I need to do and how much time you know, I need to give myself to do different things. And I've learned you know, how much study time I need…I didn't realise there was going to be that much, you know, for me anyways because I'm older and I haven't just come out of school, you know.*

Some of my peers are probably used to it, they've just done their Leaving Cert so they were well able to study. But for me definitely, I had to put in extra work, I had to work a little bit harder'. (Zoe BC6)

This experience demonstrates the additional work required by students who feel less familiar with the academic environment than those who perceive themselves to be more prepared as a result of more recent experience in a similar type of environment.

Similarly, John explained the difference that he perceived between himself and other students on his online programme, explaining how additional challenges arose for him as the programme progressed.

'Some things become extremely challenging, and some members of the class that I was with, who had previously done college were aware of how things are delivered, and they understood how to engage with a lot of this – I didn't. I hadn't a clue. I'd never…the only time I was ever in college was delivering to it, working…. I went into the campus. I'm still not with the terminology. We went in for a kind of a meet and greet I suppose, and then some lectures held in the hall, or whatever you call it – the lecture room.' (John SOL6)

Regardless of how well-prepared students believed that they were, they still had to adapt to the specific programme requirements and a new HE environment. For example, they still felt challenged to get to grips with a new discipline and the language of that particular discipline, as illustrated by Mary, who had completed an Honours degree prior to embarking on another degree as part of the apprenticeship programme.

'..coming to this kind of a degree my main challenge probably as well would have been my confidence in myself because I had never studied (subject X) or knew a whole lot about it'. (Mary APP8)

Referring to a fellow research participant on the same programme, Mary noted feeling more confident on realising that '*everybody is from a different background*' and finding out that few students on the programme had prior experience of a business degree or discipline.

> *'Like some people similar to Emma and I have done previous degrees in various subjects, so I didn't then feel alone'. (Mary APP8)*

Differences in prior learning and prior attainment illustrate an interesting aspect of self-efficacy. Taken at face value, one could assume that students who already had degrees would be very confident in embarking on another HE qualification at the same level. However, the findings suggest that the more experience a student has, perhaps the more they expect of themselves. The findings suggest that confidence and self-efficacy would appear to be determined by a very personal perception of how students rate their own ability to complete a programme in HE. Students did compare themselves to others as a way of either reassuring themselves that they were not coming to a programme without the necessary skills to succeed, or to give themselves confidence that they could develop the skills needed during the programme. Some online part-time students had previously completed HE qualifications in the Institute, either as part of the ladder system or as students returning to complete a further qualification. They therefore had prior experience of formal learning specifically within an IoT, but had also researched their specific programme workload and requirements. They were well prepared for HE, and in two cases, their experiences matched their expectations.

> *'I had done quite a bit of research prior to that and on what to expect. But experiencing it for myself, I found that the experience and the level, was very much what I was expecting it to be. And I felt well prepared for that level'. (Olive BOL7).*

The structure of the academic year meant that students were required to complete a large volume of work in a relatively short space of time. Some of the part-time online students in particular noted a challenge to master 'technical' programme content as well as the academic

skills required to succeed and do well during the semester. This was particularly challenging for those online and mature students who were not familiar with the structure of an academic year, which they perceived to be inflexible, leading to additional time pressures as they needed to balance work and study. Several online students made reference in the interviews to the potential benefits of using the Summer months to provide supports to prepare for academic life for those new to their programme or HE more generally. Continuing online students referred to their desire for the opportunity to complete academic work independently during the Summer months, believing that this would put them in a stronger position when they returned to study in the new academic year.

An online student, who had completed a Level 6 and Level 7 programme, and was therefore familiar with the structure of the academic year, explained that she had done her own research into the modules and workload that would be required for the Level 7 programme she was going to undertake after completing the level 6 Higher Certificate. She requested guidance from the programme co-ordinator about working on a literature review for one of the modules over the Summer period on her own, prior to commencing the level 7 programme. Based on the subsequent guidance that she was given from the module lecturer, she had been able to do preparatory work and found that it 'cushioned' the workload on her return to the programme.

> *'...I just knew that I would be under so much pressure, and I think as well it's something that really needs to be looked at in terms of for people like me who don't have a lot of time, could the Summer be utilised? ...our course first semester it was 30 credits and for me that's tough and I think if we could do 10 credits during the summer, if we could do one module during the summer or work, do part of it, it would really take the pressure off'. (Eileen BOL7)*

In terms of prior experience of formal learning, an interesting aspect of this is the potential assumptions that might be made about students' capabilities as they progress from one stage of a programme to the other in an HEI. While there is a lot of emphasis on the transition to HE

for first years, it is important to note that there are 'new' challenges to be faced as students progress through their programme. Two final year students from different programmes made important observations about challenges that they faced in relation to new skills such as research, where there could be an assumption that students had an inherent understanding of what was required or knew how to use the library when they had not really been required to do so to any great extent in previous years.

> *'I think a lot of it was kind of expected. I felt that you were expected to know. Like, I was reading about so much of it. Like, I honestly didn't know what it was, I didn't know what research was. So, it's not like as if, you know… I had no idea, I actually had no idea, I didn't know what it was'. (Hannah APP8)*

> *'…one thing that I do find challenging is kind of, you know the library online, kind of trying to access books and stuff and journals…I actually I tried for a few assignments I don't know if it's the way I'm trying to search things, I don't know if it's the online, like I don't know what it is I'm doing wrong, I don't really know how to work the library online to be honest. (Orla BC7)*

In such instances, participants did not want their achievements or time invested to be wasted. The point at which this might occur is likely to be different for individual students, but this sentiment was expressed most often in this case study by students who had completed either two-years of a three year programme, or who were in final year. This is captured in the quote below is from a final year student.

> *'…you know when you get over one obstacle and you get through it and then say you get to the end of that year and you get your results and you're fine with them and there's no repeats and you get to the second year. And then you're struggling again and you get through it. And then it's too late because you say 'There's no way I've done all this for nothing.' And that has been probably one*

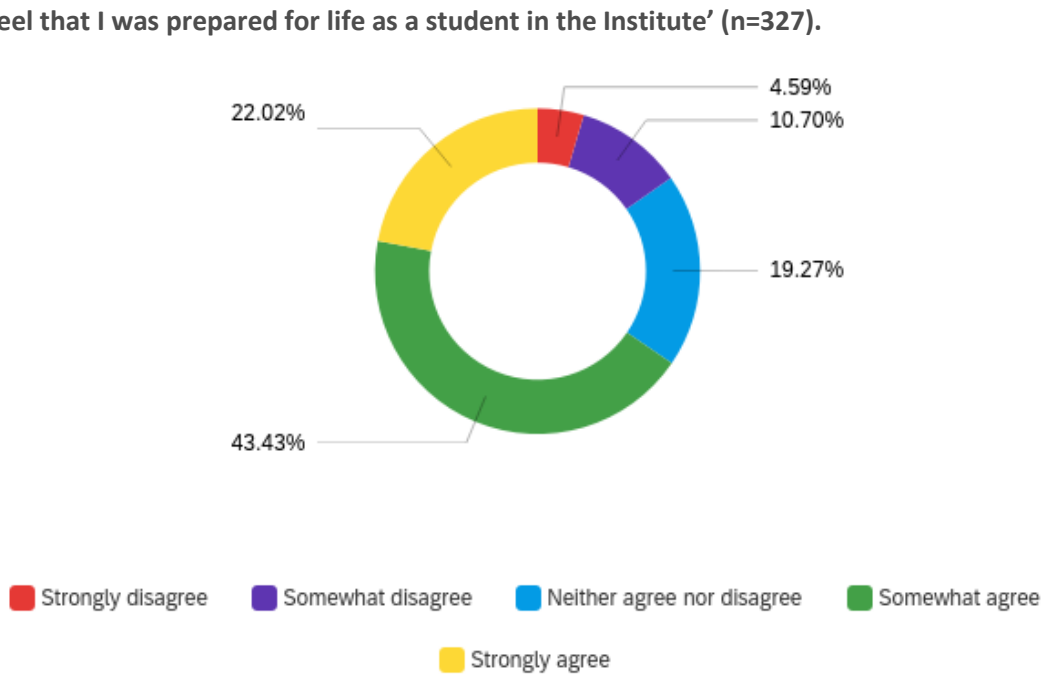
of the biggest things that's kept me going. I kept thinking 'No, I can't [give up] now.' (Hannah APP8)

A second year student noted increasing challenges as some of the programme content became more difficult while progressing through the stages of a programme, and described working even harder to try to avoid failing an examination.

'..one of my greatest fears is failing a module and having to repeat it, that's one of my biggest fears'. (Maeve BC7)

The chart below shows perception of preparedness for student life for all questionnaire respondents, which shows that the majority of them stated that they somewhat agreed that they were prepared for life as a student in the IoT, with a smaller proportion of students indicating that they strongly agreed that they were prepared for student life.

Chart 17: Feeling Prepared for Student Life (Full time and Online) n=327



The majority of questionnaire respondents (70%) were in the age bracket 18-24, with approximately half of this group stating that they agreed or somewhat agreed that they felt

prepared for student life. The questionnaire data provides less insight into the students in older age categories, given the small number in those categories, but the interviews have provided an insight into the experiences and perceptions of preparedness for student life of mature students. Family background and participation in HE can provide students with a higher level of 'cultural capital' on entering the HE field. Historically, the IoT sector would have a high proportion of 'first in family' students among their student population. Of the questionnaire respondents, a lower proportion were first in family to attend HE. A higher number of the interviewees were first in their families to participate in HE. From the questionnaire data alone, it is difficult to determine what extent family participation played in perception of preparedness for student life. Approximately 10% of students who were not first in family to attend HE believed that they were not prepared for student life, and in fact, 65% of students who were first in family to attend stated that they felt prepared for life as a student, and the same percentage of students who were not first in family stated that they felt prepared for student life, suggesting that family participation in HE did not make a difference to perceptions of preparedness for student life for the questionnaire respondents.

Overall, questionnaire respondents stated a high level of confidence in completing their programmes of study, with a total of 94% strongly agreeing (71%) or somewhat agreeing (23%) that they would complete their studies. All of the students who were interviewed stated that they were confident in progressing to the next stage of their programme or to the next programme level in the case of students who were completing a qualification and hoping to progress to an add-on year. Students who had faced challenges in an unfamiliar environment had either completed their programmes or were progressing to the next stage of their programme, having overcome these challenges.

7.4 Sub-Theme 3:- Fitting and Belonging

Fitting and Belonging is a sub-theme that encapsulates the students' perceptions of themselves in the wider HE environment, and their perception of where they belonged, if at all, in the Institute. It deals with aspects other than those that describe the specific academic

sense of 'fit' expressed by students. It deals with age and background/personal characteristics and is aligned with Tinto's concept of social integration. A sense of belonging can be an indicator of the extent to which students feel that there is a good degree of fit between themselves and the institute (Tinto, 1975, 1993). This concept, which is linked to Tinto's social integration and Bourdieu's social capital. This sub-theme is characterised by differences in students' own perceptions about whether fitting in and developing social relationships with peers would be necessary, important, or of interest to them. This was found to be varied across the student body, and dependent to some extent on the anticipated opportunities for social interaction that students believed would be available to them. Mode of study (online or on campus) and reason for studying was found to have an influence on the importance that students placed on peer relationships at programme commencement. Age was an interesting factor raised particularly by mature students in interviews; these were students who were registered on part-time online programmes, the apprenticeship programme and on campus programmes. Students' perceptions of themselves and how they believed they were perceived by others had the potential to influence their approach to engaging with their peers. Data used for this theme is drawn from interviews and the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained a specific question about sense of belonging, whereas the interviews sought this information in a broader context, rather than asking the specific question directly. The data generated in both cases is considered to be equally valuable. The findings are presented in the following section, beginning with a description of expectations about making new friends, and perception of self as a mature student.

> *'I was really excited to meet, make new friends, college friends. Even just someone to go and meet for a coffee or to even meet you know, their classmates ….it would be nice to just be able to sit down or you know, if we came out of a lecture and we didn't really understand what we had to do or we wanted to just chat among ourselves. That side of it. I'd love to be able to sit down and have a chat'. (Zoe BC6)*

This on campus mature student had described looking forward to meeting new people, and noted that the bulk of this had been done online because of the pandemic, and that this had been a reasonably good replacement for in person meetings in the circumstances. Alice, an on campus student, acknowledged that age was a factor in considering social interaction, but that it had not caused any problems. It was not a barrier to social interaction, merely an acknowledgement of her own perception of a difference in age.

> *'I guess me being older I might, even just by a couple of years, I kind of see that….I mean I just think I come from a different kind of… I don't know, because I'm older and everyone in my class is younger. So, I think I might have struggled a little bit to kind of find people that would have similar interests to me, or things like that, but not at all. I mean there's a lot of people that I got on with really well and I definitely think that it's important to, I don't know, make kind of friends outside of your group and stuff'. (Alice BC7)*

A more stark encounter relating to age was expressed by a mature student who, on their first day on campus, was mistaken for a lecturer.

> *'I was a little bit apprehensive, I suppose, because of my age…when I went down for the induction day I just said to (my husband) 'I was the oldest person there.' And then on my way in as well, it was so funny because you're picking up the books and things like that and somebody actually thought that I was one of the lecturers. [Laughter] So that was the icing on the cake, I said 'That's it, I'm too old for this.' (Hannah APP8)*

However, the concerns were short lived after commencing the programme.

> *'…it was only just the introduction days or those open days… I did feel older, I did. And they were lovely, the few that I did meet on the course were absolutely lovely. But I did feel older. Because they were the same age as my daughter'. (HannahAPP8)*

Some of the mature students had concerns that they would feel 'out of place' in their programme because of their age. However, most of these issues either did not materialise or were quickly overcome for these students. It did not deter them from having a positive educational experience, interacting with others, and fitting in, and this sentiment is captured in the quote below from a mature student studying full time on campus:

> *'…much better than I had expected, it's the…well I can't really say I was expecting it but it was my fear that I will be with students that are much younger than my daughter and much younger than me and it will be very difficult to connect to them, it will be difficult to do projects with them and all but it's totally opposite, now we're more like family I'd say'. (Maeve BC7)*

The same student had previously been in a different educational environment, where she had a less positive experience, and had done some research on the case institute before making a decision to attend there:

> *'I was the most mature student and I didn't feel comfortable there, eh, I didn't connect with the rest of the students there. I didn't feel I had a connection….so that's why I spoke to people …mature students at Institute X'. (Maeve BC7)*

The student made an interesting point about the importance of connection and fitting in:

> *'…its really important for me because at the end of the day if I'm not connecting with the people that I'm on the course with it will be hard for me to connect with people when I go out to work'. (Maeve BC7)*

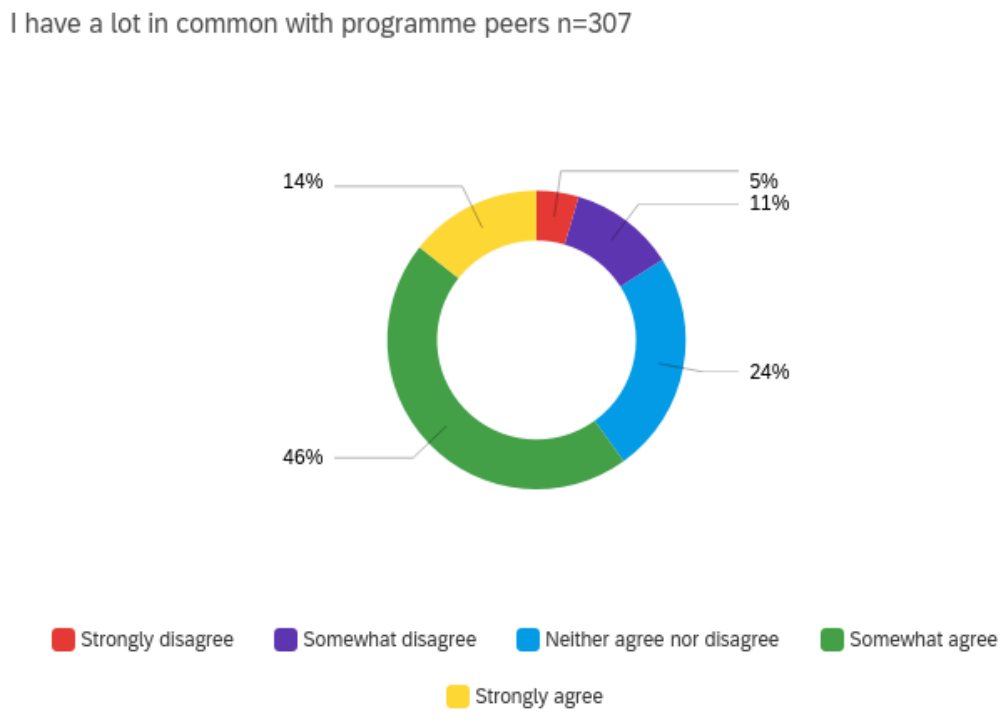
The interview findings suggested that perception of self was an important factor in determining the extent to which students believed they would fit in the environment of their programme or the Institute. An on campus student had expected to fit in with peers on the programme, based on shared interests about the programme, but this did not materialise. This participant

explained the differences that he perceived between self and some of the other students on the programme:

> *'…they just did it because they thought it would be an easy course and they have no interest in Discipline X. So I don't feel like I have similar interests....I still get on with them amicably, I don't have that connection, you know? There's nobody within my group I really click with or go for coffee with, ehm, so I joined societies, I joined like five societies thinking that would be a great way to meet people..' (Ronan BC7)*

Asked to rate the extent to which questionnaire respondents felt they had things in common with students on their programme, the following chart shows that approximately half of all the respondents agreed to some extent that they had things in common with peers on their programme, and 14% strongly agreed with this statement. With the benefit of hindsight, I could have re-phrased that question to be less emphatic about having a lot in common with programme peers, or described it in a different manner.

Chart 18: Commonality with Programme Peers (Fulltime and Online) n=307



In exploring peer interactions in the interviews, Peter explained that an informal social media group was of benefit to students who may have lacked confidence initially to engage with peers in person.

> *'..a lot of the students who were shy, who you couldn't talk to in college, but they don't mind using the phone and using the group chat. So, they might be a bit, I don't know, awkward and they'll use the group chat a lot more than students who, you know, aren't as awkward in college'. (Peter BC7)*

This quote illustrates an awareness of this student to fellow students' challenges and his belief that it is easier for students who do not engage with peers in person to engage using social media. Two online students noted similar advantages of an informal social media group to facilitate a sense of belonging.

> *'…my expectations of friendship have completely changed because I was afraid maybe that I wouldn't make as many friends because I didn't know we were going do a WhatsApp group, I didn't know what way it was going to be structured at the start'. (Mary APP8)*

> *'…we have a WhatsApp group that was set up kind of day one and you feel completely a part of the class and your group and the day to day, the face to face days and everything where you're meeting everyone. It's not like this big thing where you don't really know you know, who people are. You're part of the group already because you're communicating with them all of the time and you've got that support network'. (EmmaAPP8)*

Interestingly for those students who were studying online and those taking the apprenticeship route, the 'social' aspects of being a student were not always considered important at programme commencement. Some of this was characterised by their focus on the 'functional' aspects of being a student. For online students, this tended to be linked to them getting their

qualification without considering the broader aspects of student life. Prior to registration and course participation, the online learning environment had been perceived to be quite a solitary place for study as there was no physical classroom and interaction., a mature student who was studying online, initially considered the qualification from a rather utilitarian perspective.

> *'…more a functional thing for me, I didn't think as a student at all…' …didn't cross the mind that there would be a social life.' (Conor BOL7)*

The online students tended to be geographically dispersed, with no in person teaching, resulting in relatively low expectations about social interaction with peers. Age was another factor. An online student explained her perception of peer interactions, and their relative importance for her in programme selection.

> *'I was actually kind of more thinking that because I wouldn't meet any of these people that it wouldn't really be something that would sway me to actually study the course… at this stage in my life I wasn't in the course to make friends…so, I wasn't really too pushed about what the other people on the course were like….' (Nora BOL7)*

Olive and James had similar views at programme commencement and when they were making their decisions about studying online. Olive notes a changed view of the existence of a peer group after beginning the programme.

> *'…the social aspect wasn't that important' (James APP8)*

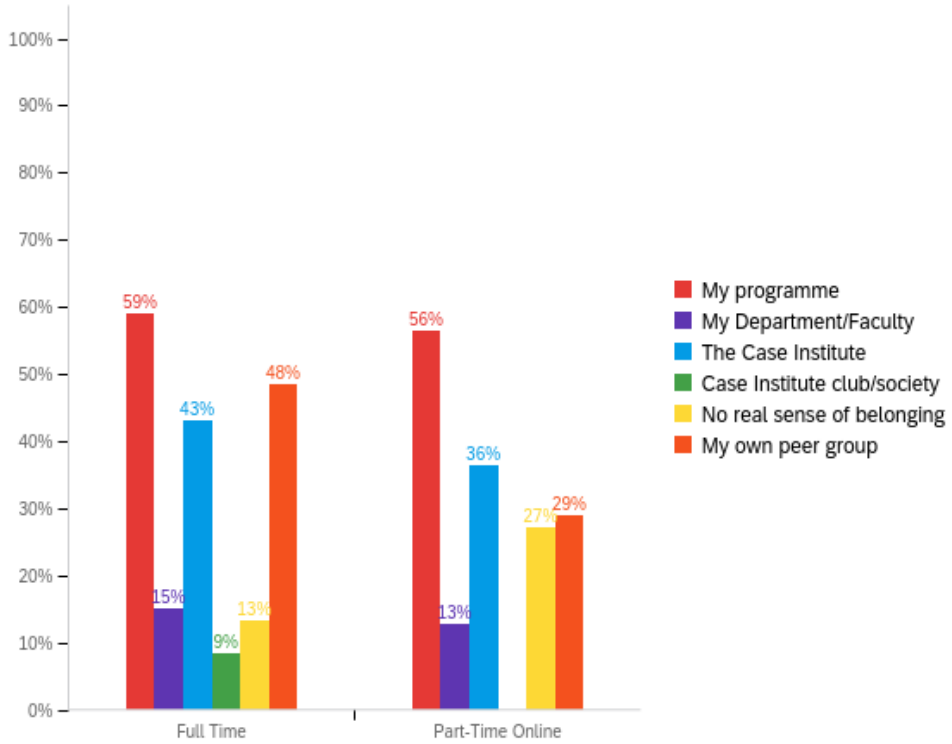
> *'I had kind of a clinical expectation of this online learning that I would be kind of siloed and on my own and it was going to be all about me and I was going to have to be super disciplined, and yes, I did have to do those things, and yes, I was somewhat siloed, but I had that peer group and I don't think I anticipated how connected I would feel and how empowering and encouraging that connection was, because I really think it was important'. (Olive BOL7)*

These peer interactions referenced by Olive and other online students were somewhat surprising to them, where the shared experience became important.

> *'Learning online, especially part-time where you are alone it can be really isolating. I mean even if you're trying to interact with (your lecturers) during a live lecture, or whatever, you are still sitting in a room by yourself doing what you're doing, and without that, that connectivity to your peer group, who are experiencing what you're experiencing, and that shared experience I think creates a comfort level' (Olive BOL7)*

The findings from interviews suggest that many students had a changed view of the nature and value of peer relationships as they progressed through their programme, where they either had not considered them important or did not expect to have interactions with their peers. The findings suggest that students place different priorities on social interaction and fitting in. It was not always the case that participants felt that they did fit in with their programme peers, but when they had an alternative option for connecting with others, and believed their programme to be relevant, they made the decision to persist, in pursuit of their end goal. The questionnaire data revealed that respondents stated that they felt the greatest sense of belonging in their programme, followed in almost equal measure by their own peer group and the case Institute.

Chart 19: Sense of Belonging as a Student (Fulltime and Online) n=307



Over 10% of the full-time respondents and approximately one quarter of part-time respondents stated that they felt no real sense of belonging in any of the categories. The likely reason that no part time online students selected a sense of belonging in Clubs and Societies is that these are generally open to full-time on campus students, and the majority are held on campus. The number of full-time on campus students selecting this option is relatively low and this could have been as a result of Covid restrictions in place at the time of questionnaire completion.

7.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has focussed on the wider institutional aspects of being a student, highlighting differences in perceptions of the research participants views about student life. A key aspect of this theme is that participants reported varying degrees of importance about having a sense of belonging in the Institute or with a wider peer group. From an institute perspective, there are some aspects that do not appear to make a significant impact on student decision-making, where the programme takes priority. In these cases, programme commitment leads to institute

commitment. In terms of encountering challenges, the research participants reported various strategies to overcome these, and they were confident in their abilities to continue with, and complete, their programme.

Chapter 8: Findings Part 3 – Theme 3 – Learning Inside and Outside the Classroom

8.0 Introduction

This theme was constructed to capture aspects of formal and informal learning. It describes some of the differences in the perception of students and staff about what was important in facilitating and supporting their learning. This theme differs from the HE environment in that it describes the role of the classroom and its connection to the wider institute and its' supports. The chapter begins with an overview of the theme and its sub-themes.

8.1 Theme - Learning Inside and Outside the Classroom

The theme of Learning Inside and Outside the Classroom is underpinned by the experiences described by students during their programme, specifically focussing on the role and purpose of the classroom with learning and associated activities such as assessment. The theme captures different types of classroom, and the subsequent opportunities for peer and lecturer interaction. The availability and use of centrally provided academic and pastoral supports is described in this theme, and compared with those that research participants created for themselves. The way in which supports are provided is of interest in the context of the assertion of Tinto (2012) that access to HE without supports for those who need them is not opportunity. The interview data shows that the Institute cannot anticipate all the supports that might be needed by students, and even those with a high level of cultural and social capital noted that they used informal support networks to help with their learning. The support of academic staff was also found to be of benefit as a source of encouragement and confidence-building for all types of students. Interactions that take place inside and outside the classroom are included in this theme. The theme is comprised of four sub-themes, which are described in the following table.

Sub-Theme	Description of Sub-Theme
Classroom as Resource	This sub-theme explores the manner in which students expect to use the classroom as a resource. It includes class contact time, provision of teaching materials, student and lecturer expectations about attendance and opportunities for asking questions.
Classroom as Connection	The role of the classroom as a basis for connections between students and lecturers. Students' views about class size are included in this sub-theme.
Learning as Mystery (Am I on the right track?)	The importance of lecturer feedback on assessments in developing self-efficacy in learning. It also captures peer interaction as a mechanism for reassurance, support and academic problem solving.
Here to help? Thanks and no, thanks	Students' perceptions and use of formal Institute supports. It deals with supplementary academic and pastoral supports that are provided centrally by the Institute.

Table 15: Learning Inside and Outside the Classroom Sub Themes

8.2 Sub-Theme 1 – Classroom as Resource

This sub-theme captures the factors that students believed had influenced their learning experiences and engagement in the classroom. For the most part, students appeared to have been satisfied with their opportunities for learning, and developing their own knowledge, but as might be expected, it was not without some challenges. The findings suggest that the classroom is the nucleus of interaction in the case institute and is the focal point of engagement for students in both intellectual development and social interaction. This sub-theme captures the students' descriptions of the classroom as a resource, and some of the differences in student and lecturer expectations in that regard. A student can engage in classroom activities only if they are present while the class is being taught, regardless of the mode of teaching. Classes that are provided online are condensed into a short timeframe in comparison to those delivered on campus. This may give rise to a situation where class time can be used in a more flexible manner on campus than online, and this may not always be welcomed by students. One on campus student reported being very committed to attending all scheduled classes but was frustrated by the pace of some classes, or instances of apparent repetition to accommodate students who had not attended previous classes.

'I felt that there was some modules and some things that we could have got done in three weeks than two months with things going back and forth and attendance being poor'. (Peter BC7)

The same student also noted frustration at some scheduled classes being reduced in length, even if this was done with good intentions on the part of the lecturer.

'I need to get those two hours in and those hours would be cut short, they'd be an hour long and like, you know, you need that two hour…that frustrates me as well…..just sometimes you feel like you're going slower than what it should be going' (Peter BC7)

An interesting point of difference for students who are taught online is that they normally had recordings of their live classes made available to them after the class was finished. This meant that a student could listen to the recording even if they had missed the live class, or listen back if they had attended, which is part of the online programme structure. However, while these classes were recorded, most students wanted to attend the live class, considering this as a valuable resource in aiding and enhancing the learning process.

'For the most part, I wasn't listening to pre-recorded lectures, I was attending the live lecture with the lecturer and being able to ask questions and interact'. (OliveBOL7)

The advantages of the resource of a live online class were contrasted to a previous experience of online learning by an apprentice, where only notes and teaching materials were provided. The quote below highlights the assertion that 'the notes' alone can allow a student to pass an exam, but that a more complete learning experience is provided when there is also lecturer interaction and the opportunity to join peers in a classroom environment.

'I had done online learning before but my perception of online learning was you were given coursework. I did a couple of courses when I was in my previous

job and you were given kind of your study work or you know, whatever, your learning. And you booked an exam for you know, six weeks or eight weeks down the line and that was it'. (James APP8)

While also attending the live classes, other online students explained one of the benefits of the recorded lecture.

'It clarifies things, if we're having a debate, you know or discussion or something and you're kind of going, let's go back and just watch the lecture like and we'll find it you know'. (Tom BOL7)

'..the lectures are recorded and you're not tied to time or anything like that, you can watch them when you want, where you want, you can pause them. That ticked the boxes for me because sometimes I can't attend lectures. So, that was absolutely perfect for me'. (Nora BOL7)

'…although overall my academic experience was very pleasant I do feel like certain lecturers could provide their students with more information on the course details and upcoming assignments as well as keeping up to date with the lecture recordings as that is very important for a fully online based course.' (Questionnaire Respondent 2)

A contrasting point raised by an online student was that the availability of resources such as recorded lectures could lead to potential misunderstandings about how they could be used (or not used) for revision or to aid understanding outside of the classroom. The research participant was struggling with a topic and was not able to make progress, even after reviewing recorded lectures. On seeking assistance from the lecturer, the participant expressed frustration that the lecturer assumed that she had not already reviewed the recorded classes.

'…just go back over the recordings' as being 'so frustrating, because the lecturer has assumed that I didn't go over the recordings, when I actually went over the recordings twice'. (Hannah APP8)

This point raises the possibility that the availability of recorded classes could lead to lecturers forming a view that students have everything that they need at their disposal, particularly in comparison to on campus students who would not normally have access to recordings of classes. A point made by interview participants was the benefit of being able to access class notes or copies of PowerPoint slides that were used in lectures. Along with their own notes taken in class, students often used these as the basis for creating their own bank of learning resources. These were considered important for aiding understanding in progressing through lecture topics and were especially important for exam and assessment preparation. Differences in teaching style and mode of provision were found to influence the way in which these resources were made available by lecturers and acquired by students. In the case of online students, most class materials such as PowerPoint slides and any supplementary materials were normally available on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), in advance of the class taking place or available at the time of the class, or soon afterwards. Students who were on campus reported varying experiences where 'the notes' were sometimes required to be copied from slides or they were provided in hard copy format in the classroom. This was linked to an expectation that they perceived from lecturers that full time students should be available to attend in person for all classes. Full time on campus students spend the greatest amount of time in classes, timetabled across four or five days. The timetable structure has a greater impact on the time spent outside of class by students who study on campus, in comparison to students who study online. One aspect that was highlighted was a lack of balance in the timetable, either where it was too packed or where there were long gaps. Students sometimes found it difficult to locate free quiet spaces for study or to work on assignments outside of class time. Timetable structure was stated as a factor for a small number of students choosing to leave campus or miss classes.

'..the timetable...there were some days but it was just kind of like in a block, there wasn't enough break in between and then you had like a day where it was completely free so I felt that something could have been moved into that day. You just felt really tired…there was a temptation for just not attending certain ones'. (Sarah BC73)

Questionnaire respondents, the majority of whom, were full time on campus students, reported attending scheduled classes most of the time or at least half of the time. Interview data confirmed that missing on campus classes could make catching up with lecture material difficult unless there was a 'buddy' who would share the notes.

'…if someone missed a class they'd ask what was covered or you know, if someone…we were struggling with what we needed, …you could kind of quickly go over you know, send a photo of your notes to somebody'. (Zoe BC6)

Another on campus student explained the challenges faced by some commuter students who depended on public transport, giving the example of a student who had to leave college before the end of lectures on some days. The class social media group was used for sharing notes.

'She'd have to get the bus to Town X, so she'd have to get the bus at like half four, so she'd miss sometimes...half the lecture. So, she'd ask for the notes and the notes would always get sent into the group chat and she could use them. That to me, that was a good informal support for a lot of students…coming up to exams, coming up to important things, it gets used for...send the notes in, send the notes in. Do this. Do that.' (Peter BC7)

For some of the students, the copying of personal notes from slides as the lecturer spoke was challenging from the perspective of listening and learning and also made it difficult for study when trying to use only handwritten notes taken in the classes. One student described a preference for having the 'official' notes in the form of printed slides to accompany the written notes and felt that this would have enhanced the learning experience.

'I loved every second of being in that class and I showed up. I didn't miss one, but I have no notes really and that's a bit annoying'. (Peter BC7)

In addition to engaging in a lecture, an advantage of being in class is asking questions and seeking clarification about lecture content and related issues. A classroom environment where students felt that it was acceptable to ask questions, and where they felt comfortable doing so, was considered important by the students who participated in interviews. This applied to both the on campus and online classroom. There were interesting points raised by the students, that related to the 'rules' of the classroom as well as the behaviour of students themselves, and how these two factors might influence each other. A key point to note is that some of the students who normally would have been on campus had experienced 'emergency remote teaching'[36] online instead, but there were also experiences presented from students who had experience of the 'normal' on campus classroom. In the physical classroom, students can ask questions directly to the lecturer. In the online class, various options for asking questions were reported, which ranged from using the 'chat' function to type a question, to students having their microphone enabled to speak. One online student reported a challenging situation where questions could only be posted in the chat function of the virtual classroom. Questions that were left un-answered for a lengthy period of time or not answered sufficiently as the lecture moved on became a source of frustration and made the learning process more difficult.

'We were at a point, we were at a point where we just stopped asking questions, because we knew it wasn't going to be answered…it's already an uphill battle. You know for a lot of us we'll say you're holding down your job, you're trying to keep your family, you're trying to do study, and not that we want the lecturer to come back and say to us 'Well look, you know, have you had your dinner? Are you okay?' We're not looking for that, you know? But we do

[36] Emergency remote teaching was introduced during the Covid19 pandemic to allow teaching to continue in a remote environment, while public health restrictions prohibited on campus attendance for students and staff.

want, when we sit down, and yes we are shattered as well, we are tired too….but you know, we want to understand what's being said to us. If you're using a word that we haven't heard, please give us an understanding of that. In what context can we use it, or how do we use it? What way do we use it? Do you know, we don't just brush over it and drive on'. (John SOL6)

Questionnaire data revealed that across programmes and modes of teaching, over 50% of respondents reported feeling comfortable in asking questions in lectures and tutorials. Students generally reported feeling less comfortable asking questions on a VLE forum page. The online students tended to be more comfortable using the VLE for questions, which is likely due to the provision and structure of the programme. While students reported feeling comfortable asking questions, some of them noted that others seemed reluctant to do so. It could be argued that the students who chose to participate in this research might be those who are more comfortable in speaking and asking questions, but they were able to describe a broader picture of the classroom and student and lecturer behaviours.

Among on campus and online students, there were several instances reported of one student being 'nominated' by their peers to ask questions in classes, in some cases, this role was shared or it might be the same person, as the quote below illustrates.

'I've kind of become known as the question asker like you know, like sometimes I felt like I was in the class on my own though because nine out of ten people do not speak….I've actually had people message me on the WhatsApp group, will you ask him this or will you ask her that'. (Alex EC7)

This is interesting because the fact that peers are asking a student to ask a question perhaps legitimises the question and the 'question asker' feels justified in posing the question, knowing that they are not alone in looking for clarification. A related point is that some students made a distinction between the type of question that they considered acceptable to ask 'in public' and those that were better asked to peers without any lecturer input.

'…we made use of the Moodle page questions as well. Let's say we had a question and we thought that might apply to the whole group, like okay if a teacher said that this recorded lecture was going to be posted and we don't see it, that might go on the Moodle group but if say somebody said, are you putting an executive summary in this paper, is this the kind of paper that we need an executive summary, that's not going to go on the Moodle group because you'd feel stupid but it would go to your WhatsApp group, and you know we could debate the merits of including an executive summary or not. And then you know, it's ultimately up to the student or you know, everyone in your class goes, well yeah, he asked for it...'. (Olive BOL7)

This was described in a very humorous manner in the interview, as the student explained that there was great camaraderie in their class group and that it was acceptable to tease peers and this contributed to easing the tension of study and their workload. An apprenticeship student explained a similar scenario of seeking reassurance and clarification.

'if you've come out of a lecture and you're a bit like okay, well that was really ambiguous, you might ask it in the lecture and then it's still a bit ambiguous. So, then to post your discussion then where the lecturer can see it, it's a bit public maybe. So, to have a group with just your peers I think definitely helps'. (Emma APP8)

The comments above show that some students may not want to ask a question of their lecturer if they feel they themselves should know the answer.

As well as being able to interact with lecturers during class time, the opportunity to speak to lecturers outside of class time was considered valuable. Their accessibility and responsiveness outside of normal working hours, while not always expected by students, provided support for students and tangible benefits.

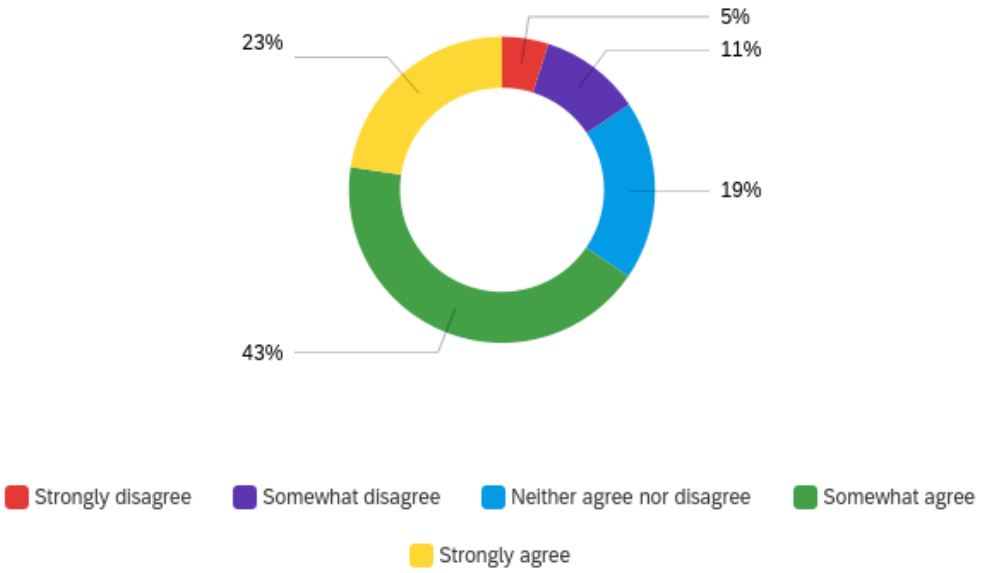
'..our lecturer(Name) is always willing to help every time so even after classes there are times we can ask for extra help.' (Maeve BC7)

'…with our lecturers as well we could reach out to any of them, but they were all very accommodating that way…they would stay behind after a lecture if they had time and if we wanted to chat…if you don't understand anything'. (Zoe BC6)

'I was emailing some of my lecturers at 7 o'clock on a Saturday evening and I was getting a reply in 20 minutes….'It was actually mind-blowing….how accessible they (lecturers) were to us and how supportive they were. And I think they exceeded my expectations totally…..especially coming up like end of semester where you maybe have projects due or assignments or you're kind of under a little bit of pressure. Knowing that you weren't going to be waiting two or three days stuck on this ….problem…which you can't solve. Kind of knowing that support is there behind you gave you so much more confidence and eased your mind you know, and the fact that you were less stressed and worried, it meant you'd perform better'.(Alex EC7)

The chart below shows that two thirds of students indicated that they had opportunities, if required, to speak to lecturers outside of class time. The interview data has provided a valuable insight into the manner in which formal and informal contact with lecturers has an impact on students, and there is some variation in the expectations of students and staff in relation to asking and answering questions, depending on the classroom type. Student and lecturer interactions are explored in more detail in the following section.

Chart 20: Opportunities to Speak to Lecturers outside of Class Time n=327



8.3 Sub-Theme 2- Classroom as Connection

This sub-theme describes the way in which the classroom was found to be a central point of connection for all types of research participant. Being part of the class group, either on campus or online, provided the opportunity to connect with academic staff and peers. While interactions with academic staff are part of the social system in Tinto's model, they were predominantly expressed in the academic system and classroom in the case institute. The majority of interviewees stated that the opportunity to interact with academic staff was important to them. Interview data illustrated that, on the whole, the Institute was considered to be welcoming and supportive with staff who were friendly and approachable. There was a strong belief among students that the institute was committed to its students, because lecturers made the effort to get to know them and took an interest in them.

> *'..the approach of the lecturers to us as students. They were there to support within anything if it was personal or college based, they were there so just easy to come and talk to because your personal life does affect your studying'. (Sarah BC7)*

An enabling factor in creating a supportive and connected learning environment was found to be small class sizes. This was particularly significant for those students who studied on campus and was cited as an advantage in getting to know peers and for finding it easy to interact with peers and lecturers in class. Small class sizes were reported by students to be enjoyable for the most part and facilitated interaction.

> *'You know the way small classrooms, all with… with all the business students together in one place and everyone talking in business language, and that definitely helps a lot. I really do enjoy that part'. (Peter BC7)*

> *'Probably because they're smaller groups and they might be a bit more personal, would they be? I'm not really sure about that. But I just know that there's a nice feel, you get used to your own group, don't you, in the lectures'. (HannahAPP8)*

> *'our class is so small...no one can believe when I tell them how small our class is, which is brilliant. And maybe it is because of the year that was in it but I love the fact that there's only a few of us and that we kind of do have the attention of our lecturers when we are in lectures'. (Zoe BC6)*

While acknowledging the positive aspects of small classes which are that there is a level of familiarity and comfort with each other, one student made a contrasting point where a class might be too small for discussion and interaction.

> *'it's a good thing because, like, it's not very intimidating….I felt like I was one of the only people always answering, me and two of the other girls, cause my class is very small, we have a really small number in my course'.(Orla BC7)*

A comparison was made by some students who had been in other HE environments such as Universities and had transferred to the IoT. They commented on the contrast between a lecture hall of several hundred students and the smaller class size online and on campus,

'…if there were 400 people in the lecture you wouldn't get that. I felt like all the lecturers knew our names and it was great, it was very personal…..' (David APP8)

'…it's smaller compared to the university I went to in (named location), this was actually smaller which I felt was better. Like you don't get lost within, you are able to approach lecturers more'. (Sarah BC7)

Two other on campus students also expressed similar views, one of whom had come to the IoT having left a programme in HE that was not matched to his career aspirations.

'…it's more personal, you know, than massive lecture halls with four or five hundred people, or students, and no one knows your name, or you're getting maybe less work done'. (Peter BC7)

'...being in a smaller college, which I wasn't expecting. I thought kind of more, I was thinking more on the bigger spectrum, but that they've been more kind of one on one and that lecturers might take an interest in individuals rather than just as groups, or as like a class group, you know'? (Alice BC7)

Apprenticeship an online students experienced similar supports.

'…the lecturers are so helpful and they go above and beyond, I think they really do and you have that one on one communication which is brilliant'. (Emma APP8)

'I think you just get so much support from the college and I wouldn't have expected as much support, just because I didn't really have that experience the last time'. (Mary APP8)

This is interesting as Mary had previously been in HE and had a different experience of the level of support that was available. This is in part likely due to the structure of the

apprenticeship programme where there are many points of contact for students, both in the college and in their place of work.

Online students cited lecturer encouragement as important in the decision to persist with the programme, despite the challenges, noting that the lecturer would acknowledge those challenges, but also put them into context.

> *'…there are mountains you have to get over…but we only have eight weeks left, we only have 12 weeks left, one day at a time, and you will get there, you have so much done so far, keep going'. (Olive BOL7)*

Lecturer support was found to encourage persistence, while enhancing the confidence of students to complete their programme and progress to programmes at a higher level.

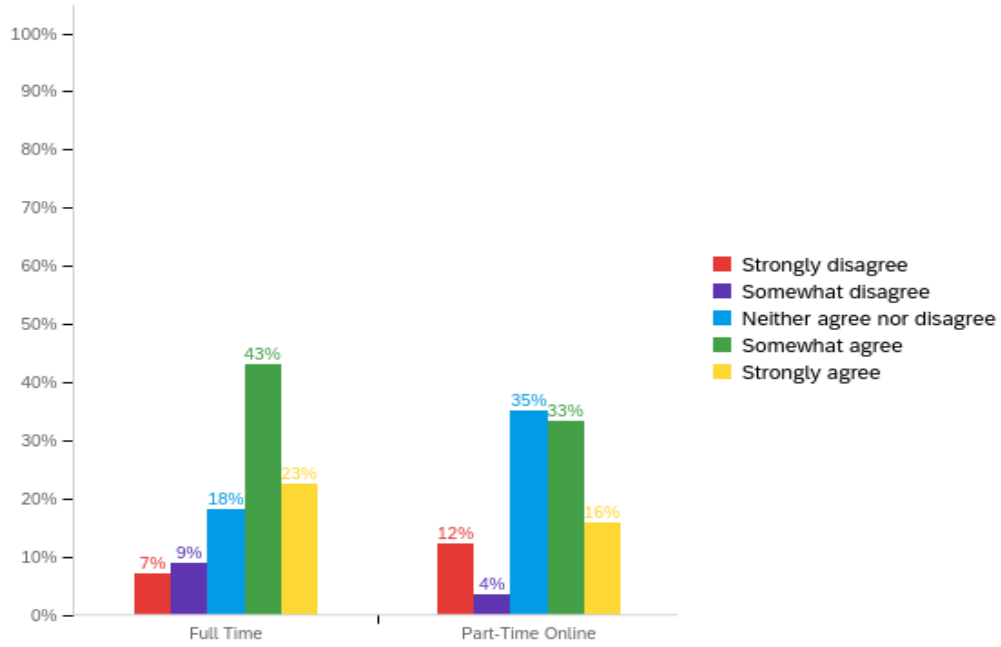
> *'I'd never, ever in a million years dream of doing a Level 8. But now with the supports that are there and the way it's taught and everything. I'm 100% confident that I can do it, 100%'. (Eileen BOL7)*

This provides further evidence that when set within the context of appropriates support from academic staff, the value of an opportunity to build up qualifications in stages via the ladder system, particularly for students who find the prospect of an Honours degree daunting and for those who are studying online, and for whom education on campus would not be possible.

In addition to the social aspects associated with being a student, interaction and connection with peers was found to be a valuable, and sometimes unexpected, source of support for academic and non-academic dilemmas and challenges. Data presented in the chart below illustrates that approximately half of the full-time students stated that the support of peers had helped them to overcome challenges, with a smaller percentage stating that peers had not been of assistance in overcoming study related difficulties. The reasons for this are not clear, for example, whether these students did not face challenges, or they were challenges that peers could not assist with, or they did not seek the support of peers. Online students

expressed a higher level of indifference (neither agree nor disagree) but approximately half of respondents did say that peers had been a source of support. An insight into peer support is provided by the interview data.

Chart 21: Peers Have Helped with Overcoming Study Related Problems n=307



The creation of social media groups such as WhatsApp was stated by interviewees as a significant factor in helping them to interact socially and to overcome problems. This type of group was found to be commonly used in all of the programmes represented by the research participants, with several students reporting that their lecturers had encouraged them to set up social media groups early in the semester.

> *'It was actually one of our tutors who told us maybe to set it up, a WhatsApp group. Because at the start everyone was very…we weren't talking much in the first week or two. But once we set up that WhatsApp group it was brilliant'. (Zoe BC6)*

It was a means of creating a sense of a group within the class for social as well as college related discussions. In considering their own use of social media with programme peers, examples of encouragement and support were described by online students Conor and Tom.

Tom noted how behaviour on social media mimics 'real-life' in that students formed their own social groups within a larger group.

> *'..even if it was just a matter of encouragement and to check in on each other and just to say just keep going, don't give up'. (Conor BOL7)*

> *'..you have splinter WhatsApp groups with like a smaller group of people that like might be chattier or more friendly you know that way, so it's great to have the support there'. (Tom BOL7)*

In considering the importance of social interaction, particularly for online students who never met in person for classes, some students made significant comments in the context of a discussion about challenges and the contribution of peer support via social media in overcoming those challenges.

> *'…there were days when the only thing that kept me there was that WhatsApp group'. (Olive BOL7)*

> *'…for me a lifeline'. (Mary APP8)*

> *'…just little chats about your job or whatever, like sometimes you just need to have you know, and where am I going with this degree, what am I doing with it, what's the point in doing this you know'. (Tom BOL7)*

Many of the students explained the benefits of this type of virtual support as confirming that they were not alone in their challenges or concerns.

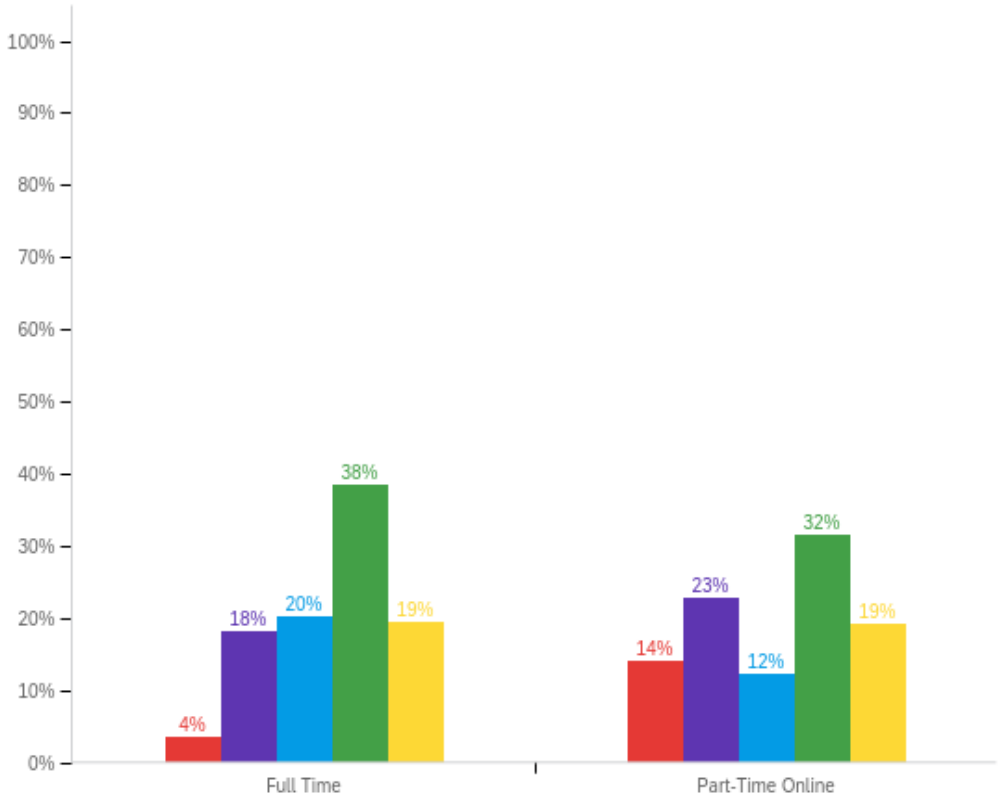
> *'..the WhatsApp group, you know? That's amazing, that's such a reassurance and even just reminders and little things. But I remember there was a few days there and I was just thinking 'It's me, I'm so thick.' And next thing a text would come in and they'd say 'I'm struggling here, anyone else?' And you just feel*

so relieved. It was like, ah, I can't explain it, you'd be just saying 'Thank God it's not just me. ..so, it's a huge support, I think'. (HannahAPP8)

'…even just to get feedback from everyone after, like if we'd done a Moodle quiz or an exam. It was just great to have that feedback. Like if you struggled on something and then you were checking in with everyone else and they were kind of feeling the same you were like okay, well it wasn't me. Maybe it was just a difficult question'. (Zoe BC6)

Collaborative learning provided opportunities for peer interaction. It is defined in this case study as the opportunity for students to work with peers, inside or outside the classroom, which may or may not be associated with formal assessment. Questionnaire data confirmed that there were opportunities to participate in class groupwork and discussion in more than half of all classes, as shown in the chart below.

Chart 22: Opportunities for Collaboration in Groupwork and Class Discussion n=311



Interviews revealed that formal collaborative work for assessment could be a double-edged sword if the workload or motivation was not shared equally by all group members, as described by two on campus students. The second quote is based on an interesting student comparison of collaboration in a work context with that of the academic context.

> *'I would have rather just done three persons work all myself. When you're engaging with others and they're just not interested, they're not replying, they have no interest in doing it, I found that horrible'. (Ronan BC7)*

> *'..it was a challenge trying to get times to meet up and I do know it's all part of the process and all that kind of stuff but like I just do feel like it would be a bit easier in the working world because you're clocked in at 9 o'clock you have to be there but with college, there's no one forcing you to go... I found it very difficult trying to meet up with people…'cause I'm very organised…I just like to be ahead of myself but some people aren't like that which you have to be mindful of as well, you know?' (Orla BC7)*

8.4 Sub-Theme 3 - Learning as Mystery (Am I on the Right Track?)

This sub-theme captures students desire for feedback and reassurance to guide future work or to provide confidence that they were completing work to the required standard. It incorporates the role of formal feedback from lecturers and informal feedback from peers as a mechanism for providing reassurance and motivation. Research participants explained that they were often completing what was described as continuous assessment (CA) and had hoped to get feedback on relatively small pieces of work that they had submitted early in the semester. Often this type of assessment, from the perspective of the student, was treated like an examination, with some CAs being run as multiple closed book exams. Assessment is a complex area and one that attracts a lot of discussion and debate. A detailed investigation of assessment is outside the scope of this research, but I acknowledge that it has an important

effect on how students engage with their studies and there is a potential impact of being unsure about whether or not they are doing things correctly.

Several on campus students explained how this affected confidence and performance.

> *'I could be making the same mistake over and over again without knowing it until it is too late. If I get to the end of the term and I've had no grades back, or even no feedback, I'm in the dark about what I might need to change so that I can improve. The grade for a small piece of work might be rolled into a final grade that is worth most of the marks and that makes it difficult to know how I am doing'. (Peter BC7)*

> *'…when we kind of got graded…the lecturer would say this is a good example or this was a good thing or this is where you went wrong in a very brief and not detailed way of how to improve. So, I don't know what it was or why that was different but I did find it strange that there was just so little feedback because I love feedback, I've had to message lecturers just to try to get feedback to see what I can improve on'.(Ronan BC7)*

Similarly, another on campus student explained the benefit of getting feedback to help with areas of study for improvement, particularly in preparation for exams:

> *'…(Subject X) is one subject that I'm not doing great in and I have a feeling I'll fail the module because I haven't done great in the assessments…I've also told myself that I haven't done well in all the assessments that we've been given but I have done my best and there's no point getting 100% and not learning anything from that…' (Maeve BC7)*

Several online students noted challenges in not having feedback on work submitted as continuous assessment, which may be compounded by the limited class contact time available

and the fact that the students are not campus based, making incidental or informal contact with lecturers to ask for feedback, more unlikely or more onerous.

> *'..my very first assignment was worth I think 10%, maybe 20% of my mark. And I had to hand it in at the end of the first month. But it wasn't marked until after my final assignment was handed in at the end of the semester'. (Olive BOL7)*

> *'…when you're looking at something that is just not responding in the way that you want it to respond, or give you the feedback, or give you the information that you were hoping to get, it can be so disheartening'. (John SOL6)*

In addition to getting feedback about continuous assessment, students also valued having 'banked' some marks before a final exam, where there were multiple components to module assessment. Students who had not received feedback or grades reported carrying on regardless, progressing successfully through their programmes. While it would be important to consider how a lack of feedback might have affected students who did not persist in their studies, it is outside the scope of this research. As well as the formal and informal feedback from academic staff, research participants often used peers for checking that they were doing things correctly and this was done where they did not want to have any lecturer involvement, to fill a perceived gap, or because it was convenient and timely. This is discussed in the following section, prior to the discussion of the use of formal institute supports.

Research participants noted that it was beneficial to be able to ask questions of peers relating to lectures without the lecturer seeing the question or being involved in the process of answering the question. While they were keen to point out that lecturers were very supportive and helpful, they did not necessarily want to ask for help with a topic that perhaps had already been explained. This 'hidden discussion' is informal among peers and can be considered as a form of self-created academic support. A benefit of the informal group was the instant answer that it usually returned, and this was valued by students who might be working on an

assignment or trying to make sense of lecture material outside of the normal class hours. Some innovative and generous activities were reported such as students taking on the role of lecturer, sending recorded material showing step-by-step solutions to a problem, and groups setting up MS Teams meetings to discuss lecture material and help each other, by pooling their resources and collective knowledge. This helped with solving academic problems related to assignments and coursework.

> *'it does help save time I mean if I ran a question through Conor and Conor said yeah that's the same answer, that's it I'm happy then like that we're on the same track you know, instead of maybe investing another hour of my time in double checking or something'. (Tom BOL7)*

> *'Tom was great with financial and accountants side of things you know so he'd be the go-to guy to ask, why does that not make sense to me, you know and he'd be able to explain it which was fantastic.' (Conor BOL7)*

> *'If someone didn't understand the question, I've seen people do the question out on pages and then send a screenshot, a picture of it in. So, it is, they definitely do help. (David APP8)*

> *'Sometimes it's just in the detail and you need to break one piece out and there's some lovely resources but we as students would find different resources and bring those to the WhatsApp group and say, hey did you see this and things like that and you know or I took notes at a lecture and somebody else couldn't attend the lecture so I could share my notes with them' (Olive BOL7)*

> *'What feeds through our WhatsApp sometimes is you know, someone has gone and asked a question to a lecturer, you know that kind of way. But then they'll post it to the group or you know, they'll give information to the entire*

group and everyone forms a conversation then around it… discuss it and come up with a solution and you know, if needed, someone goes and okay, well this is what this actually means…there's definitely been times where I've been pulling my hair out and then you ask a question on WhatsApp' (Emma APP8)

The on-campus students had spent at least some of their time being taught remotely and their social media use may have been higher as a result of that. It would be interesting to consider if the same scenario might be replicated if there had been more on campus activity.

'…after a few months, a few of us got together and organised Microsoft Teams and we set up a Team for each module. And a few of us then decided to be the moderators, like I was the moderator for the programming group and maybe every couple of weeks or if someone had a problem I'd actually arrange a Teams call and we'd all you know, maybe six one day, maybe 15 another day would all go on Teams in the evening and we'd work through a couple of programming issues. And maybe if I was good at one thing I'd be showing them okay look, this is a good way to work this right and then I'd be stuck on something asking, someone else would show me a technique to solve a different problem. And yeah, we've really, really got it going after a while like'. (Alex EC7)

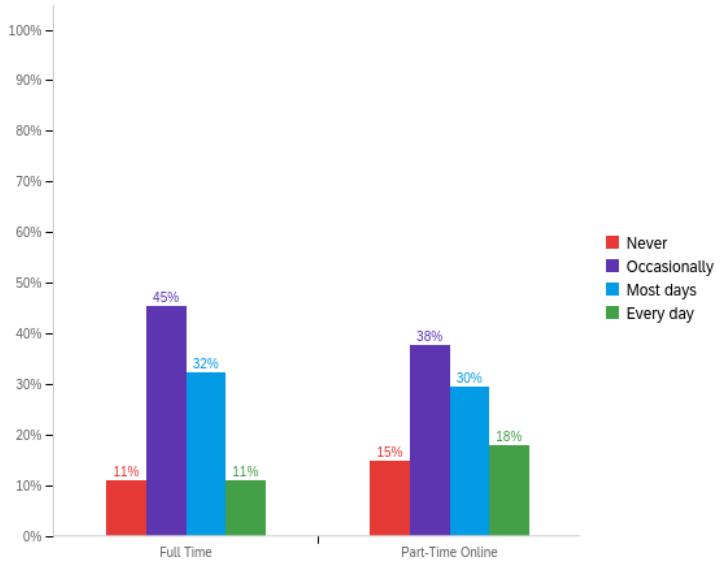
The value to students of this type of activity was attributed to the willingness of a number of students to participate in an environment where there is no perceived judgement, and where everyone has the potential to benefit from their peers. It is not replacing the learning in the classroom or taking the place of the lecturer, but it was described as a very positive activity that enhanced learning and was significant as a means of removing obstacles to learning and building confidence. A final year and first year student shared similar views, as they explained in their discussions about such benefits.

'I think someone didn't understand one part of the exam that was going to come up. And someone would do the question out for him and then send it in. I even know a couple of the lads that I actually text himself on, it wasn't on WhatsApp it was Snap Chat I text him on and I said, 'I just don't understand this'. And he sent me a full video, I think it was a three or four minute video of how to do it.' (David APP8)

'I think it was good to get other people's opinions on things. To kind of share information. To share notes, because someone else might have picked up on something that we didn't….and just to kind of, yeah, kind of have debates and talks on different subjects or different areas, things like that. It was kind of good to get another person's insight on something'. (Peter BC7)

It is of course feasible that the opportunity to collaborate with peers on an academic problem leads to opportunities for social interaction. This is a commonly used strategy for enhancing learning in the classroom and it is interesting to see how students explained how they took ownership of this type of activity themselves. Questionnaire respondents reported varying amounts of social media use, shown in the chart below.

Chart 23: Participation in Social Media Groups n=314



8.5 Sub Theme 4 - Here to Help? Thanks and no, thanks

Most interview participants reported having good awareness of the formal, centrally provided academic and pastoral supports that were available to them. There was a difference noted in the ease with which supports could be accessed by online and on campus students. Interestingly, the majority of supports that are offered to on campus students are also offered to online students, but in a format that is accessible online. Interview participants reported receiving a lot of information about supports that were available at the beginning of their programme and during their programme. In referring to the staff across the Institute who provide information about supports, it was noted:

> *'They don't make a small deal of them at all. It's all they talk about for the first two weeks. They're always trying to advertise the academic supports. They always say they're available. There's posters around the place, you get emails about it and at the mentoring thing they talked about the academic supports and pastoral supports and the counselling supports and all that stuff'. (Peter BC7)*

And Zoe noted

> *'…they definitely do keep you informed. I think I get about three emails a week'. (Zoe BC6)*

An online student confirmed knowledge of academic supports available to students.

> *'I was fully aware of the supports that were available to students, I have to say that online induction piece that has all those modules that they put into your Moodle page where you can go back and find all those things like the library supports and the writing centre and the maths centre and things like that, brilliant' (Olive BOL7)*

This student made the point that some of the supports should be made available in the evening for students who are attending classes in the evening as this would be a better fit for their schedule. David had not used the formal Institute supports but noted that the Institute created string awareness about them and their availability. He speaks of Institute staff in the quote below.

> *'..they were very good for giving us advice on what supports are made available to us.'(David APP8)*

An on campus student explained that while the information about supports was made readily available, the responsibility was on individual students to use the supports and to ask for them. In a sense, this sounds a bit like leading a horse to water…where the decision regarding use is ultimately the student's own choice.

> *'I knew if you don't do it nobody will come running after to you to say - oh do you need, you know there's information there, it's for you to approach for it…it's for you as yourself, you need to approach it. I mean there was a lot of information everywhere especially with the student union, they did inform us constantly of the support we had available. So, it wasn't like it was hidden, no'. (Sarah BC7)*

A significant number of interviewees did not use any of the academic supports offered, despite being aware of their availability. In some instances, there was no clear rationale for not having used them, but some students stated that they believed that they should be able to manage without them. The term supports was discussed and the perception of supports was that they could be considered to be something that you should be able to progress through the programme without using, that somehow you might be deficient in some respect if you used supports. It was suggested that if they were called resources, that students who held this view, might be more likely to use them. They would be considered as a resource for improvement rather than to fix a problem or compensate for a deficiency, which may remove a perceived

stigma relating to their use. The quotes below provide a sense of research participants views about the supports available.

> *'But to be honest I kind of shied away from it for the first month or two when I probably needed it most'…and maybe that's part of the psychology of it. Like when you see this you're like well I don't want to be going in there or whatever like, you know which is an absolutely ridiculous way to think looking back on it like' (Alex EC7)*

> *'I wish I used the supports but I didn't want to go, but that's something…Like I struggled…'I wished I used more academic supports. The maths support. I wish I used, yeah. I didn't use that. The only reason was I just didn't want to. It was a silly mistake but… I have to start using them'. (Peter BC7)*

> *'I actually never thought of the maths support, regardless of how many times (X) had actually said to us, don't forget the supports are there'. (Emma APP8)*

Some students in hindsight expressed the view that they should have used the supports available.

> *'I could do with it because I think the library is a bit tricky to be honest'. (Mary APP8)*

> *'I only used that a bit at the end, I feel like I should have used it more during the year but…' (Conor BOL7)*

> *'I just thought I'd just work it out myself. It just never really appealed to me, I suppose'. (Ronan BC7)*

Online availability provided an anonymous way of accessing the supports without being 'seen' to be using them. On the other hand, students who were studying online stated that they might

be more inclined to use supports if they were on campus and they walked past the office or area where they were provided.

> *'I think when you're physically in a college as well you might be walking past rooms or that kind of way and you're like oh, that's what that is' (David APP8).*

In a different viewpoint expressed about why supports are not used, an online student had considered that this would take time away from his primary focus, which was learning, even though he acknowledges that some supports might have made learning easier.

> *'…there was a lot of services apparently available. I can't say I availed of them, because I was so focused on what I was there to try and learn, and that maybe if I had of reached out for some of the supports it might have been easier, but I don't see how it could have, I'm not sure myself how it could have made it easier'. (John SOL6)*

In response to my question as interviewer, and trying to tease out the role of institute supports, I asked for clarification from a different participant, on a point that was made, suggesting 'the college isn't always providing the type of support that might be needed at a given point in time but that kind of informal mechanism that you have actually provides the support that you need…would that be fair to say?' And the informal WhatsApp group was mentioned again.

> *'you're part of a group but then once a lecture is finished then everyone's on their own again. So, then at least then with the WhatsApp group there you're like okay, what did we all take from that lecture? Do we do it this way, do we, you know that kind of way?' (Emma APP8)*

The quote above and the other examples of informal support and the 'organic' development of collaborative learning suggest that there was a willingness for students to voluntarily work in groups of their own choosing to benefit others, and to be able to ask for assistance from the same group. This is in contrast to some of the experiences of students who were completing

'prescribed' collaborative learning for formal assessment purposes, where there were marks at stake and different ways of working. An interesting approach to the use of formal institute academic supports was to consider them as resources, and while this was uncommon, it provides an insight into an alternative way of promoting these from an institute perspective. An online student explained how these had been of benefit.

> *'I could actually brush up on my maths and even though maths isn't like a huge part of the course that I'm doing, that was available to any student of (the Institute) …that was another reason why I chose the Institute because I knew that these kind of things were available and stuff like that….I definitely did avail of that and so that kind of thing like access to tutors and that kind of thing I saw that as a big advantage..'. (Nora BOL7)*

Research participants who had used the supports described their benefits, and noted that they used them on an ongoing basis, rather than as isolated events.

> *'..even now when I'm comfortable doing stuff, I go to that X learning centre all the time. And when I have like, if I had essays, I'd to do essays for personal development you know, I'd always run my first draft and my final draft and stuff past the academic writing centre ..and yeah, that's something I never thought I'd use but I definitely would never go without it now'. (Alex EC7)*

> *'I found just for report writing and things like that and especially referencing, I found that so difficult. So, I used the academic writing centre for those, I thought they were invaluable'. (Zoe BC6)*

> *'I know where my flaws are and one of them is maths, and I knew going in straight away maths is on the course so I have to nail this, and I just started using the maths support group straight away and it was extremely helpful to me, and I went whenever I could'. (Alice BC7)*

As well as academic supports, the institute also provides pastoral supports such as counselling and the health centre. Students reported a high level of awareness of these supports and those interview research participants who had used them found them to be very beneficial in overcoming challenges in their personal lives, some of which were indeed very difficult. They found that they were of great importance in minimising potential disruption to their progression through their programme. By having the support available at the time when it was needed, students were able to continue with examinations and assessments or to make the decision to defer to a later date. A challenge noted by some students was the high demand for supports during the pandemic which led to some delays in accessing them. While this was an unusual situation, it does emphasise the importance of timely supports that are available when they are needed. This type of support minimised the risk of students perhaps drifting away from the programme and finding it difficult to return. A high percentage (82%) of students who completed the questionnaire did not use pastoral supports, which might be expected, but the reasons for this cannot be determined from the questionnaire data alone. Perhaps more surprisingly, the questionnaire data showed that 60% of students did not use first year mentoring. Mentoring is considered important by the Institute, and a structured mentoring programme [37]is provided for first year students (including during the pandemic). It is possible that peer created supports could have replaced the mentoring sessions to some extent, as students depend on their own groups, for example, the use of social media. It is interesting to capture the provision of pastoral supports by the case institute, and the subsequent use of these by the research participants. Tinto (2012) describes the differences between adding a course and embedding supports throughout a programme that are available all the way through the student journey. The interview and questionnaire data relating to the use of pastoral and academic supports suggests that students, where they can, might tend towards creating their own support networks (even though they may not describe them as such) with

[37] The IoT provided first year mentoring to assist students in their transition to HE. The programme is structured to deal with particular topics and challenges as they are likely to arise during the academic year and is facilitated by student mentors, academic and administrative staff. It takes place in a large group, which is sub-divided into smaller tables with a staff member and student mentor available to each programme group.

peers or with academic staff in order to solve academic problems and to get information. Perhaps a sense of ownership of the manner in which these networks are created means that students are more inclined to use them than they are those that are provided by the Institute. Another important consideration is that when they are separate to the programme of study, some students considered the available supports as additional work requiring a time commitment, and for online students in particular, this made them an unattractive option.

8.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter concludes the presentation of the case study findings, with the third theme that focussed on the classroom as a key resource for learning and for the development of relationships with academic staff and peers. Informal support from peers and academic staff was found to be important for some of the research participants and more convenient or attractive than using institute supports. Classroom practices and programme design are worthy of consideration in addressing the findings that fall under this theme.

Chapter 9: Discussion

9.0 Introduction

Persistence in Higher Education is a complex phenomenon that requires an understanding of the perceived relationship that a student has with an Institution, shaped by their expectations and subsequent experiences. This relationship leads to a commitment to the institute that can be strong or weak, and which can be categorised as something as seemingly nebulous as 'sense of belonging' (Yorke, 2004; Tinto, 2006, 2012). As with any concept that is challenging to dissect and disentangle, persistence is more than the sum of its parts, but the parts, once identified and explored, at least provide some insight into how and when decisions about persistence might arise. This chapter provides an opportunity to reflect on the research findings and the themes in the context of the model of Tinto (1975, 1993, 1997) and the thinking tools of Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2014). The findings that are discussed in this chapter represent a distillation of the key and most relevant aspects of the themes that have been presented in Chapters 6-8. Tinto's model is critiqued in its application to the Irish HE system, in particular the IoT sector, which has a diverse student body and provides on campus, online and apprenticeship programmes.

I will begin the chapter by briefly explaining my approach to reviewing the findings. I will then introduce my model of the student journey, which I will use to discuss the factors that influence persistence. This includes student attributes, goal setting and goals and institute commitment. I will then review the ways in which this commitment is manifested during engagement with the Institute. I will do this by assessing the influence of their expectations, and the relative importance of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997), or congruence (Bourdieu, 1984). I will use this as a basis to identify the factors that influence persistence in the case institute.

9.1 The Use of Bourdieu and Tinto in Consideration of the Research Findings

An illustration of the theoretical context for the research was provided in Chapter 3. The research findings, as themes, have been considered using this framework which brings together the model of Tinto (1975, 1993) and the thinking tools of Bourdieu (1984, 1988; Grenfell, 2014). Webb et al (2017) emphasise the importance of using the thinking tools to better understand empirical data rather than using them as *a priori* categories for data mining, searching for evidence of field, capital and habitus. The thinking tools of Bourdieu have not been used in this case study as a regimented frame of analysis but rather as a means of enhancing the insights available from the research findings, when used in conjunction with the model of Tinto (1975, 1993). Tinto (1975, 1993) dominates the analysis and discussion because it provides a more complete theoretical framework for all stages and aspects of the student journey and includes a detailed frame of reference for the classroom, where the majority of student activities and interactions occur. I presented the Tinto-Bourdieu theoretical framework in Figure 4, Chapter 3. I present it again in Figure 15, with arrows added, to indicate the relationship between the different components of the framework. I have used Bourdieu (1984, 1988) to provide insight into the field of power and the policy context for the case institute. The focus of this research is at the level of the student and the Institute, particularly the classroom, and Tinto provides the more comprehensive framework for discussion in that regard. Bourdieu (1984, 1988) has enhanced the insights from analysis, using the model of Tinto (1975, 1993). The themes were considered in the context of this theoretical framework, with the greatest emphasis on levels 2 and 3, i.e. those that relate to both Tinto and Bourdieu. Tinto is used as the overarching theoretical lens for discussion, with the thinking tools of Bourdieu providing a lens through which to consider the role of capital and habitus in the formation and strength of goal and institute commitment.

At level 1, which relates only to Bourdieu, the focus in on policy and system, and this is dealt with in Chapter 10, where the implications of the findings for policy are considered.

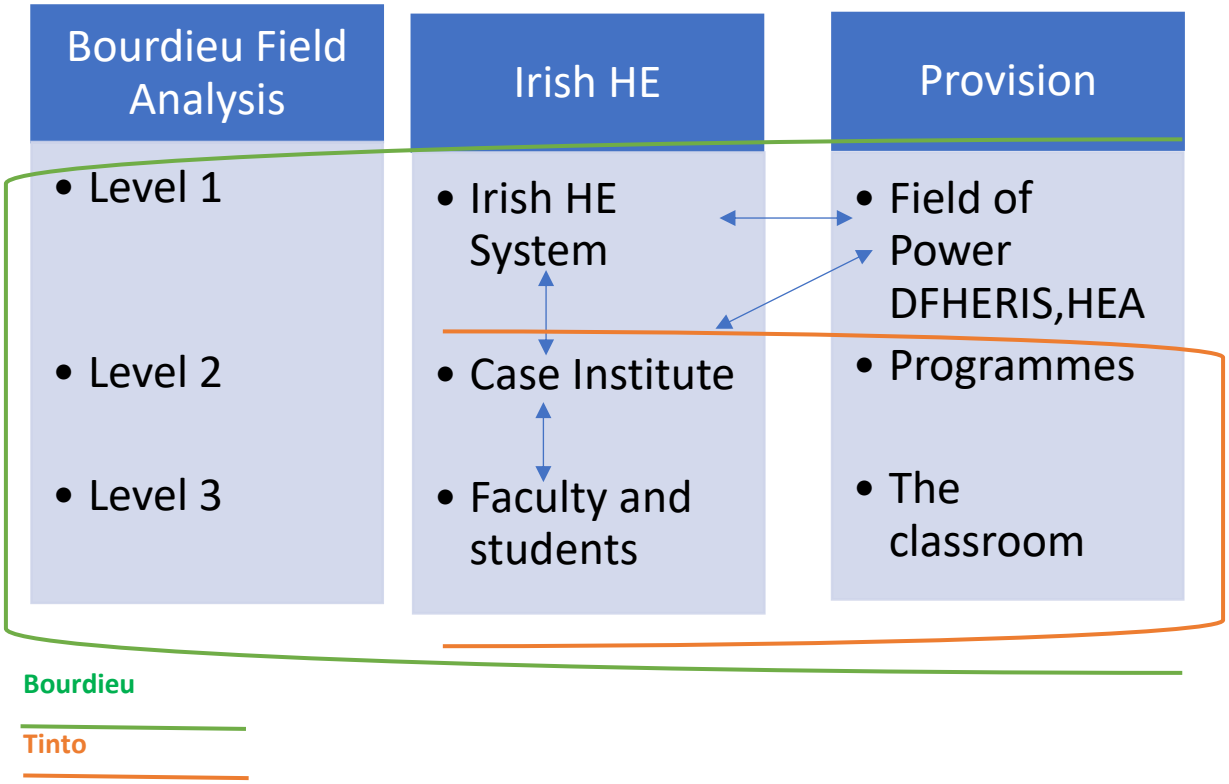


Figure 15: Analysis and Relationships Using the Tinto-Bourdieu Framework

9.2 A Model of the Student Journey

The themes that were constructed and presented in Chapters 6,7 and 8 have been interpreted by me, in the context of the theoretical framework, to create a model of the student journey. I will use this model as a basis for discussion and identification of the factors that I consider to be most influential in persistence in the case institute, and the wider HE context. This model is based on elements of the model of Tinto (1975, 1997) and Bourdieu's thinking tools (Grenfell, 2014). It is shown in Figure 16, and followed by a brief explanation of its' components.

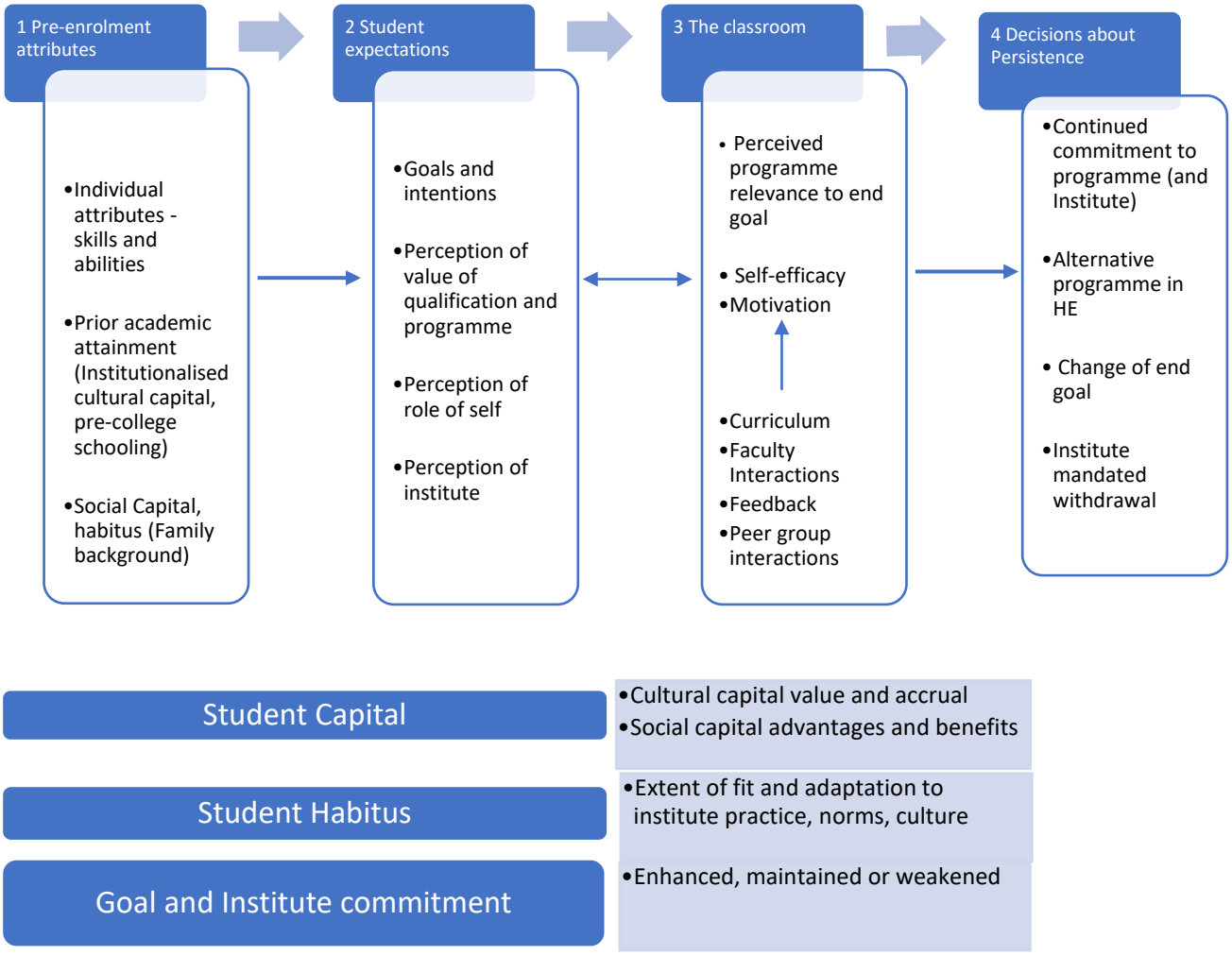


Figure 16: A Model of the Student Journey

The first two pillars, pre-entry attributes and student expectations, represent the aspects of the student decision making process about their participation in HE and their expectations about HE. Goal formation, a pre-cursor to goal commitment, occurs between pillar one and two. The third pillar represents the classroom experience and the double headed arrow between pillar two and three illustrates the relationship between expectations and pre-entry attributes and the experience of HE in the classroom. The classroom is the place where students make judgements about the value of their participation in their programme and this is informed by the curriculum, faculty interactions, feedback about their performance and peer interactions. The curriculum, classroom practices and faculty interactions are the most important factors in determining students' perceptions of the relevance of the programme,

linked to their end goal. Based on their assessment of experiences and expectations that occur between pillar 2 and pillar 3, students will decide to continue with their studies, or they may decide to follow an alternative pathway. The model does not specifically address situations where students are required to leave the institute due to poor academic performance but this is represented in pillar 4 as institute mandated withdrawal. Initial goal and institute commitment are represented under the first two pillars, along with initial student capital and habitus. Student habitus is presented on the basis that it is relational with the field (Atkinson 2011). Habitus is defined by Bourdieu as a product of people's own history (Grenfell and James, 1998), and it provides a useful lens through which to evaluate the perceptions of prospective students in relation to how well they would fit within HE, particularly those who had been out of a formal learning environment for a significant period of time. Bourdieu's (ibid.) concept of habitus applies to the individual and is aligned with the culture and practice of the institute and the field. The habitus of the individual can be viewed in the context of the field of higher education, and more specifically the sub-field of higher education that is the IoT or TU sector, and their programme of study. The habitus of HE is second nature for those who work in the system, particularly academic staff, and there are differences in the social and cultural capital of staff and students. My case study findings confirmed that cultural capital changes as the student progresses through their programme and as a result of their engagement with the institute and peers. Such changes in student capital and habitus are illustrated under the classroom pillar, on the basis that the classroom is the central point in which such changes occur or are instigated. Changes in goal and institute commitment are represented in the same way. The elements of the model will be discussed in the sections that follow.

9.3 Pre-enrolment Attributes

A student who believes that they have the capacity to achieve their qualification will be more likely to persist to programme completion (Tinto, 2012). Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988) or pre-college schooling (Tinto, 1975, 1997) can be considered as an indicator of the likely ease with which a student can adapt to the HE environment. Tinto (ibid.) uses pre-college

schooling as an ‘input’ variable in his model, and I have interpreted pre-college schooling as an input variable as well as a process variable in the form of cultural capital for this case study. In this section, I will discuss cultural capital as an input variable, along with habitus, as factors that can influence the entry and transition to HE. In later sections, I will discuss the influence of capital and habitus on goal setting, institute choice and the classroom experience. The concept of maturity as social and cultural capital will be included in these later sections.

Entry to Irish HE is on the basis of ex-ante admission policies, which should help to determine a student’s capability to complete the programme to which they are admitted. This is frequently decided on the basis of Leaving Certificate (LC) points, which are equivalent to institutionalised capital in the form of credentials (Bourdieu, 1984) and map onto pre-college schooling in Tinto’s (1975, 1997) model. HEA (2019) data has been used to demonstrate a positive correlation between points and programme completion, which could be construed to mean that the points system does go some way towards ‘matching’ students with programmes based on their prior attainment. It can also be considered as a proxy for knowing the rules of the learning and examinations game (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988; Astin, 1972a; Tinto; 1975, 1993). The research participants in this case study would likely agree with the sentiment (Godor, 2017; Tinto, 2018; Yorke, 2004; Murphy and Fleming, 2000) that, having allowed a student to enter the HE system, there is an onus on the part of the Institution to provide opportunities for students to navigate and complete their programme successfully. Tinto (2012) describes the relationship between Institute and student as a type of moral contract where the Institute must provide a learning environment that is conducive to success (Tight, 1998; Thomas, 2002). Expectations that form the basis of this moral contract depend on those of the student and the Institute.

While the HEA identifies LC points as a predictor of programme completion, it is noteworthy that up to half of the new entrants into the Technological Higher education sector in any given year do not gain access on the basis of leaving certificate points, meeting alternative ex-ante

requirements. These are frequently those associated with maturity and advanced entry[38]. Pre-entry cultural capital requirements therefore vary across the system and the sector, and the extent of this variation within and between programmes is determined to some extent by the mode of provision, and the purpose of programmes. HE continues to become more diverse in terms of the student body, (Loxley et al, 2014; HEA, 2016b; Fleming, 2016; MacFarlane, 2020), manifested in terms of age (mature students age 23 and older), part-time and online study, combined with other core activities such as work or caring responsibilities. Thomas (2002) notes that it is tempting to assume that, despite the actions of the Institute, the level of non-completion will likely increase alongside increasing diversity and participation rates, but there is not always a clear correlation between these factors. Nonetheless, institutes may see higher numbers of students who find it challenging to conform to the habitus of HE (Godor, 2017), and there is an onus on the Institute to ensure that programme entry requirements are appropriate, with supports in place where required.

Tinto (2018) notes that it is advantageous for students to know that facing challenges and overcoming them is to be expected in HE, calling it the normalisation of struggle. Knowing the 'rules of the game' (Grenfell, 2014) is critically important in completing any programme (Tinto, 2012). For those who come to Higher Education with relatively low levels of relevant cultural capital, it is possible that they are moving from a model of education in which they have not performed particularly well, to a 'thinly disguised' version of the same thing again – at third level with some form of supports (Gabi et al, 2021). Students belief that they lack the cultural capital (Robbins, 2005; Longden, 2004; Reay et al, 2001; Reay 2021, 2022) to succeed in HE is often associated with first generation students (Longden, 2004; Tinto, 2012). A higher number of first-generation students has been a feature of the IoT sector (Thorn, 2018) and interestingly, this case study questionnaire indicates that the majority of full-time on-campus respondents were not first generation. While it is difficult to draw any conclusions from this limited data, the case institute is likely to continue to monitor the student profile. The interview

[38] THEA Strategic Plan 2018-2023

participants provided greater insight into the experiences of first generation students, in terms of motivation and familiarity with the HE environment. Interview participants described their 'possession' of varying degrees of cultural capital at programme commencement. In using the term 'possession', I do so with the intention of considering the relative value of their cultural capital in relation to the HE field. Those students who had most recently been in a formal learning environment such as secondary school or who had already some experience of an HEI were found to have expressed a higher level of possession of cultural capital (albeit that they did not express it in those terms) in the form of familiarity with the culture and practices of formal education at programme commencement. In agreement with Murphy and Fleming (2000), this made some aspects of study such as the use of academic language, referencing and assessment formats easier for them. Those who had already completed an HE qualification had greater still cultural capital, but interestingly, they too had reservations about commencing a new programme. Research participants who had been away from a formal learning environment for many years expressed most concern about their cultural capital at programme commencement and believed that they had a greater challenge to face than students who had more recently experienced formal learning. They specifically referred to the differences between how they perceived their readiness for HE with that of their more recently formally educated peers, often linking this with age – where younger meant more recently in formal education. Murphy and Fleming (2000) confirm the need for mature students to play by the rules of the HE game (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988), which can be difficult when common knowledge is of no advantage for academic knowledge. I have found that students expressed the belief that more recent and higher levels of prior formal education assisted with making the transition to, and navigating, the HE environment, as illustrated in Figure 17.

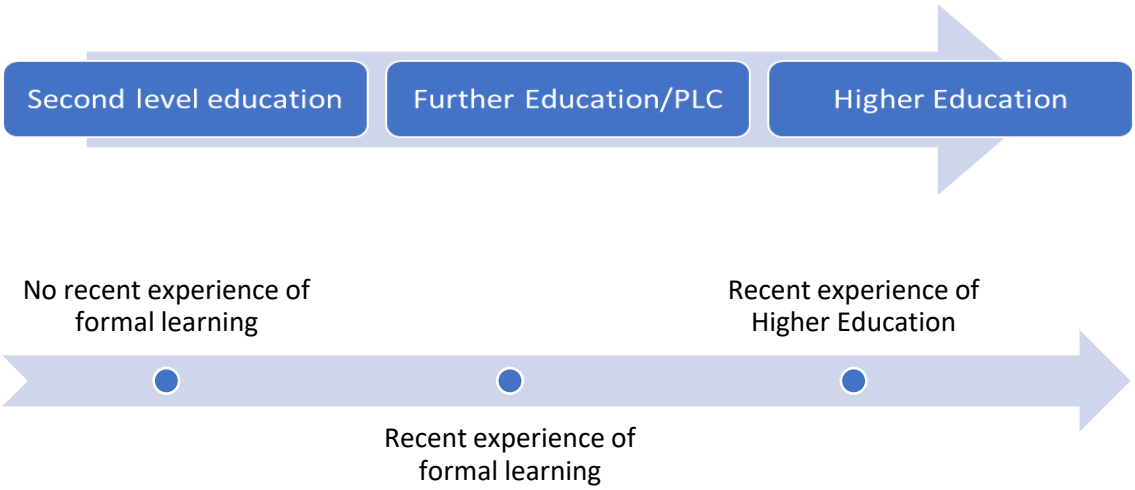


Figure 17: Prior experience of Formal Learning

In the following section, I will discuss the influence of pre-enrolment attributes as a factor in determining students' reasons for study, and goal setting, before moving on to discuss the choice of institute as a place of study. Perceptions of themselves and the institute were found to influence their expectations and assessment of their subsequent experiences.

9.4 Student Expectations

Student expectations about HE will determine how they perceive their subsequent experiences, and the extent to which they believe that their expectations have been met. Expectations about the institute and their programme are discussed in the sections that follow.

9.4.1 Reasons for Study and Goal Setting

This research has provided a valuable insight into reasons for study and goal setting, which can help to determine the likely strength of commitment to the goal (Tinto 1975, 1993, 2012). The pursuit of an HE qualification for employment, allied with the desire for personal achievement, acted a strong source of motivation for the research participants at programme commencement. Some goals represented long-term aspirations for achievement, others were described as goals of necessity for the workplace. The HE qualification was described as the enabler of a variety of clearly defined personal goals. These goals were found to have influenced programme choice, shown in the figure below.

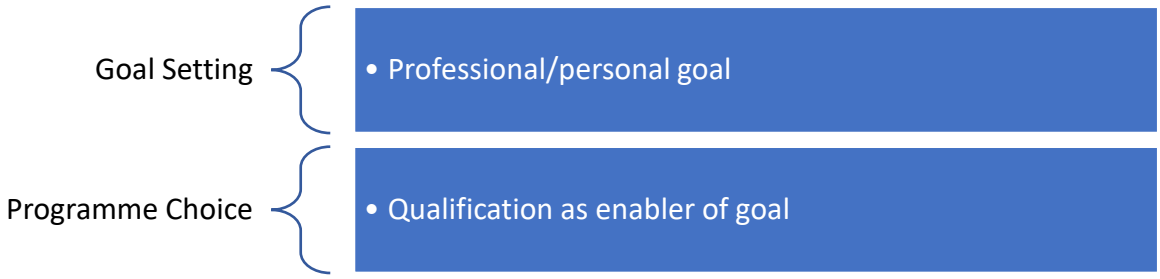


Figure 18: Qualification as Goal Enabler

The research participants stated reasons for study support multiple perspectives of about participation in HE and the purpose of an HE qualification. A key finding was linked to credentialism. 'The degree' is an indicator of an ability to achieve not only the academic qualification but also an indication of character and social skills (Marginson, 2016a). In the majority of cases, research participants wanted to use their qualification to take advantage of opportunities in the world of work that they believed might not otherwise be available to them, believing that HE had become 'quasi-compulsory' (Marginson, 2016a p. 259). Marginson (ibid.) notes that credentialism is an outcome, and not a leader, of increased educational participation. The online students in particular, would likely agree with Marginson (ibid.) in his suggestion that graduates may displace those without qualifications from their roles, or an opportunity to be considered for those roles. This is one driver of increased participation rates in HE. I believe that an additional driver of increased participation is the incorporation of new qualifications as part of industry upskilling such as the new apprenticeship in the case institute. For example, this programme attracted students who already had Honours degrees, to complete another Honours degree by a different HE route. All apprenticeships will migrate to a National Apprenticeship office with links to the HEA[39] and their inclusion with programmes that come under the remit of the CAO signals the many options and routes to an HE qualification. These routes do not all require full time attendance in a higher education institute, and degrees achieved by the apprenticeship route specifically incorporate a significant amount

[39] Action Plan for Apprenticeship DFHERIS

of accredited learning in the workplace. Robbins (1993) notes the work of Bourdieu on the potentially competing fields of education and employment and considers a 'reciprocal appropriation' of both fields, where each one tries to accommodate the needs or characteristics of the other. A shift in emphasis to the role of education being the creation of graduates with industry-relevant skills and competencies is an example of, according to Robbins' interpretation (1993) of Bourdieu's stance, the appropriation of the field of education by the field of employment. Higher Education is aligned with human capital development and as a mechanism for cognitive development (Marginson, 2016a; Bathmaker, 2015; Berger and Braxton, 1998), Marginson (ibid.) cautions that education has been elevated to economic and social arbiter, based on notions of its potential to transcend social and cultural capital in preparation for the world of work. Tight (2015), Seery (2013) and Khalaf (2020) have debated the purpose of higher education, and whether it is to support the development of knowledgeable and well-rounded individuals or to produce graduates with skills and competencies ready to contribute to the knowledge economy, or both. The findings from this case study support both perspectives. Having made the decision to join the ranks of mass HE, a key decision to be made by prospective students, alongside what to study, is about where to study, or according to Teichler (2008 p.350) 'where in the *fabrique* of education they should be allocated, or allocate themselves'. This is discussed in the following section.

9.4.2 Decisions about where to Study – Perceptions of the Institute

Yorke (1999) cites poor decision making about Institution of study as a factor in non-completion among the undergraduate student population. Factors such as social and cultural capital have been found to influence decisions about where to study (Reay, 2022; Byrne and McCoy, 2013; Byrne and McCoy, 2017; Grenfell, 2014), but for all learners, making a choice about where and how their HE qualification will be pursued has been shown to be highly complex (Walsh et al, 2015, 2018; Briggs and Wilson, 2007). This case study provides evidence of agreement with the assertion that this choice will be influenced by factors as diverse as course and Institute reputation (Walsh et al, 2018), geographic location (Cullinan,

Flannery, Walsh and McCoy, 2013), cost (which becomes more significant once the decision to attend HE is taken), access to grants, employment prospects (McCoy et al, 2011; Byrne and McCoy, 2017; Briggs et al, 2007), and information about student satisfaction with teaching quality (Obermeit, 2012; Dwyer, 2015, 2017). Where the programme was quite generic and available in other locations, cost and convenience associated with the geographic location of the case institute became more important in decision making. The on-campus research participants choice of the case institute was based on similar factors to those identified by other authors (McCoy et al, 2011; Byrne and McCoy, 2017; Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Obermeit, 2012; Dwyer, 2015, 2017) – location, cost, knowledge of the institute. Many research participants sought information about the institute from current students or alumni in their personal networks. Of particular interest to them was the culture of the institute, which they described in terms of the approachability of academic staff and associated teaching practices. This is relatively common among prospective students and has been identified by other authors (Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Yorke, 1999; Walsh et al, 2018; Tinto,1975, 1993, 2012; Braxton, 2014). Research participants placed less emphasis on academic reputation in terms of profile and publications (Marginson, 2016a), but more on lecturer approachability and support for students. Information about class size was also sought. Faculty interactions are influential in determining the student experience in the classroom (Tinto, 1997; Dwyer, 2012, 2015; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005) and the case study findings lend weight to the importance that prospective students placed on their anticipated classroom encounters. Where students could envisage a good fit between themselves and the institute, this served to create expectations and increase their level of institutional commitment in advance of study.

For online students, knowledge of the institute and institute reputation were important, but perhaps more importantly the convenience of the online classroom, which in some cases created an attractive programme that was difficult to replicate elsewhere (pre Covid19). While apprenticeship students became students of the institute by default, they too were found to have considered the features of the institute in their decision making process. In some

instances, the programme became the dominant factor in decision-making, with the institute a secondary or incidental factor. I would suggest that, where a programme has unique features that are of value to students, choice of programme becomes more important than choosing the institute as a place of study per se. The case study confirmed that the ladder system that is a feature of the IoT sector was important, and while it could be argued that this is a foregone conclusion, based on the research sample, the research has identified that level 6 and 7 programmes are attractive to some students, despite the falling demand among traditional age students. Of note was the reduced risk and enhanced flexibility in comparison to a four-year Honours degree programme, where leaving after two or three years, would mean losing an incomplete educational investment. For online students, the ladder system provided access to HE that otherwise may not have been available; this aspect of study was not specifically explored with the on-campus students. In considering institute reputation, credibility and the subsequent value of the qualification for employment were important. As part of a signalling mechanism for employers, Marginson (2016b) notes that factors such as institution attended as well as personal characteristics are taken into account by employers, who may attach more importance to these factors than specific qualifications or skills. Where disciplines are relatively generic and do not lead to a specific vocation or profession, the institute becomes a more important signal of prestige than the qualification itself. Changes in the manner in which a degree can be achieved (Byrne and McCoy, 2017) and therefore the additional skills that it indicates may be different for graduates of different types of programme and Institute. Prestige was not a specific aspect of this case study, however, some of the research participants did mention it, and noted their satisfaction that the IoT was recognised as being on a par with the Universities. In a sense, this adds weight to the argument that the University is everything (Marginson, 2008), and that institutes and students alike will gravitate towards what is perceived to be an institute of higher status. Reay (2022) re-iterates the point made by Harris and Dobson (2015) that individuals can be expected to be autonomous pursuers of their dreams and ambitions regardless of social location or resources. This point, while made in a different geographic and HE systems context, can be applied to Irish students' decisions

regarding participation in HE. Until the establishment of TUs, there was a disparity in the provision of University education, for example, in the Border and Western regions (HEA, 2021; Walsh et al, 2018). The creation of TUs in almost all regions of Ireland (HEA) addresses University access but will not immediately address access to all types of discipline and programme areas, and the future strategic direction of the TUs remains to be seen. Access to HE at different points on the NFQ provides a means of reducing inequality where there is an appropriately supported educational framework and structure available to students. The contemporary student body is not homogeneous; it is diverse and demanding and brings with it a variety of expectations about the HE habitus and their role in completing their studies. The choice of programme and the institute where students believe their expectations will be met to their satisfaction depend on factors that are personal, institutional, practical, and aspirational. Arguments are presented in the literature to proclaim that, all else equal, some students state a preference for studying in a University rather than a non-university provider (Marginson, 2016a; Walsh, Flannery and Cullinan, 2018) such as an IoT. This is not always the case. The findings from this case study demonstrate the value that is placed on studying in an IoT by students who participated in the research; however, they did also value the parity of esteem with the traditional University as a result of the re-designation of the Institute as a TU. Opportunities for studying outside of the traditional University sector, what Trow, in Burrage (2010) might classify as a democratic form of postsecondary education, should not be viewed as the consolation prize of Higher Education, but as an opportunity to achieve an HE qualification by pursuing multiple entry pathways and modes of provision.

These sections have discussed goal setting and institute choice, factors that will influence the likely commitment that students exhibit towards their chosen programme of study. Tinto (1975, 1993) includes goal and institute commitment at two points in his model, the first set of commitments perhaps more accurately described as perceived or intended commitments, and the second set as commitments in practice. These concepts are discussed in more detail in the following section.

9.4.3 Goal and Institute Commitment

Goal commitment is attributed to the commitment of the student to achieving their qualification and linked to the academic system Tinto's model (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Institute commitment is influenced by the characteristics of the institute, faculty and peer interactions, and is aligned with the social system in the model. Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012) identifies goal and institute commitment as two determinants of the likely persistence of students during their studies. They each appear twice in his model to indicate that these are not fixed, and that they can change during engagement with the institute. Nicoletti et al (2019) point to the fact that there is no periodicity in Tinto's model to determine at which time period goal commitment and institute commitment might change for a student, and that it is not feasible that these would only be considered at two points in time. I agree with Longden (2004) that this time period cannot be specified and is likely to be different for each student. The two points in time are indicative of the fact that goal and institute commitment are most likely to be influenced after some engagement by the student post-registration. Goal commitment and institute commitment can be thought of as two continua rather than fixed 'before and after' engagement points in the model of Tinto (1975, 1993), as illustrated in the diagrams below.

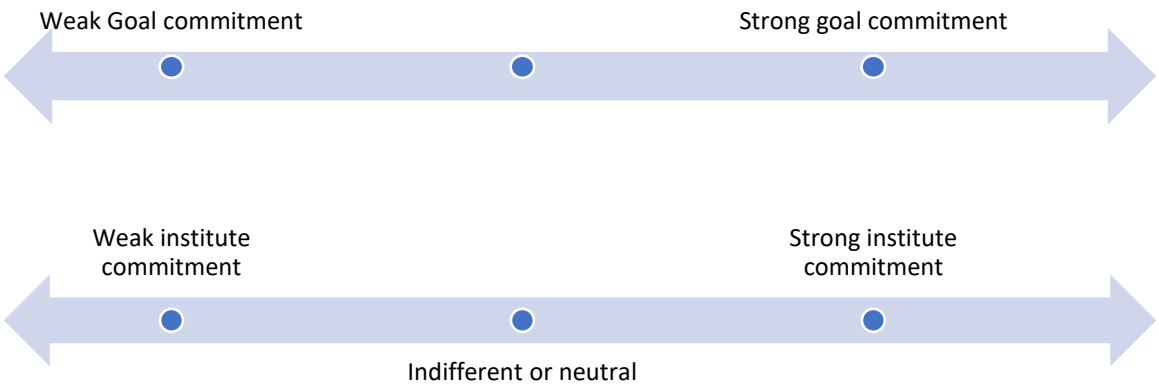


Figure 19: Goal and Institute Commitment Continua

Having selected a programme of study, programme relevance (Tinto, 2012) was found in this case study to influence the research participants commitment to both the programme itself and sometimes by default, the Institute. It is not likely that a student will remain in an institute if they do not perceive that the programme is relevant or of value to them, even in instances where students do not have a particular role in mind, but they believe in the value of their qualification. They need not be interested in the entire programme but they need to be sufficiently interested and engaged to remain on the programme. My findings identify goal commitment as taking precedence over institute commitment, in certain circumstances. Where goal commitment remains reasonably strong and the programme on which the student is registered is perceived by them to meet their needs, institute commitment is less likely to change. This situation will be influenced by the existence of alternative ways of achieving the goal that are available to the student. It has been observed in this case study that some students who participated in the research had left another institute to pursue alternative qualifications in the case institute. In these situations, programme choice was a major part of their decision to transfer, rather than only factors that were related to the institute. THEA, in their analysis of factors that prompted students to consider withdrawing[40] from their

[40] Based on data from 11 of the then 14 institutes of technology (9 of the current 12 technological HEIs) who chose to offer the optional 'withdrawal' question to their students in the ISSE Survey in 2019. Student success in technological higher education: An exploration of reasons why students consider withdrawing from their programmes THEA_ISSE_withdrawal_exploration_2019 and 2020.

programmes, identified 'course'[41] as a prominent reason. I would suggest that where a student has completed at least one year of study, and is still committed to their initial goal and discipline area, and the overall programme is still considered relevant to them, they are less likely to leave one institute for another. Even if they can transfer to another institute with advanced entry, there is an element of uncertainty about what they will encounter and the 'exchange rate' of their existing credits into which they have invested a lot of time and effort. There are also practical considerations such as finance and grants, but this is not specifically within the scope of this study. The findings lend weight to the importance of the first-year experience in that if students believe that their programme is right for them, and they have strong goal commitment, then they are more likely to stay in the institute. The case study findings support the view that those students who are registered on programmes in the ladder system are also more likely to stay and continue their studies in the institute at which they were first registered, unless there are other reasons for them to move such as personal and family circumstances. The case study also showed that students will likely remain in the Institute to complete their programme where they are confident that the Institute, although not perfect, will provide the learning environment to enable them to complete their qualification; this might arise as a result of familiarity with the institute. They might fall into the category of those who 'stick it out' (Tinto, 2012). Institute commitment is linked to the social system in Tinto's (1975, 1993) model, but my findings have shown that institute commitment in the case institute was also strongly linked to programme structure such as the ladder system, unique programme offerings and the ability to study remotely. Regardless of the mode of study, the classroom was the place where the majority of engagement with the institute occurred, and this is discussed in the following section.

[41] The use of the term 'course' is equivalent to programme.

9.5 The Classroom

The classroom plays a key role in the student experience and engagement (Tinto, 1993, 1997, 2012, 2018; Dwyer, 2012, 2015). The research participants valued (and expected) a structured learning environment and one in which they felt that they would be challenged and supported to achieve their qualification. While the full time on campus students had a broader and more regular engagement with the institute (for those who had been on campus prior to the Covid19 pandemic), the classroom was also the key location for their engagement with the institute. For online students, the physical classroom was in a place of their choosing, most often their home or place of work. The case study participants expectations about classroom interaction influenced the perceived value of time spent in the classroom as part of the learning process. Where the time spent in contact with lecturers is relatively short, it needs to be of value in terms of advancing the learning process from a student perspective. For part-time online students in particular, time in class was an opportunity cost, for which they needed a return. Astin (1984) notes that student time a zero-sum game and a most precious institutional resource (Astin, 1984, p. 522), which is often overlooked by administrators and academic staff. Students will use class time to determine the relevance and value of their programme of study and to make judgements about the value of the time that they invest in study. This is discussed in the following section.

9.5.1 Programme Relevance and Curriculum

The perceived relevance of the programme on which students were registered was found to be a recurring feature among those who persisted with their studies. This was based on the curriculum and classroom interactions with academic staff and peers. In terms of the curriculum, students' perceptions of its relevance varied across modules and points in time. An interesting point raised was the perceived irrelevance of some of the programme content, for example, academic writing, communications or some of the softer skills on programmes where this was believed to be somewhat peripheral in comparison to the core discipline material. There is an important role for the institute in ensuring that students are aware of the

relevance of such aspects of the programme, even if this is not immediately apparent to them. This also has implications for programme design and sequencing of modules at different stages. Tinto (2012, 2018) highlights the possibility of using alumni for this type of action, and notes that students are less likely to invest their time and energy into something that they think will not pay. A related point is that mature students with significant work experience, or those who were studying on the apprenticeship programme believed that some of the programme content would not be relevant to their role in the workplace or to their future career, but they acknowledged that it was part of the learning process that they needed to complete to achieve their qualification. This is also an important consideration relating to the type of programme that is being provided and if it is perceived to align more with practical or theoretical type skills and competencies.

9.5.2 Motivation and Self-Efficacy

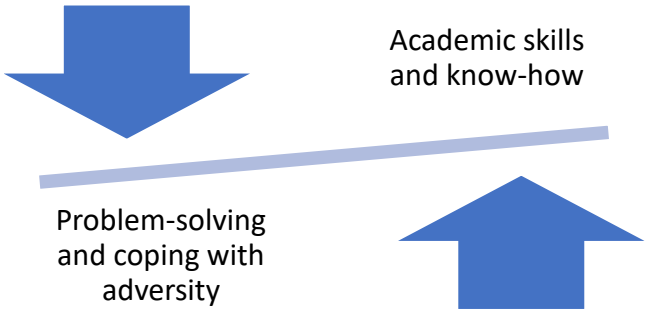
In agreement with Dwyer (2015, 2107), Reason (2009) and Tinto (1997), student perceptions of the classroom experience, based on lecturer teaching style, classroom engagement and availability of the required resources was found to influence student motivation and self-efficacy. In the case of on campus students, small class sizes for lectures and tutorials in some instances created a supportive learning environment, which contributed to increased self-efficacy. This was often as a result of lecturer support for students and a sense that they were valued (Tinto, 2012). For the students who persisted, intellectual development was found to be important to them, as well as grade performance. The need for intellectual development was manifested in students setting academic goals for themselves, often in the form of grades or award classifications, which suggests that the achievement of the qualification alone was not sufficient, but that they wanted to achieve a high standard. Tinto (2012) refers to the difference between the value that a student places on intellectual development and vocational development in the achievement of their qualification, aligning intellectual development with intrinsic reward (Tinto, 1975). This case study provides evidence of the need or desire for both the qualification (linked to grades and compliance with academic standards) and the personal

achievement that is associated with intellectual development and intrinsic rewards. Interestingly, some of the online students noted competing with themselves and each other but as a means of encouragement rather than trying to outdo each other. This is an example of the way in which students' expectations of themselves changed during their engagement with the institute and with their peers; *bildung* (Seery, in Fleming et al, 2017), self-formation and self-actualisation (Marginson, 2016b) are evident in this change in attitude and perception of what they can achieve.

Habitus of the individual is important in considering faculty and student interactions (Thomas, 2002). Of particular interest is how or if capital can change during engagement with the Institute and peers. Unlike time, cultural capital is not a zero-sum game in the sense that it can accrue or accumulate during engagement with the institute. Yorke (2004) explains that positive and supportive experiences of engagement with institute staff can lead to students realising that they can tap into their unrealised potential, and this leads to increased self-efficacy. Yorke (ibid.) also points out that age is an important factor in persistence and that older students generally are less likely to leave a programme early because they have spent more time researching it or being sure about what they want to do. He also notes that maturity may also mean that they can develop better coping skills. However, maturity is not a proxy for academic skills. In the classroom, lecturing staff might inadvertently equate 'adulthood' with ability to navigate the academic world (Fleming and Finnegan, 2011). The mature research participants demonstrated good coping and problem-solving skills, as well as a tolerance for disparity between their expectations and experiences. Having the skills to deal with adversity may be associated with mature students to a greater extent than younger students, but some of this potential advantage could be diluted by the increased academic challenges that they faced in an unfamiliar environment. Supports for learning need to be embedded into HE

Institutions to take account of mature learners' profiles and needs (Fleming and Finnegan, ibid.).

Figure 20: Balancing Academic Know How and Problem-Solving Skills



Tinto (2012) points to the challenges faced by students who enter higher education without the required academic skills and cultural capital to succeed, or believe that they can succeed, in their programme. Despite some initial challenges, during their engagement with the institute, all of the research participants became more confident in scenarios where they achieved their goals and were successful in assessments and examinations. This aligns with Tinto's (2012, 2018) view of the importance of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995; Bean and Eaton, 2000) in persistence in HE. However, each new year of the programme brought new challenges in some cases, and the findings suggest that making it past first year does not mean that students are 'out of the woods'. There is a lot of emphasis on the first-year experience (Black et al, 2018), for good reason, as it is important to ensure early engagement and commitment from students to their studies. Interestingly, some final year students reported challenges that they had not anticipated as they progressed from one stage of their programme to the next. This seemed to be particularly true for the development of skills such as research and academic writing. Students who expressed this sentiment noted that they perceived a significant increase in expectations from academic staff about what they were able to do. This points to potential differences in habitus and capital between lecturers and students. For example, final year students understanding of research was considered to be almost assumed by academic

staff. Research skills were taught, but they believed that it was from the perspective of students almost having an innate understanding of how to conduct research; this is an important consideration for pedagogy, programme design and the provision of academic supports. The approach to the use of institute supports found in the case study is discussed in the following section.

9.5.3 No to Supports?

As students progressed through their programmes, there were varying perspectives on the use of institute academic supports. Some students used them as a resource, others did not, and some believed that, with the benefit of hindsight, they should have used them. In terms of expectations about themselves, this highlights a potential dilemma for students, in that some of them might feel that they should not need to rely on supports. What is unclear is the reason why a relatively high percentage of students do not use the formal institute supports that are available to them. The collegial approach evident in various types of peer support suggests that students are happier to find their own solution to a problem, rather than perhaps 'resorting' to the institute supports. This may also link to habitus whereby the use of supports could be associated with an inability to reach the standard required for HE. Tinto (2018) proposed an alternative approach to the provision of supports, which is to embed them in programmes rather than providing them as additional modules or activities, and where they are additional activities, to present them as 'opt-out' resources. In other words, students are presented with the option of *not* attending rather than attending. Tinto (ibid.) notes that the majority of students do not opt out. From an institute perspective, this approach would have implications from a resourcing perspective, but would be worthy of consideration in the context of amending the model of academic support provision for different programme types. For academic issues, students in this case study were found to often have used their peers instead of the formal academic supports provided centrally by the Institute. Students expressed a preference for solving problems (where they could) on their own terms at a time that suited them. This often was at a time when they were in need of an answer or guidance at a particular point in time

when the institute staff or academic staff would not be available or when the answer was needed quickly to allow them to move forward with an aspect of their study. A related finding is that of Walsh, Flannery, Cullinan and Kennelly (2022), who examined students' preferences for the availability of counselling services on the campuses of thirteen Irish HEIs. They found that long waiting times for appointments resulted in students not using those services, indicating that timeliness is important for students. For the institute, the provision of supports represents an investment in institutional action (Tinto, 2012) to assist students to achieve their potential, and it is a costly financial investment, which is often expected by students. At a time of reduced funding to HEIs (Walsh et al, 2022), institutes are expected to make support services available, usually at no cost to the student. The financial aspects of supports and who pays for them is outside the scope of my research, but is an important consideration at policy and Institute level in terms of the costly balancing act of support provision, accessibility, usage and benefits. Tinto (2012) advocates for some far-reaching fundamental changes to the way that institutes approach their strategies for improving persistence and retention, that go beyond adding a course or seminar to address a known or perceived difficulty. He advocates for institutions to continuously monitor student outcomes and to try to identify issues early in the student journey. Tinto (2012) agrees with the importance of the first year experience (Reason, 2003; Yorke, 2004; Black et al, 2018). However, Tinto (ibid.) believes that some of the actions taken do not go far enough and advocates for a complete overhaul of the classroom experience. There is a shift in emphasis and understanding of the needs of the Institute to support students and make provision for different types of learner and different ways of demonstrating their learning. For example, the growing emphasis and importance attached to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in HE is one example of this. A discussion of the merits or otherwise of UDL is outside the scope of this research and it is used here for as one example of the way in which this recognition of the need for institutes to be flexible to learner needs is manifested in HE in both programme design and assessment strategies.

9.5.4 The Role of Affirmation and Feedback

Linked to increasing self-efficacy and enhancing cultural capital, the need for early and meaningful feedback on assessed work was expressed by almost all of the students is in line with the findings of Yorke (2004), Tinto (1993, 2012, 2018), Dwyer (2015) and Gabi at al (2021). As a result of another potential mismatch between academic staff and student habitus and capital, when students had passed a module, or part of an assessment, the need for feedback might have gone unrecognised by academic staff, whereas students often wanted this feedback for affirmation, as well as guidance for improvement in their future endeavours.

Students valued interaction with lecturers in the classroom and wanted to make the most of the time that was available to them during lectures, whether this was online or in the physical classroom. In comparing the characteristics of the online and the on-campus classroom, the very condensed nature of teaching and class contact time which was a feature of the online classroom did not appear to detract from the opportunities presented for intellectual development. Maturity and relevant work experience may also contribute to this ability to manage a condensed teaching format. In some cases, a lack of satisfaction with the classroom experience caused some students to consider programme withdrawal. A satisfactory classroom experience, on the other hand, often confirmed a decision to continue with study. In cases where students across all modes of study expressed frustration or disappointment with their academic engagement with the institute, which was manifested in the classroom experience for the most part, it was found not to be sufficient to make them decide to leave their programme.

9.5.5 Student Habitus and Sense of Belonging or Congruence = Integration = fish in water?

Whether it is described as congruence (Tinto and Cullen, 1973; Spady, 1971; Bourdieu, 1984) or integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993), the notion of a sense of fitting within the HE environment and habitus has been borne out in several ways in my case study. Academically, the idea of

congruence and integration puts the emphasis back on students to conform to institutional norms (Godor, 2017), despite the shifting emphasis towards institutional action (Tinto, 2012) to accommodate a diverse student body. For individuals, habitus and capital has the potential for them to feel like a fish out of water (Bourdieu, 1984) and experience a sense of 'otherness' (Read et al, 2003; Reay, 2022) in HE. The research findings showed that feelings of being somewhat out of place can happen in a number of contexts, not only in an overall academic or social context, but in smaller sub-sets of each of these, and at any time. They can occur at programme commencement, or at any stage during the programme or in the exam hall. From a social perspective, my research findings illustrate that there were varying degrees of homogeneity and diversity across the programmes that were represented. Part-time online students could be viewed as a relatively homogeneous group of mature students, reducing the perception of themselves as other (Read et al, ibid.) which might occur in a physical campus classroom comprised mainly of traditional age students (Kuh and Love, in Braxton, 2000). Another interesting aspect of the fish in water from my perspective is that this does not only necessarily relate to the social aspects of being a student, and finding oneself among like-minded peers, or able to adapt to an unfamiliar environment. I would also propose that the feeling of fit and congruence that a student perceives with their programme can also contribute to the sense of a fish in water. Where the programme feels relevant and of value to the student, this could also be described as a sense of fit with the academic environment, contributing to persistence. Mindful of the fact that a seemingly trivial event can be enough to trigger the decision by a student to depart (Longden, 2004; Black et al 2018), it is important for HEIs to appreciate the importance of being able to navigate the 'ancillary' aspects of programmes. This is particularly important for students who may perceive that they lack the cultural and social capital to fit into the HE environment and to make sense of its culture and practices.

The research findings illustrated the ways in which lecturers were cognisant of the likely lack of familiarity with the HE environment among new students, based on the descriptions of

student-faculty interactions, their approach to support and assistance. While this was not expressed uniformly or consistently by all of the research participants, those who did cite their experiences of lecturer support stated that they had considered it to be of benefit to them in persisting with their studies. Webb et al (2017) point to evidence that suggests that the field of HE is not accommodating to students who access it with lower levels of social and cultural capital, and that no significant changes are usually made to take account of this. My case study suggests that within the case institute, there is evidence that practice has evolved and changed to ensure that students are supported in a way that the institute considers meaningful, appropriate and relevant.

9.5.6 The Classroom as Academic and Social System – Faculty and Peer Group Interactions

While the separation of the academic and social systems of the HE Institute is a strength of Tinto's model to allow for analysis, it is also a weakness in that it mis-represents the reality of HE life, if taken at face value. Tinto (1997) proposes that a more accurate representation of the social and academic systems of the institute would be as two nested spheres, where academic activities occurred within a social sphere. Based on my case study findings, I would suggest that for the part-time and apprenticeship online classes, that the spheres could be reversed to show the social aspects of student life being represented inside the academic sphere. This could also be applied but to a lesser extent for the on-campus students.

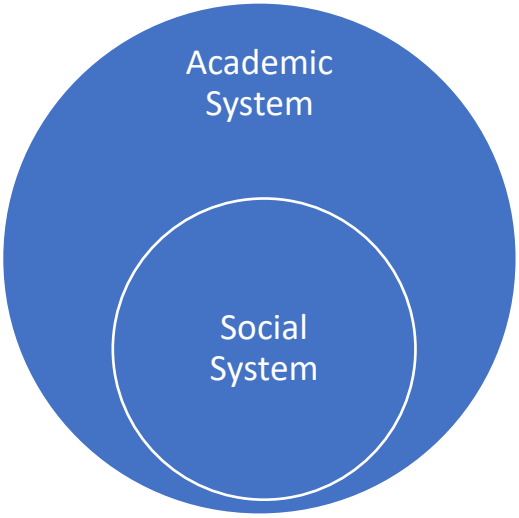


Figure 21: Representation of Social Interaction within the Academic System

Tinto's concept of social integration aligns in his model with peer group and faculty interactions (albeit with a relationship with the academic system). Tinto (1975, 1993) highlights the compensatory aspects of some of the components of his model, such as academic and social integration (Pascarella et al, 1983), where one can compensate for the other. The importance attached to peer group interactions in this case study was found to be influenced by students' perceptions of their classroom environment, opportunities for interacting with peers and their own need or desire for social interaction. Students studying online did not have any strong expectations about social interaction with peers, and as many were mature students, some of whom had already completed an HE qualification, and were really focussed on the academic system in Tinto's model, The social integration aspect of Tinto's model might be better thought of as social interaction in the context of students who study online and are not attending on campus. My research identified a blurred line between social and academic engagement in the case institute where informal collaborative learning was instigated by students outside of the formal classroom. This was often a catalyst for social interaction, with an academic focus.

9.6 Field Considerations

Now that the historical binary divide has effectively been erased by the re-designation of almost all of the IoTs as Technological Universities, it remains to be seen how this new 'softer' binary will work in practice. The Technological Universities are charged with programme provision which is partially based on their RTC/IoT DNA of regional provision of qualifications from levels 6 to 10 on the NFQ. This is a differentiating factor for TUs in comparison to the traditional Universities. The TUs are also providing what could be considered traditional University programmes, which they have been doing for some time as IoTs (Highman, 2015, 2020). Institutional ambition and autonomy (Neave, 1979; Clancy, 1996; Goglio et al, 2017; Kyvik, 2007) will likely see this pattern of provision continue. The value to students of the ladder system was evident in this case study. This staged approach is likely to continue to be of value to a diverse range of students, even though demand for sub-degree programmes has reduced among the traditional age population (HEA, 2021). The University status might put a new 'gloss' on the sub-degree programmes for traditional age students, but this remains to be seen. Given the drive for upskilling and the desire for enhanced qualifications in the workplace, the sub-degree (and degree) programmes that are provided as part-time provision will very likely make an important contribution to the fabric of HE in the context of lifelong learning[42]. The provision of lifelong learning opportunities and a broad range of access routes for a diverse student body has been central to the mission of the Technological Higher education sector[43]. Life-long learning that is accessible as part-time, online and flexible provision has been, and continues to be, very much part of the Irish Government policy (Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017). Walsh, Flannery and Cullinan (2018) emphasise the need for heterogeneity in provision of HE to accommodate the different preferences and needs of prospective students, and this case study supports this viewpoint. This includes a more flexible approach to building up HE qualifications for students who are not in a position (or do not wish

[42] TURN Report, HEA, 2019

[43] Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science Future Funding for Higher Education, Technological Higher Education Association, February 2022.

to) complete a programme on a continuous basis in full time higher education. In the 1970s, Astin (1977) had cautioned against using the term ‘stopout’ as a mechanism for allowing HEI management some comfort in considering that a student had only temporarily stepped away from their programme of study, with the intention on returning at a later date. ‘Stopout’ would not be used in a contemporary context, but there are an increasing number of students who are completing their programmes on a flexible basis, and who step away from a programme and return to complete it, or those who complete their programme as discrete packages of learning. Stopping out has become legitimate, and even possibly encouraged on the basis of innovative programme design.

The findings from this research suggest that linkages between the world of work and the world of education are important to students, linked to end goals, and contributing to persistence decisions. Employers are becoming more overtly aligned with HE provision for programmes, allowing students to develop work-based competencies that are used for credits on academic programmes. An interesting finding from this research was the assertion from some of the online students that tacit knowledge was not the same as academic knowledge, where they encountered unexpected aspects of their academic programme that were unfamiliar to them. This often required them to demonstrate knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the academic environment in a manner that was different to what was required of them in a work context, perhaps a type of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Academic programmes that ‘bake in’ work experience during programme design address this issue to some extent by defining the requirements of the work-based components in terms of learning outcomes and module content. Interestingly, work-based learning that leads to a form of tacit knowledge that is developed and approved in the academic environment as part of programme design is considered more acceptable than that which students might bring with them as prior learning. Perhaps this is because that which is part of an academic programme is considered a legitimate form of knowledge, whereas something that falls outside of the HE habitus is not. Mangez and Vanden Broeck (2020) draw attention to the changing semantics around

education, which capture some of these competing perspectives on educational purpose. They note that, across the globe, education has adopted a different language, and a shift towards the use of learning, competence and projects, part of which stems from a need for education to be relevant and future oriented. What is interesting is the point that they make about the paradox of school education trying to accommodate real life scenarios, shifting from an older order of a transmitted curriculum to a new order of learning to learn, developing competencies and future proofing students, in an uncertain environment. For some programmes, this means making specific links between the educational world and the world of work (O'Connor, 2022). Mangez and Vanden Broeck (2020) suggest that education perhaps is being invited to become what it is not if it is to more focussed on real life scenarios. I believe that HE has already accepted this invitation and will very likely continue in this vein. In the following section, I will discuss the relevance of the model of Tinto (1975, 1993) and the thinking tools of Bourdieu (1984) in their application in this case study.

9.7 Critique of Tinto and Bourdieu

For all the limitations cited (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004; Chrysikos et al, 2017; Yorke, 2004; Longden, 2004; Tinto, 2012) of Tinto's model, it is a valuable framework for analysing the HE environment. My research has shown that Tinto's model can be used to study the persistence decisions of a varied student body, that includes part-time online learners, mature students, commuter students and those who are studying on sub-degree and add-on programmes. The study of part-time commuting students in the US by Metzner and Bean (1987) Terenzini and Reason (2005) led to the assertion that Tinto's (1975, 1993) model was inappropriate for the study of part-time students because of its emphasis on social integration, which was less relevant for commuting students. This does not mean that the model cannot be used in such a way that the most important variables or factors can be identified, based on the student and institute profile (Reason and Terenzini, 2005; Braxton, Jones, Hirschy and Hartley, 2008). Dwyer (2015, 2017) used Tinto's model to study the persistence decisions of commuter students in an Irish IoT. Yorke (1999) believes that there are limitations in applying Tinto's

model (1975, 1993) at a systems level for HE, stating that there are too many variables to be of assistance to policy makers and institutional leaders in determining where to invest resources to address specific factors. He notes that many of the components are unknown at a systems level and that factors relating to individual students will likely be widely dispersed at institute level, making a complete picture of a student challenging. Tinto (2018) clarifies that policy at institute level cannot solve every individual student problem, not would this be expected. However, he asserts that it can provide a framework for addressing the key issues. Tinto's model (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004; Yorke, 2004; Longden, 2004; Tinto, 2012), can be viewed as being overly formulaic in its construction, or containing too many variables to be used as a predictor of non-completion (Yorke, 1999). It has also been criticised for excluding external environmental factors and its suitability for use with mature, non-traditional students has been questioned. Longden (2004) raised questions about the transferability of the model from the private US residential universities and colleges, comprised of mainly white middle class students, in which it was originally tested, to other countries and other HE contexts and systems, with a diverse student body. Tinto (2018) has acknowledged that he developed his original model in 1970s US, where there was a different cultural context, and that the concepts of integration do not have the same meaning in a contemporary HE environment. However, student engagement and involvement are important in describing a sense of belonging or integration in a contemporary context.

I would suggest that it might be possible that too much is expected of Tinto's model. In one sense, it is not an equation where values can be entered, and an answer produced. Each of the elements of the model requires interpretation in the context of the HE field, and a knowledge of the HE system where the student-institute interaction takes place. Context is important in interpreting the findings from analysis that employs the model. I have found the model to be of benefit in this case study, but I found it more useful when used in conjunction with the thinking tools of Bourdieu. Other authors have used the concepts of Bourdieu to study persistence and retention in HE, using the lenses of cultural capital and habitus (Longden,

2004; Thomas, 2002; Reay, 2003, 2004, 2022). These studies have produced insights into student experience and persistence decisions, based on their individual cultural capital (Longden, 2004; Reay,2003, 2004, 2022) and habitus (Thomas, 2002) relative to their institute of study, and likelihood of accessing particular HEIs. From my perspective, the thinking tools of Bourdieu have been of benefit in considering how cultural and social capital are employed by students at the commencement of their student journey and as they progress through their programme.

Tinto (1975, 2012) stated that the higher the level of qualification, the more likely was the student's commitment to achieving their goal and that goal commitment would be stronger if the student sought a higher level of award. My research illustrates that goal commitment is also strengthened by the ultimate purpose of the qualification or award. Interview data from students studying on Level 6 and Level 7 programmes provide support for this view. Their qualifications are at the lower end of the NFQ in higher education, but their motivation was high and goal commitment very strong; they linked this to their future career and ability to move on to higher levels on the NFQ.

9.8 Chapter Summary

Santoalha, Biscaia and Teixeira (2018) and Frolich and Stensaker (2021) note that the political goal of many Governments is increasing diversity of provision of higher education that is better adapted to a greater diversity of individual qualifications, motivations and career aspirations. This diversity of qualifications and students has been exhibited in this chapter, which has presented my reflections on the case study findings in the context of the relevant academic literature and Irish HE policy. I believe that it is possible to interpret the findings from this case study at the level of the specific programmes that were examined, but that there are principles that can be applied to other programmes that come under the remit of the Institute. I hope that the findings and my interpretation of those findings, will go some way towards identifying the factors that contribute to persistence, and that can be used in practice to consider the degree of fit and adaptation that is required for a diverse student body. This will, I hope, be of value

for the case institute that extends beyond the thesis. The case study has shown that HE is associated with high expectations and high hopes, in a sense, a multi-purpose product or service to be put to good use by individuals and society for personal and economic advancement. The Technological Higher Education sector will play a central role in the provision of varied HE opportunities. This is a case study of the particular (Tight, 2010), from an institute perspective, but not a student perspective (James, 2015). Fuzzy generalisations (Bassey, 1999; Hammersley, 2001) may be of value to other HEIs in this sector. Conclusions from the study and answers to the research questions are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 10: Conclusions

10.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will answer the research questions, as part of the overall conclusions of the case study. In answering the research questions, I am mindful of the views of authors (Metz, 2005; Tinto, 2006, 2012; Davidson et al, 2009) who challenge the possibility (legitimately, based on their own research) of devising a one size fits all solution that is difficult to employ or translate across different types of student, programme and institute. Individualism is the key. Individualism is not intended by these authors to be something that needs to be tailored to the needs of every single individual student; this would not be feasible and likely would still not resolve all of the reasons for non-persistence. In using the themes and interpreting their meaning for persistence, I offer the answers to the research questions on the basis that they can be further interpreted in the context of the case institute and other HEIs. The answers presented in this chapter reflect the nature of the institute as an IoT.

An overview of the contribution of each of the themes to the research questions is contained in Appendix Six. I will begin the chapter by presenting each research question and answer in turn, followed by the insights and implications for HE policy, the case Institute and practice. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research, and my reflections on the contribution and limitations of the case study and my role as a researcher.

10.1 The Identifiable Factors Contributing to Persistence in HE

Research Question 1 was 'What identifiable factors contribute to persistence in Higher Education? And to what extent does programme choice, if at all, influence persistence and programme completion?'

In answering this question, I will address both parts separately.

10.1.1 Research Question 1, Part One

For part one, I present in the figures below the factors that contribute to persistence, shown for the student and for the institute, recognising that there is a relationship between the two. If I was asked to say which was the dominant party in determining likely persistence, it would be the student. This does not mean that the institute has no role to play; it does, because the culture and accepted practices of the institute inform the overall student experience.

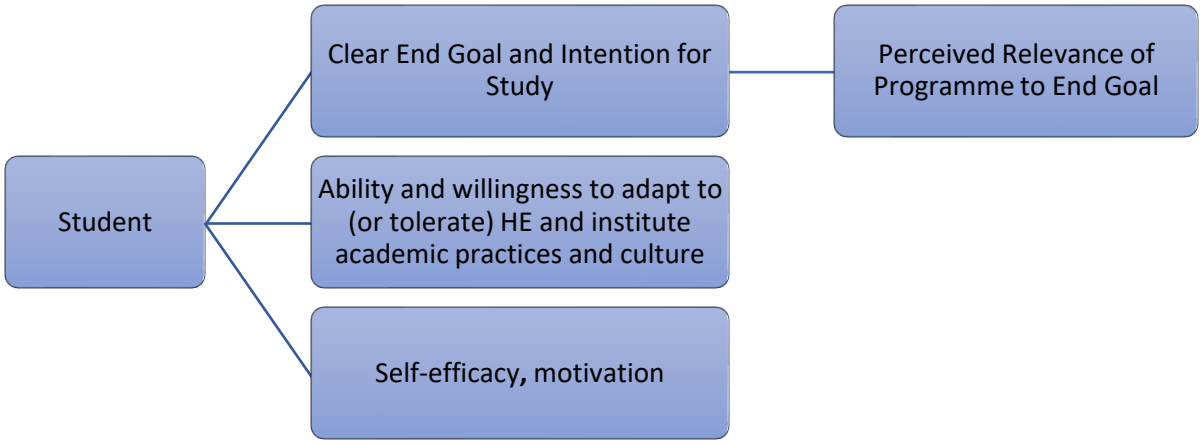


Figure 22: Student Factors that Contribute to Persistence in HE

Of the factors that are linked to the student, I suggest that if any one of these factors is weak or absent, there will be a greater likelihood of non-persistence. End goal and perceived relevance of the programme are shown at the top of a hierarchy because these are essential in persistence and act as determinants of a student's willingness to commit to study. This aligns with Tinto's (1975, 1993) goal commitment. Academic integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993) is reflected in a student's ability and willingness to meet the requirements of their programme. Social integration is part of the adapting to the HE habitus, but the relative importance of academic and social integration will vary by programme and student profile. This is also in agreement with Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012). Self-efficacy and motivation are required to persist in a programme of study but will be weak in the absence of a clear end goal and perception

of relevance of the programme. The figure below illustrates the institutional factors that contribute to persistence in HE.

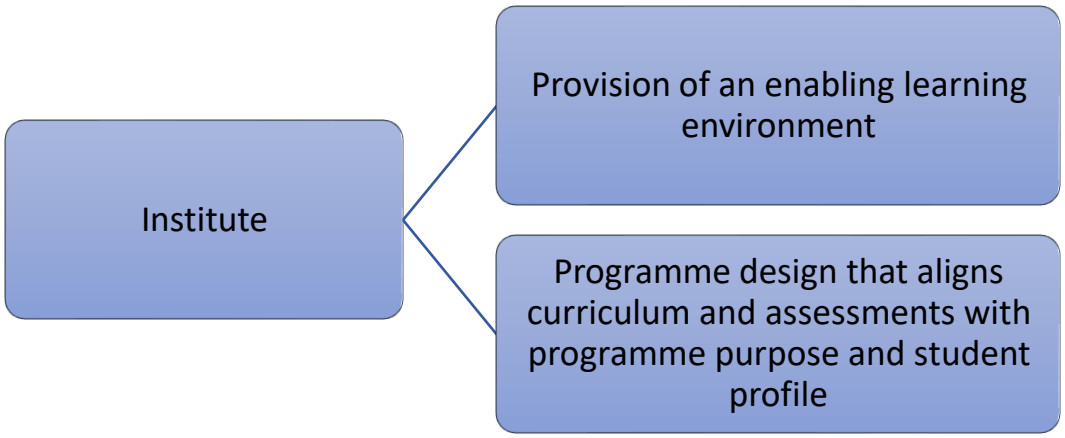


Figure 23: Institutional Factors that Contribute to Persistence in HE

There are two key factors over which the Institute has control, and these are programme design and the learning environment. These appear to be deceptively simple in the diagram but they are complex when considered in their full detail. I have chosen to use the term enabling rather than supportive learning environment, in recognition of the fact that the learning environment is the responsibility of the HEI and that the use of supportive might suggest supports for students as separate (Tinto, 2012; Braxton et al, 2014) to the core ethos and culture of the Institute. I consider the provision of appropriate supports to be part of an enabling learning environment. Programme design is the foundation upon which student learning is borne out in practice. There is a need to ensure that the learner is at the centre of programme design, with consideration given to their transition to HE and their subsequent progression through their programme. I believe that the factors presented here can be interpreted in the context of any HEI, with reference to the HE system and the specific profile of the HEI.

10.1.2 Research Question 1, Part Two

Programme choice was found to be important insofar as students believed that it would serve their own identified needs and allow them to achieve their goals. Choosing an appropriate

programme will depend on the information available to, and sought by, prospective students. For example, a statement of HEI graduate attributes reflects their vision for the type of graduate that they aim to 'produce', often citing a combination of technical, professional and personal skills and qualities (Marginson, 2008). In light of my case study findings, an alternative way of asking this question might not have been about programme choice but about the perceived relevance of the programme when students were engaging with the curriculum. In agreement with Tinto (2012), perceived programme relevance was found to be a key influencer of persistence in the case institute. There can be a gap between student expectations and experiences, but where they fundamentally believe that the programme and qualification is worth pursuing, they are likely to complete their studies. Students are highly unlikely to remain in an institute (unless that are other compelling advantages or reasons) where they believe that the programme will not meet their needs.

10.2 Persistence at Student, Programme and Institute Level

Research Question 2 was 'How and under what conditions (e.g. institutional, cultural, socio-personal, programmatic etc) do these factors become manifest within the context of Irish Higher Education and specifically within the context of programmes that are typical of the Institutes of Technology'?

For the student, having clear goals and intentions for study will go a long way towards harnessing their motivation and self-efficacy in completing the HE journey. In terms of Tinto's model (1975, 1993), I found that academic integration is more important than social integration and that goal commitment is more important than institute commitment for the students at programme level. Academic integration and goal commitment will compensate for a lower amount of social integration and institute commitment, but not the other way around. Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988) is more important than social capital in adapting to the culture and practices of HE, but importantly, social capital was employed by students in creating their own networks of support from within their peer groups. In this sense, this aligns with the assertion of Bourdieu (1984, 1988) that social capital can lead to advantages for individuals,

in the context of the HE habitus. The need for affirmation through some form of feedback or signal of satisfactory performance was identified as important from a student perspective, even if it was not always available. In agreement with Lazerson (1998), Marginson (2016a) and Byrne and McCoy (2017), personal sacrifice and financial investment represented a manifestation of motivation to achieve qualifications, which were considered to be a necessary return on investment (Flannery and McGarr, 2014).

At institute level, the factors that contribute to persistence were evident in engagement with the programme, in the classroom, and during interactions with academic staff and peers. Opportunities for interaction and feeling valued by academic staff (Tinto, 2012) were associated in some cases with small class sizes, which are a particular feature of the case institute, but I would suggest that an alternative way to think about class size is that it is appropriate for the programme and the learner profile. The ladder system is a contributor to persistence, for those students who consider it attractive and appropriate. Curriculum design and relevant content is an important consideration at institute level. In the programmes that were studied, not all of these factors were evident and students had persisted, therefore it could be argued that they are not all necessary. However, they were important to the students who had persisted and I am suggesting that they could be contributing factors, if absent, in instances of non-persistence. These were distilled from the themes that are shown in Appendix Six.

The following table illustrates the manifestation of factors that contribute to persistence for students, by programme; this provides specific institute context for these factors.

Factor	Level 6 & 7 On campus	Level 6 & 7 Online	Level 8 Apprenticeship
Clear end goal and intention for study (the qualification)	Knowledge of opportunities for employment or further study based on qualification	Use of qualification for employment opportunities, personal achievement	Employment based specifically on programme and qualification.
Perceived relevance of the programme to end goal	Discipline specific areas or generic programme where purpose is identified by student	Aspects of the curriculum can be applied in the workplace or used as credential	Learning can be applied directly in the workplace and workplace learning is relevant in the classroom
Commitment to study - self-efficacy and motivation	Grade performance Opportunity cost Overcoming challenges	Personal sacrifice of time and finances Overcoming challenges Grade performance	Achievement of embedded professional qualifications aids self-efficacy Work-based activity reinforces learning and competence Use of personal time for study
Ability and willingness to adapt to (or tolerate) HE and institute academic practices and culture (playing by the rules of HE)	Developing an understanding of academic language and requirements.	Illustrating tacit knowledge in academic terms Mastering academic language and requirements	Mastering academic language and requirements

Table 16: Manifestation of Student Factors Contributing to Persistence

The following table illustrates the manifestation of institutional factors by programme type, providing case institute context for the conclusions.

Factor: Provision of an enabling learning environment	Level 6 & 7 On Campus	Level 6 & 7 Online	Level 8 Apprenticeship
Ladder system of qualifications	X	X	
Small class sizes (needs to be quantified in the context of programmes)	X		X
Optimum use of class time	X	X	X
Availability of teaching materials	X	X	X
Opportunities for asking questions in class and outside of class time	X	X	X
Lecturer encouragement	X	X	X
Opportunities for interaction with programme peers	X	X	X
Centrally provided Institute supports (despite the low uptake)	X	X	X
Factor: Programme design that aligns curriculum and assessments with programme purpose and student profile	Level 6 & 7 On Campus	Level 6 & 7 Online	Level 8 Apprenticeship
Identifiable programme purpose (specific occupation, discipline specific or generic)	X	X	X
Relevant curriculum	X	X	X
Assessments aligned to teaching practices and programme purpose		X	X
Lecturer feedback on assessments	X	X	

Table 17: Manifestation of Institutional Factors Contributing to Persistence

10.3 The Importance of Intentions and Goals

Research Question 3 was ‘How do students stated intentions to study, goals and objectives influence their persistence throughout the duration of a programme of study in an Institute of Technology? To what extent, if at all, do these objectives change or become modified during their engagement with the Institute’?

Students’ stated intentions to study were found to be a significant contributing factor in their persistence decisions. This clarity of end goal and goal commitment (Tinto, 1975, 1993) was a factor in enduring and overcoming academic challenges (Tinto, 2012) that accompanied their studies. Most students stated that their goals and objectives were affirmed during their engagement with the Institute, through the curriculum, and lecturer interaction (Dwyer, 2015). This was particularly true for programmes in the case institute that had a direct link to the workplace. On campus students could appreciate the relevance of the curriculum and their qualification, and work placement on some programmes helped to reinforce the value of the learning that was taking place in the classroom. In some cases, students had strong initial goals and intentions, but these changed during the programme of study as they became aware of different career paths as well as their own interests in subjects that they had not anticipated. Some students whose initial intentions were to study for two or three years at levels 6 or 7 had modified their intentions to continue studying at higher levels, once they had achieved their initial qualifications. This was often the result of increased motivation and self-efficacy (Tinto, 2012; Bourdieu, 1984, 1988) that was associated with their classroom experiences (Dwyer, 2012, 2015) and achieving their sub-degree or ordinary degree qualifications. The case institute offers a series of Add-on programmes as part of the ladder system, which facilitates this type of progressive study in stages.

10.4 Motivation and Expectations

Research Question 4 was ‘From a student perspective, how does, if at all, motivation and expectations of 1) themselves and 2) the Institute change over the course of the programme of study’?

In answering this question, I will deal with the motivation and expectations of the student first. Students who commenced study with high levels of motivation generally maintained a high level of motivation to complete their programme, despite any challenges that they may have encountered. The case study findings confirmed that student motivation varies over the duration of a programme and can wane at points in the curriculum that are of little interest or perceived relevance. However, where the students believed in the relevance and value of the programme and the qualification, motivation was maintained sufficiently to persist with their studies. Motivation was enhanced in some cases, by the support of peers and academic staff (Tinto, 1975, 1993; Astin, 1984; 1999; Braxton, 2014; Dwyer, 2012, 2015). In terms of student expectations of themselves, there were areas of commonality across programmes and areas of difference. Areas of commonality across programmes included a recognition of the opportunity cost of study and the time commitment required.

Students who were studying online had relatively low expectations of engaging in a ‘typical’ student life, one in which there would be opportunities for social interactions with their peers. They expected to operate as individuals in a classroom setting without really considering themselves as part of a group within a class. In contrast, the on campus students tended to have higher expectations of participating in a more social setting for learning, where they would be part of a group as opposed to being an isolated individual within a class. Over the duration of the programme of study, online students’ expectations of themselves as isolated individuals tended to change as a result of peer interaction that was made possible by the structure and teaching practices of the class, as well as the actions of the students themselves. A feature of the online programmes that are provided by the case institute is live online classes, where students attend in real time and participate in the same way as they would in

an on campus classroom. This very likely has contributed to the opportunity for peer interaction and support that was described by the research participants. The extent to which peer interaction experiences met the expectations of on campus students varied, some good and others disappointing. While small class sizes were described as a positive feature of the case institute, they also had some disadvantages if they were too small to facilitate larger group discussion and the creation of a dynamic learning environment. What appears to be important is that the expectations of the students can be matched to their experiences, regardless of whether or not they prioritise social interactions and connections.

Most of the students' expectations of their abilities to complete their programme were challenged at times, but not to the extent that it undermined their belief that they could overcome such challenges. Students who persist are likely to exhibit increasing levels of self-efficacy in progressing from one stage of their programme to the next. Students who persisted had high expectations of themselves in terms of grade performance and in their overall GPA and award classification. While many of the students were studying for work-related or utilitarian reasons, a general sense of achievement and pride on programme completion and graduation was part of their initial expectations, and this was a motivating factor during study.

Students' initial expectations of the institute determined how these might change over their programme of study. The most important expectation that the institute needed to meet was the value of the time spent in the classroom, linked to good teaching practice and organisation (Dwyer, 2012, 2015; Tinto, 2012). Students exhibited tolerance in instances where the institute did not meet their expectations, and in general, students expressed satisfaction or tolerance with the institute despite some instances of dissatisfaction. Different classroom rules mean that there is the potential for a gap between expectations and experiences, but in the context of overall satisfaction with the programme, this will not be likely to result in students leaving the institute. Similarly, differences in students' expectations and experiences of feedback on their academic performance can differ, but will not lead to them leaving their programme, as long as their academic performance meets the requirements of the institute.

10.5 Insights and Implications for Policy

The field theory of Bourdieu (1984, 1988) has provided a lens through which to consider the relationship between the field of power and the field itself. As noted in Chapter 2, policy is created by those in power (in this case, the HEA, DFHERIS), to be implemented by HEIs, who can be considered as 'rule-takers' (Gunn et al, 2021). In terms of HE policy, there is a reciprocal relationship between those who create policy and those who are charged with its implementation. In considering the implications of the case study findings for policy, I will briefly address the role of the Technological Higher Education sector and programme provision in the Technological Universities. Meagher (2017) notes that the role of the IoTs aligned with a neoliberal and vocational perspective of the function of HE, in serving the knowledge economy. The TU sector builds on the achievements to date of the technological sector, including their provision of the overwhelming majority of sub-degree and ordinary degree programmes:

> *'The potential of the TU sector can only be achieved through consolidating these strengths, particularly through ensuring that the existing diversity in the provision of learner and employer relevant programmes at levels 6 and 7 is maintained, and using them as a solid foundation for the development of robust TUs and the achievement of new missions'. TURN, 2019, HEA, p.4*

The description of programmes as learner and employer relevant in the TURN Report (HEA, 2019) is interesting; learners might consider programmes relevant if they are also employer relevant, in cases where the qualification is being used for employment. The case study findings demonstrated a clear link between the perceived relevance and value of programmes that are employer relevant, based on the apprenticeship model and, for online and on campus programmes, based on the value of the qualification for employment.

HEA data shows that the number of enrolments in both level 6 and 7 programmes reduced by close to 30% between the academic year 2016/17 and 2021/22. Full time level 6 enrolments

have reduced by close to 40%, while part time enrolments have reduced by 7%. Level 7 part-time programme enrolments reduced by 9%. This means that there is a greater shift away from level 6 and 7 programmes among full-time students in HE, and this could be a difficult tide to turn in the new TU sector. O'hAnnracháin (2018, p.183) cautions against the creation of a 'squeezed middle' for TUs, which will be simultaneously operating in the territories of the traditional Universities and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). A potential solution for the reducing demand among full time students is to focus on part-time provision at levels 6 and 7, but this would be a narrow perspective to take on these programmes, and remove them as gateway programmes into HE, or as final qualifications for full time on campus students. Diversity of provision that allows access and progression through the HE system requires a recognition by policy makers that programmes at these levels can be resource intensive, particularly where programme numbers are small. The market might influence future programme provision as it becomes challenging to justify running programmes with low numbers, in light of the Performance Compacts.

In the IoT sector, institutional diversity was manifested in differences in size, mission, regional profile, research and programme provision. This diversity will continue in the TUs but there will also be commonality in terms of core educational values and principles[44], particularly in relation to the approach taken to teaching practices. As HE is charged with creating more flexible programme structures, as well as recognising the competing demands on student time, the use of class time and teaching practice will be brought into sharp focus. The fabric and practice of the classroom is not only changing; it has already changed.

TURN (ibid.) highlights the changes occurring within the Irish HE system as:

> '…*a major opportunity for a fundamental re-evaluation within the Irish education system and Irish society of the role and value of core higher vocational, technical,*

[44] THEA Strategic Plan 2018-2023

technological and professional skills and qualifications to meet the demands and opportunities of the future world of work' TURN, 2019, HEA, p.33.

In the context of a unified system of HE, there is the possibility of change for the Technological Higher Education sector on a scale that might further disrupt the accepted norms that govern the HE field.

10.6 Insights and Recommendations for the Institute and Practice

A question posed by Braxton et al (2014) is relevant in considering the implications of the case study findings for the institute - why it is difficult to solve the retention puzzle and even if we do, why does it not solve the problem? There are many factors that make up the retention puzzle (Braxton et al, ibid.), some of which are often addressed by what Longden (2006) and Tinto (2012) describe as kneejerk reactions and initiatives or adding a course. Such initiatives might amount to little more than a solution to a symptom of a problem rather than uncovering the problem itself. In addressing Braxton's (ibid.) question, it is possible that the problem of non-completion will always exist to some extent, or never be fully resolved. Making fundamental changes to practice potentially poses some challenges for HEIs. Sectoral and institute cultures and norms could hinder radical change, if it were needed, to practice and pedagogy. The Bologna declaration has created a culture of provision in undergraduate HE programmes that is based on modules and ECTS, often of the five credit variety. A semester is a short time in learning, particularly for students who must become familiar with the language and rituals of HE, as well as mastering programme content. The structure of the academic year is difficult to change, but the non-teaching Summer months could be used to provide bridging programmes for students to help them prepare for the HE habitus (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988; Reay, 2022). Tinto's call (2012) to radically re-think the first year is valid but potentially difficult to achieve in practice. My research identified ongoing challenges for students, which means that any radical re-think would need to support the subsequent years or they would need to align with the new first year world. The case institute provides programmes that align with conventional undergraduate programme structures and others that are designed to

challenge conventional programme provision, providing access to HE in a flexible manner, and embedding employer relevance. Some of the innovative approaches to programme design that are evident as part of a response to policy could be extended to traditional programmes. I agree with Tinto's (2012) mantra that access to education without supports is not opportunity. The case study provided an insight into how students across all programmes in the institute tended to pool their resources and knowledge, providing their own networks of support and problem solving. In considering the student perspective, having seen what works for them and what they will do of their own accord, perhaps more student-led, institute supported activities should be considered alongside the formal institute supports. Learning to learn is part of this type of activity but for students, learning to expect, manage and overcome academic adversity and challenges is also important in enabling learning and progression. For the Institute, the student journey should be mapped out to identify institutional factors that are likely to enable or impede learning and progression, in the context of different programme types and student profiles. In the following section, I will discuss the use of the theoretical framework in the case study.

10.7 Contribution of the Case Study to Theory

In considering the contribution of the case study to theory, I do so from the perspective of a 'scholar-practitioner' (Spencer, Anderson and Ellwood, 2022, p.423; Loxley et al, 2012), and discuss the contribution in terms of originality and utility (Corley and Gioia, 2011). I will discuss the contribution that is relevant to the model of Tinto, before discussing the amalgamation of Tinto and Bourdieu as the theoretical framework. It is possible to identify a theoretical contribution within the existing framework and model of Tinto (1975, 1993, 1997). The use of Tinto to study the phenomenon of persistence is not new; in fact, it has been used to study persistence in a variety of contexts since its original application to traditional American residential students who were registered on four-year degree programmes. This case study has demonstrated the applicability of Tinto's (1975, 1993) model in a new context, that includes non-traditional students who study online as well as on campus. I believe that

analytical (theoretical) generalisability (Hammersley, 2001; Yin, 2016) has been demonstrated and that aspects of the contribution to theory are incremental (Corley et al, 2011) in the sense that they add to the existing body of knowledge about, and generated by, Tinto's model. Revelatory aspects are those that have highlighted new and interesting perspectives on a topic that is heavily researched, by using the model to study students who had stayed on their programmes, rather than those who had left early. In terms of utility, the model can be used to understand and propose practical approaches to real-life issues. The use of the model in the case study was central to the research and this has demonstrated that the model can be used more broadly than in traditional residential institutions, whose focus is the four-year degree. This is useful in the changing context of HE. To be of most value, Tinto's (1975, 1993) model needs to be interpreted in the context of the culture, practices and mission of the Institute in which it is applied. The factors in the model are common to all students entering and progressing through HE, but they will have varying degrees of importance or impact for different students, depending on their mode of study. Tinto's model (1975, 1993, 1997) provides a strong basis from which to study persistence at institute level, where those responsible for programme design and provision have the greatest understanding and knowledge of their student profile and the aims and objectives of their programme portfolio. The case study has highlighted the importance of appropriate application and interpretation of the model, as well as some of its limitations, which were addressed by the inclusion of the thinking tools of Bourdieu (1984, 1988). The amalgamation of the model of Tinto (1975, 1993) and the thinking tools of Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2014) has created a framework that is comprehensive, and that has been applied in a new context. I have demonstrated that the thinking tools can be applied to scenarios that are not only about studying the reproduction of social advantage by elites, but also in considering how students use social and cultural capital as a means of supporting and completing their HE journey. The application of Bourdieu's thinking tools with Tinto's model was revelatory in that it allowed insight into the use of social capital to replace institute supports, and this has a high level of utility from a practitioner perspective. Tinto's model (ibid.) and the thinking tools and field theory of Bourdieu (1984,

1988) are both interactionist, in that Tinto's model relates to interaction between the student and the institute, and Bourdieu's thinking tools are based on relationships between the field, habitus and capital. One of these on their own is less meaningful than all three considered together. The notion of congruence, while perhaps less popular as a term for describing student 'fit' with the environment of HE, is common to both Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012) and Bourdieu (1984, 1988), albeit considered from different perspectives. I believe that congruence is an acceptable term when used to describe the sense of fit that a student perceives when they encounter a programme that they believe is worthy of their efforts and sacrifice in order to achieve their end goal. Using these theories together has allowed for this interpretation of the requirement for a student to adapt to and conform to the HE environment; a necessary form of symbolic violence (Godor, 2017) in a field whose habitus is based on academic regulations and relatively fixed structures and practices. In my use of Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012) and Bourdieu (1984, 1988), I found that each addresses aspects of HE that the other does not. Bourdieu (1984, 1988) demands consideration of the field, which requires an understanding of the systems level of HE, and in particular, the relationship between the field of power and the field itself. It focuses less on the academic aspects of the institute level than Tinto (ibid.), whose model does not take into account the systems level of HE. Therefore, each has their own strengths, but combined, I found a synergy for thinking about persistence, by using both perspectives.

10.8 Overall Limitations of the Case Study

The case study limitations were in part linked to the time period in which the research was conducted, which was during the Covid19 pandemic. As well as causing some delays in the research process, and making the recruitment of research participants more challenging, it eliminated the possibility of conducting in person interviews. However, the online interviews worked well as an alternative. As was intended in the research design, all student views were expressed retrospectively; however, some of the students had only completed one year of study so an assumption was made that they will be returning. The research design was based

on mixed methods. Having had an opportunity to reflect on the design and the research in practice, the use of the questionnaire to provide some contextual institute data was limited to some extent by the nature of the questionnaire respondents. A small number of online student respondents made it challenging to draw any significant conclusions about that group of students. The volume of data generated by the interviews was extremely large and thematic analysis was very time consuming. This was done at the expense of perhaps further analysis of the questionnaire data, but this choice was made in the interests of making the best use of the data available. As noted in the research methodology chapter, this is a single case study, which has limitations in that it provides an insight into only one HEI, but with the hope that the findings will have resonance for others. In turning to the words of Tinto and Pusser (2006), that leaving is not the mirror image of staying, this case has limitations in that staying is not the mirror image of leaving. In other words, I can provide an insight into the conditions under which students persisted at a given point in time, but that does not necessarily tell me why students will leave.

10.9 Recommendations for Further Research

There is scope for further research on the basis of the findings in this case study, and the areas that are worthy of consideration are presented below.

- Further research into the signalling quality of HE qualifications in the context of newer and varied modes of provision and learning would be of interest. Similarly, it would be interesting to further explore the value of the HE qualification in the context of credentialism.
- Perceptions of contemporary student life could be teased out further to identify potential changes in classroom practices that should be implemented for a diverse student body.

- Research into online programme design should investigate the degree of alignment between novel methods of programme provision and the subsequent examinations and assessments.
- An exploration of the perceptions of academic staff about the value and challenges in providing feedback to students, would be of interest, particularly for students who do not appear to have any academic challenges.
- It would be beneficial to explore the use of group collaborative learning at programme level for lower stakes assessments as a possible replacement for large group mentoring.
- It would be interesting to further explore the concepts of capital and habitus in the context of the HE field by assessing the views of students at programme commencement and after engagement with the Institute.

10.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided answers to the research questions, as well as a consideration of the implications of the findings of the case study for the case institute, practice and wider HE policy. Limitations of the case study and areas for further research have been identified. Having had an opportunity to reflect on the research process and the insights that have been provided by the research, I hope that this will be beneficial for practice, and that future research can build on what has been presented in this thesis.

10.11 Concluding Thoughts

This educational experience has been for me, a practical endeavour, a journey of learning and '*bildung*'; in Tinto (1975) style, academic and social integration were features of my D.Ed. journey. I now have a completely different perspective about research, and the rigour that it requires. I have been challenged to consider the multiple meanings attached to knowledge, what it is, how it is created, understood and used, and my role as a researcher. Having

completed the thesis, I consider writing for me, as an integral part of research and understanding (Kamler and Thomson, 2001), rather than as a mechanism by which the research is recorded on paper, or 'written up'.

From the perspective of practice, the opportunity to gain an insight into the student lived experience would never have been possible in my professional role; to do this, I had to become a part time student myself. To borrow a sentiment from one of my research participants, tacit knowledge is not the same as academic knowledge, but the combination of both types, brought together in this professional Doctorate in Education (Loxley and Seery, 2012), is extremely valuable and will have value beyond 'the piece of paper'. I believe that I am now better placed to contribute to policy and practice in HE and have already made changes to my own work practices. This was a key goal for me and that is why I was here.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information Leaflets and Consent Leaflets

Invitation and Participant Information Leaflet

Full Time and Part Time Students

Title of Study: A Case Study of Persistence in Higher Education, with a Focus on the Institute of Technology Sector in Ireland

Research to be conducted into Student Experiences and Expectations in (the case Institute)

Name of Researcher: Ms Marie Moran

Position in Organisation: Head of Department of Business

Contact Details of Researcher – Marie Moran: Postal Address: XXXX Email mmoran5@tcd.ie Telephone XXXX or 087 1506548

Contact Details of Supervisor: Dr Andrew Loxley, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. Email loxleya@tcd.ie

Purpose of Research

You are invited to participate in a research project that is being conducted by Marie Moran as part of a doctoral thesis (Doctorate in Education) being undertaken in the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin.

The purpose of the research is to help to identify factors that contribute to decisions that students make in relation to completing their programme of study, and to identify reasons why they may have considered leaving the programme or transferring to another programme of study. More specifically I intend explore the experiences of students and compare them with their expectations, and look at academic as well as social experiences and the use of student support services.

I wish to invite you to participate in this research to share your views and experiences of your programme and (the case institute) since you commenced your studies. I hope that this information will help in my understanding of your experiences and any factors that may assist with managing expectations and programme completion.

What You are Being Asked to Do

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and, should you choose to participate, you may withdraw from the study and cease participation at any time, without giving any reason and without prejudice.

You are invited to participate in a focus group and/or individual one-to-one interview to allow me to get an insight into your student experience in (the case institute).

The focus group will consist of 4-6 students, and these will vary in composition of students from programmes in (the case institute).

The process of data generation will be carried out on campus or via online meeting in a sensitive manner. At present (May/June/July/August 2021) you will be asked to take part in this research via an online meeting. You will only be asked about topics that you can comment on, and that you are willing to discuss. You will not be under pressure to comment on anything that you consider to be of a personal nature or matters which you consider to be intrusive. Some of the questions have been designed to explore the decisions you have made regarding your choice of programme and reasons for those choices, and others will focus on your experiences of studying and how this experience influenced any decisions that you made.

Your Time Commitment

The expected time commitment for the focus group is approximately 1 hour. The anticipated time commitment for the individual interview is approximately 45 minutes. You will be asked to participate once for the focus group and/or interview and you may be invited subsequently for one other follow up focus group. The focus groups and interviews will be organised on dates and times of mutual convenience.

Purposes of Data

The data that will be generated will be in oral format only and you will not be asked to submit anything in writing. The focus groups and interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. The purpose of this data is to identify themes or issues that would assist with the research objectives. ALL data will be anonymised and not attributable to any individual.

Anonymity

> *Participants will be identified only be a code and not by name. Each participant will receive a code at the time that consent is given for research participation. The code will be developed as follows:*
>
> *Focus group: FG (focus group) FT(Full time) P (participant) 1 to create FGFT1, FGFT2 and so on. The numbers will be allocated to each participant at random. Each participant will know their own code, but this will not be disclosed to any of the other participants. In the written work for the thesis, all comments or quotes, where attributable to an individual, will be presented using codes. Only the researcher will know the codes of each individual, and will not make any reference to the names of participants.*

Data Storage

The recordings will be password protected and available only to the researcher. All transcribed data will be stored on a laptop that is accessible only by the researcher. The laptop has encryption and a second layer of security. After the initial start-up of the laptop, all files will be stored as password protected files and in Sharepoint, which requires separate login and 2 factor authentication. This is via the mobile phone of the researcher, which is also password protected, and not accessible to any other party. No personal data will be stored. It is intended to store the data until at least project completion and for 15 months following project completion, at which point, recordings will be deleted and all written files deleted. Hard copies of any written work will be kept in the office of the researcher in a locked cabinet, to which no other party has access. This is a single person office in (the case institute), which is kept locked at all times that the researcher is not present. There is a

master key for access to the office, which is used only by the Head of School, and on his authority. Separately, campus security can open the door, but this is only done in very limited circumstances and at the request of the researcher. Hard copies of data will also be stored at the home of the researcher, in a locked filing cabinet. All hard copies of data will be shredded in (the case institute) using the confidential waste services.

Withdrawal of Data

You may withdraw your data up until the point at which it is anonymised.

If you agree to take part in this study, on the basis described above, please sign in the relevant sections below, and please also complete and sign the attached consent form.

I agree to participate in the following if requested (please tick all that apply; you may choose to participate in only one if you wish):

Focus Group	
Individual Interview	

Signature: Date:

Invitation and Participant Information Leaflet

Apprenticeship Students

Title of Study: A Case Study of Persistence in Higher Education, with a Focus on the Institute of Technology Sector in Ireland

Research to be conducted into Student Experiences and Expectations in (the case institute)

Name of Researcher: Ms Marie Moran

Position in Organisation: Head of Department of Business

Contact Details of Researcher – Marie Moran: Postal Address:XXXX Email mmoran5@tcd.ie Telephone XXXX or 087 1506548

Contact Details of Supervisor: Dr Andrew Loxley, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. Email loxleya@tcd.ie

Purpose of Research

You are invited to participate in a research project that is being conducted by Marie Moran as part of a doctoral thesis (Doctorate in Education) being undertaken in the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin.

The purpose of the research is to help to identify factors that contribute to decisions that students make in relation to completing their programme of study, and to identify reasons why they may have considered leaving the programme or transferring to another programme of study. More specifically I intend explore the experiences of students and compare them with their expectations, and look at academic as well as social experiences and the use of student support services.

I wish to invite you to participate in this research to share your views and experiences of your programme and (the case institute) since you commenced your studies. I hope that this information will help in my understanding of your experiences and any factors that may assist with managing expectations and programme completion.

What You are Being Asked to Do

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and, should you choose to participate, you may withdraw from the study and cease participation at any time, without giving any reason and without prejudice.

You are invited to participate in a focus group and a follow-up individual one-to-one interview to allow me to get an insight into your student experience in (the case institute).

The focus group will consist of approximately 7 students, from BA Insurance Practice in (the case institute). The individual interview will be conducted after the findings of the focus group, and a subsequent questionnaire, have been reviewed.

The process of data generation will be carried out in a sensitive manner, either on campus in((the case institute), or at a mutually convenient agreed location, such as offices of the Insurance Institute in Dublin. In some instances, you may be asked to take part in an interview by telephone if it is not

possible for you to travel to the campus. You will only be asked about topics that you can comment on, and you will not be under pressure to comment on anything of a personal nature or matters which would be intrusive. Some of the questions have been designed to explore the decisions you have made regarding your choice of programme and reasons for those choices, and others will focus on your experiences of studying and how this experience influenced any decisions that you made.

Your Time Commitment

The expected time commitment for the focus group is approximately 1 hour. The time commitment for the individual interview is approximately 45 minutes. You will be asked to participate once for the focus group and/or interview and you may be invited subsequently for one other follow up focus group. The focus groups and interviews will be conducted during the academic year 2019-2020/21 and organised on dates and times of mutual convenience.

Purposes of Data

The data that will be generated will be in oral format only and you will not be asked to submit anything in writing. The focus groups and interviews will be recorded using a dictaphone and later transcribed. The purpose of this data is to identify themes or issues that would assist with the research objectives. ALL data will be anonymised and not attributable to any individual.

Anonymity

Participants will be identified only be a code and not by name. Each participant will receive a code at the time that consent is given for research participation. The code will be developed as follows:

Focus group: FG (focus group) FT(Full time) P (participant) 1 to create FGFT1, FGFT2 and so on. The numbers will be allocated to each participant at random. Each participant will know their own code, but this will not be disclosed to any of the other participants. In the written work for the thesis, all comments or quotes, where attributable to an individual, will be presented using codes. Only the researcher will know the codes of each individual, and will not make any reference to the names of participants.

Data Storage

The recordings will be password protected and available only to the researcher. All transcribed data will be stored on a laptop that is accessible only by the researcher. The laptop has encryption and a second layer of security. After the initial start-up of the laptop, all files will be stored as password protected files and in Sharepoint, which requires separate login and 2 factor authentication. This is via the mobile phone of the researcher, which is also password protected, and not accessible to any other party. No personal data will be stored. It is intended to store the data until at least project completion and for 15 months following project completion, at which point, recordings will be deleted and all written files deleted. Hard copies of any written work will be kept in the office of the researcher in a locked cabinet, to which no other party has access. This is a single person office in (the case institute) , which is kept locked at all times that the researcher is not present. There is a master key for access to the office, which is used only by the Head of School, and on his authority. Separately, campus security can open the door, but this is only done in very limited circumstances and at the request of the researcher. Hard copies of data will also be stored at the home of the researcher, in a locked filing cabinet. All hard copies of data will be shredded in (the case institute) using the confidential waste services.

Withdrawal of Data

You may withdraw your data up until the point at which it is anonymised.

If you agree to take part in this study, on the basis described above, please sign in the relevant sections below, and please also complete and sign the attached consent form.

I agree to participate in the following if requested (please tick all that apply; you may choose to participate in only one if you wish):

Focus Group	
Individual Interview	

Signature: Date:

Participant Information Leaflet Accompanying Questionnaire Invitation Email

A Case Study of Persistence in Higher Education, with a Focus on the Institute of Technology Sector in Ireland

Name of Researcher: Ms Marie Moran

Position in XXXX: Head of Department of Business

Contact Details of Researcher – Marie Moran: Postal Address: XXXX, mmoran5@tcd.ie Telephone XXXX or 087 1506548

Contact Details of Supervisor: Dr Andrew Loxley, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. Email loxleya@tcd.ie

Purpose of Research

You are invited to participate in a case study that is being conducted by Marie Moran as part of a doctoral thesis (Doctorate in Education) being undertaken in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

The purpose of the research is to help to identify factors that contribute to decisions that you have made in relation to your programme of study, and to find out about your experiences as a student in XXXX. It is not related to any other questionnaire that you may have been asked to complete.

Purposes of Data

The data will help me to understand student expectations and experiences, and decision-making. It is being used with data from interviews and focus groups.

Anonymity

ALL responses to this questionnaire are anonymous and not attributable to any individual.

Data Storage

No personal data will be stored. Data from the questionnaire will be accessible to the researcher only. The questionnaire is designed to comply with GDPR requirements, in line with Trinity College Dublin ethics policy and approval, and XXXX GDPR requirements.

Ethical Approval

Permission has been granted to conduct this case study in (the case institute) and the research methods have been approved by Trinity College Dublin ethics committee and filed with (the case institute) Ethics Committee Chairperson. Further information is available from the researcher if required.

Appendix 2: Interview Schedule for Individual and Group Interviews

1. Are you the first in your family to attend higher education? Do you think that your family's views of higher education influenced your decision to pursue your studies?

2. Can you tell me why you chose to study your broad discipline area?

3. Why did you choose your particular type or level of programme?

4. Why did you choose this particular institution? Was a similar course available somewhere else? Was there a specific reason that you chose an Institute of Technology/Case Institute?

5. In thinking about your expectations before you started college/enrolled in your programme, what did you think it would be like to be a student here?

   Case institute image was included to show student social activities

   What did you expect when you thought about the amount of work, study time, your own role in your learning?

   Case institute image was used to show campus information

6. Did you think about what it would be like from a 'social life' perspective, for example, having friends and having opportunities to do things outside of your course?

7. In thinking about your expectations, how would you compare these to your own experiences of:

   - Your programme
   - Student life (whatever that means to you)
   - The Institute

Case institute image was used with commentary on the student experience

8. In thinking through the experience that you have had so far, what do you think were your main challenges - eg

    - Programme / curriculum / subjects
    - Other factors inside or outside of the Institute
    - Were there any areas that you consider were not challenging for you (this absence of challenge could be positive or negative from your perspective)?

9. Were you aware of any of the formal Institute supports available to you – academic or pastoral?

Case institute image used with information about supports

10. Did you use any of the **Institute** supports available to you? If so, to what extent were these helpful in overcoming any challenges?

11. What is it that you want to do when you have your qualification? Did these goals influence your choice of programme and/or Institute?

Case institute image of graduate story included

12. At present, do you feel comfortable in moving on to the next stage of your programme in the Case Institute or further study elsewhere, or employment?

Appendix 3: Questionnaire

(Case Institute) Student Experience

Dear student,

You are invited to complete this questionnaire about your experience in (case institute). It is divided into different sections and should take a maximum of 10-15 minutes to complete. Please try to answer the questions without considering the impact of Covid19 on your studies, but try to consider your overall experience as a student.

Benefits of Participation

This research is unique to (case institute); it is not part of a national study. Your participation will help me to understand the (case institute) student experience and provide an insight into the academic and social aspects of student life, as well as your reasons for studying.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You must be over 18 years of age to participate. If you consent to taking part, and meet the age requirement, please complete the questionnaire if you wish to do so.

Anonymity ALL responses to this questionnaire are anonymous and not attributable to any individual.

Data Storage No personal data will be stored. Data from the questionnaire will be accessible to the researcher only. The questionnaire is designed to comply with GDPR requirements, in line with Trinity College Dublin ethics policy and approval, and (case Institute) GDPR requirements.

Your Student Profile

Gender

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Non-binary / third gender
- ○ Prefer not to say

Please indicate your highest completed educational qualification to date.

- ○ Junior/Leaving Certificate
- ○ PLC/Advanced Certificate
- ○ Higher Certificate
- ○ Ordinary Degree
- ○ Honours Degree
- ○ Level 9/10 qualification

If you completed Leaving Certificate, please indicate your points range (if known):

- ○ Up to150
- ○ 151-300
- ○ 301-400
- ○ 401-600

Is this your first time in Higher Education? If you are a full time student on an add-on programme, you should select yes if your level 6 or 7 programme was your first time in Higher Education.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No, Previous Qualification Completed
- ○ No, Returning to Complete Qualification

Please select the option below that most closely describes your current reason for participation in Higher Education:

- ○ Progression from second level education to gain a qualification
- ○ Progression from FE/PLC programme
- ○ An opportunity to return to education
- ○ For progression at work or for career change
- ○ For my own personal interest and development

Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend Higher Education?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ Unsure

Please indicate your entry route to (case Institute).

- ○ CAO
- ○ Mature Student/Direct Entry
- ○ Transfer from similar programme in another Institute
- ○ PLC/QQI/HELS
- ○ Advanced Entry

Your Age

- ○ 18 - 24
- ○ 25 - 34

- ○ 35 - 44
- ○ 45 - 54
- ○ 55 - 64
- ○ 65 or over

About Your Programme

Please select your general area of study and level of the programme.

- ○ Art and Design Level 7
- ○ Art and Design Level 8
- ○ Business / Accounting Level 6
- ○ Business / Accounting Level 7
- ○ Business / Accounting / Finance / Insurance Level 8
- ○ Marketing / Tourism / Sport Level 7
- ○ Marketing / Tourism / Sport Level 8
- ○ Social Sciences Level 8
- ○ Engineering / Architecture / Construction Level 6
- ○ Engineering / Architecture / Construction Level 7
- ○ Engineering / Architecture / Construction Level 8
- ○ ICT/Computing Level 6
- ○ ICT/Computing Level 7
- ○ ICT/Computing Level 8
- ○ Science Level 6
- ○ Science Level 7
- ○ Science Level 8

Please indicate your current year of study on your programme.

- ○ Year 1
- ○ Year 2
- ○ Year 3
- ○ Year 4
- ○ Level 7 Add-On Year
- ○ Level 8 Add-On Year

Please indicate your mode of study. If you are normally a full time 'on campus' student, please select full time, even if your programme is being delivered online due to Covid19. Part time blended is for online students who have some form of on campus or workshop activity.

- ○ Full Time
- ○ Part-Time Online
- ○ Part-Time Blended

My current programme of study in (the case institute) was:

- ○ My first choice
- ○ In my top 3 preferences
- ○ A unique programme that was not available elsewhere
- ○ None of these

Your Qualification

It is important to me that I gain my qualification (please select all that apply).

- [ ] To get a job
- [ ] To improve employment prospects
- [ ] For career progression
- [ ] For professional body registration or exemptions
- [ ] For entry to postgraduate study
- [ ] For personal achievement
- [ ] No specific reason

My perception of my qualification has changed since I commenced my studies.

- ○ Not at all
- ○ Somewhat
- ○ A great deal

I am very committed to completing my qualification:

- ○ In (case Institute)
- ○ In another Institution
- ○ Not committed to complete at this time

Achieving good grades is important to me.

- ○ Strongly disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Strongly agree

Studying in (case Institute)

I believe that I made the right choice in registering in (case institute).

- ○ Strongly disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Strongly agree

I feel that I was prepared for life as a student in (case Institute).

- ○ Strongly disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Strongly agree

I regularly attend all my scheduled classes, unless I have a valid reason to miss the class.

- ○ Never
- ○ Sometimes
- ○ About half the time
- ○ Most of the time
- ○ Always

I have good opportunities to speak to lecturers outside of class time.

- ○ Strongly disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Strongly agree

I feel confident that I will complete my programme of study.

- ○ Strongly disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Strongly agree

If you will repeat or have repeated or deferred any modules, please indicate below. If none, leave blank.

	In first year of study	After first year of study
Repeat CA or exam after exam board	☐	☐
Approved to progress carrying failed module(s)	☐	☐
Repeat attend a module	☐	☐
Repeat attend a semester	☐	☐
Deferred modules or assessments	☐	☐

If you have ever considered leaving (case Institute) before completing your programme, please state why (you may select more than one answer):

☐ Employment opportunities

☐ To do a different type of programme

☐ To do a similar programme elsewhere

☐ For a more convenient campus location

☐ Personal/family reasons

☐ Financial reasons

☐ Other reasons. Please state if you wish. _____

☐ I have never considered leaving (case Institute)

Curriculum and Learning

The content of my programme is close to what I had expected.

- ○ Strongly disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Strongly agree

I am interested in the topics being presented in lectures and tutorials.

- ○ Never
- ○ Sometimes
- ○ About half the time
- ○ Most of the time
- ○ Always

I believe that I have good opportunities for academic and intellectual development.

- ○ Strongly disagree
- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Strongly agree

I see a connection between what I am learning and my future career prospects.

- ○ Definitely not
- ○ Probably not
- ○ Might or might not
- ○ Probably yes
- ○ Definitely yes

If I have a question about a topic, I feel comfortable asking it (tick all that apply).

- ☐ In lectures
- ☐ In tutorials
- ☐ In practicals/labs
- ☐ On a moodle page forum
- ☐ I don't feel comfortable asking questions

I participate in an informal student group chat eg WhatsApp, Facebook to get information about my programme or to ask questions about course material.

- ○ Never
- ○ Occasionally
- ○ Most days
- ○ Every day

I can obtain all the teaching and learning materials that I need for my studies.

- ○ Never
- ○ Sometimes
- ○ About half the time

- ○ Most of the time
- ○ Always

Opportunities for class participation such as group work/discussion allow me to feel involved in learning and interact with other students and lecturers.

- ○ Never
- ○ In a few classes
- ○ In about half of my classes
- ○ In most of my classes
- ○ In almost all classes

Student Life

I feel a sense of belonging as a student in (tick all that apply):

- ☐ My programme
- ☐ My Department/Faculty
- ☐ Case Institute
- ☐ A (case institute) club/society
- ☐ My own peer group
- ☐ No real sense of belonging

I have a lot in common with other students on my programme of study.

- ○ Strongly disagree

- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

I am satisfied with my social interactions in (case Institute), for example, friendships, extra-curricular activities (when possible), Clubs and Societies.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

My relationships with other students have enabled me to overcome problems or difficulties related to my studies.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

My family is a source of encouragement to me during my studies.

- Strongly disagree

- ○ Somewhat disagree
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree
- ○ Somewhat agree
- ○ Strongly agree

Information and Resources

I get information that I need about my programme (eg timetable, electives, modules):

	In the programme handbook	From Moodle Pages	On the (case Institute) website	From emails	From friends/social media	From lecturers/Programme Chair/Head of Department	From administration staff
Never	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Some of the time	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Most of the time	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Always	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I get information about Institute regulations (eg examinations, academic procedures)

	Never	Some of the time	Most of the time	Always
On the (case Institute) website	☐	☐	☐	☐
From emails	☐	☐	☐	☐
From friends/social media	☐	☐	☐	☐
From lecturers/Programme Chair/Head of Department	☐	☐	☐	☐
From administration staff	☐	☐	☐	☐
From the Student Union	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please state which of the following resources you have used, if any.

	First year mentoring	Academic Writing Support	Maths Support	Pastoral supports eg counselling, chaplaincy
Never	☐	☐	☐	☐
Occasionally	☐	☐	☐	☐
Frequently	☐	☐	☐	☐
Not aware of this	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please include any additional comments that you may wish to add.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Would you be willing to participate in a focus group or interview to discuss your student experience?

- ○ Yes - I will email mmoran5@tcd.ie or (case institute email) to provide my email address
- ○ No

End of Questionnaire

Appendix 4: Example of NVivo Work in Progress

Nodes\\Phase 2 initial coding

Aligned with 2nd phase of Braun &Clarke Thematic Analysis

Name	Description	Files	References
A go-to-guy for answers		1	1
Academic Goal	Finishing the programme and further study	4	5
Amount of Effort	Students describe the amount of work they had to do to succeed	2	2
Apprehension at start		2	2
Assumption that you know what you are doing	Students describing the feeling that lecturers and others assumed they knew how to operate in the academic world	2	3
Benefits of informal social media groups	Advantages as perceived by students	3	7
Celebrating achievements during the programme		1	1
Challenges in getting to know people		1	1
Challenges in learning during programme	Types of academic challenges faced at any stage.	5	10
Change	Change of any sort as a result of the programme	3	6
Changing perceptions of the programme after starting		5	9
Chip on the shoulder	From not having the qualification	1	1
Clubs and societies		3	5
Confident about the programme	Feel like they had the skills to manage the programme	2	3
Convenience of the IoT location		2	5
Daunting and scary	Coming into education or back into education	5	10

Degree is more important than social life		1	1
Determination to succeed		1	1
Didn't tell anyone I was studying to reduce pressure on me		1	2
Difficult parts of the course		2	2
Easy transition to programme and HE	Ease with which students describe their initial programme experiences	1	1
Expectations exceeded		1	2
Family circumstances as enabler		2	2
Family circumstances as making access to education difficult until later in life		3	5
Family encouragement	The roel of family in providing supports of any kind for the student while on their programme	5	13
Family Influence	Family influence on decision to study regardless of age. Applies to all students in this code.	9	30
Feedback on performance	Feedback on assessment to know if they are right.	4	8
Feeling comfortable asking questions		2	7
Feeling happy with programme and choice		6	15
Feeling old	Feelings of mature students in comparison to others or just themselves feeling old.	2	4
Feeling out of place	Any situation where the student felt out of place	2	4
Feeling stupid asking questions		3	3
Filling a gap	Completing the qualification or filling a gap that was annoying the student. Usually mature students.	1	1
Financial investment		6	8

Flexible study approach in stages of the NFQ	Building confidence in finishing one level of qualification before moving on to the next. Eg level 6, 7 ,8	8	17
Flying blind		2	4
Get the degree even if you never use it because you have it		1	2
Getting the degree	Students who mentioned getting the degree	5	6
Giving up	Thoughts of giving up when things were hard	5	7
Giving up time for study		6	10
Groupwork assignments		4	5
Hating things		1	1
Having friends		3	3
Having the craic with other students		1	1
Home life as a student	Impact on home life and family. Mostly mature students.	1	3
Informal interaction with lecturers	Considered a positive thing in terms of feeling confident and creating good learning environment.	3	7
Irrelevant parts of the course are waste of time		2	4
Knew the area, not intrigued by it	Course interest especially for mature students with industry experience	1	1
Knew the area, nothing like I had imagined	Students with prior knowledge in a subject area	0	0
Knowing about supports	Academic and pastoral supports	9	17
Knowledge of IoT	What was known about the IoT in advance.	7	19
Learning in the workplace	Apprentices and online students who described learning in work or using work knowledge	5	10
Learning style	Describing how students learn or prefer to learn.	5	8
Likes campus structure		1	2

Liking the college location	Not specific to the IoT but the town and geographical location	1	1
Little chats about lots of things		1	1
Making the same mistake because of no feedback.		1	5
Making up for the past	Addressing times of lack of effort or achievement as perceived by the student	4	7
Mature student experiences and perceptions of themselves		1	1
Meeting with friends on campus		2	4
Might not fit in	Fears of not fitting in with class or others	2	5
More money with qualification		1	4
More work than I expected		3	4
Motivation at start of programme	Level of motivation described at start of programme and during programme.	3	6
Need a good foundation for learning	Knowing what is required to do well	1	4
Need experience in how to learn		2	4
Need for achievement		1	2
Need to know the systems in college		2	2
Needing the degree or qualification		6	12
No deadline on learning	Come back at any time. Anybody can be a student.	3	6
No time on campus	Students who did not attend on campus for their programmes	2	3
Not a student	Students who don't see themselves as a typical student. Especially mature students.	4	7

Not connected in any way to the campus		5	6
Not using Institute supports, probably should have used	Students describing why they did not use supports but in hindsight wished they had.	7	14
Notes and course materials		5	10
Online is a safety net for not having to interact with others in person		1	1
Online learning as an advantage or facilitator		5	11
Opportunities for asking questions formally or informally		4	9
Overwhelmed	By study or programme content or exams	1	6
Peer checks save time		0	0
Peer pressure as encouragement		2	2
Peer support outside of social media		5	8
Peers answer questions quickly		2	4
Perception of learning environment online		5	11
Personal achievement		5	9
Personal Goal		3	4
Personal Sacrifice	Anything that is considered a personal sacrifice	3	3
Prepared for HE	Extent to which students felt prepared for HE.	3	6
Pride	Proud of self, family proud of student, making someone proud	2	2
Professional Goal	Future oriented professional goal in the short or medium term	2	4

Questions are not seen by lecturer in WhatsApp	Comfort in asking questions that maybe they do not want to ask the lecturer	3	3
Rationale for choosing business		8	18
Reasons for change that are related to personal circumstances		3	5
Relevance of the programme to end goal		7	17
Repeatedly overcoming challenges		1	1
Reward for Effort	Students describe a sense of reward for their efforts	2	3
Role Model	Had a role model or would like to be a role model	2	2
Safety in numbers in asking questions		3	4
Small class size is bad		0	0
Small class size is good	As a benefit	3	8
Sociable but not social life	Description of students who socialised with peers but not in the sense of a 'social life' so they were peers being sociable but not necessarily in the sense of going out as friends.	7	12
Social Life with peers		4	6
Sources of information about programmes	Where students got or found programme information	9	15
Sticking it out		2	2
Struggling		4	6
Support of lecturers in learning		10	30
Teaching styles		4	12
The fame	The 'glory' of getting the qualification	1	1

The photo in the gown	Linked to pride and achievement and validation of their achievement	3	5
The piece of paper	Linked to getting the degree and validation learning	1	2
Thought I knew the area, I was wrong		1	3
Time investment		6	13
Timetable		3	7
Too much invested to give up on this		1	1
Tools of the Trade	Knowing what you need and beign able to bring them or acquire them	2	2
Unfamiliar environment	Could be campus, online, work.	2	2
Use of the WhatsApp group	What is it used for and benefits	8	27
Use the Summer to get prepared		1	3
Using email is formal communication	Students describing asking questions by email.	1	1
Using Institute supports		9	24
Validating experience		1	1
WhatsApp Group	Existence of a WhatsApp group and membership	3	4
WhatsApp passengers	Students who are in social media groups but do not contribute to them	2	2
Work Goals	End goals specifically relating to work. This could be promotion, new role, career change.	4	8
Workload	Descriptions of workload	4	9
Wrong choice of course		4	9

Nodes\\Phase 3 Coding Initial Themes

Amalgamation of some of the codes

Name	Description	Files	References
Benefits of informal social media groups	Advantages as perceived by students	8	46
A go-to-guy for answers		1	1
Little chats about lots of things		1	1
Peers answer questions quickly		2	4
Use of the WhatsApp group	What is it used for and benefits	8	27
WhatsApp Group	Existence of a WhatsApp group and membership	3	4
WhatsApp passengers	Students who are in social media groups but do not contribute to them	2	2
Challenges in learning during programme	Types of academic challenges faced at any stage.	9	55
Celebrating achievements during the programme		1	1
Difficult parts of the course		2	2
Giving up	Thoughts of giving up when things were hard	5	7
Groupwork assignments		4	5
Hating things		1	1
Irrelevant parts of the course are waste of time		2	4
More work than I expected		3	4
Overwhelmed	By study or programme content or exams	1	6
Struggling		4	6
Workload	Descriptions of workload	4	9

Name	Description	Files	References
Change	Change of any sort as a result of the programme	10	28
Chip on the shoulder	From not having the qualification	1	1
Making up for the past	Addressing times of lack of effort or achievement as perceived by the student	4	7
Reasons for change that are related to personal circumstances		3	5
Wrong choice of course		4	9
Changing perceptions of the programme after starting		8	16
Confident about the programme	Feel like they had the skills to manage the programme	2	3
Expectations exceeded		1	2
Knew the area, not intrigued by it	Course interest especially for mature students with industry experience	1	1
Thought I knew the area, I was wrong		1	3
Daunting and scary	Coming into education or back into education	6	20
Apprehension at start		2	2
Assumption that you know what you are doing	Students describing the feeling that lecturers and others assumed they knew how to operate in the academic world	2	3
Didn't tell anyone I was studying to reduce pressure on me		1	2
Feeling stupid asking questions		3	3
Determination to succeed		10	20
Amount of Effort	Students describe the amount of work they had to do to succeed	2	2

Name	Description	Files	References
Giving up time for study		6	10
Repeatedly overcoming challenges		1	1
Reward for Effort	Students describe a sense of reward for their efforts	2	3
Sticking it out		2	2
Too much invested to give up on this		1	1
Easy transition to programme and HE	Ease with which students describe their initial programme experiences	6	16
Feeling happy with programme and choice		6	15
Family circumstances as making access to education difficult until later in life		5	8
Family circumstances as enabler		2	2
Filling a gap	Completing the qualification or filling a gap that was annoying the student. Usually mature students.	1	1
Family Influence	Family influence on decision to study regardless of age. Applies to all students in this code.	12	46
Family encouragement	The role of family in providing supports of any kind for the student while on their programme	5	13
Home life as a student	Impact on home life and family. Mostly mature students.	1	3
Feedback on performance	Feedback on assessment to know if they are right.	5	17
Flying blind		2	4
Making the same mistake beacuse of no feedback.		1	5

Name	Description	Files	References
Feeling comfortable asking questions		8	30
Informal interaction with lecturers	Considered a positive thing in terms of feeling confident and creating good learning environment.	3	7
Opportunities for asking questions formally or informally		4	9
Questions are not seen by lecturer in WhatsApp	Comfort in asking questions that maybe they do not want to ask the lecturer	3	3
Safety in numbers in asking questions		3	4
Feeling out of place	Any situation where the student felt out of place	4	8
Feeling old	Feelings of mature students in comparison to others or just themselves feeling old.	2	4
Getting the degree	Students who mentioned getting the degree	7	13
Academic Goal	Finishing the programme and further study	4	5
Get the degree even if you never use it because you have it		1	2
Having friends		11	39
Challenges in getting to know people		1	1
Clubs and societies		3	5
Degree is more imprtant than social life		1	1
Having the craic with other students		1	1
Mature student experiences and perceptions of themselves		1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
Meeting with firends on campus		2	4
Might not fit in	Fears of not fitting in with class or others	2	5
Sociable but not social life	Description of students who socialised with peers but not in the sense of a 'social life' so they were peers being sociable but not necessarily in the sense of going out as friends.	7	12
Social Life with peers		4	6
Knowledge of IoT	What was known about the IoT in advance.	7	25
Convenience of the IoT location		2	5
Liking the college location	Not specific to the IoT but the town and geographical location	1	1
Learning style	Describing how students learn or prefer to learn.	12	45
Learning in the workplace	Apprentices and online students who described learning in work or using work knowledge	5	10
Likes campus structure		1	2
Notes and course materials		5	10
Small class size is good	As a benefit	3	8
Timetable		3	7
Needing the degree or qualification		9	30
More money with qualification		1	4
Professional Goal	Future oriented professional goal in the short or medium term	2	4
The piece of paper	Linked to getting the degree and validation learning	1	2
Work Goals	End goals specifically relating to work. This could be promotion, new role, career change.	4	8

Name	Description	Files	References
Not connected in any way to the campus		6	9
No time on campus	Students who did not attend on campus for their programmes	2	3
Online learning as an advantage or facilitator		6	12
Online is a safety net for not having to interact with others in person		1	1
Peer support outside of social media		6	10
Peer pressure as encouragement		2	2
Perception of learning environment online		7	18
Not a student	Students who don't see themselves as a typical student. Especially mature students.	4	7
Personal achievement		8	21
Need for achievement		1	2
Personal Goal		3	4
Relevance of the programme to end goal		7	17
Pride	Proud of self, family proud of student, making someone proud	2	2
Role Model	Had a role model or would like to be a role model	2	2
The fame	The 'glory' of getting the qualification	1	1
Validating experience		1	1
No deadline on learning	Come back at any time. Anybody can be a student.	3	6

Name	Description	Files	References
The photo in the gown	Linked to pride and achievement and validation of their achievement	3	5
Personal Sacrifice	Anything that is considered a personal sacrifice	9	24
Financial investment		6	8
Time investment		6	13
Prepared for HE	Extent to which students felt prepared for HE.	9	40
Flexible study approach in stages of the NFQ	Building confidence in finishing one level of qualification before moving on to the next. Eg level 6, 7 ,8	8	17
Motivation at start of programme	Level of motivation described at start of programme and during programme.	3	6
Need a good foundation for learning	Knowing what is required to do well	1	4
Need experience in how to learn		2	4
Need to know the systems in college		2	2
Tools of the Trade	Knowing what you need and beign able to bring them or acquire them	2	2
Unfamiliar environment	Could be campus, online, work.	2	2
Use the Summer to get prepared		1	3
Rationale for choosing business		12	33
Sources of information about programmes	Where students got or found programme information	9	15
Teaching styles		10	43
Support of lecturers in learning		10	30
Using email is formal communication	Students describing asking questions by email.	1	1

Name	Description	Files	References
Using Institute supports		12	55
Knowing about supports	Academic and pastoral supports	9	17
Not using Institute supports, probably should have used	Students describing why they did not use supports but in hindsight wished they had.	7	14

Appendix 5: Ethics Submission

Ethics Submission

School of Education, Trinity College Dublin

Application for Ethical Approval of Research Proposals

Title of Research	**A Case Study of Persistence in Higher Education, with a Focus on the Institute of Technology Sector in Ireland**
Researcher Name(s)	**Marie Moran**
Trinity Email Address	**mmoran5@tcd.ie**
Supervisor Name (if applicable)	**Dr Andrew Loxley**
Supervisor Email (if applicable)	**loxleya@tcd.ie**

Category of Proposer (please tick)

Student ☒
Principal Investigator (Staff) ☐

Course of Study (please tick)

BMusEd ☐
PME ☐
MEd ☐
DEd/PhD ☒
ASIAP ☐
CertC21T&L ☐

Please indicate the level of approval required
(See Code of Practice for the School of Education Research Ethics Committee document on https://www.tcd.ie/Education/research/ethics/ for description of levels)

Level 0 ☐ **Level 1** ☒ **Level 2** ☐

Has your proposal been submitted to any other Research Ethics Committee?

Yes ☐ **No** ☒

If yes, please provide details:

Declaration by All Applicants:
I have read and understood the School of Education's policy on ethics in educational research: http://www.tcd.ie/Education/research/ethics/
and Trinity College Dublin's Policy on Good Research Practice:
https://www.tcd.ie/research/dean/assets/pdf/TCD%20Good%20Research%20Practice%20Policies%20copy.pdf
including requirements in relation to data protection in Trinity College Dublin as set out here:
https://www.tcd.ie/info_compliance/data-protection

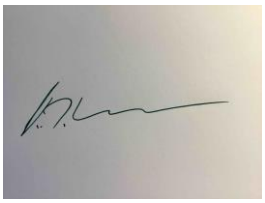
I declare that the details provided reflect accurately my research proposal and I undertake to seek updated approval if substantive changes are proposed after this submission. I have consulted an authoritative set of educational research guidelines.

Applicant's Signature:

Signed: **Date 6/12/19**

Declaration by Supervisor (if applicable)
I have read this application. I am satisfied that it is in line with the criteria set out by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee in their published Code of Practice and application form templates.

Supervisor's Signature:



Signed: **Date 6/12/19**

In instances where supervisors feel that their specialised expertise may be important, information for the REC to take into account (e.g. in relation to researching highly sensitive areas such as trauma/abuse), please submit an additional page with any relevant information.

Final Approval Signed-Off by a member of the Research Ethics Committee (for staff submissions)

Signed: Date

SECTION 1 – DETAILS OF RESEARCH STUDY

1.1 Working title of proposed study

A Case Study of Persistence in Higher Education, with a Focus in the Institute of Technology Sector in Ireland

1.2 Dates & duration of Study

Proposed Start Date:	Proposed End Date:
February 2020	September 2023

1.3 Please give a structured abstract of the proposed research (approx. 400 words).

State research aim(s) and objective(s), research question or hypothesis, as appropriate. Include background, research approach, design, data collection methods.

The objective of the research is to study persistence in higher education in Ireland, with a focus on the IoT sector. The research aims to identify factors that lead to persistence through a programme of study, as well as identifying factors that potentially lead to students leaving their programme. The research methodology is a case study in the Institute of Technology, XXX, which will encompass full-time and part-time programmes at levels 6 and 7, as well as the 'new' level 8 Apprenticeship. The research methods will be predominantly qualitative, and supported by quantitative methods. While quantitative methods are aligned with a survey approach, they can also be incorporated into case studies as an acceptable form of data collection as a case study allows for multiple sources of data and data collection instruments. Alongside primary research methods, it is proposed to use anonymised secondary sources of data to identify if there is an existing relationship between course preference and progression and retention among full time undergraduate students. Some of the research will be conducted across the entire Institute, and some will be conducted in the Department of Business, within the School of Business and Social Sciences. The research methods that will be used are as follows:

Focus groups – students on level 6 and 7 full time programmes in the Department of Business.

Questionnaire – distributed online, to all students of the Institute (full time and part time).

Interviews – selected individual interviews with students in the Department of Business.

1.4. Please answer the following questions in relation to your proposed research. Questions (b), (c) or (d) will require detailed explanations if answered 'yes' and will be referred for additional scrutiny by the REC or Trinity REPC. Answering 'Yes' to (e) will require a separate application to the relevant HSE REC and must comply with HRB regulations regarding explicit consent .	**Please tick**	
	Yes	**No**

a. Does the research involve work with children (under-18) or vulnerable adults? If 'Yes', has appropriate Garda clearance (or equivalent) been obtained (include details)?		√
Please provide the date of issue on the Certificate.		
b. Could any aspect of the research give rise to any form of harm to participants, including the researcher(s)?		√
c. Could any aspect of the research produce information that could lead to criminal prosecution of the participants or others?		√
d. Is deception of the participants planned in any aspect of the research? If yes, provide details.		√
e. Does any aspect of the research involve patients (or their relatives or carers) or other users of health and social care services, the premises or facilities of such services, access to personal records or the participation of health or social care staff?		√

For Level 1 and Level 2 applications ONLY

SECTION 2 – DETAILS OF PARTICIPANT SELECTION

2.1 Who are the proposed participants, e.g. teachers; students? Please indicate the method of sampling you intend to use and the approximate sample size

The study encompasses full time and part time undergraduate students in an Institute of Technology. One part of the study will require access to the entire population of the Institute, which is approximately 6500 students, divided almost equally between full time and part time study modes. A questionnaire, distributed electronically, will be used for this purpose. There will be two separate questionnaires used, one for incoming first year students, and one for all continuing students. There are approximately 1000 incoming first year students. The proposed participants are students of higher education, all of whom will be over 18 years of age. Students who are under 18 years of age will be excluded from the research. The numbers are approximately 60 in total for focus group interviews, and individual interviews. All students will receive an online questionnaire to complete and this will be distributed by electronic means to approximately 6,500 students, via their XXX student email address.

There are five proposed samples that will be drawn from the Department of Business within the Institute of Technology, for the purposes of conducting individual interviews and focus groups. The population sizes vary between the programmes but are approximately as set out below, and smaller sample sizes will be used for qualitative research. Purposeful (purposive) sampling (Yin, 1994, 2011; Stake, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) will be employed in the case study.

Level 6 Full Time (across 3 programmes of 2 years duration): First Year 35, Continuing 20-25

Level 7 Full Time (one programme of 3 years duration): First Year, 25, Continuing (years 2 and 3): 40 – 45. Add-on Level 7 year: 20-25

Level 6 Part Time: First Year, 25, Continuing 22

Level 7 Part Time: One year programme: 45-50

Level 8 'New' Apprenticeship (3 year programme): First year, 60-70, Continuing 60-65

2.2 What is your relationship with them? (If you are in a position of authority, for example, indicate how you will deal with the potential influences of such a relationship.)

For the students who are in the Department of Business, I am their direct Head of Department, and in a position of authority. However, I have no direct contact with the students in a teaching capacity and have no authority over their grades or academic performance. The issue of reflexivity has been considered in the design of the research methodology and all students who take part in the focus groups and individual interviews will do so on a voluntary basis and will be given the option to opt out at any time.

I recognise the power imbalance (or perceived power imbalance) that exists between the students and myself and this will be acknowledged in any individual interviews and focus groups. I consider

the questionnaires to be less problematic as they are completely anonymous, but the nature of questions and the subsequent use of the data will be appropriate and ethical. It cannot and will not be used to disadvantage any of the participants, or to make them participate in the research, or to give what they may perceive to be the 'correct' answers to questions. All findings will be anonymised and not attributable to any one individual.

2.3 Who is the gatekeeper(s) (e.g. school principal) for this study (if applicable)? What is the relationship, if any, between the gatekeeper and the prospective participants?

Permission has been given by the President of XXX to conduct research on the basis of a single case study and support has been offered for the research from the Executive Committee. Approval has also been given by the relevant bodies regarding including the 'new' level 8 BA Insurance Practice apprentices in the case study. Ethical considerations centre on the impact that the research may have on the participants, as the primary research will involve human subjects. The purpose of the research will be clearly explained to all participants, who will be invited to take part in the research on a voluntary basis. The research is considered to be of low risk to the participants and will not include vulnerable adults or children. XXX requires ethical approval for research to be conducted and will accept ethical approval that has been secured in TCD.

2.4 What are the primary location(s) for data collection? Specify address of classroom, participant's home, laboratory, place of convenience, etc.

The data will be collected in the Institute of Technology. Research will be conducted on campus in a specified location, such as an interview room in the School of Business and Social Sciences. In some instances, it may be necessary to contact participants by telephone and this will be done from the office of the researcher in the IT. For apprentices, every effort will be made to collect data on campus, but it may be necessary to collect data in an alternative location. Where this is deemed necessary, a neutral and central location such as the Insurance Institute offices, Harbourmaster Place, Dublin, will be the location.

2.5 Describe exactly how participants will be recruited. Include what steps you will take to access the sample, specifying details of people who will be contacted, how they will be contacted, during this process.

Participants will be recruited by open invitation by email to their student email addresses (based on the criteria of being over 18 years of age and fitting the student profile of level 6 and 7 programmes and the level 8 apprenticeship programme). A group email invitation will be sent to students of the level 8 apprenticeship programme who have completed their studies**.** A questionnaire will be sent to all students of the Institute via their student email address, and permission has been granted from the Institute to do this.

2.6 Will the participants be from any of the following groups (tick as appropriate)

	INVOLVEMENT	
	YES	**NO**
Children under 18 years of age		√
Adults with learning disabilities		√
Adults with communication difficulties		√
Adults who are unconscious or very severely ill		√
Adults who have a terminal illness		√
Adults with mental illness		√
Adults suffering from dementia		√
Prisoners		√
Young Offenders		√
Those who could have been considered to have a particularly dependent relationship with the investigator, e.g. those in care homes, students	√	
Other groups who may be considered vulnerable (Please specify below)		√

2.7 If participants are to be recruited from any of the potentially vulnerable groups listed please provide details of:

a) The extra steps taken to ensure that participants from any of these vulnerable groups are as fully informed as possible about the nature of their involvement

13.

While students will be included in the research, they are not dependent on the researcher. The consent forms will explain the nature of the student involvement.

14.

b) Who will give consent

15.

16. Students will give consent.

17.

c) How consent will be obtained (e.g. will it be verbal, written or visually indicated?)

18.

Written consent will be obtained. All participants will be provided with consent forms to be completed prior to the focus groups or interviews. This will be done initially by email to the student email address, and a signed copy will be obtained prior to any research being undertaken. Consent will also be obtained from students who complete the questionnaire, and they will be required to acknowledge that, by completing the questionnaire, they consent to participating in the research project. Consent forms are attached.

d) When consent will be obtained

19.

20. Consent will be obtained at the time of requesting involvement in the research project, and prior to any data collection.

21.

e) The arrangements that have been made to inform those responsible for the care of the research participants of their involvement in research.
22.
23. Not relevant for this project. All participants will be 18 years or older.

The Research Ethics Committee may require the applicant to contact researchDPO@tcd.ie to complete a DPIA in some instances.

SECTION 3 – DATA PROTECTION, DATA PROCESSING AND DATA STORAGE: FOR PERSONAL DATA ONLY

3.1 Does the study involve collecting, using, accessing or sharing personal data[45]? If no please go to section 4

Yes ☒ **No** ☐

If **yes** please give details in the table below of the **personal data** (participant identities, contact details, signed consent forms, code keys that link personal data to other data)

Please specify details for all that apply and likewise for all media forms utilised (online, hard copy, audio etc.). Under the Data Protection Law the collection of personal data is to be kept to a minimum. Please indicate how the personal data being collected relate to the aims and objectives of the study.

Data Collected	Justification	Processing Activity
Student ID numbers (which can be linked to student names)	Identification, so that I can apply matching codes across data sets, and to be able to identify legitimately registered students on relevant programmes of study.	Excel database, or Word file, situated in Hard Drive on laptop computer of the researcher. The laptop is used in the office of the researcher in IT XXX, in various locations on and off campus. It is encrypted and password protected.
Written consent forms	Legal basis for processing, and required to record participant consent.	Paper forms, stored in locked filing cabinet in the office of the researcher in IT XXX. Access restricted to researcher only.
Audio recordings	Data collection method for focus groups and interviews.	Recorded using a Dictaphone and password protected. Files will be transferred to researcher laptop which has double encryption. Data will be retained for 15 months after the examination process is complete.
Transcriptions	Transcripts required for analysis of interviews and focus groups.	These files will contain particpants names until they gave reviewed their data (for two weeks after the transcript is available). All files will be stored on the laptop which has double encryption. Following the review period, names will be removed from the files and codes applied.

[45] Personal data is information which can identify a person – in particular: a name, address, email, telephone number, an identification number, location data, an online identifier, or and IP address.

3.2 Does the study involve collecting, using, accessing, or sharing sensitive data[46]?

Yes ☐ **No** ☒

If **yes** please give details of the sensitive data collected. Please indicate below how collecting such data is relevant to the aims and objectives of the study

Data Collected	Justification	Processing Activity
None		

3.3 Who will control i.e. determine the purpose and way in which the personal and sensitive data is used and be responsible for this use?

TCD is the data controller for the institution.

3.4 Specify the name/s of any personnel who will have access to the personal and sensitive data? Please identify the affinities and roles of those individuals who are not employees or students of Trinity or their affiliated hospitals or institutes. For other personnel such as data inputters and transcribers see 3. 5 (Insert multiple lines for more individuals)

Personnel names	Data access to	Format available to these
Research Supervisor	All data	Electronic or paper-based
Thesis Examiners	Data	Electronic or paper-based

3.5 Specify the name/s of any service providers such as transcribers, third party's carrying out analysis, data collection etc.? Indicate below the format in which they will receive the data i.e. original, anonymised, non-anonymised or pseudonymised. Please confirm and attach the agreement that is in place with the service provider

Personnel names	Data access to	Format available to these
N/A		

3.6 During and after the study, what steps will you take to protect the confidentiality of personal or sensitive personal data collected as part of the project? (e.g. Participant identities, contact details, consent forms, code keys that link personal or sensitive personal

[46] Sensitive personal data means genetic, biometric and health data, as well as personal data revealing racial and ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or ideological convictions or trade union membership.

data to other data,). Please specify details for all that apply and likewise for all media forms utilised (online, hard copy, audio etc.)

Please note: Double encryption is required on all computers, laptops and mobiles devices. Personal data should not be stored on portable devices unless absolutely necessary and it should be stated here if this is necessary and why. Cloud storage of personal data require secure clouds as recommended by TCD and if cloud storage is used it should be indicated here.

Personal/sensitive date type and media format	Format	Comments on protection details
Signed consent forms	Hard copy original forms.	All consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher office, accessible only by me. The office is occupied solely by me and is locked at all times when unoccupied. When consent process is complete, the paper forms will be shredded.
Scanned consent forms	Digital file	Uploaded to Blackboard and local copy deleted.
Audio recordings	Original digital files	Recorded using a Dictaphone and password protected. Files will be transferred to researcher laptop which has double encryption. Data will be retained for 15 months after the examination process is complete.
Transcriptions	Digital files	These files will contain particpants names until they gave reviewed their data (for two weeks after the transcript is available). All files will be stored on the laptop which has double encryption. Following the review period, names will be removed from the files and codes applied.
Questionnaire responses	Original digital files	The questionnaire will be distributed online, will be completed without any personal details, and will be password protected. It will be accessed only be the researcher, and on the laptop described previously, which has double encryption.

3.7 Please specify that you have a log and controls in place to record who accesses, changes, discloses or erases all personal data collected.

All personal data will be accessible only by the researcher and nobody else will be able to access this. All files will be password protected, with the password only known by the researcher, meaning that nobody else can access, change or disclose any personal data.

3.8 It is recommended that all researchers and students complete GDPR training prior to working with personal and sensitive data. Please provide details of any GDPR training undertaken by those named in 3b.4. (e.g. Blackboard GDPR training module) **https://www.tcd.ie/itservices/vle/kb/overview-GDPRtraining.php**

I have completed GDPR training with PwC and has also completed an online training module in the IT for GDPR.

3.9 Indicate clearly <u>when</u> processing (i.e. pseudoanonymisation, anonymization, deletion) will occur and where. Please indicate who will be responsible for these processes and who will retain the key code if applicable.

I will be responsible for anonymisation and deletion of all data. Signed consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet in my own office, accessible only to me and locked at all times when unoccupied. When all paper consent forms have been scanned and stored, the originals will be shredded using the facilities in the IT. No identifiable data will be collected or retained as part of the focus groups or interviews, and the process of anonymization is described in the participant information leaflet. The survey will be anonymous at the time of data collection. The survey will be completed online and no personal identifying information will be collected or requested. Students may be invited to indicate a willingness to be contacted to participate in a follow up interview, by providing a student email address. The process of consent and anonymization will then follow the procedure described for focus groups and interviews.

Audio recordings will be later transcribed and these audio recordings will be password protected. Recordings will not be modified, but will be anonymised by assigning codes to participants so that no contribution will be attributable to any individual. Recordings will be stored for 15 months after the completion of the thesis examination process, after which time they will be deleted.

3.10 Are there any potential confidentiality issues through identification of the study site?

Yes ☐ **No** ☒

If yes, please expand.

3.11 Accepted best practice recommends secure retention of <u>personal</u> non-anonymised (of all the types listed previously) for 7 years. If there is any reason to apply for a variation from these guidelines, please give details and provide a justification.

*Consent forms **must** be kept for 7 years, in the case of students these must therefore be retained by the supervisor. The Participant Information Leaflet must include information regarding the anonymization and destruction of personal and sensitive data and the implications of this i.e. once anonymised data cannot be withdrawn.*

Personal/sensitive data type and media format	Format	Retention time, when it will be destroyed
Original hard copy consent forms	*Paper*	*Retained until scanned (maximum 2 weeks after collection))*

Scanned consent forms	*Digital files*	*7 years (Blackboard archive)*
Audio recordings	Digital files	Retained until 15 months after examination process is complete.
Transcripts	Digital files	Retained until anonymized and viewed by participants (2 week period from when transcribed) and retained for 15 months after examination process is complete.
Questionnaire responses	Digital files	Will be retained for 15 months after the examination process is complete.

3.12 If identifiable or pseudoanonymised data or material (photographs etc.) will be retained after the study is completed, is it stated on the informed consent form that this will be done and that material <u>will not</u> be used in future unrelated studies without further specific permission being obtained?

Yes ☐ **No** ☐

No such material will be retained.

3.13 Researchers must allow the participant access to their data and transcript, if they so wish. Please give details of these arrangements also in the Participant Information Leaflet.

Participants can view and have an opportunity to amend transcripts of audio recordings from individual interviews up until the point of anonymisation and data analysis. This is stated in the participant information leaflet.

3.14 Data Subject Rights. Describe here how participants will be informed of what data will be collected (and why) and how they can exercise their rights? These include:

- right of access;
- right to rectification;
- right to erasure;
- right to object to processing based on legitimate or public interest;
- right to data portability;
- right to object to profiling or making decisions about individuals by automated means?

What measures will be put in place to ensure compliance with this obligation? How will you deal with any data subjects rights? Do you have a procedure in place if a data subject wishes to withdraw from the study for example?

NB: These rights exist until the data is anonymised. At that point, the data ceases to be personal data

These issues are addressed in the participant information leaflet. Participants can view and amend transcript data up until the point of anonymization. Subjects can withdraw from the research process at any time.

SECTION 4 : CONSENT

4.1 Best and common ethical practice involves ensuring informed consent is obtained from the research participants. How will you ensure informed consent is obtained from the research participants? Give details of who will take consent and how it will be done. Please attach a copy of invitation letter, consent form and participant information leaflet for **each** participant group.

See guidelines on how to prepare these documents: and adapt sample consent forms here accordingly to suit your study and participants.

N. B. Please indicate if you have modified the consent form and/or the participant information leaflet template included in the link above? Yes ☒ No ☐
If **yes** please highlight the changes made and why these were necessary.

References to health research/patients removed. Sharing of personal data with third parties is not envisaged.

NOTE: If data protection aspects of the template are changed substantially - this may need to be reviewed by Deputy DPO for Research: email: researchDPO@tcd.ie

4.2 What is the time interval between giving information and seeking consent? During this time prospective participants should receive a letter of invitation, PIL and Consent Form to consider. It is recommended that a period of seven days be provided for reflection. If less than this, please justify.

7 days.

Final Consent checklist

4.3 Please complete the checklist below to confirm you have considered all ethical aspects of consent. **(Note that the consent forms must accompany this application; any omission or inadequacy in detail will result in a request for amendments).**	**Please tick**
I have attached the consent form(s) for **all** research participant groups which are accessible to the target participant audience (e.g. children, participants with literacy needs, etc).	√
Each consent form clearly informs possible participants that participation is voluntary and that the participant has the right to cease participation at any time without giving a reason and without prejudice	√
Each consent form gives assurances that the data collection (questionnaires, interviews, tests etc.) will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner.	√
Each consent form has full contact details of the researcher (and of the supervisor for student applications) to enable prospective participants to make follow-up inquiries.	√
Each consent form has full details, in plain non-technical language, of the purpose of the research, the proposed role of the person being invited to participate, the research instruments (e.g. tests, interviews, questionnaires) with indicative questions if appropriate and the expected duration of participation	√
Each consent form has full details of the purposes to which their data (in all their forms: text, oral, video, imagery etc) will be put, including for research dissemination purposes and requires informed consent for each purpose and each form of data	√
Each consent form explains how the anonymity, where appropriate, of the participants will be ensured and operationalised	√
Each consent form explains how participant data in all its forms (e.g. paper forms, recordings, etc) will be protected, including how it will be stored and for how long and how it will be ultimately destroyed.	√
Each consent form clearly states up to what point a participant can withdraw their data from a study, e.g. up until the data is irrevocably anonymised or until analysis or publication of the data findings.	√
Please include here any other comments you wish to make about the consent form(s)	

SECTION 5 – OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES INCLUDING RISK, BENEFIT AND HARM

5.1 Will individual or group interviews/questionnaires discuss any topics or issues that might be sensitive, embarrassing or upsetting.

No

5.2 Is it possible that criminal or other disclosures requiring action could take place during the study.

No

5.3 Are there any circumstances that might give rise to security concerns for participants or researchers?

No

5.4 Are there any conflicts of interest where data might be critical of working practices, people etc. If yes, please provide an account of specific procedures in place to deal with these issues.

No information about individual people will be disclosed, and care will be taken to present data in an anonymised format. The research methods will be designed to ensure that participants are made aware of an appropriate manner in which to discuss topics, and the interview schedules and focus group moderation will make clear that individuals must not be identified by name or by any other means that will make them identifiable. It is not anticipated that individuals will be identifiable, and rules will be set for focus group/interview participants to ensure that they are aware of the way in which the discussion will be structured. It is not expected that illegal activities will be uncovered. It is possible that varying working practices will be identified during the course of the research, and that there would be possible criticisms of work practice. This data will be used only for the purposes of this research and not for any other purpose, such as staff reviews, feedback or any other actions. The staff in the Department of Business or any other department will not be in any way held to account over any of the findings of the research.

5.5 What (if any) is the potential for benefit for research participants? Please outline only the direct benefits

No direct benefits for research participants.

5.6 Will payment be made to research participants?

		NO

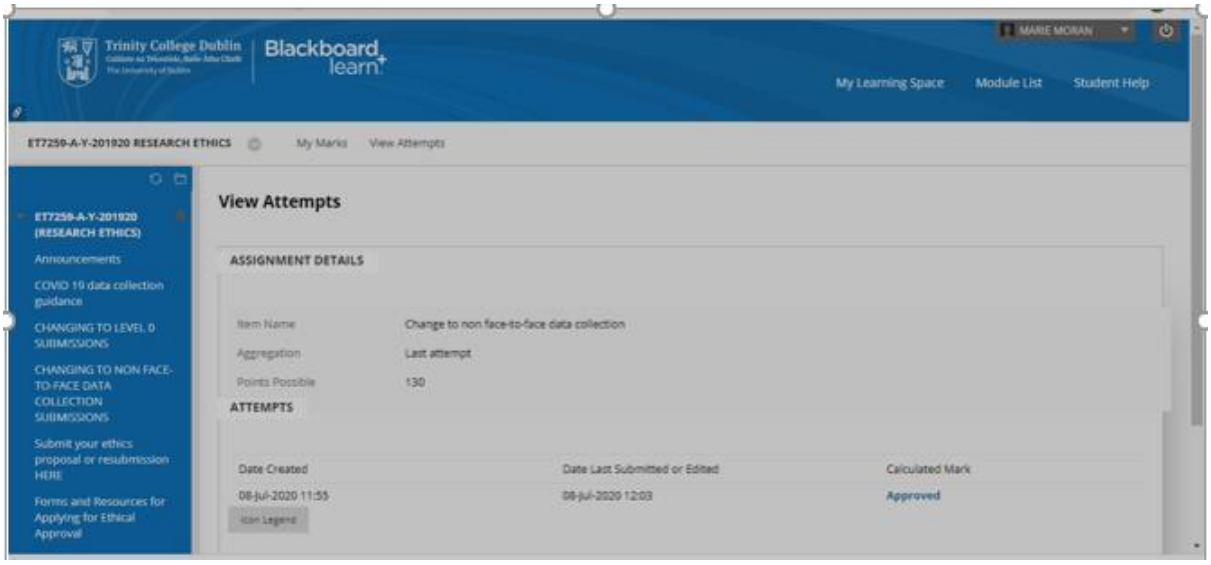
5.7 If you answered YES to question above, please specify for what purpose the payment will be made and the amount to be provided to each participant.

5.8 Are there any further ethical issues or problems which may arise with the proposed study and what steps will be taken to address these?

No

If you have any further comments or notes in relation to any aspect of your application (e.g. funding and relevant ethical issues), please outline them here:

Approval for Amended Format for Interviews



Appendix 6: Contribution of Themes to Answering the Research Questions

Theme	Sub-theme	Research Questions
Getting the Degree	Degree as Credential	1,2,3,4
	Degree as Relevant	1,2,3
	Degree as Achievement	1,2, 4
	Degree as Risk and Investment	1,3
Navigating the Higher Education Environment	Choosing the Institute	2
	Prior Experience of Formal Learning	2, 4
	Fitting and Belonging	4
Learning Inside and Outside the Classroom	Classroom as Resource	2,3
	Classroom as Connection	2, 4
	Learning as Mystery (Am I on the right track?)	1,2
	Here to Help? Thanks and no, thanks	2