

**An investigation of the experience of students
who progress from further education to higher
education nursing degrees.**

By

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the requirement for the degree of Professional Doctorate in
Education.

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Supervisor: Dr John Walsh.

Declaration

I, **Eunice Brown Clarke** declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other institution and is entirely my own work. I agree to deposit this thesis in the university's open access institutional or allow the library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my beloved brother Greg Brown, gone too soon.

“ Live your life ”

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CAO:	Central Application Office
CAS:	Common Award System
DES:	Department of Education and Skills
EEC:	European Economic Community
ETB:	Education Training Board
FE:	Further Education
FET:	Further Education and Training
FETAC:	Further Education and Training Award
HE:	Higher Education
HEA:	Higher Education Authority
HEI:	Higher Education Institution
HELS:	Higher Education Links Scheme
HETAC:	Higher Education and Training Award
INMO:	Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation
IOT:	Institute of Technology
LC:	Leaving Certificate
NCVA:	National Council Vocational Awards
NFQ:	National Framework Qualifications
NMBI:	Nursing and Midwifery Board Ireland
PLC:	Post Leaving Certificate
QQI:	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RCN:	Registered Children's Nurse.
RGN:	Registered General Nurse
RM:	Registered Midwife
RNID:	Registered Nurse Intellectual Disability
RPN:	Registered Psychiatric Nurse
SOLAS:	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
TU:	Technological University
UCAS:	Universities and Colleges Admission Services
VEC:	Vocational Education Committee

Summary

This study explores the experience of further education graduates who have accessed places on nursing degree programmes in higher education and investigates the influence of further education in the transition to undergraduate nursing degree programmes and progression through the nursing course in higher education.

For this study semi structured interviews were conducted with thirty six further education graduates who are now undergraduate students in nursing degree programmes in higher education. The participants were graduates from twenty two further education providers in the Republic of Ireland who had achieved the QQI level 5 Nursing Studies or Healthcare Support Award. Participants were attending eleven higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland and studying four different disciplines of nursing.

The data generated was transcribed by the researcher and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. This involved coding data and identifying emergent themes. Following this analysis five themes emerged: 'Personal growth', 'Insight to nursing', 'FE pedagogy', 'Preparation for HE' and 'Relationships in HE'. The findings of the study are presented using these themes with subthemes.

The findings of this study indicated that the experience of further education increased participants' self-confidence, built resilience and reinforced their commitment to pursuing a nursing degree. They also perceived that they were well prepared for the transition to higher education having developed study, academic and independent learning skills. Knowledge gained in PLC modules along with competency in clinical skills encompassed in the QQI level 5 awards contributed to reduced stress levels for the participants, particularly in the first year of undergraduate studies. The work experience component of further education provided an insight into nursing as a profession and encouraged the development of a dual identity of learner and nurse. This facilitated academic and social integration by participants on the undergraduate programme and fostered a sense of belonging in the communities of the academic environment and the clinical placements. The influence of further education continued in the progression

through the undergraduate years. Participants in the final year of the nursing programme perceived that their experience in further education was crucial to their continuation and success in their studies.

The findings of this study are discussed and analysed with reference to the scholarly literature, employing Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning as the framework to explore the influence of FE on this group of higher education nursing students.

From this analysis and with reference to other relevant literature presented recommendations are made for practice, policy and further research in further and higher education to enhance the experience of students in tertiary education.

Concluding this study the researcher reflects on the personal learning from the research process and implications for the researcher's practice as a teacher in further education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Aim of this study

The aim of this study is to investigate the experience of students who progress from further education to undergraduate nursing degree programmes in higher education. This study will seek to explore how such students perceive the influence of further education in preparing them for the transition to nursing degree programmes and the extent to which participation in further education may influence the experience of nursing degree students throughout their time in higher education.

The research questions:

1. How do students pursuing undergraduate nursing degree programmes who had prior experience of study in further education perceive the influence of FE in preparing them for transition to undergraduate nursing courses in higher education?

The intent behind this question is to explore the student experience of entering the higher education environment and how their previous experience of further education has influenced the transition to HE and their engagement both academically and socially in the HEI.

2. How or to what extent does the experience of further education influence the progression of students within undergraduate nursing programmes in higher education?

The intent of this question is to ascertain whether or to what extent the experience of further education had influenced the progression of students through the undergraduate nursing degree programme. This research question focuses on changing approaches to learning and belonging in the final years of study and preparing for life after graduation.

1.2 Rationale for the study

I qualified as a general and sick children's nurse in 1984 and as a midwife in 1989. At that time nurse education was an apprenticeship style training where nursing students worked as part of the health care team and attended lectures on block placement. Following graduation as a registered nurse and midwife I worked in many areas of nursing in Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. In 1992 I commenced working in further education as a teacher of nursing and related studies. I have been in my present position with Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board since 2005. Over the past thirty two years there have been many changes in further education which will be outlined in later chapters. However, despite these changes as a practitioner in further education over these years there have been a number of facets of further education that remain consistent.

Firstly, a negative perception of further education remains influential among applicants. At the start of every academic year many students commence the nursing studies course with varying degrees of disappointment that they have not obtained a place in higher education nursing degree programmes. A large proportion of these students were previously unaware of Post Leaving Certificate courses in further education and those who were aware mainly considered further education as "a last resort". This negative perception of further education is recognised in the research literature. The sector of further education has been portrayed as underdeveloped and lacking in status compared to other parts of the educational system especially higher education (O'Sullivan, 2017; Rami et al., 2016). Terms such as the "poor relation" and "Cinderella sector" have been used to describe the public and official perceptions of the further education sector (O'Sullivan, 2017). This perception has often been highlighted in the media. An article in the Irish Times which commented on "Snobbery at the heart of the two-tier education system" stated that students perceive higher education courses as the only measure of success and further education is viewed as "second best" (O'Brien, 2020).

At present further education in Ireland is overseen by the further education and training authority (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) SOLAS. The majority of FET is channelled through 16 regional Educational Training

Boards (ETBs) which provide FET directly or through contracted providers in the ETB region. There are 64 FET centres which focus primarily on providing further education at QQI Level 5 or 6, with 58 second-level institutions offering PLC qualifications. Outside this provision there are 25 independent centres funded to deliver PLC courses (SOLAS, 2020).

Since 1996, students who have completed programmes in further education have accessed places in higher education through the Higher Education Links Scheme. At present graduates of FE can apply for places in higher education using QQI level 5 and 6 awards through the Central Applications Office (CAO). In recent years there have been initiatives through various policies (DES, 2011; HEA, 2020; SOLAS, 2020; ETBI, 2021) to increase the rate of progression of further education graduates to higher education and to highlight further education as an alternative access route for third level education. The establishment of the Department of Further and Higher education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2020 and the development of Tertiary degree programmes in collaboration with FE providers and HEIs marks a significant step to a more unified tertiary education system in Ireland.

In 2002 nursing education in Ireland became an undergraduate degree course in higher education. There are four QQI Level 5 awards recognised by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland for progression to nursing degree programmes in Ireland, Nursing Studies, Healthcare Support, Community and Health Service Skills. As there are the additional requirements for the components of Anatomy Physiology, Nursing Theory and Practice, Human Growth and Development or Biology which are mandatory modules of the Nursing Studies Award this is the most common award provided by further education colleges for students who wish to progress to higher education. Students who have accessed the nursing degree through the mature student route may have obtained the Nursing Studies or the Healthcare Support award.

The certificate in Nursing Studies is part of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Level 5 (QQI). The overall aim of the programme is to provide the student with the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, competence, and skill to work under supervision in a variety of healthcare settings and /or to progress to further or higher education and training. Upon successful completion of a minimum

of eight programme modules the student may achieve the required 120 credits for a level 5 QQI major award through the Common Awards System (CAS). The student will have many transfer and progression options available to them. The student may transfer to another programme leading to certification in another level 5 QQI major award or to appropriate programmes leading to awards at the next level of the NFQ. Alternatively, the student may be eligible to apply to progress to the next or higher levels of the NFQ with a higher education provider, through the Higher Education Links Scheme (QQI, 2020). Currently there are approximately 150 reserved quota places in higher education for FE graduates who meet the criteria for entry to undergraduate nursing degrees.

Over the years I have been teaching in further education there has been a high number of students attending nursing studies courses in further education with the aim of progressing to nursing degrees in higher education. These students are both Post Leaving Certificate and mature students. On enrolment in further education colleges, students are frequently made aware of the limited quota of places for FE graduates on nursing degree courses in higher education in Ireland. An alternative option for FE students is to obtain places on nursing degree programmes in the UK. Since the introduction of fees for nursing degree programmes in the UK the number of students applying to the higher education institutions in the England has declined with students applying more frequently to Northern Ireland and Scotland. Unfortunately for many students in our FE college, relocating outside of Ireland is not an option due to factors such as the cost of accommodation and every year students are unable to progress to higher education despite achieving the required grades in the QQI Level 5 Award in Nursing Studies.

A significant aspect of my experience is the consistent positive feedback on further education from the FE graduates who progress to higher education nursing degree programmes, albeit this is almost entirely anecdotal. Every year, teachers in further education are contacted by past students who wish to express their gratitude to the staff for the positive experiences they had while in the college. Graduates who have progressed to higher education report how valuable the experience of further education has been in their transition to undergraduate nursing degree programmes in higher education and their progression through the

nursing course. This feedback is appreciated by all staff in the college but as is indicated above, it is anecdotal and thus far appears to have had no impact on the perception of further education within the public or the limited quota of places for FE graduates in higher education. In the literature on further education some similar evidence of the benefits of further education for progression to higher education is noted in recent Irish based studies (McGuinness et al., 2018; DES, 2020; Rami et al., 2018). This study explores the experience of further education graduates who have accessed places on nursing degree programmes in higher education and investigates the influence of further education in the transition to undergraduate nursing degree programmes and progression through the nursing course in higher education. It will provide empirical evidence regarding student perceptions of the role of further education in facilitating transition to and progression through higher education and make a contribution to the literature of the experience of students who transfer from further education to higher education in Ireland. As this study concerns the cohort of students who progress to nursing degree programmes it has particular relevance to the issues relating to the nursing profession in Ireland in recent times.

The healthcare system in Ireland has for a number of years been experiencing challenges in attracting and retaining nurses (Jilani, 2020; McDermid et al., 2020). This is cited as global problem, in 2018, the WHO (2018) issued statistical data that in relation to the current shortage of healthcare workers, 50% of these are in the area of nursing and midwifery. Though still a popular career choice in Ireland, there was a sharp decline by 27% in applications for places on nursing programmes in 2022 (O'Brien, 2022), followed by smaller but consistent falls in applications up to 2024. Furthermore, recent figures from the Nursing and Midwifery Board Ireland (NMBI) identified attrition rates for student nurses as high as 22% in some disciplines of nursing (Appendix 1). Among the factors which may account for such relatively high attrition rates of nursing students are misconceptions of the profession of nursing (O'Brien et al., 2008) and the level of academic content in the degree programme (O'Donnell, 2011).

Another issue for the nursing profession in Ireland is the increasing numbers of newly qualified nurses who either leave the profession or leave Ireland to pursue careers in healthcare environments abroad (Humphries et al., 2015; Malone,

2023). A survey of preregistration nurses carried out by the Irish Midwives and Nursing Organisation (INMO) in 2023 found that 73% of nursing and midwifery graduates approaching qualification were considering emigrating upon graduation (INMO, 2023). The shortage of graduate nurses in Ireland has been an issue for a number of years. In the decade from 2000 to 2010 there was almost as many nurses recruited internationally as trained locally. In that period, 14,546 non-EU and non-Irish EU-trained nurses joined the Irish nursing workforce alongside 17,264 Irish-trained nurses (Humphries et al., 2012). In terms of international comparisons, since 2004 Ireland has had a greater reliance on international recruits than the UK and is more reliant upon nurses who graduated outside Ireland than traditional immigrant destinations, such as Australia and New Zealand (OECD, 2010). There are many complex factors associated with these trends in the nursing profession in Ireland today and research studies pertaining to nurse education may provide evidence to support possible solutions to mitigate against these trends.

For this study semi structured interviews were conducted in 2022 with thirty six further education graduates who are now undergraduate students in nursing degree programmes in higher education. This sample consisted of thirty six nursing students male and female, in all disciplines of nursing, in every undergraduate year, in eleven different HEIs and who had attended twenty one further education providers and achieved QQI Level 5 Awards in Nursing Studies and Healthcare Support. The sample also represented mature students in nursing degrees in higher education who had transitioned from further education. The data generated from these interviews reflects the diverse experience of the cohort of students who are the subject of this study. The study set out to capture the broad experience of the FE graduates without focusing on a particular aspect such as socio-economic or ethnic group.

The data generated was transcribed by the researcher and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. This involved coding data and identifying emergent themes. Following this analysis five themes emerged: 'Personal growth', 'Insight to nursing', 'Preparation for HE', 'FE pedagogy' and 'Relationships in HE'. The findings of the study are presented using these themes with subthemes.

The findings of this study indicated that the experience of further education increased participants' self-confidence, built resilience and reinforced their commitment to pursuing a nursing degree. They also perceived that they were well prepared for the transition to higher education having developed study, academic and independent learning skills while completing QQI awards in FE. Knowledge gained in PLC modules along with competency in clinical skills encompassed in the QQI level 5 awards contributed to reduced stress levels for the participants, particularly in the first year of undergraduate studies. The work experience component of further education provided an insight into nursing as a profession and encouraged the development of a dual identity of learner and nurse. This facilitated academic and social integration by participants on the undergraduate programme and fostered a sense of belonging in the communities of the academic environment and the clinical placements. The influence of further education also influenced the successful progression by the participants through the undergraduate years. Participants interviewed in the final year of the nursing programme perceived that their experience in further education was crucial to their continuation and success in their studies.

The findings of this study are discussed and analysed with reference to the scholarly literature, employing Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning as the theoretical framework to explore the influence of FE on this group of higher education nursing students. This theory comprises four components:

- Learning as becoming - identity, involving the formation of an identity that enables the learner to understand what is of importance to the community of higher education in which they are engaged.
- Learning as belonging - community, a sense of belonging is integral to becoming part of a community: when students participate and engage in the activities of a community this fosters a deeper level of engagement and commitment, creating a supportive learning environment.
- Learning as doing - practice, the concept that learning is not just acquiring knowledge in isolation but engaging and connecting the knowledge to practice. This involves active participation in the learning environment and practical application of knowledge.

- Learning as experience - meaning, learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but a process of meaning making where individuals make sense of their experience by interpreting the information and constructing an understanding of the learning.

In view of the findings recommendations are made for practice, policy and further research in further and higher education to enhance the experience of students in tertiary education. The researcher reflects on the learning from the research process and implications for practice as a teacher in further education.

1.3 Structure of Thesis

This thesis continues with **Chapter two**, which sets out the background and the policy context to this study. The historical perspective of further and higher education in Ireland and their evolution are summarised with reference to policies and for access, transfer and progression in tertiary education. The growth of Post Leaving Certificate courses for providing access to higher education and the process of progression from further education through the Higher Education Links Scheme through the Central Application Office are explained. There is discussion of pathways from FE to HE and studies from Ireland and the UK of students who transition from FE to HE are explored. The establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2020 and the closer alignment of further and higher education are presented with discussion of the development of Tertiary degree programmes in FE and HE.

The development of nurse education is addressed and the literature on the conversion of nurse education from apprenticeship training to higher education is explored from Irish and international perspectives. Issues concerning the nursing profession globally and their implications for nurse education are discussed. Current requirements for application to nursing degrees and the scope of the regulatory body of nursing in Ireland are outlined. The structure of QQI Level 5 Nursing Studies Award is outlined and details of quotas of places in higher education for FE graduates are presented.

Chapter three guides the reader into the subject matter through a review of the relevant literature and research. The student experience in higher education is explored discussing the theoretical models of Tinto (1993) and Jones (2018). Central to these theories is the importance of academic and social integration for the student experience which is comprehensively covered in the review of the literature of the student in higher education. The concept of belonging (Meehan & Howell, 2018; Van Herpen et al., 2020) and its importance for effective academic and social integration is outlined and the factors which contribute to the student's sense of belonging to the higher education institution they are attending are identified. The various stages of the student journey in particular transition to higher education are also presented. In this chapter there is discussion of the importance of learner identity (Wenger, 1998; Weil, 1986) and professional identity (Boyd & McKendry, 2012; Brown et al., 2012) which specifically relates to nurse education. Of particular interest to this study was the review of the research and theories (Briggs et al., 2012; McFarlane, 2018) which consider identity development prior to entry to higher education. This chapter also outlines Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning which will be the theoretical framework which underpins this study

Chapter 4 considers the research methodology and the decision making approach underpinning this qualitative study design. This chapter outlines the rationale and focus of the study, considering the development of the research questions, the research approach and research methods. Ethical considerations and the position of the researcher is considered through reflexivity. Methods of data generation and the process of thematic data analysis using Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework are set out. The themes which emerged from this process are identified.

Chapters 5 and 6 represents the findings of the study. Using narration and direct quotations from participants the emergent themes from the research are explored. The individual experience of each participant gives a unique insight into the influence of further education on the transition by FE students to HE and their experience through the undergraduate nursing degree programme.

Chapter 7 analyses the main findings in the context of the scholarly literature in the field and how the findings of the experience of the participants of this study compare and contrast to previous research studies is discussed. This research

adds to the body of knowledge about FE graduates who progress to higher education.

Chapter 8 summarises this study and gives recommendations for further research, policy and practice. In this chapter there is also a personal reflection by the researcher encompassing the learning both personally and professionally from conducting this study.

Chapter 2: Tertiary Education

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the policy, structural and institutional context for further education, higher and nurse education and the professional preparation of nurses within further and higher education. There is a comprehensive history of further education and higher education outlining the legislation and strategies which have prompted the evolution of these sectors from their inception to the present day. Post Leaving Certificate courses are the most relevant aspect of further education for this research and are discussed referring to current literature. The pathways for graduates of FE to transition to HE is outlined and policies to promote access, transfer and progression from FE to HE is identified. The development of nursing education is outlined with reference to the current requirement for entry to nursing degree programmes in Ireland. The QQI Level 5 Nursing Studies Award is explored in depth and the process of access, transfer and progression from further education to undergraduate nursing programmes in higher education is explained. The current global issues for the nursing profession and the relevance to nurse education in Ireland are also addressed in this chapter.

2.2 Historical Context Further Education and Training

Originally technical education was under the remit of the pre independence Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) and was subsequently transferred to the newly formed Department of Education in 1924. The Vocational Education Act, 1930 established 38 Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) which oversaw the development of second level vocational schools. In 1977 funding became available from the EEC through the European Social Fund for the provision of pre-employment courses in vocational, community and comprehensive schools. In 1984 these courses were redeveloped as Vocational Preparation and Training (VPT) courses and Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs) resulted when a second year was added in 1985 (ESRI, 2014). Up to the mid-1980s the term PLC was often used to describe courses in higher level institutions. The first formal recognition of further education at a national level was in the White Paper on Education Charting our Education Future issued by the

Department of Education and Science (DES,1995) which saw further education as a distinct category and proposed the development of a FE training authority “to provide a coherent national framework” (DES,1995, p.81) for the coordination of adult education, apprenticeships, and Post Leaving Certificate education.

At this time there was a rapid development of PLC courses which led to the evolution of an emerging but poorly defined further education sector (Clancy, 1996). The development of this sector was varied, incremental and uneven with local providers developing courses from the ground up in response to local needs. This was recognised by Geaney (1998, p.55) who states, “The present situation regarding further education within the Republic of Ireland did not emerge in a planned and ordered way, but instead resulted from many and varying influences”. Coupled with this, much of the development in vocational education and training fell outside the system of established qualifications and lacked standardisation in assessment and certification (Granville, 2003). The lack of standardised certification and assessment was identified in a NESC report (1993), while also recognising that further education and training courses were provided by different providers and developed separately. Similar programmes were being provided by FAS, VECs, community groups, private providers, and secondary schools.

Growing participation rates in this sector led to the establishment in 1991 of the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) to provide certification for vocational education. The NCVA introduced a modular framework, integrating general studies and vocational modules with a focus on the development of personal and interpersonal skills (Trant, 2002). PLC courses were categorised at NCVA level 2. This system though bringing in national certification was not broad enough to match the diversity of courses provided by further education colleges, second level schools, and other providers who continued to offer certification from UK and other bodies. Subsequently a national certification authority, TEASTAS was established in 1995 by Minister Niamh Bhreathnach to coordinate all the certifying bodies of courses being provided after the Leaving Certificate. This agency operated from 1995 but was suspended in 1998 following controversy surrounding its role and a backlash from several established stakeholders in the area (O’Sullivan, 2017).

Shortly after the implementation of the NCVA structure, the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) was introduced in 1996. This allocated places on "selected" courses in Institutes of Technology and universities based on attainment achieved in the NCVA level 2 awards. A small number of university places were reserved for the learners who met a certain criterion, still applying through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system. This scheme is still in effect for students who wish to progress to higher education from further education QQI level 5 and 6 awards on the national framework of qualifications.

As the sector continued to grow, the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 (DES, 1999) established the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). Under this act the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) was formed in 2001, which subsumed the NCVA, TEASTAS, FÁS and CERT who continued to operate four separate certification systems (O'Sullivan, 2017). All further education qualifications including vocational awards were now under the one body for the first time. This Act also gave legislative status to the Further Education and Training (FET) sector for the first time although largely by describing what the sector did not do, defining FET as "education and training other than primary or post-primary education or higher education and training" (ESRI, 2014, p.14).

As part of European agreements outlined in the Bruges-Copenhagen Process (2002) the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was formulated in 2003 to promote credit transfer and comparability within a projected European Higher Education Area envisaged by the Bologna Process, the reorientation of courses around outcome based education and the development of quality assurance mechanisms (Walsh, 2018). The NFQ set out a comprehensive structure of awards from level 1 to 10 based on learning outcomes and for the first time the many different types of qualifications included in the NFQ were organised based on their level of knowledge, skills, and competence. All primary, secondary, further education and higher-level programmes were mapped onto this framework, placing FET courses at levels 1 to 6. Many PLC courses were placed at Level 5 on the framework, equivalent to honours Leaving Certificate. In the move from the NCVA to FETAC all modules were revised, incorporating learning outcomes and altering content and assessment approaches. Another major development linked

to the emergence of the national framework of qualifications was that quality assurance procedures were introduced for all NFQ qualifications, allowing qualifications to be recognised both in Ireland and abroad. A systematic quality assurance system in further education colleges was introduced. Six areas were addressed in terms of quality assurance: Assessment, Access Transfer and Progression, Communication to Staff, Communication to Learners, Continuing Professional Development and Programme Delivery and Review.

The growing PLC sector was recognised in the *White Paper on Adult Education* (DES, 2000), and following this paper the Department of Education and Science commissioned a steering group to examine and make recommendations regarding the organisational, support, development, technical and administrative structures required in schools and colleges with large scale PLC provision. McIver Consulting was engaged to undertake extensive research and reported their findings in 2003. These findings covered various aspects of further education including improving management structures; flexibility; buildings; facilities and services; teachers' qualifications, induction, and development; duration and level of course; progression; funding; support structures and linkage. The findings also highlighted the need to recognise the distinctiveness of the further education sector from second level provision by providing separate institutions, management, and organisational structures (ERSI, 2014). While many valuable recommendations were made, this report was never acted upon due to the drastic deterioration in the economic climate.

In response to the economic crash from 2008, successive governments moved to reform and restructure the FE sector. In July 2011, the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn T.D., announced that a new further education and training authority (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) SOLAS would be established to replace FAS and take the lead in terms of skills development and training. It would fulfil a role for the Further Education and Training (FET) sector similar to the Higher Education Authority for higher education institutions (DES, 2011). With the help of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), areas of duplication, gaps and weaknesses would be identified. This ministerial initiative led to a significant restructuring of the VEC system. The 33 VECs were restructured to form 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Sixteen FAS

training centres were also brought into the remit of the ETBs, phased in by 2014. The role of the ETBs was the systematic delivery of education and training programmes throughout the country.

In addition to this the Minister also published the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Bill, (DES, 2011). This resulted in the amalgamation within a single national organisation of existing quality assurance and qualification organisations, including the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) (Walsh, 2018). The Minister outlined the main functions as being the maintenance and implementation of the NFQ, access, transfer and progression between programmes, international recognition, and effective quality assurance systems (DES, 2011). Following from this, the Quality Assurance and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 2012 was passed (DES, 2012) and the new state agency entitled Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was formed. QQI replaced FETAC and the other bodies mentioned, making awards based on FETAC standards. QQI has the responsibility to develop, promote and maintain the Irish NFQ.

A new national awards system called the Common Award System (CAS) was introduced and by 2014 all FETAC Awards were to be part of this system, including awards developed by FÁS, Fáilte Ireland, Teagasc and Bord Iascaigh Mhara. Each major award under the common award system was to be awarded a total set number of credits and these credits were accumulated through achieving several minor awards. The credit value system was adopted in Ireland so that the Irish educational system was more in line with other European countries and to provide learners with more mobility and recognition within the European Union. For the migration of FETAC components to the CAS, all the components of the FETAC awards were re-written specifically for and in consultation with staff from each of the course providers using assessment criteria from QQI. On completion modules were available for consultation to all staff. The new migrated modules subsequently became the property of the separate ETBs.

The Further Education and Training Boards Act adopted in 2013 (DES, 2013) resulted in the establishment of SOLAS which was responsible for three main areas in further education:

1. Leading and co-ordinating the change management process of integrating the FE institutions and programmes
2. Co-ordinating and managing the funding and performance of FET programmes
3. Leading the modernisation of FET programmes to ensure that they are focused on the lifelong needs of learners, especially jobseekers, and are flexible and relevant to the needs of the labour market. (ESRI, 2014, p.40)

These legislative and statutory changes brought together the previously disparate elements of 'further' and 'training' establishing a more integrated and coherent FET system in the Irish state.

According to the second SOLAS national strategy, *Future FET Further Education and Training Strategy 2020 – 2024* (SOLAS, 2020), FET offers the opportunity for around 200,000 learners each year to achieve level 1-6 awards of the National Framework of Qualifications in nearly every community in Ireland regardless of previous levels of education. SOLAS currently invests €800 million annually in FET. The majority of this is channelled through ETBs which provide FET directly or through contracted providers in the ETB region. There are 64 FET centres which focus primarily on providing further education at Level 5 or 6, as well as 58 second-level institutions offering PLC qualifications. Outside this provision there are 25 independent centres funded to deliver PLC courses (SOLAS, 2020).

2.3 Higher Education in Ireland

The roots of higher education in Ireland can be traced back to the monastic schools of the early medieval period. These schools, which emerged in the 6th century, were among the first in Europe to offer advanced education. Monasteries like Clonmacnoise, Clonard, and Glendalough became renowned centres of learning, attracting students from across Europe (McGrath, 2002). The formal establishment of universities in Ireland began with the foundation of Trinity College Dublin in 1592 by Queen Elizabeth I. This institution was modelled after the collegiate universities of Oxford and Cambridge and aimed to promote the Anglican faith and British rule. Trinity College quickly became the primary

institution of higher education in Ireland, focusing on classical studies, theology, and the liberal arts (McDowell, 1992).

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, Trinity College remained the sole university in Ireland, primarily serving the Protestant ascendancy. The Penal Laws significantly restricted educational opportunities for the majority Catholic population, forcing many to seek education abroad. In response to these restrictions, the Catholic University of Ireland, now known as University College Dublin (UCD), was established in 1854 under the influence of Cardinal John Henry Newman to provide Catholic university education as an alternative to the Queen's colleges (French, 2010).

The 19th century saw significant changes in Irish higher education, the British government established the Queen's Colleges in Belfast, Cork, and Galway in 1845, which were non-denominational and aimed to provide higher education to all, regardless of religious affiliation, but failed to attract significant Catholic participation, as they were considered 'godless colleges' by the Catholic bishops (Walsh, 2018). The Irish Universities Act of 1908 established the National University of Ireland as a federal university comprising University College Dublin and the Queen's colleges of Cork and Galway, with the separate reconstitution of Queen's University in Belfast as a standalone institution. The colleges of the National University were to be non-denominational in terms of their governance and curriculum but were designed to serve different religious and denominational constituencies (Walsh, 2018). It was not until legislation in 1989 that more universities were established in Ireland when the two former National Institutes of Higher Education (NIHEs) were given university status and became the university of Limerick (UL) and Dublin City University (DCU) (Coolahan, 2017).

In higher education the mid-20th century witnessed substantial changes driven by economic and social factors. The 1965 "*Investment in Education*" report by an Irish survey team under the auspices of the OECD and the Department of Education highlighted the elitist nature of access to higher education and the deficiencies in vocational and technical education provision. This report highlighted the restrictive and elitist nature of university institutions noting that there was a strong association between entrance to university and social class (Walsh, 2014). Following from this report the 1960s and 1970s saw the creation of a network of

Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs), these institutions aimed to provide practical and technical education to support Ireland's growing economy and diversified the provision of higher education in Ireland. Prior to the establishment of the RTCs, the higher education system was dominated by the university which in 1969, accounted for 78% of total fulltime enrolments in higher education in Ireland (Clancy, 1996). The RTCs played a crucial role in widening access and participation in higher education, particularly among first-generation students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Thorn, 2018). This massification of higher education, the development of higher education from an "elite" system to a "mass" system as envisaged by Trow (1974) was driven in Ireland by economic priorities and resulted in a four-fold increase in full time student enrolment between 1965 and 1992 (Walsh, 2014). The Higher Education Authority (HEA) was established in 1971 to coordinate the development of higher education and ensure equitable access (Coolahan, 2017). The diversification of higher education widened participation and led to the development of a binary system of higher education, with the differentiation of the mission between universities and the RTCs. There was also tighter control on the management of RTCs which was out of the remit of the HEA, which had executive functions in relation to the HEIs including universities. The RTCs remained under direct control of the Department of Education and day to day oversight of the VECs. The RTCs were upgraded to Institutes of Technology in the 1990s and ultimately were brought under the remit of the HEA in 2006, following a recommendation by the OECD review of higher education in 2004. In 2013, the HEA produced a report for the Minister for Education and Skills which distinguishes between IoTs and universities as follows: "Institutes of Technology were dominant in Levels 6 and 7 and were stronger than the universities in part-time and flexible provision. They also had a larger proportion of mature and disadvantaged entrants, were involved in less research activity in a smaller number of focused areas, and were significantly involved in industry support and regional engagement. Universities, on the other hand, generally focused on Level 8 at undergraduate level, were more active at postgraduate level and in international education and had a higher proportion of research activity and a much higher proportion of national and international research funding" (HEA, 2013, p.10).

A significant policy document in the restructuring of Irish higher education was *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, commonly known as the Hunt Report, published in 2011, it was launched at a moment of crisis for the Irish state (Walsh, 2018; Walsh & Loxley, 2015). This report was initiated in the wake of the OECD review of higher education and took up many of the concepts and recommendations from the OECD report in 2004. This report advocated for a more coherent and diversified higher education system that could meet the needs of society and the economy, seeking significant changes in system structure and institutional governance. It emphasized the creation of Technological Universities through the merger of Institutes of Technology, aiming to create fewer but larger and more competitive higher education institutions (DES, 2011). The Hunt Report set out several key objectives, including improving the quality of teaching and learning, enhancing the research capacity of institutions, and ensuring that higher education was accessible to all members of society. It also highlighted the need for greater collaboration between institutions and with industry to ensure that graduates have the skills required by the modern economy (Walsh, 2018).

Following the recommendations of the Hunt Report, the Irish government introduced the Technological Universities Act 2018, which provided the legal framework for the establishment of Technological Universities (TUs). These new institutions were formed through the amalgamation of existing Institutes of Technology and were designed to provide a more coherent, integrated approach to higher education and research, with a strong emphasis on critical mass in research, focus on applied research and close links with industry (DES, 2018). The first Technological University, Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), was established in 2019, followed by Munster Technological University (MTU) in 2021, and Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest (TUS) in 2021. In 2022 Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and South East Technological University (SETU) were established. These institutions aim to enhance regional development and provide greater access to higher education in their respective regions (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022).

In recent years, the Irish state has moved to refine governance and oversight over both higher education and FET, while placing a greater emphasis on

promoting a unified tertiary education system that integrates further education and higher education. The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) was established in 2020 as a new department with a broad remit over further and higher education, separating higher education from the remit of the Department of education for the first time in half a century. This department introduced a comprehensive policy platform in 2022, aimed at unifying further and high education to provide a seamless and responsive system that meets the needs of learners, researchers, and society (DFHERIS, 2022).

The key initiatives include:

- Establishment of the National Tertiary Office (NTO): this office was created to oversee the integration of the further and higher education sectors. It launched pilot tertiary programs in 2023, focusing on enhancing access and creating alternative pathways to higher education (Twomey & O'Toole, 2023).
- Policy for Access, Transfer, and Progression (ATP): This policy aims to ensure that students have clear and coherent pathways through the education system, facilitating transitions between further education and higher education (QQI, 2022).

These significant legislative and statutory changes have largely transformed the context in which HE and FET operated before the economic crash. Yet, changes to promote a more cohesive and recognisable tertiary system remain at an early stage.

2.4 Access, transfer and progression

2.4.1 Common Awards System

The Common Awards System (CAS) is a system of linked FET awards specifications at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 1 to 6 inclusive. All QQI awards contain the minimum expected learning outcomes to be met in order to gain an award and have a common structure, characteristics and features such as title, volume, profile, assessment and grading. These awards standards reflect the knowledge, skill and competence to be achieved by the learner in order to gain their award.

The Common Awards System makes use of the NFQ's four main award classifications: Major, Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Awards. The Major QQI Award is the principal class of award made at each level representing a significant volume of learning outcomes. Major awards usually comprise of 8 minor awards / modules. The CAS Specification for each major award lists the mandatory modules which must be completed along with the elective modules which are required to make up the overall specified credit value of the award. Credit values range from 20 credits for Level 1 to 120 credits for Level 5/6. Minor QQI Awards are also commonly referred to as component certificates. These awards are single modules which can be completed and certified individually and have credit values from 5 to 15. All minor awards are linked to a major award which allows learners the opportunity to build on their minor awards and work towards a major award. It is important to note that minor awards are an achievement in their own right. Learners wishing to focus on one specific area or gain a specific skill may find that completing a minor award in that area is much more appropriate than completing a major award which may be too broad to meet their specific needs. Special Purpose QQI Awards are developed for specific areas of learning that have a narrow scope. All Special Purpose awards comprise one or more components. This means that the credit value of this award will be higher than that of a minor award but significantly lower than a major award. Supplemental QQI Awards recognises learning concerned with updating/up-skilling and/or continuing education and training. They are occupation related awards, and they consist of one or more components.

These awards are published on the QQI website and are available to all QQI registered Providers. Programmes leading to these common awards must be submitted from the Centre for validation and approved by QQI prior to delivery (QQI, 2015).

Where there is no appropriate CAS award, it is possible for a provider to submit a programme to lead to a brand new award, termed 'non-CAS'. A non-CAS programme may lead to a major, special purpose, supplemental or minor award. For validation for a non – CAS programme providers are to show evidence of good practice regarding all areas of education provision and specific evidence to support the development of a new programme such as:

- the proposed programme compares favourably with existing related (comparable) programmes in Ireland and beyond. Comparators should be as close as it is possible to find.
- there is support for the introduction of the programme (such as from employers, or professional, regulatory or statutory bodies).
- there is evidence of learner demand for the programme.
- there is evidence of employment opportunities for graduates where relevant.
- the programme meets genuine education and training needs (QQI, 2024)

2.4.2 Higher Education Links Scheme

The Higher Education Links Scheme provides systematic progression opportunities through the Central Applications Office (CAO) for applicants with CAS major awards at level 5 and 6 to the first year of higher education programmes.

A scoring system for each component of a major award applies to all NFQ level 5 and 6 major awards listed on the CAO and higher education institutions websites.

- Distinction 3.25
- Merit 2.16
- Pass 1.08

This number is then multiplied by the individual component credit value to a maximum of 120 credits, a total of 390 points.

A major award may be achieved over more than one year. However, some institutions require that the 120 credits used for scoring must be achieved in a 'single sitting', over one certification year, i.e. between 1 August and 31 July. Some programmes in higher education also specify certain components as part of the major award.

Higher Education Institutions offer places through HELS, but in slightly different ways. Universities only offer places from a reserved quota for FET award holders. Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology generally accept applications based on any CAS or legacy NFQ level 5 and 6 awards, in open

competition with Leaving Certificate candidates. However, they may also offer places through reserve quotas for QQI applicants only, for example, to some nursing degree programmes. Within institutions, some provide access to a wide range of programmes based on any CAS level 5 or 6 major award (achievement of 120 credits), while other programmes specify particular major awards. (QQI, 2017).

2.4.3 Pathways from FE to HE

Since the introduction of the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) in 1996 students have progressed from further education to higher education. One of the consistent issues for such progression are the traditionally limited and complicated pathways for students from further education in gaining access to higher education. In a scoping exercise of FET transition to HE (Rami et al., 2016) it was found to be difficult to obtain transparent information regarding progression pathways as many HEIs did not have formalised FET to HE progression strategies or common stated policies. This led to individual FET Centres negotiating local pathways with individual programmes within HEIs often through Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs). In the more recent working paper (DES, 2020) examples of nine different collaborative models of pathways from FE to HE were identified demonstrating the complexity of accessing places in higher education for further education award holders. The *National Plan for Equity to Access Higher Education Plan (NAP) 2015 - 2019* included a specific target to increase participation in higher education of further education award holders from 6.6% to 10%. A priority goal for this plan was to build coherent pathways from further education to higher education (HEA, 2015). But despite the strong emphasis in various official policies on access, transfer and progression only limited progress was made with this goal. A review of this plan in 2018 reported that achieving the target for this group had been slow compared to other groups whose target had already been exceeded. Only a marginal increase had been reported in the participation rates of holders of further education awards. The main reason cited for this was the lack of progress in respect of transparency of pathways from further education. This was despite the funding of €7.5 million dedicated to building and enriching relationships between relevant institutions to target students from further education. The development of access and foundation courses to be provided by further education and training providers was also limited which was attributed to lack of

collaboration between FE and HE institutions. The report concluded that the target for this group should be retained as it is a recognised priority area for the following national access plan (HEA, 2018). In the *National Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022 -2028* further education award holders are not included as a specific target group for national targets though there is reference in one of its goals to examine transitions to and within further education and higher education but with a focus on specified target groups (HEA, 2022).

The Hunt report also referenced pathways from further education to higher education (DES, 2011). One of the strategic objectives of this report has been met in the evolution of Institutes of Technology to Technological Universities (TUs) under the Technological Universities Act 2018. The development of these TUs has many implications relating to participation, access, quality, and research and development. In the area of access one of the remits of a TU was to play a pivotal role in facilitating access and progression by developing structured relationships with providers of further education and training (DES, 2011). Some progress has been made in this regard with the development of Tertiary degree programmes between ETBs and HEIs which will be discussed later.

In the diverse provision of further education and training (FET) in Ireland data has shown that transitions from FE to HE is significant at least to the higher technological sector, accounting for around one-fifth of the annual intake of this higher education sector and about one-quarter of annual Level 5 and Level 6 PLC FET graduates (SOLAS, 2020). The issue of unclear pathways is acknowledged in the *National Further Education and Training FET Strategy 2020-2024* which noted that “There are in excess of 1,200 publicised entry links from FET to HEIs in Ireland, the UK and Europe, with over 200 advanced entry routes, but these have been largely dependent on institution to institution relationships rather than a consistent and universal transitions approach” (SOLAS, 2020, p.53) As part of the FET strategy SOLAS, with other key stakeholders as part of the work of the Transitions Reform FET-HE working group, which was established in 2017 by the Department of Education and Skills to facilitate a more consistent approach to progression from FET to HE, developed an action plan to work towards a more strategic and consistent transitions. The key actions agreed include:

- setting clear overall national targets for FET-HE transitions and embedding these within HEI performance compacts and ETB strategic performance agreements.
- comparing and contrasting a selection of Level 6 awards/programmes in cognate areas across FET and HE by examining learning outcomes, content, entry standards and progression.
- considering potential for greater recognition of FET awards in comparison with Leaving Certificate points within the CAO and how this might be benchmarked
- standardisation of university entry requirements for FET graduates, building on the common system across the technological higher education sector (SOLAS, 2020).

The Future FET Strategy also introduces the concept of a new integrated FET college of the future which will also impact pathways from further to higher education. An integrated FET College of the Future would operate at three levels- as college setting of scale, a local FET centre or college and a local FET resource. These three learning settings would be linked through clearly identifiable pathways within FET and HE (ETBI, 2021, p.10). An example of an integrated FET college was offered by Kerry ETB which converted its PLC college and its training centre into Kerry College, with Youthreach, VTOS and BTEI centres as constituent parts. This Kerry college has an Admission Unit which provides applicants with a consistent experience of admission to course registration for courses which are for employment and courses with higher education progression pathways (KETB, 2021).

These recent strategies of the Higher Education Authority, SOLAS and the ETBI demonstrate that a collaborative approach is required to improve pathways from further to higher education. A significant development for this collaboration has been the formation of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in 2020 which includes both further and higher education explicitly in a departmental remit for the first time and is committed to “Promote the complementary roles of further and higher education and champion closer alignment and integration, facilitating enhanced information for school leavers and for all seeking learning opportunities, providing a wider choice at transition points

and enabling pathways across and between different institutions” (DFHERIS, 2021, p.9).

2.4.4 National Tertiary programmes

Another notable development in the creation of progressive pathways from further education was the establishment by the DFHERSI in 2023 of the National Tertiary Office (NTO) which is jointly managed by the HEA and SOLAS. In collaboration with HEIs and ETBs the NTO has developed unique pathways in a number of specific programme areas.

For the academic year 2023/2024, twenty three new tertiary degrees programmes are being piloted. These degree programmes are in eleven locations and in the fields of Business, ICT, Arts, Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction and Health and Welfare. The individual institutions involved have created each course, with the guidance and co-operation of the National Tertiary Office to be in line with their local context so there is variation in the structure of the courses. These courses differ from existing further education to higher education pathways as there is guaranteed progression between the further to the higher education institutes to continue the NFQ Level 7 or 8 degree as long as the student reaches the required academic standard. Step-back awards are also built into the programmes' design, meaning that if a student leaves the programme before completing the final award, they have formal recognition of the learning they have already completed. Students apply for these programmes through the ETB and on commencement the student is registered with the ETB and the partner HEI and can access the facilities and support services of both campuses.

These tertiary degree programmes are only a small element in the system as yet, but are undoubtedly innovative in providing students with the opportunity to start their chosen degree in the further education sector before making the transition to higher education. Yet, in the area of nursing students the programme is a different model and is referred to as a Tertiary Access Route programme. The student completes the standard QQI Level 5 Nursing Studies Award and following the achievement of the required grades will be guaranteed a place to start the first year of the Bachelor of Science Nursing degree programme in the partner HEI. Nursing students on this programme do not have to apply through the CAO for

allocated QQI quota places and will continue to study in the same geographical area which is an advantage for many students in particular mature students. Currently partnerships with ETBs for the new tertiary programmes are only with technological universities (TU) and institutes of technology (IOT). In Dublin no TUs or IOTs offer nursing degree programmes so this is a significant limitation on a new initiative, ensuring that students based in Dublin would have to relocate to avail of the Tertiary Access Route programme in nursing.

2.4.5 Post Leaving Certificate Courses

FET covers a broad spectrum of education and training in many settings and with diverse students. The Post Leaving Certificate course has a dual function as described in a report of the evaluation of PLC programme provision. The national Post leaving Certificate (PLC) programme, more commonly known as PLC courses, is a well-known, well regarded and trusted FET brand. It has proud history of delivering “in demand’ employer skills and at the same time enabling others to achieve their ambition of attending third level education” (McGuinness et al., 2018). This report found that students are equally divided between those taking PLC courses to gain employment or access to higher education. It also concluded that an additional role of Post Leaving Certificate courses is to fulfil lifelong learning and social inclusion.

These courses were initially delivered by Vocational schools around the country from the early 1980s. These courses were traditionally courses such as hairdressing, beauty therapy and childcare and were female dominated (Watson et al., 2006). Such courses were often validated by UK institutions such as City and Guilds before the introduction of the National Council for Vocational Awards in 1991. These Post Leaving Certificate courses were originally considered to be an alternative and not a route to higher education. In most cases the idea of enrolling in a course in further education to progress to higher education would not have occurred to students (Fleming & Murphy, 1997). Similarly, Watson et al (2006) found that participants in further education were less likely to progress to further study than any other school leavers of similar characteristics in terms of age, gender, Leaving Certificate performance and social background which reflected the purpose of PLCs for employment at that time.

The emphasis on further education as preparation for employment and the need for courses to provide the skills required for the labour market is very evident in the strategies of SOLAS. There is explicit recognition for the importance of skills and training outside the higher education framework. The expansion of higher education for economic development has led to the discussion that in some sectors the labour market will not be able to absorb the increased number of higher education graduates and that they would be “overqualified” for the jobs where they are employed. Behan (2014) found that, while there was a shortage of highly skilled workers in some areas of the economy, there was also a higher share of higher education graduates in occupations where the entry qualification would be more typically for FET graduates. From 2013 they found that 42% of general administrative workers and 44% of customer service workers had third level qualifications. Quite simply put by a senior policy spokesperson:

“What we don’t hear in this country is that a significant number who have third level education...don’t get the rewards. There is a large number of quite ordinary jobs in Ireland being held by people with a third level education, in other words for which they didn’t need a third level education” (INT10 as cited in O’Sullivan, R, 2018).

Notwithstanding this acknowledgement there is unequivocal evidence that higher education qualifications have economic and social benefits for the individual and society (OECD, 2024). Recent policies and strategies from SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) have sought to target and increase the number of further education and training graduates progressing to higher education. This strategic direction, and increased demand for access to higher education from students and their families has resulted in the development and marketing of “pre-university” courses in further education across Ireland. This reflects the emergence of ‘access, transfer and progression’ as a key objective of government policy in education over the last decade. It is clear from targets set by national policies (SOLAS, 2020) that further education is both positioned as important in its own right but also as a viable stepping stone entry for students to higher education.

This access to higher education applies to all students, students who progress to further education following Post Primary education and in particular the ‘non-traditional student’. The term ‘non-traditional student’ refers to groups of students

who are under-represented in tertiary education due to structural and institutional barriers. This includes people with disabilities, mature students, and students from working-class and particular ethnic backgrounds (Finnegan et al., 2019). A non-traditional student may be from one group, a number or all of these groups.

The most recent National Plan for Equity of Access in Higher Education identified categories of non-traditional students as priority groups for access to higher education, including students with the following characteristics:

- with an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.
- Over 23 years of age.
- Who are socioeconomically disadvantaged due to circumstances such as students from low-income families and/or who are long-term social welfare dependent, from socioeconomically disadvantaged area, lone parents, survivors of domestic abuse have experienced homelessness, the care system or the criminal justice system.
- Who are members of the Irish Traveller or Roma community (HEA, 2022, p.52)

2.4.6 Transition from FET to HE

The evaluation by McGuinness et al (2018) of the provision of PLC courses which seeks to meet the needs of students with varying backgrounds, ability and motivation to study, along with the needs of employers who require in a changing labour market, specialist skills, was an ambitious undertaking as it sought to evaluate the complexity of PLC provision and was intended to inform SOLAS on how best to improve FET and specifically PLC courses. The research used desktop analysis and surveys of students and principals in colleges of further education. This research, although very broad in its scope, is one of the few studies to allude to the preparation of students for the transition from further education to higher education.

The qualitative response from the principals in this study reflects the commonly held perception among those working in the further education sector and in

particular PLCs courses. The report concludes that PLC “courses equip students with the technical, social and educational skills needed to succeed in the workplace or in higher education... excellent stepping stone which bridges the gap between second and third level. Prepares students very well for third level, both in terms of content of programmes and in helping students to get into the habit of study ”(McGuinness et al., 2018, p.36).

In some incidences HEIs also give feedback to further education colleges particularly where there are direct pathways between the institutions. In the scoping exercise on access, transfer and progression from FE to HE by the FET2HE group which was a network comprising representatives from further education and training providers and HEIs, it was “noted” by “many” HE providers that “FET graduates present well prepared for HE and typically experience success. Persistence, maturity and an informed decision underpinning participation are features of successful FET progression within HE” (Rami et al., 2016, p.15).

This conclusion underlines the other factors that are influential in success in higher education such as maturity. This is significant as a number of FET graduates are mature students and are more likely to progress to an Institute of Technology or Technological University than a university. Age has been identified as significant in this sector of higher education. According to Liston et al (2016) mature students are twice as likely to attend Institutes of Technology, comprising 8.5% of student population and are more likely to progress than traditional students. Also, as participants in PLC programmes are disproportionately female, (Mc Guinness et al., 2018) this may also be relevant to the higher progression rate of FET graduates. Though gender differences vary depending on institutions and NFQ levels across all FET sectors and levels, one in five males, compared to one in eight females are not progressing to higher education regardless of prior educational attainment (Liston et al., 2016).

The recognition of other variables influencing students progressing from further education is demonstrated by the results of the learner survey conducted as part of a report for the evaluation of the PLC provision (Mc Guinness et al., 2018). As the research was conducted when students were currently in Post Leaving Certificate courses, no information could be ascertained on how further education

influenced the transition to higher education. Yet, statistical analysis for progression indicated that the demographic profile of the PLC participant maybe an indicator of future success in higher education. It was found that PLC participants who subsequently progress to higher education are typically from more highly educated backgrounds and have higher Leaving Certificate grades than their counterparts who do not make the transition (Mc Guinness et al., 2018). This suggests that the students progressing may have already have skills and attributes that will assist in the transition to higher education. Yet, the study reaffirmed the importance of FET for access to higher education as it noted that one third of students who entered a PLC course to gain employment subsequently progressed to higher education and PLC students are 27% more likely to progress to higher education than groups from employment without completing a PLC with similar characteristics such as age and socio-economic background. (Mc Guinness et al., 2018).

A report on the outcomes for students following PLC courses suggests that retention rates of PLC graduates compare favourably to those in HE from the lower Leaving Certificate bracket (less than 300 points). The Department of Education noted in 2020 that “If validated, would seem to validate the anecdotal evidence heard by the sub-group that students progressing from FET to HEI have a level of preparedness drawn from this experience which helps them through their degree” (DES, 2020 p.22).

Further empirical evidence was found for this official assertion in a report published in 2016 by the National Teaching and Learning Forum of a comparative study of FET students and Leaving Certificate students who had progressed to HE. In this report, 83% of FET students felt well prepared for their studies in HE (National Teaching and Learning Forum, 2016). As well as increase in confidence and self-efficacy students reported that having learnt the skills of essay writing, reading academic literature and referencing in FE were valuable for them in HE. The reported challenges for these FET students in HE was time management due to family and financial commitments, group work with young students and socially being older than the cohort of students in HE. There was also an recognition of being overprotected in FE which one research participant referred to as being “mammied”. Although the nurturing environment of further education is seen as

positive for many students (McGuinness et al., 2018; Denny, 2015) on entering higher education making the transition to a much less protected environment can be very difficult. This finding was amplified by recent studies in the UK. Tett et al (2016) in a study of students' progression from further education to higher education in the UK, identified that differences between FE and HE in institutional size, contact with staff and timing and quality of feedback resulted in undermining the self-confidence of new students in HE. In another UK study by Myhill et al (2019) FE students progressing to HE reported similar experiences which caused challenges in navigating the transition. They referred to being "spoon fed" particularly in the area of exam revision in FE, differences in assessment techniques from FE and lack of academic support in HE compared to FE.

Myhill et al (2020) focused on the progression of FE students in higher education and identified variables in comparing the progression in higher education of FE and traditional entry students which in the UK were post A - Level. In this UK study the FE students who participated in the research were proportionally more likely to be mature students (over 21 in the UK), students from lower socio-economic groups and students from ethnic minorities than the comparison group of traditional entry students. None of the FE students had completed A Levels and they had been studying more vocational modules for the previous two years before entering higher education. This study found that both cohorts of students had challenges transitioning to higher education but from the perceptions of the students and lecturers in higher education the students who had completed A - Levels had many advantages in the academic environment of higher education compared to the FE students. These advantages included proficiency in exam technique, essay writing and subject knowledge in certain degree courses. The report highlights the complexity of the relationship between prior qualification, access to and progression through university, and the difficulty in disentangling whether it is the prior qualification or the social disadvantage, or a combination of both, which is most significant in determining the patterns of progress through higher education (Myhill et al., 2020). This underlines that in comparative studies the role of further education should be considered in the context of previous educational experience and societal disadvantage to identify a range of influences in the progression to and through higher education for FE students.

This is important to note when looking at the experience of further education students from an international perspective. International Studies can provide useful insights for further education in Ireland while being cognisant of the different education systems of other countries. For example, in the UK compulsory education ends at 16 years when GCSE examinations are taken. Thereafter, students decide whether to continue with academic qualifications and study in sixth forms or choose the vocational route and study in further education colleges which relies heavily on work-based scenarios. Students with lower education attainment and who are from lower socio-economic groups often report being encouraged by teachers to the more vocational route of further education (Myhill et al., 2020). In Ireland compulsory education also ends at 16 years but 86.5% of students continue in secondary school and complete the senior cycle by sitting the Leaving Certificate (OECD, 2017).

2.4.7 Societal Status of FET

Students engage in further education for a variety of reasons including personal growth, access to higher education, an alternative to higher education and lifelong learning. This reflects the ethos advanced by SOLAS of “FET is unique, FET is for everyone “(SOLAS, 2020). Yet, the image of further education has for many years been stigmatised. Higher education has always been held in high esteem in Irish society and further education struggles in contrast to HE. This also reflects the traditional division between academic secondary schools and publicly administered vocational schools, who operated in ‘watertight compartments’ up to the 1960s (Walsh, 2009). There is a historical context to this bias where children from more affluent families traditionally went to secondary schools and children from lower socio-economic groups went to vocational schools. A legacy of underfunding and lack of recognition of the further education sector has resulted in a prevailing negative perception that further education was for students that have “failed” in school and that further education is inferior to higher education (O’Sullivan, 2017).

The influence of the negative image of further education was addressed in a recent Irish study (Sartori & Bloom, 2023). A Community Needs Analysis (CNA) was carried out in collaboration with Dublin City University (DCU) and involved research with 58 further education students. The aim of this study was to gain a

greater understanding of who the further education student is, and what factors influence their decision to progress to higher education. Participants on this research described being affected by the negative stigma surrounding FET even to this present day. This manifested as feelings of anxiety, low self-esteem and embarrassment for having “ended up” attending FE as opposed to HE. This negativity has compounded the challenges perceived by the participants in this study when progressing to higher education.

The participants were very positive in their experience of further education citing the support of FE tutors and their peers in increasing their self-confidence and the value of work experience in making a decision on career choice. Yet, there were concerns about embarking on the transition to higher education. These concerns were not unfounded as they reflected the challenges experienced by other FET students in higher education both in Ireland and the UK (Teaching and Learning forum, 2016; Tett et al., 2016; Myhill et al., 2020). The perceived barriers to continuing their studies in higher education for these participants revolved around anxiety about academic workload, increase in class size and lack of support. They also expressed fear of being isolated in the higher education environment and fear of failure. Other very practical barriers to moving forward, which were closely related to the differing perceptions of FE and HE were financial and care commitments. Having had the experience of the strain of financial and care commitments for the year in further education, these students had reservations that a further four years in higher education would not be worth the financial and emotional investment. This analysis by Sartori & Bloom (2023) makes a number of recommendations to alleviate these barriers in the form of more flexible financial support for students, while also recommending more targeted support and a “culture of welcome” for FE students on transition to higher education. These recommendations are similar to those proposed in the UK report by Myhill et al (2020) to ensure that similarly FE students in the UK who access higher education are given the supports to progress and reach their full potential.

2.5 The History of Nursing Education in Ireland

In considering the linkage between FE and undergraduate nursing programmes in higher education and the influence of FE on graduates in nursing courses in higher

education, it is important to chart the historical and policy context for the evolution of nursing education in Ireland,

Historically, nursing education in Ireland in the 20th century was very much aligned with individual hospitals which had complete autonomy on the selection of candidates for nursing training. This training was embedded within the distinctive culture of the individual hospitals and many of the student nurses were working in hospitals controlled by religious orders where the professional regimen and restrictions emanated from the religious ethos of hospital management.

The apprenticeship scheme of nurse training consisted of a large number of young trainee nurses learning their skills from a small number of senior nurses while being an integral part of the workforce, undertaking all aspects of care within the hospital ward. These arrangements were very favourable from the hospitals' point of view, since the apprenticeship system supplied a steady supply of inexpensive, skilled, efficient and loyal hospital workers (Fealy, 2006). Nurse training at this time consisted of three years of hospital duty rosters combined with blocks of class work averaging usually six weeks per year. Success in a written and oral examination at the end of three years yielded a certificate in General, Sick Children, Psychiatric, or Intellectual nursing. This fulfilled the requirement for the student to register with An Bord Altranais (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland) and to work as a nurse in Ireland and the UK.

Changes to nurse education in Ireland in the 1990s resulted from a range of policy, structural and cultural changes over the previous decades. As early as 1970, the Irish Matrons' Association commissioned a report on nursing in Ireland (Scanlon, 1991). This report highlighted that the majority of respondents to a survey were favourably disposed to linking training schools to university departments. In 1974, a working party was established by the Minister for Health Brendan Corish to examine and report on the role of the nurse and on appropriate education and training for the future. The Working Party on General Nursing Report, completed in 1980, acknowledged the importance of a university education and stated that nurses educated to degree level and beyond were necessary for the profession (Department of Health, 1980). The process of policy changes proved gradual but a consultative document on Nurse Education and

Training, published in 1991 by An Bord Altranais also contributed to the discussion on the future of nursing education in Ireland (Bord Altranais, 1991).

Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 initiated an important supranational influence on nursing education (Chavasse, 2000). In 1979, for example, EEC directives for general nursing sought mutual recognition of qualifications in European member states. Then in 1989, a far-reaching EEC directive that mandated 4,600 hours of theoretical and practical instruction for student nurses had a more significant impact on nursing education and training in all European countries. The changes that were proposed resulted in an expansion of the curriculum and affected the length of time that students were available to meet the service needs of the hospitals. As the educational needs of students began to take centre stage these changes heralded the end of the apprenticeship system and gave momentum to the far reaching reform of nurse education that followed

Irish nurses also played a key role in reforming nurse education. Starting with modest proposals for reforms that were documented in various reports, Irish nurses eventually took to the streets in October 1999 in the first-ever national strike. This strike by members of the Irish Nurses Organisation, Psychiatric Nurses Association, and Impact lasted nine days. The key issue for this strike action was to enhance both the pay and professional status of nurses to a level equal to their qualifications and workplace demands. A study of nurses who participated in industrial action at that time indicates that the strike was not only about financial gain, but also was an attempt to reposition nursing publicly in terms of professionalism and strength. This was in response to the perception by nurses and the public that government representation of nursing was as weak, unprofessional and lesser educated than equivalent groups (Brown et al., 2006).

Throughout the 1990s, as nurses became empowered by trade unionism and their concerns became increasingly visible to the public, the merits of retaining the traditional apprenticeship model and the benefits of a complete overhaul of nursing education were widely debated. This debate was conducted not just among nurses, but also within a wider sphere in Irish public life that included members of the medical profession and journalists many of whom argued that there should be less emphasis on the intellectual aspects of nursing and the retention of the more

practical and trusted apprenticeship system (Fealy & McNamara, 2007). Discourse on nurse education came from a number of sources. Charles Ward, a clinical professor in the US, referred to the changes that were occurring in Irish nursing education. Having praised the 'care, compassion, [and] concern of the Irish nurse, and having remarked that that Irish nursing 'has long been recognized as some of the finest in the world', Ward expressed a sharply traditionalist perspective proceeding to condemn the project to reform nursing education and even arguing that nursing in Ireland was threatened by the 'effort to increase academic skills in nursing' (Ward, 2002, p. 22). The writer lamented the fact that emphasizing 'academic excellence' in the US had resulted in a reduction and a loss of quality nursing care, where the 'new highly trained nurse' had now lost the personal touch.

Similar concerns were expressed by a leading columnist in a national newspaper who claimed that a nursing degree would 'academicise the non-academic', observing that nurses' 'calling' did not require degree training but 'patience, care and technical skill' (Myers, 2002). For Myers, academic qualifications in nursing were at best unnecessary and at worst they diverted nurses from their essentially practical tasks. Similarly, another critical public view expressed at that time was that a nursing degree was not as much about improving nurse education but for nurses to attain greater status and improved pay (Redlich, 2003). This rhetoric was a change in the popular public perception of nursing as a 'vocation' or the elevation of nurses to the status of 'angels' and reflected a backlash to the increasing professionalisation and academisation of nursing, as well as an element of anti-intellectualism in Irish public debate.

But the leadership of the professional body regulating nursing was convinced of the need for change as the An Bord Altranais Chief Executive Officer noted:

"Change [in nursing] happened in this country not because there was any deficiency found in the product emerging from the traditional system but rather because forces within the profession were looking for academic accreditation and greater freedom for students" (Simons et al., 1998, p. 42).

The first academically accredited general nursing registration diploma course commenced on a pilot basis in 1994 and was delivered by the School of Nursing

University Hospital Galway in association with the National University of Ireland Galway. Over the following years this programme was also offered by other schools of Nursing and HEIs and by 1998 all Schools of Nursing had made the transition to pre-registration diploma courses in general, intellectual disability and psychiatric nursing.

The establishment of the *Commission on Nursing* by the Minister of Health in 1997 proved to be a watershed in the transformation of the nursing profession. For the first time, the contributions of nursing to Irish health care were formally made visible by the state (Tracey, 2005). Recommendations from this commission were made in relation to the preparation for the profession, professional development, role of nurses and midwives in the management of services, nursing in the care of the elderly, issues concerning mental health, handicap nursing, midwifery and sick children's nursing (Government of Ireland, 1998). The Commission on Nursing report in its recommendation for preparation for the profession provided a blueprint for the future of nursing education.

In 1998 the report of the Commission of Nursing recommended that pre-registration nursing should be based on a four year degree programme delivered by the HEIs to encompass clinical placements, including a twelve month continuous clinical placement as a paid employee of the health service. In September 2002 a four year Bachelor of Science (BSc) Level 8 pre-registration nursing degree programme commenced in general, intellectual disability and psychiatric nursing across thirteen HEIs.

All undergraduate and post graduate nursing programmes in Ireland are regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI), formally known as An Bord Altranais, the regulatory body for maintaining standards of nursing practice in Ireland and have to comply with the standards and requirements set down. The undergraduate nursing programmes aim to provide students with the academic and practical learning to be an effective nurse or midwife and are a combination of theoretical and clinical coursework. Clinical placements commence within three months of the programme and a continuous 36 week clinical placement or internship takes place in fourth year. Following a successful completion of nursing and midwifery graduate programme graduates may apply to place their name on the Register of Nurses and Midwives. It is illegal to practice

nursing or midwifery in Ireland without registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland.

A nursing degree programme is the only qualification recognised for registration as a nurse by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland. Other European countries such as Germany have historically had dual degree and apprenticeship programmes for nurse registration. In the United Kingdom the degree programme became mandatory for nurse registration in 2009. More recently UK policymakers have introduced a nursing apprenticeship programme. This programme allows nursing students to be in paid employment in healthcare and study in an approved education centre (NHS, 2024). This programme was initially welcomed as an alternative route into nursing to address the immediate and future supply of nursing staff in the UK. Apprenticeships were seen as a useful addition but were presented as complementing rather than substituting for investment in higher education and a wider workforce strategy (RCN, 2019). However, with the programme's widening implementation there are concerns that it may be a regressive step for the profession of nursing as expressed by a spokesperson for the Royal College of Nursing "We settled this debate some years ago, didn't we? We are a graduate profession and nursing deserves its place in our university system." (Mitchell, 2023).

2.6 Influence of nursing degree programmes for nursing care

A range of international studies have been published on the influence of the relatively new degree programmes on nursing care and patient outcomes. Studies in the US found that there was a positive correlation between the level of nurse education and patient mortality (Aiken, 2003; Kendall-Gallagher et al., 2011). In another study Belgen et al (2013) concluded that patients cared for by degree level nurses had less complications and had earlier discharge. In one of the first studies in continental Europe, a study from Belgian hospitals showed that degree level education was associated with lower patient mortality in the cardiac units (Van den Heede et al., 2009). Further research studies conducted in Europe showed differences between degree and apprentice trained nurses. Golubic et al (2009) compared Croatian hospital nurses' work ability. Of those sampled, 27% had a degree and 73% were trained through an apprenticeship model. This study found that apprentice trained nurses despite having similar responsibilities were

less able to complete their work satisfactorily. Other international studies suggest that critical thinking, decision making and communication were developed through degree level nurse education programmes leading to increased patient satisfaction (Shin et al., 2006; You et al., 2013).

These studies argue strongly for the merits of degree level education for nurses and have informed policy in the USA, Europe and South Asia to increase the level of nurse education in their workforce (Institute of medicine, 2010) Yet, studies of nurse education and its impact on healthcare are complex and influenced by a number of variables. In a case study of the role of nurse education on patient outcomes and satisfaction in hospitals in Ireland and Germany by Lehwaldt (2016) it was noted that aspects such as nurse patient ratio, working conditions, non-nursing duties and the working environment were influential in the quality of nursing care provision. Other wider factors, include factors relating to the hospital environment such as size, teaching status, technology level and bed occupancy, patient factors such as age and condition, and importantly the years of nursing experience were also relevant. This case study research concluded that hospital-based factors influenced the care provided by all nurses, including degree educated nurses, but from the accounts of patients and nurses, who participated in the study there was an overall affirmation that nurse education at degree level contributes positively to patient outcomes and patient satisfaction with nursing care (Lehwaldt, 2016).

2.7 Contemporary development of nursing in Ireland

The significant transformation in nurse education with the professionalisation and academisation of education and training over the past few decades formed part of wider changes in the role of nurses in Ireland. These changes reflect broader shifts in healthcare policy, education, and societal expectations. The evolving landscape has expanded the scope of nursing practice, enhanced professionalisation, and increased the responsibilities and opportunities for nurses in various healthcare settings. One of the most notable changes in the role of nurses in Ireland is the expansion of their scope of practice. This shift has been driven by the increasing complexity of healthcare, advancements in medical technology, and a growing emphasis on multidisciplinary care. Nursing specialization has grown significantly, with nurses pursuing postgraduate

education in fields such as critical care, oncology, mental health, and community health. The introduction in 2001 of more autonomous nursing roles with greater authority over patient care, such as Advanced Nurse Practitioners (ANPs) and Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNSs), has been a significant development in the provision of nursing care (Doherty, 2024). Advanced Nurse Practitioners are educated to master's degree level and have the competencies to make decisions regarding undertaking and interpreting the results of physical and mental assessments to diagnose, plan and deliver care to patients including prescribing and managing medications. Typically, they work independently but are also part of a multidisciplinary team. Registered Advanced Nurse Practitioners (RANPs) work within an agreed scope of practice and meet established criteria set by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (DOH, 2020). The role of Clinical Nurse Specialist provides a major clinical focus of care to patients in a specialist area of nursing in a variety of settings as part of a multidisciplinary team. These include the management of chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiology, mental health and intellectual disability support. Clinical Nurse Specialists are required to have the relevant experience and post graduate qualifications for this position (HSE, 2024). It is acknowledged that specialised nurses bring advanced knowledge and skills to their practice areas, improving patient outcomes and enhancing the quality of care (NMBI, 2020). Since the creation of advanced nurse and midwife posts in 2001, 447 advanced practitioners have registered with NMBI, with a further 175 candidates expected to register in 2022. However, international benchmarking indicates that this remains a comparatively low number and a target has been set to achieve 2% of the nursing and midwifery workforce registered at an advanced practice level (DOH, 2022).

Higher education is internationally recognised as crucial for the changing role of the nurse (Institute of medicine, 2010; Gray, 2016; Golubic et al., 2009). Since the introduction of the nursing degree higher education institutions in Ireland have provided post graduate courses in all levels and areas of nursing. To ensure that nurse education meets the needs and challenges of healthcare there are continuous reviews and recommendations by the statutory bodies. A recent review of the nursing undergraduate curriculum commissioned by NMBI recommended changes to the curriculum to include a greater emphasis on healthcare policy, the social determinants of health and medication management (NMBI, 2023).

Recommendations for postgraduate studies were made by a review of nurse education for higher education institutions to develop programmes facilitating the development of a greater range of skills such as advanced leadership, supervision, and delegation capabilities, digital health and communication and data analytics and decision making (DOH, 2020). These recommendations are in response to Sláintecare the 10-year strategy to reform healthcare in Ireland with a focus on integrated care between hospital and community services (DOH, 2018). More nursing roles in the community will require more autonomous and specialist nurses, knowledge of social issues and expertise in the area of digital health.

These reviews also made recommendations for widening access to nursing degrees such as more places for mature students, further education graduates, those already working in healthcare services and the development of graduate entry programmes to increase diversity and retention in the nursing profession in Ireland. Globally there is a shortfall in nurses (WHO, 2024) and there will be an increasing demand for nurses and midwives in the future, with skills and roles changing. These changes will occur not least due to the ageing population but also aligned to the growth in the number of people living with long-term illnesses (OECD, 2019). In addition, the anticipated shortage of healthcare workers will be exacerbated by an increase in nurses and midwives reaching retirement age in Ireland over the next decade (Ryan et al., 2019). These challenges will require a supply of nurses, educated to provide a high standard of care for the future of healthcare in Ireland

2.8 Entry to Undergraduate Nursing Programmes in Ireland

All applications for nursing and midwifery programmes are through the Central Applications Office. The demand for places for nursing degrees in Irish HEIs consistently outnumbers places available. Figures available for the number of first preference CAO applications for nursing and places available are as follows

Table 2.1. CAO Applications

Year	Applications	Places
2005	4,869	1,640
2015	5,368	1,782
2022	4,363	1,700

(INMO, 2022)

Through the Central Application Office there are three categories of applicants for nursing and midwifery undergraduate programmes.

2.8.1 Leaving Certificate students

These students must secure in the Leaving Certificate examination a minimum grade of H5 in two higher level papers and a minimum grade of 06/H7 in four ordinary or higher level papers drawn from the following subjects.

Irish or English

Mathematics

Laboratory science subject

Three other subjects

In addition to the NMBI requirements applicants must meet the basic course requirements for the HEI concerned. Leaving Certificate students can also apply under the DARE and HEAR schemes which may enable students to access places with reduced points.

Appendix 2 final (CAO) Leaving Certificate points in recent years for Nursing and Midwifery programmes in Ireland's Education Bodies.

2.8.2 Mature students

All applicants over 23 years of age applying for admission to nursing and midwifery programmes sit assessment tests which are delivered online remotely. The current assessment consists of three separate tests focusing on the understanding of basic instructions, numeracy, and a job simulation exercise.

Applicants must be successful in the assessment test to be considered for an offer as a mature applicant. However, success in the test does not guarantee an offer of a place. The assessment is year specific, and results may not be carried forward to a future year.

2.8.3 Further education graduates

There are four Level 5 awards recognised by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland for progression to nursing degree programmes in Ireland namely, Nursing Studies, Healthcare Support, Community and Health Service Skills. These awards must be achieved in one year. There are also additional requirements that applicants must achieve distinction grades in the mandatory components of Anatomy Physiology, Nursing Theory and Practice, Human Growth and Development or Biology. The Nursing Studies Award is the most common award provided by further education colleges for students who wish to progress to higher education. Students who have accessed the nursing degree through the mature student route may have obtained the Nursing Studies or the Healthcare Support award.

There are reserved quotas for FE graduates in all the HEIs which provide nursing degrees in Ireland. These quotas are determined by the individual HEI with entry requirements regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Board Ireland. Due to the large volume of applications and small number of places available to FET graduates, applications are frequently subject to a random selection system that is operated by the CAO similar to Leaving Certificate students.

The table below shows the restricted number of places available for entry to level 8 nursing degree programmes in the academic year 2022.

**Table 2.2. Quota of places reserved for QQI FET/FETAC applicants on
Nursing courses in 2022.**

Applicants should note that specific FETAC Awards and Modules are required to meet the minimum entry requirements for these courses.

Institution	Course	Quota of Places
Athlone Institute of Technology	AL830 General Nursing	6
	AL832 Mental Health Nursing	6
St. Angela's College	AS110 General Nursing	2
	AS130 Intellectual Disability Nursing	3
University College Cork (NUI)	CK710 General Nursing	14
	CK712 Children's & General Nursing	2
	CK720 Mental Health Nursing	6
	CK730 Intellectual Disability Nursing	7
	CK740 Midwifery	3
Dublin City University	DC215 General Nursing	10% of places spread over these four courses are reserved for QQI FET/FETAC applicants
	DC216 Psychiatric Nursing	
	DC217 Intellectual Disability Nursing	
	DC218 Children's & General Nursing (Integrated)	
Dundalk Institute of Technology	DK870 General Nursing	5
	DK872 Intellectual Disability Nursing	3
	DK874 Mental Health Nursing	4
	DK877 Midwifery	2
University College Dublin	DN450 General Nursing	10
	DN451 Children's & General Nursing (Integrated)	4
	DN452 Midwifery	3
	DN453 Mental Health Nursing	3
Galway-Mayo Inst. of Technology	GA880 General Nursing (Mayo Campus)	5
	GA882 Psychiatric Nursing (Mayo Campus)	3
NUI, Galway	GY515 General Nursing (Galway & Portlincula)	5
	GY516 Mental Health Nursing	3
	GY517 Midwifery	1
University of Limerick	LM150 General Nursing	2
	LM152 Mental Health Nursing	1
	LM154 Intellectual Disability Nursing	3
	LM156 Midwifery	1
Letterkenny Inst. Of Technology	LY908 General Nursing	3
	LY918 Psychiatric Nursing	3
	LY928 Intellectual Disability Nursing	3
Munster Technological University	TL890 General Nursing	4
	TL891 Mental Health Nursing	2

Institution	Course	Quota of Places
Trinity College Dublin	TR091 General Nursing (Meath & St. James's)	2
	TR093 (Adelaide School of Nursing)	4
	TR095 Mental Health Nursing	4
	TR097 Intellectual Disability Nursing	4
	TR911 Children's & General Nursing (Integrated)	0
Waterford Institute of Technology	TR913 Midwifery	3
	WD116 General Nursing	4
	WD117 Psychiatric Nursing	4
	WD120 Intellectual Disability Nursing	4

2.9 Level 5 Nursing Studies Award

The overall aim of the programme is to provide the student with the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, competence, and skill to work under supervision in a variety of healthcare settings and /or to progress to further or higher education and training. Upon successful completion of a minimum of eight programme modules the student may achieve the required 120 credits for a level 5 QQI major award through the Common Awards System (CAS). The student has a range of transfer and progression options available to them. The student may transfer to another programme leading to certification in another level 5 major award or to appropriate programmes leading to awards at the next level of the NFQ. Alternatively, the student may be eligible to apply to progress to the next or higher levels of the NFQ with a higher education provider, through the Higher Education Links Scheme (QQI, 2020).

2.9.1 Profile of students

Students on this programme typically are from diverse backgrounds, socially, economically, and culturally. Many students have completed the Leaving Certificate examination and have not obtained the required points for direct entry to higher education and/or wish to evaluate if nursing is the right career choice for them. There is also a significant number of mature students who are considering a career in nursing and are undertaking this programme to assess their suitability for a nursing degree programme. If students have not completed second level education or a previous formal qualification, it is expected that they will be able to

demonstrate the levels of knowledge, competence, and skill equivalent to level 4 before commencing the programme.

2.9.2 Entry requirements

Individual providers specify the entry requirements for the nursing programme.

These would include:

- Leaving Certificate or Leaving Certificate Applied
- Level 4 QQI Certificate or can demonstrate the levels of knowledge, skill and competence associated with NFQ level 4.
- Minimum age of 16 years
- Proficiency in the English language
- All students must be Garda Vetted before commencing work experience placement.

2.9.3 Academic programme

The programme may be offered on a full time or part time basis and is based around an overall duration of 1200 hours (typical learner effort) to achieve a minimum of 120 credits to include time for both directed and self-directed learning. Component certificates are awarded where the learner has achieved success in any module.

This programme is mainly centre based and delivered in a classroom setting or other learning environment such as distance learning, e-learning or other appropriate modes. Students are required to master practical skills for many modules, so specialist equipment is required for teaching and assessment on this programme.

The teaching methodologies are chosen based on the needs and profile of the students and are inclusive of a range of learning styles. In addition, supports and resources will be available to the participants on the programme such as academic support, career guidance and other reasonable supports as applicable. Assessment for the components of this programme is continuous and are combinations of examinations, skills demonstrations, assignments, learner records, collections of work and projects. All assessment is devised and graded by the internal assessor who is usually the subject teacher and externally

authenticated by a subject expert appointed by the ETB. Assessment is based on whether the student has reached the required national standards of knowledge, skill and competence expressed as the learning outcomes of the programme component (QQI, 2013).

2.10 Conclusion

Further education has been providing education and training for students for nearly a century and following the redefinition of the further education and training sector is increasingly being positioned to play a significant role in meeting the needs of the labour market and economy. With the establishment the Higher Education Links Scheme and the National Framework of Qualifications, Post Leaving Certificate courses in further education are now not only providing qualifications for employment opportunities but are an access route to higher education for students. Progression from further education has been the subject of recent national strategies for education in Ireland, including the Hunt report and both national FET strategies in 2014 and 2020. SOLAS in its Further Education and Training Strategy (2014) sees as part of its mission to assist “individuals to progress to Higher Education who otherwise would not directly do so” (SOLAS, 2014). The *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021* identified further education award holders as an underrepresented group in higher education and set a target for participation in higher education of further education award holders to increase from 6.6% to 10% (HEA, 2015), although progress in reaching this target was limited. Further education award holders were not included as a priority group in the *National Access Plan for Equity of Access in Higher Education 2022-2028* but one of the strategic goals of this plan is to build and improve pathways, partnerships and collaborative pathways between further education and higher education (HEA, 2022). This goal has also been identified in other strategies from both further and higher education (DES, 2011; SOLAS, 2020; ETBI, 2021) demonstrating official expectations for co-operation between the two sectors to facilitate access, transfer and progression for FE graduates to HE.

In conjunction with government commitment to FET there has been increased recognition in the public domain of further education as another access route to higher education (O’Brien, 2020). This has enabled students to fulfil their potential

in progressing to higher education and achieving qualifications that enable them to pursue careers in nursing and other fields.

Nurses have been educated in schools of nursing for over a century providing highly skilled health care professionals. Significant changes to the profession have occurred in the last three decades as nursing education became integrated within higher education. Since the introduction of degree courses in nursing in third level education in 2002, nurses have been able to achieve Bachelor, Master and PHD qualifications in HEIs all over Ireland. These qualifications bring a wealth of knowledge to caring for patients, ensuring that Irish nurses are educated to international standards and that nursing is recognised as a graduate academic profession. In light of the challenges for the nursing profession globally, nurse educators in Ireland are required to evaluate nurse education and access to nursing degree programmes to ensure that the demand for nursing professionals in all healthcare facilities are met in the future.

Chapter 3: The Student Experience

3.1 Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a vital role in shaping the lives of students and preparing them personally and professionally for the future. Recognising the significance of student experience within this context, researchers and educators have increasingly turned their attention to understanding the multifaceted aspects that contribute to a fulfilling and impactful journey through higher education. This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the existing theories and research that explore complexity of the student experience in higher education.

The student experience encompasses a wide range of interconnected factors, including academic engagement, social integration, personal development, and overall satisfaction. Each student brings a unique set of characteristics, motivations, and aspirations that shape their educational journey, and it is essential to explore how various aspects of the higher education environment influence their experiences and outcomes.

The objective of this literature review is to critically examine the existing body of knowledge surrounding student experience in higher education, with a particular focus on understanding the factors that contribute to positive educational outcomes, engagement, and overall satisfaction.

3.2 Exploring the student experience

The student experience has been the subject of much discussion over many years. Case (2008) uses the words of Cardinal Newman from the mid nineteenth century, who described students as being:

“forced to load their minds with a score of subjects against an examination, who have too much on their hands to indulge themselves in thinking or investigation, who devour premiss and conclusion together with indiscriminate greediness, who hold whole sciences on faith, and commit demonstrations to memory, and who too often, as might be expected, when their period of education is passed, throw up all they have learned in disgust, having gained nothing really by their

anxious labours, except the habit of application.” (Newman, 1852/1964. p.112-113 as cited in Case, 2008).

Case (2008) cites this quote as an example of how the student experience was perceived a century and a half ago and posits that it may be recognisable to some learners in HE today. Researching student experience in higher education has developed through an appreciation of the importance of improving and enhancing student experience in an era of steadily increasing enrolment and mass participation in higher education. The auditing and evaluation of student experience is part of quality assurance measures in all further and higher education institutions. However, much of this evaluation continues to focus mainly on procedures relating to the quality of teaching and learning, supports and resources within the institution (HEA, 2019). This focus, is of course of paramount interest to a range of stakeholders, including students and policymakers and has implications for the responsibilities of tertiary education institutes. In the final quarter of the twentieth century the concept of the totality of the student experience began to be discussed. Research developed to investigate the multiplicity of factors that relate to the holistic experience of students through higher education (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1993; Haselgrove, 1994). Therefore, educators are becoming increasingly aware of the other important elements such as social integration in the student experience and their influences on student outcomes. The concept of student experience has many facets depending on the aspect of the student experience being explored and several theoretical frameworks have been developed to understand the phenomenon.

3.3 Alienation and Engagement

Underpinning much of the literature on student experience is the perspective of alienation and engagement. Alienation has been defined as “the state or experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong, or in which one should be involved” (Mann, 2001, p.8). The term alienation is derived from the Latin *alienatio* and where its meaning encompassed separation or estrangement in a legal, societal and medical context (Ludz, 1975). According to Ludz (1975) the concept of alienation as used in contemporary science originates from the theory of alienation of Karl Marx and the theory of anomie developed by Emile Durkheim. The understanding of the term alienation from social science has

resulted in its use in everyday language and predominantly in the discussion of the student experience.

In the discussion of alienation relating to the student experience, in contrast engagement is considered to occur as where there is the presence or connection resulting in real involvement with the group and/or activity (Case, 2008). Hagel et al (2012) conceptualise student engagement in three dimensions: behaviour, which relates to the students approach to academic, social, institutional and extra-curricular activities, emotionally, which is the student's response and connection to their teachers, peers and institutions and the cognitive perspective which refers to the investment that the student makes in learning (Hagel et al., 2012).

These studies and the understanding of the concepts of alienation and engagement have implications for institutions and teaching and learning strategies but studies of the student experience from a more holistic approach also look at alienation and engagement from "the group" perspective in all aspects of college life. The level at which the student is alienated or engaged in the student cycle will determine their student experience and ultimately the outcome.

3.4 Theoretical models

The concept of both academic and social integration as being fundamental to student engagement is explored by Tinto (1993) and more recently by Jones (2018). These studies, though different in approach, have many similarities. They both discuss the importance of the student's experience prior to entering college. These include family background and previous educational experience which will influence the student's expectations and goal commitments. Both studies emphasise the positive effect of peer interaction and the social aspect of college in the integration of the student to college life.

While there are marked similarities the studies also differ in certain aspects. Tinto's (1993) study looks primarily at the influence of these factors on student attrition and completion of programme is presented as being the main objective of participation in college. Jones (2018) includes in this study of the student experience, preparation for life after graduation. This could be attributed to the

cultural differences in society and the perception of higher education from the time of one study to the other.

Jones (2018) also considers a classification of the factors that contribute to engagement, acknowledging that depending on individual characteristics and predisposition some influences will figure more prominently for certain students. Tinto (1993), though including individual characteristics presented a much more generic model considering mainly traditional students.

The theoretical models from these studies are discussed below.

3.4.1. Tinto's Theory of Integration

Any discussion of the student experience must include the seminal work of Tinto. In 1975 Tinto first published a student integration model of attrition. This model identifies factors which contribute to concepts of engagement and alienation that influence the attrition of students in tertiary education. Tinto draws from the work of the sociologist Emile Durkheim.

In Durkheim's study of suicide first published in 1897 he purported that the likelihood that an individual will commit suicide is predicted by the level of their integration into society. If an individual has social support and is integrated into society, they are less likely to commit suicide. Tinto drew the analogy that as suicide is the voluntary withdrawal from existence, leaving college is the withdrawal from an aspect of society. The influence of an individual's integration into society, community, institution, education or otherwise will determine the outcome and lack of integration is more likely to result in the individual excluding themselves. The model was not solely based on Durkheim's study as Tinto was aware of the drawbacks of the study, such as the failure to consider the personality characteristics of the individual. Tinto was cognisant of this aspect but the effect of the level of both academic and social integration on the decision to withdraw from college is fundamental to the model.

At the time of publication of Tinto's model, the use of the term "dropout" to refer to an individual who left college was commonplace. Its negative connotations were derived from the still widely held belief that an individual would be adversely affected both financially and socially by not pursuing third level education. Even

more concerning was the perception that individuals who 'dropout' are failures who lack moral fibre and the ability to persist and complete the task at hand.

Studies such as Tinto's show a more enlightened approach to the factors that may influence an individual decision in this regard. In fact, Tinto (1993) subsequently recognises that leaving college is often the best decision for some individuals who find goal fulfilment elsewhere. An interesting example of Tinto's hypothesis is Bill Gates who left college without completing his degree in the same time frame as Tinto's research.

Although there has been some criticism regarding aspects such as social integration (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Duquette, 2000), the issue of attrition is a major concern for higher education institutions. An institutional goal proposed by Tinto (1993) is that the concern for institutions should be the social and intellectual growth of students and consequently enhanced student retention will follow.

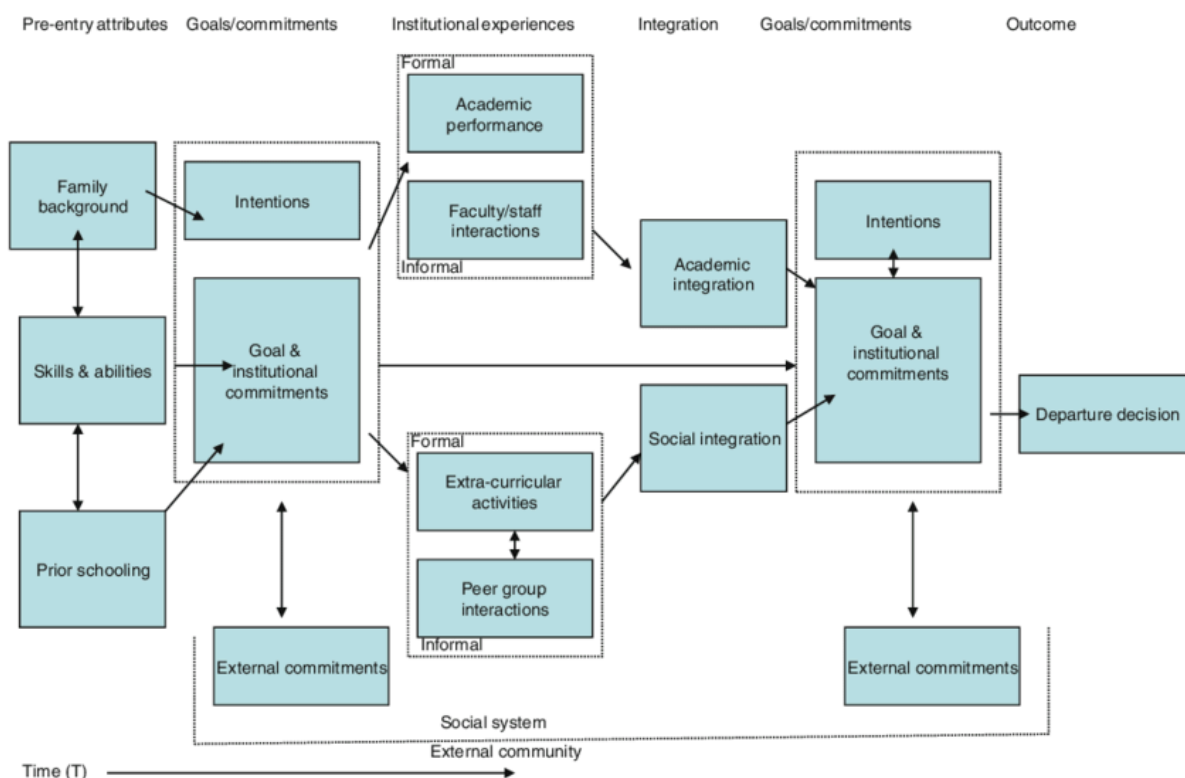


Figure 3.1. A longitudinal model of institutional departure (Tinto 1993).

Tinto's revised model proposes that a student's departure from an institution occurs as a longitudinal process of the interactions between the student and other members of the of the institution representing its academic and social aspects.

3.4.4.1 Pre-entry attributes

The characteristics of individuals shown to be the most important to student attrition, pertain to the characteristics of family and the individual, educational experiences prior to college entry, and expectations concerning future educational attainments (Tinto, 1975). Factors such as socio-economic group, parental education and financial resources as well as student's personal attributes such as sex, race, ethnicity and disabilities are noted as relevant to student's decision to leave college. Intellectual and social skills associated with previous educational experience and achievement are indicative of persistence in college.

3.4.4.2 Goals/commitments

This refers to the student's commitment to the course, including a strong sense of purpose, course selection, aspirations, and expectations of college. The importance of this commitment is cited as "once the individual's ability is taken into account, it is his commitment to the goal of college completion that is most influential in determining college persistence" (Tinto, 1975, p.102). Tinto (1975) also refers to the student's commitment to the particular institution they are attending. Institutional commitment is influenced by a number of factors such as prestige of the HEI and the time and financial commitment "in the final analysis, it is the interplay between the individual's goal of college completion and his commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to dropout from college and the forms of dropout behaviour the individual adopts" (Tinto, 1975, p.96). The forms of dropout behaviour refer to individuals who may dropout temporarily or transfer to another institution. In the later conceptual model Tinto (1993) acknowledged the external commitments of family, friends and work and how these external forces can either have a supportive or negative influence on a student's goal and commitment.

3.4.4.3 Institutional experiences

These include the formal and informal aspects of institutional experiences and the interaction/effect of the academic and social systems. “Simply stated, it is the student interaction with the peers, advisers, and faculty that increase satisfaction with the institution, create a sense of belonging, and strengthen commitment to the institution’s educational goals and standards.” (Levin and Levin, 1991 as cited in Connolly, 2016).

The importance of peers in college is affirmed by Astin (1993, p.4) who states, “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development”.

Tinto emphasises the importance of classroom interaction in the student experience particularly for students who live off campus. Tinto (1993) recommends learning in collaborative groups and as an extension of the classroom, learning communities, which bring together students from different disciplines and encourages academic and social integration. The use of technology has made it possible for student groups to engage and connect with each other both physically and online to a much greater extent than was possible when Tinto first proposed his model. Although there is no replacement for physical contact technology can be used to support academic and social integration. Vaughan (2010) reports that higher education students who use social media networks for communication with staff and colleagues in college are inspired by a sense of community and found these students achieved higher final grades than students who did not use social media tools. Similarly, the findings of Salmon & al (2015) propose that the use of social media within university settings has been found to enhance learning outcomes for students in academic and social interaction.

3.4.4.4 Academic and Social integration

Tinto concludes that the interplay of the student’s involvement in the social environment with the academic environment is critical to success in college. “Generally speaking, the greater students' involvement in the life of the college, especially its academic life, the greater their acquisition of knowledge and development of skills” (Tinto, 1997, p.1). Tinto, in later work (2012) considers that academic and social integration are important at different points through the student experience, with social integration being most potent in the early period of

student life when social relationships act as a support network. Tinto cautions too, of the dangers of over integration socially, to the detriment of academic integration.

There have been many research studies with a focus on the Tinto's model (Pascarella & Terrenzia, 1977; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Duquette, 2000). A large proportion have been supportive, but some research suggested flaws in applying this model particularly in relation to the attrition of non-traditional students. It was found that social integration was not a major factor in attrition especially with mature students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This could be because most mature students will have an extensive support network in place and are less likely to need the intra-university social and academic integration described by Tinto. They may also have time constraints due to family commitments which make social interaction in college less practical. A study by Duquette (2000) of students with disabilities in university found that the results were consistent with Tinto on attrition but again found the effect of social integration less significant in the students researched.

Another aspect affecting attrition among working-class students that was not addressed by Tinto was student finance although this was later acknowledged in his later work. Tinto's explanation was that the "model was developed to explain certain things, not all modes or facets of dropout behaviour that may occur in particular types of higher educational settings" (Tinto, 1982, p.688). Tinto argues that other researchers overextended the model and generalised it to all types of students and all forms of tertiary education. Despite the shortcomings of Tinto's model, it has provided a framework for analysing and reducing the possible factors which contribute to student attrition in higher education.

3.4.2 Jones Model of the Undergraduate Experience

Over four decades after the publication of Tinto's student integration model, Jones (2018) draws on the work of developmental psychology: he employs Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development to study the influences of the student experience. In developing his model of the undergraduate experience Jones (2018) uses a broad and flexible theoretical

framework model when describing the student experience, it implies that there are multiple influences and multiple locations for an experience to unfold.

Bronfenbrenner's model has been used extensively in developmental psychology. It examines the process where an individual's interaction with the environment develops growth and learning. Human development takes place through the processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a regular basis over an extended period (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model places these interactions into a system which Jones (2018) employs to group together the influences on student life into meaningful classifications.

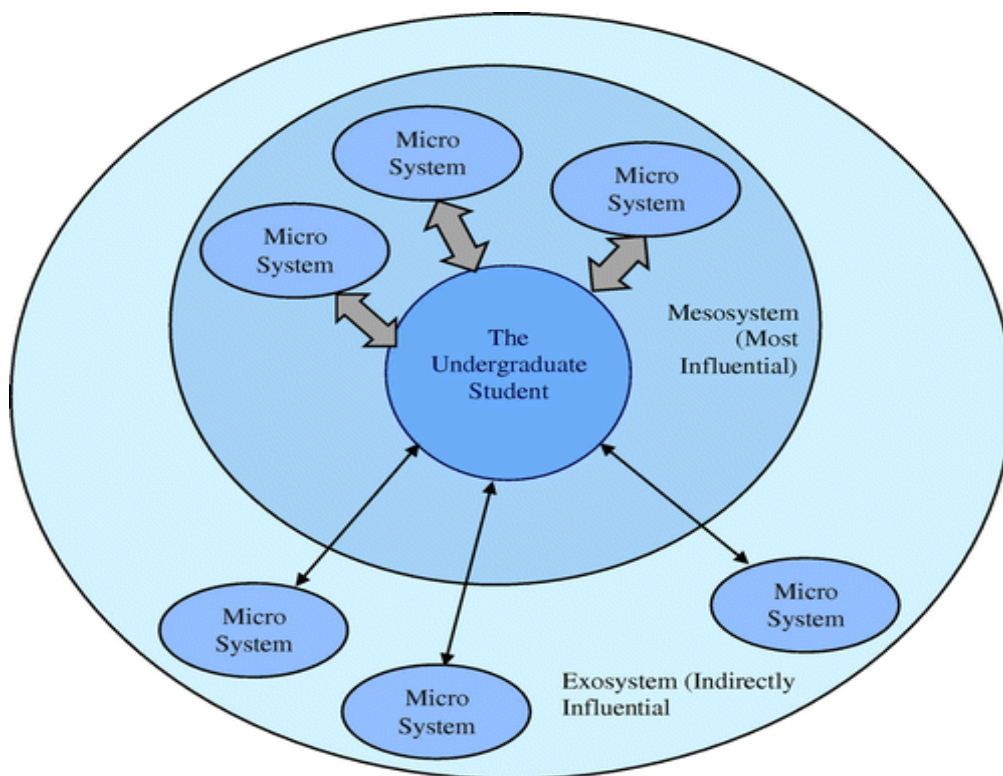


Figure 3.2. An illustration of the importance of proximity in determining the influence of microsystems, adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1994) and Renn and Arnold (2003) as cited in Jones (2018)

This model places the student in the centre of a macrosystem consisting of a **mesosystem**, factors that have the most influence on a student's experience and an **exosystem**, factors which have a lesser influence as they are not directly in the student's everyday life. Within these systems are microsystems or influences which shape the student experience. These micro systems are defined as the "pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face to face setting, examples include such settings as family, peer group and workplace" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.39).

The concepts of engagement and alienation are applied to explain how some microsystems figure more prominently for some students and less for other students. It is the individual's circumstances and predispositions that will determine the level of engagement or alienation felt by their experiences. These feelings will be reinforced or contested by interaction with other microsystems.

Jones identifies seven key influential microsystems that shape the experience of the undergraduate student.

- **Pre-university influences:** The views and expectations of students on arrival to college. These views and expectations will be shaped by the student's socio-economic background and social networks such as family, friends, school or college. The background and previous experience of the student may influence the expectation of success or failure and the confidence of the student when making the transition to higher education.
- **Transition:** Settling into college life and the emotional challenges of making sense of their new environment and establishing their identity as an undergraduate (Beard et al., 2007). In the first year of the undergraduate programme the student is coping with change and adapting to a new environment which is an emotional process that may lead to feelings of alienation and exclusion. For students to develop a sense of belonging to university life they must integrate both socially and academically to this environment.
- **University peer and friendship groups:** These groups have an important role in social learning and emotional wellbeing and may be influential in the student completing the programme. Peer and friendship groups may fulfil the

support role of family for students who have moved away from home for university. Their influence in academic and personal development while important in the transition phase may remain strong for the duration of the undergraduate student experience.

- **Social background outside university:** The influence of the student's social background will continue as they are exposed to new experiences which enable them to have more control over decisions on how they live their lives. Family was found to be still influential in shaping values in relation to levels of academic achievement (Banks et al.,1990) and in developing opinions about employability post-graduation (Byrne & Willis, 2005).
- **The degree programme:** The teaching and learning and the role of the academic staff in their approach to engaging with students both in and out of class. Students need to feel engaged in the programme and academic staff are essential to the facilitation of this. Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of class is important as well as the nature of the interaction which can engender negative and positive emotions within students.
- **Extracurricular activity:** Out-of-class experiences from which students benefit by developing critical thinking and organizational skills and can support the taught curriculum. These attributes are highly correlated with satisfaction and success after college. Higher education institutions that place a high value on extra-curricular activities can have a positive influence on the student involvement in these activities.
- **Preparing for life after graduation:** Graduation is the end of the undergraduate student journey, but it is having a major influence on the student's life and experience. It can be a very anxious time as decisions have to be made regarding employability and or further studies. Students require support from HEIs to prepare for entry to the labour market or guidance on progression to further studies.

The increasing recognition of the student preparing to graduate as an integral part of the student experience by higher education institutions aligns with Jones (2018) model of the undergraduate student experience. In Morgan (2012 p.126) the final stage of the student's journey is referred to as "out duction"- preparing to leave, graduation and beyond. In recent years there has been recognition of the importance of graduation as the final stage of the student journey. The obvious

outcome for any student is to successfully graduate from higher education. The recognition of this phase in the student experience and how it is perceived by the student in the context of the student experience has implications for both students and HEIs. Students need to be guided mentally and emotionally to prepare for life after graduation and prepare for the change of identity from student to graduate.

3.5 Belonging in Higher education

Van Herpen et al (2020) refers to a sense of belonging as feeling at home at university and where you fit in, that you are a member of one or more communities there, and that you are supported at the university. People develop a sense of belonging by giving meaning to experiences in a setting. In making sense of their belonging in HE, students seek to interpret both the new social context and themselves, including who they can be in that context.

Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualisation of habitus is discussed by Thomas (2002) in relation to HEIs having "institutional Habitus". Habitus is defined as "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.86). These "internalised structures" and "schemes of perception" structure the subject's view of the world and how they make sense of things. According to Bourdieu, habitus puts value upon things, be they material or immaterial, of which some things are valued and others not. Bourdieu believes that a sense of habitus is conferred through institutions, firstly through the family during primary socialisation and then other institutions of secondary socialisation such as education and employment. The institutions of secondary socialisation can reinforce or restructure how the subject views the world. Thomas (2002) describes how HEIs can create an institutional habitus as "educational institutions are able to determine what values, language and knowledge are regarded as legitimate, and therefore ascribe success and award qualifications on this basis. Consequently, pedagogy is not an instrument of teaching, so much as of socialization and reinforcing status" (Thomas, 2002, p. 431). Students may find it difficult to feel a sense of belonging in educational institutions that are culturally very different from their social background.

This is particularly significant for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds as Bourdieu posits that education is the main institution through which

class differences are maintained. Bourdieu (1986) talks about three types of capital: economic capital which refers to economic resources – money etc. which can be converted to other kinds of capital, to avail of educational resources such as extra tuition. Social capital exists as sets of lasting social relationships, networks and contacts. Cultural capital is made up of forms of knowledge, education, skills dispositions and attitudes. Cultural capital allows dominant groups to legitimize the maintenance of status and power.

Bourdieu contends that educational institutions exacerbate class inequalities as they reproduce and legitimate the class structure by transforming social distinctions into educational distinctions. Children from different class backgrounds enter the school with varying degrees of 'linguistic and cultural capital' competencies passed on in primary socialization. Bourdieu believes that members of different social classes differ in the nature of their primary socialisation with each class having its own characteristic habitus, with individual variations. The habitus, then, "brings about a unique integration, dominated by the earliest experiences statistically common to the members of the same class" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.79). In institutions of education the influence of class habitus is profound in conferring linguistic and cultural competences were children from higher socio-economic groups have the linguistic and cultural competences to 'decode' academic knowledge. Bourdieu (1984) explains this influence in terms of the ability to appreciate art.

"Consumption is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code. In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see (voir) is a function of the knowledge (savoir), or concepts, that is, the words, that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programmes for perception. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.2)

Class habitus may also influence educational choices and contribute towards an under-representation of social groups in higher education. Bourdieu was among the first sociologists to identify the stratified system of mass higher education as a fundamental institution in the reproduction of class inequality from generation to generation as a differentiated system of higher and secondary education channels children of different classes into different positions in the economy. This

differentiation of educational pathways has been noted in the discussion of the perception of further education in Ireland and the binary system of higher education which encourage students from lower socio-economic groups to study for vocational skills rather than pursue more academic studies regardless of academic ability (Byrne & Coy, 2017).

Other studies have explored these concepts of capital and habitus. Reay et al (2009) in a study of working-class students in elite universities in the UK the issue of class and habitus is addressed, regarding how working-class students adapt or “fit in” to the middle-class background of an elite university. The analogy of a ‘fish in water’ and a ‘fish out of water’ are used to describe the experience of these students who move from one habitus to another. In this study Reay (2009) suggests that this transition can generate change and transformation but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity, and uncertainty. The participants report these effects of change in adapting both socially and academically to the elite university. It was found that having earlier academic success and a positive learner identity did not compensate for the self-doubt that inevitably emerges when confronted with a totally unfamiliar educational field (Reay et al., 2009). This was most evident in the early terms of university when students experienced struggle, challenge, and difficulty. All students reported a crisis of confidence, for some that lasted all through the first year. This research and many others (Scanlon et al., 2020; Keane, 2009) identify the difficulties of students from disadvantaged backgrounds entering higher education. In the theories of Tinto (1993) and Jones (2018) academic and social integration are integral to the sense of belonging in higher education and will be discussed in detail below.

3.5.1 Academic Integration

Nora (1993) defines academic integration as the development of a strong affiliation with the college academic environment both in and out of class. It may be developed both through learning centred interaction with faculty, academic peers, and staff, and through informal social contact with faculty and involvement in student organisations. Several studies (Spady, 1971; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Tinto & Godsell-Love, 1993) emphasise the importance of multiple interactions between students and academic staff not only in lectures but with tutorials and seminars which can be more informal and personal.

Academic staff in their teaching and interaction with students play a vital role in ensuring that all students feel valued and welcome in the institutions. Thomas (2002) states that students seem to be more likely to feel that they are accepted and valued by staff if lecturers and tutors know their names and exhibit other signs of friendship. If academic staff are interested in the student's work, students will feel respected by staff then they are more able to take problems to staff and issues can be resolved with early intervention which is important for students who maybe struggling.

In a study of non-traditional students in the UK in 1980s Weil (1986) found that the learning outside of the classroom was not valued and students were expected to conform to the structural norms of the institutions. This was also found in another, more recent study of student transition to university in Newcastle. In this study only 47% of students said that the tutors and lecturers value their contribution in class (Clark & Hall, 2010). To address this, the concept of staff and students working in partnership is proposed by Matthew (2016) who considered partnership as a process to facilitate meaningful student engagement. Matthew argues that a "students as partners discourse focuses on student-academic partnerships as a process for engaging with rather than doing to or doing for students. The linchpin of partnership is a relational process between students and academics/staff underpinned by a mindset – and an institutional culture that values the collaborative interaction between all members of the university community" (Matthew, 2016, p.2-3).

The relationship between teacher and student is fundamental in the student-centred approach in teaching advocated by Carl Rogers (1983). For Rogers, a student-centred approach begins with the person of the student and aims to provide an environment where the student can 'become' themselves and engage in learning. This approach can be used in any educational setting but is of particular relevance in further education where students have moved from compulsory education and are preparing to enter third level. They are required to be become independent learners and this involves 'whole person' learning, where learning is seen as meaningful, experiential and the focus is on the process of learning rather than the product (Rogers & Frieberg, 1994). In this theory whole

person learning involves using the whole brain or setting it 'free' to use intuition and appreciate the aesthetic as well as the logical

“significant learning combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning. When we learn in that way, we are whole, utilizing all our masculine and feminine capacities.” (Rogers & Frieberg 1994, p.37).

The concept of using logic and intuition in learning is crucial to nurse education as a nurse need to use both these elements when caring for patients. Work experience is an integral for FE students pursuing Nursing and Healthcare studies. On work experience placements students are engaged in using their intellect and feelings to understand the meanings of the course content covered in the classroom.

The concept of the teacher as being a 'facilitator of learning' in this approach involves using practices in the classroom which recognise the student's interest, personal goals and self-discipline. A crucial precondition for this to occur is that the “leader or person who is perceived as an authority figure in the situation, is sufficiently secure within himself and in his relationship to others that he experiences an essential trust in the capacity of others to think for themselves and learn for themselves” (Rogers & Frieberg 1994, p.212). For the development of this trust in the relationship between the teacher and students, Rogers identified three core attributes required of the teacher

- **Congruence** or genuineness – this requires that the face one presents in the classroom is not substantially different from the face one presents in one's personal life and teachers are real people without pretence or a facade. Teachers with this attribute display caring and understanding demonstrating compassion for their students rather than appearing all knowing and perfect.
- **Unconditional positive regard** - The unconditional acceptance of the students as an individual. Teachers who demonstrate trust, respect and view potential in each person facilitate the growth and development of the student.

- **Empathic understanding** – seeing the world through the eyes of the student so that the teacher can appreciate and really understand their position. This facilitates an understanding of the emotional state of the student and the student feels that their feelings are valid and they are not being judged.

A key element of the approaches reported here involved allowing students to see the lecturer as a human being, with fears and imperfections just like everyone else. This can be difficult for some teachers who may have fears and insecurities regarding potential perceptions on behalf of students and colleagues of unprofessionalism, of being under-prepared or not knowing enough about a certain topic. These maybe legitimate concerns for teachers but the findings of research studies report that there is positive outcomes to being 'real' with students. In a study of nursing students in Jamaica, Bryan et al (2013) indicated that 'realness' was the most significant predictor of positive interpersonal relationships with teachers and students suggesting that "faculty members who allowed students to know them personally and know what to expect of them as teachers through the demonstration of compassion, fairness, and reliability were more likely to be assigned higher IPRs scores and experience positive relationships with students." (Bryan et al., 2013, p.145). Positive interpersonal relationships with teachers increase a sense of belonging in the classroom, which provides more opportunities to engage in learning and achieve greater academic success (Levett-Jones et al., 2009). In other international studies (Kendrick et al., 1993; Bozkurt & Ozden, 2010) the attributes of empathy and unconditional regard have also been found motivate students and to cultivate a learning environment which improved learning outcomes for students. By forging successful partnerships between teacher and student Rogers (1983) and Matthew (2016) posit that students will become more engaged in the learning process.

Engagement in learning is also strongly influenced by the learning approach of the student. Mann (2001) discusses approaches to learning, surface and strategic or deep approaches from the perspective of alienation and engagement. Mann (2001) proposes that students who take a strategic approach to learning are more active and present, and this facilitates academic engagement in higher education. Surface learning is characterised by passive learning focusing on rote learning,

memorisation and reproducing information with little or no reflection to meet the minimum requirements for the course. A student with surface learning is able to regurgitate the material but not explain it, draw out its implications or apply it in areas beyond that in which it was learned (Gibbs, 1992). A deep approach in contrast is active learning which engages and seeks to understand the subject matter. The learner is concerned with what the discourse is about and what it signifies as opposed to surface learning where the learner focuses on the discourse or sign and recall of it (Marton & Salijo, 1976). In deep learning the knowledge, beliefs, abilities and skills are connected together into a coherent view or perspective, and are related to what has already been learned. This involves understanding and interpretation so that the student can explain and discuss, not merely repeat, what has been learned, and is capable of generalising and transferring the knowledge and skills to other areas, topics or activities (Gibbs, 1992).

Adopting a deep approach to learning may be problematic for students entering higher education from second level education. The method of highly dependent, rote learning and examination focused learning in Ireland has been referred to as the “read, remember and regurgitate approach” (Keane, 2013, p.16). In a report on widening participation to higher education, Keane (2013) reports that many school leavers or traditional entry students to higher education experience “severe academic culture shock” and require “deconstruction” from the dependent learning approach in school on entry to higher education.

Learning in higher education requires the student to develop autonomy in their approach to learning. A student is considered autonomous when they are able to pursue their studies according to their own choices and under their own direction. For a student to possess autonomy they must have the knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities necessary to pursue their studies; together with the power, self-confidence and motivation to exercise these attributes (Hussey & Smith, 2010). Fazey & Fazey (2010) describe autonomous people as “intrinsically motivated, perceive themselves to be in control of their decision making, take responsibility for the outcomes of their actions and have confidence in themselves” (Fazey & Fazey, 2010, p.345-346). Further discussion by the authors identifies intrinsic motivation in higher education where students study due to their interest in their

studies rather than to simply pass exams and where they engage in learning which is self-initiated. The components of motivation, perceived competence and perceived control are behaviours commonly described as those that relate to autonomy and achievement in learning. Self-perceived confidence is described as the extent “to which a student holds an expectation that he or she is competent to meet the demands of higher education” (Fazey & Fazey, 2010, p.346). Students are considered to have perceived control when they feel that they have control over their success academically and will apply their efforts accordingly.

Academic self-confidence is a significant factor in student’s performance and progression through higher education. A comprehensive study of student attrition in the USA, by Lotkowski et al (2004) showed that students who are not achieving academic self-confidence and who are struggling through the course are at high risk of attrition. In another study Lowe (2003) explores the issue of students who do not drop out but who underachieve and struggle quietly through their studies. They cite Johnston (1994), who suggests that non persistence rates are only one indicator of lack of success in first year students and statistics for retention are less important than lack of interest and disengagement from the educational and social aspects of university life. Statistics are readily available for retention for higher education institutions but less plentiful for students who are underperforming due to difficulties in transition. These students who struggle quietly present a subtle but real challenge for higher education institutions. In a study of first year students in the University of Ulster up to 30% of students experienced academic and personal difficulties and reported that coming to university had been a negative experience (Lowe & Cook, 2003). These students were not only at risk from dropout but under-performance and lack of fulfilment. Becoming and remaining a successful student are therefore, not just about meeting the academic requirements set by institutions but are embedded in the totality of student’s experiences throughout their academic career (Donche et al., 2010). Lowe & Cook (2003) expands this theory to suggest that the experience of the struggling student will not only have a detrimental effect on academic performance but on the personal and social development of the individual with immediate and long-term effects for academic achievement, career prospects and psychological well-being.

Resilience is often closely linked by the literature to developing academic self-confidence. Stress is likely to be a common experience for university students, but this can easily lead to distress depending on the level of resilience or coping mechanisms possessed by the student. If the student perceives that they do not have the ability to achieve their potential stress will inevitably lead to distress and possible mental health problems. This perception of stress and the coping skills required to prevent distress for students in higher education are explored by two theories (Xuereb, 2015).

The Lazarus & Folkman (1984) theory of Cognitive Stress suggest that stress involves three main processes. First, in primary appraisal, individuals perceive that they are facing a threat; for students this might include coursework deadlines or receiving large amounts of information during lectures. Second, in secondary appraisal, they consider which resources they can use to respond to the stress, judging how adequate these resources are; as an example, students might reflect on whether they have enough time to complete their coursework, whether they know how to use the library to complete the preparatory research or whether they understand the content presented to them in class. The students who appraise their resources as too inadequate to cope with what they perceive as a threat might experience worry, anxiety or feelings of depression. This negative emotion then influences the third stage; coping, which refers to actions taken in response to events that are appraised as stressful.

To consider the response of students to perceived stressful situations the concept of learned resourcefulness (Rosenbaum, 2001) depicts the self-control skills required to prevent stress. Learned resourcefulness requires two types of self-control; redressive self-control, where the individual primarily exerts cognitive control over emotions, thoughts and autonomic responses and reformative self-control, where the focus is on problem solving, planning and delaying gratification. Learned resourcefulness comprises the use of cognitive behaviour and self-instructions to cope with perceived threats by applying problem-solving strategies, delaying gratification and having a belief in one's ability to self-regulate and cope in difficult circumstances. In terms of applying learned resourcefulness to higher education, specific behaviours, in particular reformative self-control skills which are identified in learned resourcefulness have proven to be effective. Kennett & Keefer

(2006) concluded that more academically successful students were better able to meet deadlines, remained calm when taking part in tests, had an excellent attendance record and allocated time to study every week, approaches which are consistent with reformative self-control.

Having coping strategies and availing of resources in higher education to prevent distress are key to success. Thomas (2012) in a report on programmes to improve student engagement and retention in higher education concludes that professional services can play a vital role for students, but they are not used by the majority of students. This report found that students who were considering leaving the HEI were more likely to seek advice initially from family and friends. Similarly, Quinn et al (2009) cite a study from the University of Leicester (2002) which showed that 69% of students seek advice and help from family and friends rather than members of staff with only 7% seeking counselling services in the HEI they were attending. With students experiencing an increase in mental health problems (Quinn et al., 2009) counselling and other services need to be easily accessible and students need to be aware of the supports that are available outside their close contacts. Initiatives such as peer mentoring and student ambassadors can help signpost students to what is available on campus (Thomas, 2012).

Supports in HEIs along with other sources prior to and entering higher education can encourage the development of self-efficacy, which is the individual's perception of their competence and effectiveness in dealing with various situations. These beliefs influence how individuals approach challenges, handle setbacks, and pursue their goals. Self-efficacy can have a significant impact on motivation, resilience, and overall psychological well-being.

In Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy four main sources, mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion and emotional and physiological states were identified that contribute to the development of self-efficacy beliefs:

- **Mastery Experiences:** Successfully completing tasks or achieving goals enhances self-efficacy. When individuals accomplish something, they gain confidence in their abilities. Failures or setbacks, on the other hand, can

diminish self-efficacy unless individuals perceive them as learning experiences or temporary obstacles.

- **Vicarious Learning:** Observing others who are similar to oneself successfully performing a task can increase self-efficacy. Models can be real or fictional, and their success can serve as inspiration and provide guidance. Witnessing others overcome challenges fosters a belief that one can do the same.
- **Social Persuasion:** Encouragement, feedback, and support from others can influence self-efficacy. Positive feedback, constructive criticism, and affirmations of one's abilities may boost confidence. Conversely, negative or discouraging remarks may weaken self-efficacy.
- **Emotional and Physiological States:** Individuals' emotional and physical states, such as stress or anxiety, can impact self-efficacy. High levels of anxiety or physiological arousal can undermine self-belief, while positive emotions and a calm state can enhance it.

3.5.2 Social Integration

Social integration in higher education has been identified by various studies as integral for student's success. Tinto (1993) in his model of student attrition considers social integration of equal importance to academic integration for retention of students in undergraduate studies. Other studies such as Astin (1993) state that the student's peer group is the most potent source of influence on the student's growth and development.

In a study of students in the first year of college Buote et al (2007) found that friendships formed in college showed a significant relationship with students' feelings of attachment to university, and even their academic adjustment. This study identified a number of key functions in helping students accommodate to their new environment. Friends provide a sense of belonging, give both emotional support and tangible assistance when needed, offer advice and counsel, and serve as role models with regard to appropriate behaviour in the campus environment. New friends are also a source of fun and enjoyment, balancing out the many stressors that students experience in adjusting to university life. In addition to these functions, the data indicated that students' new friends played an

important role in introducing individuals to other potential friends and expanding their social networks.

The importance of social integration has been recognised by HEIs who aim to foster social interaction by organising on campus events such as Freshers week which has become a tradition in many HEIs globally. Yet, such events may be overwhelming for students in the early weeks of college. Studies such as Briggs et al (2012) recommend more events that bring students and staff together on a course related basis over an extended induction programme which combine the purposes of social and academic integration. Maunder (2018) found that an adjustment period for students to higher education was an ongoing process, not just in the first term and recommends extended induction for first year students. This extended induction was intended to allow students to gain confidence in their academic abilities and have an increased sense of connectedness to other students (Risque et al., 2008). An extended induction period could also ease the burden of information overload that students experience on arrival to higher education.

Scanlon et al (2020) found that anticipating social integration was a particular stress for working class students transitioning to higher education in the period leading up to enrolment and the early weeks of university. This Irish study of 16 students who entered high education through the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) found that the students interviewed were particularly concerned with developing relationships with their peers and feared social isolation. Thomas (2002) describes making social connections in higher education as “social capital” which can be important to students to overcome social exclusion related to social background. This “social capital” or mutual support can help to overcome difficulties that students may encounter in an environment where they feel a lack of sense of belonging. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have many challenges but apprehension around making connections and forming friendships in higher education could be applicable to students from any socio-economic background and especially students who relocate for higher education.

The level of social integration depends on the personal circumstances of the students. As mentioned previously, Bean & Metzger (1985) in their study of mature students found that social integration in higher education was not as relevant as

with traditional entry students. Mature students had external responsibilities such as employment and childcare and also maintained already solid relationships in their lives so therefore did not need the connections for emotional support from other students to the extent that younger students required. They also needed to prioritise their time for the external responsibilities (Brennan & Osborne, 2008). As indicated by Scanlon et al (2007) mature students tended also to be more goal orientated and their expectations for higher education were more focused on academic integration (Scanlon et al., 2007). Yet, this lack of social integration may lead to feeling of isolation (Moran, 2012) and many mature students tend to socialise mainly with other mature students (Scanlon et al., 2007; Moran, 2012; Keane, 2009).

For mature students being in a learning environment with younger students may present issues. Keane's (2009) study of mature students found that these differences can lead to conflict in the learning environment in lectures, tutorials, and library facilities. Mature students in this study perceived that the younger students were immature and not participating fully. Younger students in contrast felt that mature students were over participating, particularly in class and group work. Yet, in another study regarding participation, Inglis & Murphy (1999) found that younger students were reliant on mature students to ask questions and provoke discussion during tutorials.

Increasingly the use of social media may be a valuable tool for integration of students. Vaughan (2010) discussed how the use of technology collaboratively in the learning environment can have positive effects in student performance and retention, but its use outside formal teaching and learning cannot be underestimated. Several studies on the use of social media in college discuss its influence for students. Madge et al (2009) describe it as 'the social glue' that supports students when transitioning into higher education providing a sense of community and as a tool for communication for academic matters and social events.

A study by Selwyn et al (2009, p.161) of students' interaction on Facebook in a college in the U.S identified five themes (1) recounting and reflecting on the university experience; (2) exchange of practical information; (3) exchange of academic information; (4) displays of supplication and/or disengagement; and (5)

“banter” (i.e., exchanges of humour and nonsense). This forum can be used to provide emotional support for students who were struggling either in college or in their personal life. Social media provided a safe private place, or ‘backstage arena’ as described by Selwyn (2009) where students can express their experiences, relationships, expectations, and possible conflicts in their student life.

3.6 The Learner Identity

The literature of the student experience (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Briggs et al., 2012; Jones, 2018) indicates that transition to higher education is a critical point for the student experience. When students begin their first year at university, they are required to reorganise the way they think about themselves, as learners and social beings (Huon & Sankey, 2002). Adjustment includes making connections between pre-university experience and experience at university (Perry & Allard, 2003). The degree of success in transition influences retention, progression, and graduation from higher education. It will also influence the experience of the student both positively and negatively. Previous discussions of influencing factors in the student experience such as family background, prior education and goal commitments have been suggested as indicators in determining the outcome for individual students. Studies on the transition to higher education have identified a common factor that may adversely affect transition. This relates to the expectation of students at university and the reality of their experience. Studies suggest that there is a mismatch between pre-transfer aspirations of students and the reality of their first year in university (Tranter, 2003; Smith & Hopkins, 2005)

The role and importance of the formation of the learner identity in bridging the gap between expectation and reality is evident in much of the literature on the student in higher education (Hussey & Smith, 2010; McFarlane, 2018; Huon & Sankey, 2002; Thomas, 2012). This new identity as a student in higher education enables the student to adjust more quickly to university life and feel a sense of ‘fitting in’ and belonging within the institution. This is key to the integration into the university community which is crucial to student engagement as opposed to alienation.

Learner identity is commonly understood to be a temporary identity which is socially constructed. That is, one’s sense of self and self-belief about one’s own

social group as well as others are constructed through interactions with the broader social context in which dominant value dictate norms and expectations (Mc Ewan, 2003). In the theory of social learning advanced by Wenger (2009) identity is considered a key concept involving learning through active social participation with people and practices in communities where knowledge is acquired through negotiation and mean-making. This theory does not separate learning from becoming a learner as you cannot give people knowledge without them having an identity where this knowledge is meaningful (Wenger, 2009). The construction of this identity enables the learner to understand what is of importance to the enterprise of the community of the higher education institute which they attend; to engage productively with the members of the community and use the resources of this community (Wenger, 2010).

Although defined as learner identity, it is recognised that an identity is not formed specifically for formal learning in any specific environment (Wenger, 2009) and is “the process of 'coming to know' oneself as a learner through interactions within and across different learning contexts over time” (Weil, 1986, p.223). This situated nature of identity means that individuals engage in identity formation in multiple contexts of what is a segmented lifeworld. Identity is thus multifaceted with individuals having as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons with whom they interact and about whom they care (Cooley, 1922 as cited in Scanlon, 2010).

Nursing students in higher education by the nature of their studies form dual identities. Student nurses not only have to integrate into the academic institution but must adapt to learning in both academic and clinical settings at an early stage in their undergraduate studies. This requires students to develop the dual identities of student and clinician entering higher education (Boyd & McKendry, 2012). Student nurses are identifying as professional nurses from the first clinical placement. Happell (2014) describes identity as a fundamental aspect of being a professional and how an individual presents themselves. Identity is who an individual is and relates to their choice of profession aligning with perceptions of themselves, matching their values and beliefs influenced by societal and personal factors. Sabanciogullari & Dogan (2015, p. 848) states “The development of professional identity in nursing begins when a student enters nursing education”.

Identifying as a nurse is an essential element to becoming a nurse. The construction of a nursing professional identity evolves during the education of nursing students through socialisation when undertaking clinical placements as part of the course requirements and where students begin to identify as a professional nurse (Walker et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2012).

Professional socialisation is a process of learning skills, attitudes, values, and behaviours necessary to fulfil and understand the professional role while also being a process in which an individual gain an identity that displays the characteristics, knowledge, and skills of the chosen profession (Brown et al., 2012; Del Prato, 2012). Anteby et al (2016) discusses this process in the context of the transformation of medical students when they are 'becoming socialised' to the medical profession. This socialisation includes overcoming the social inhibition from intruding on another person's space, allowing care without embarrassment, focusing emotional energy toward other team members, and seeing all people as patients, and the relations one develops with them as desexualised. Brennan & Timmins (2012) when examining the student nurses' education identified that the core identity of an individual prior to entering the nursing degree programme is reshaped through the professional socialisation process, involving interactions, relationships and experiences during the course of their studies. Professional socialisation occurs during teaching and learning and the nurse educators are the socialising agents (Brown et al., 2012).

Role modelling is an important concept for nursing students developing a professional identity. Baldwin et al (2014) in a literature review regarding role modelling in undergraduate nursing education identified two main themes. These were the importance of nurses in clinical practice as role models during clinical placements and nurse academics as role models in the further and higher education setting. This emphasises the interconnectivity of the dual identities and learning environments of nursing students.

A positive learning environment and a sense of belonging on campus and on clinical placement is integral to nursing students (Levett-Jones et al., 2009). The first clinical placement is an important experience for nursing students in reinforcing their career choice and a positive experience and sense of inclusion motivates continuation in the education course (Cooper et al., 2015). Last &

Fulbrook (2003) also describe the first clinical placement as pivotal for nursing students. Pitkeithly & Prosser (2010) suggest that many students leave from second and third year because of events that occur in the first year often in clinical placement. Developing both a learner and professional identity ensures that nursing students will foster a sense of belonging in all learning environments and enables the students to be successful in gaining the academic knowledge and clinical skills required for this degree programme.

3.6.1 Formation of New Identity

There are numerous studies on how HEIs can facilitate students in developing a sense of belonging (Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Temple et al., 2014; Thomas, 2012). In much of the literature (Huon & Sankey, 2002; Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Temple et al., 2014) the formation of student identity has been viewed as developing on entry to higher education and the emphasis has been placed on the role of HEIs in supporting the student in this regard. Supportive systems such as student peer groups and small groups of first year students with higher staff student ratios have been advocated by scholars (Carter & McNeill, 1998; Pitkethley & Prosser, 2001; Huon & Sankey, 2002). Pitkethley & Prosser (2001) also stress the importance of effective communication in the form of handbooks and staff information for incoming students. The role of the HEIs is highly relevant to support students entering higher education but the concept of how students can begin to develop a learner identity prior to entering higher education has also been explored (McFarlane, 2018; Briggs et al., 2012).

McFarlane (2018) in a study of thirty higher education students conducted in Scotland who had previously attended a pre university programme while in final year in secondary school, found that 87% of the participants reported that the transition from school 'pupil' to university 'student' started while they were attending the programme, before they actually entered university. On this programme learner identity was nurtured through the opportunity to develop academic skills and become independent learners, developing social relations and networks with new friends and a less formal relationship with teaching staff than participants were used to at school. Personal and social skills including confidence, independence and motivation were facilitated from the experience.

These key factors facilitated the development of a positive learner identity as a higher education student prior to entry to higher education.



Figure 3.3. Higher education learner identity McFarlane (2018)

The difficulties in envisaging university life and accurately predicting their experience in higher education is the subject of the study by Briggs et al (2012). This study identifies several key areas where supports can be provided on both sides of the transition from school/college to higher education. Briggs et al (2012) identified important factors that enabled the growth of student identity:

1. Aspiration to be a university student, preferably starting early in life.
2. Imagining oneself realistically as a student.
3. Clear, reliable systems of support leading up to higher education application.
4. Support from school, college and university targeted to the individual.
5. One-to-one encouragement.
6. Access to university students and staff pre-entry.
7. Access to a range of pre-university experiences for applicants and their families.
8. Induction activities that combine social and academic purposes.
9. Class activities that encourage interaction with staff and other students.
10. Sustained programme of induction to encourage 'belonging'.

11. Interaction with university staff during the first year.

12. Help in developing independent learning skills, pre- and post-entry. (Briggs et al., 2012)

From these findings and analysis of associated literature, transition was conceptualised through modelling as a system to enable the formation of this identity.

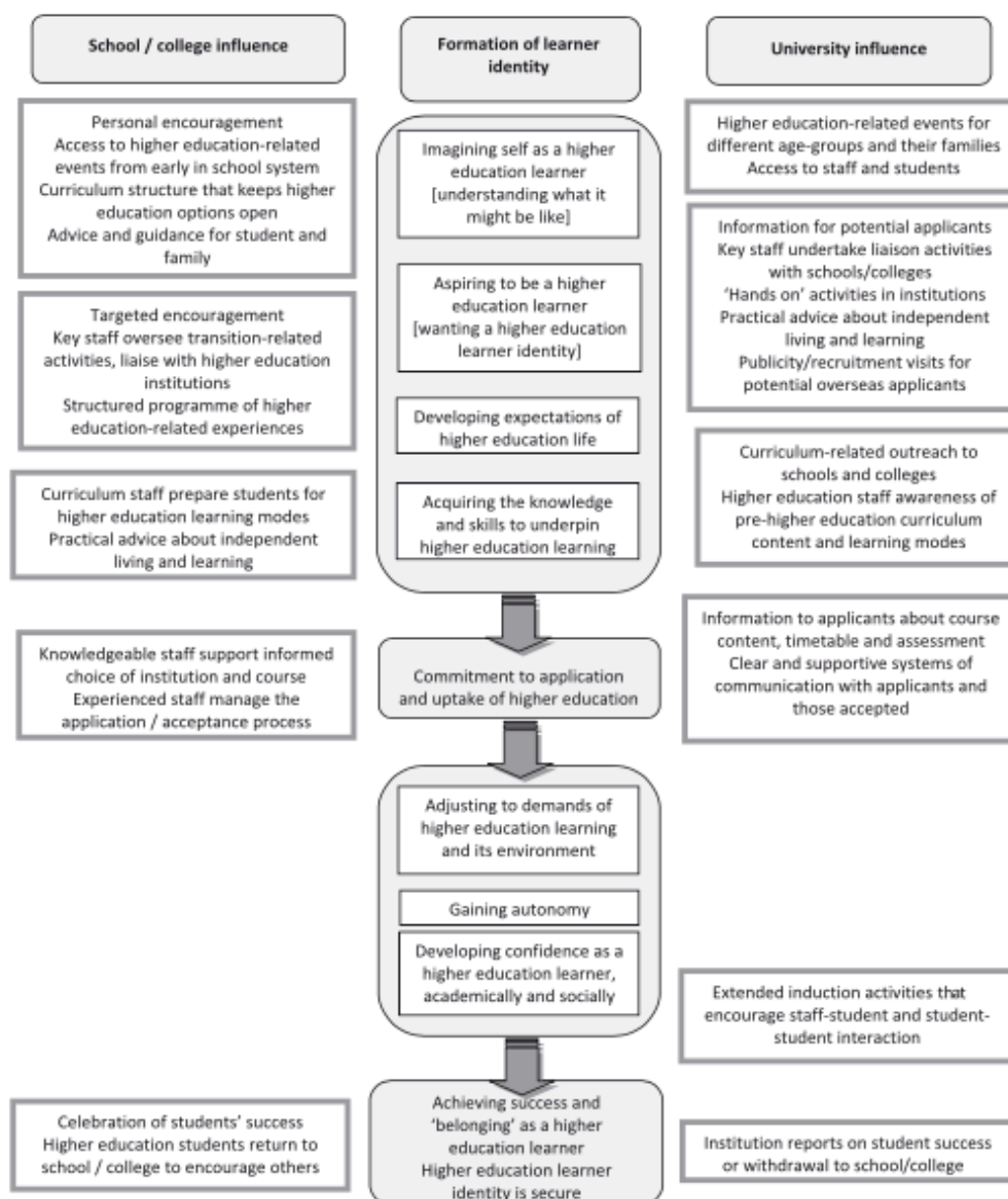


Figure 3.4. Transition as a system to support the formation of higher education identity. Briggs et al (2012).

This model devised by Briggs et al (2012), which positions the student as central to the transition process clearly illustrates how institutions on both sides of the transition through a collaborative approach can be effective in facilitating the student in the formation of a new identity in higher education. In this model the terms school and college are used when referring to the institutions from where the student is transitioning to HE and suggests a number of ways that these institutions may facilitate the formation of learner identity prior to transition. The recognition of these influences are particularly relevant for staff teaching on FET courses which provide access, progression and transfer from FE to HE and are incorporated into the course programme and practice.

3.7 Theoretical framework for study

From the literature review of the student's experience a number of concepts emerge as particularly significant for this study. The importance of fitting in (Case, 2008) and belonging (Meehan & Howell, 2018) are intrinsic to the level of engagement or alienation (Mann, 2001) the student will experience in both academic and social aspects of higher education. The recognition of the role of both academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975) when applied to students' attrition and progression in higher education (Lowe & Cook, 2003) is an important consideration for all HEIs and educators.

The significance of learner identity in becoming academic and socially integrated into HE is dominant in the discussion of the student experience and theories of how this identity can be developed prior to transition have been explored (McFarlane, 2018, Briggs et al., 2012). The theory of McFarlane was considered as theoretical framework for the study but this theory was based on students in second level education who were progressing to generic degrees in third level. There was no aspect of work experience in a specific vocational setting which was the experience of the participants of this study. The researcher concluded that although relevant to the research these theories were not broad enough to encapsulate the experience of nursing students and the formation of dual identities. The theory of Bourdieu (1977) in relation to identity and habitus was also considered. This study aims to investigate the experience of FE graduates who transitioned to a nursing degree programme and the researcher considered that this theory would be more appropriate if the research was for a

specific group of participants entering HE. In the final analysis a theoretical framework with the concept of identity formation in multiple settings and its relation to belonging and learning in HE was considered most appropriate for this study and is discussed below.

Implicit in undertaking a nursing degree programme is that the student will acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to be eligible to register as a nurse or midwife with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland. The acquisition of this knowledge, competence and personal development, which is fundamentally multifaceted learning during the undergraduate programme is, what constitutes the student experience of nursing degree programmes in higher education. To investigate the experience of a particular cohort of students it is necessary to consider theories of the processes of how learning occurs. In order to research the phenomenon of the experience of further education graduates in higher education the theoretical framework of a social learning theory was chosen.

A theory of learning that is congruent with literature previously discussed was developed by the social theorist Etienne Wenger. Wenger (1998) proposed a social learning theory with the primary focus on learning as social participation. This social theory of learning gives a multidimensional view of learning. Learning as social participation involves active participation in activities with people and practices in social communities. This participation is not just engagement in specific events with certain people but a process of being an active participant in the social communities which in the higher education context can be academic staff, colleagues, friends and family.

Wenger (1998) refers to these as communities of practice which encompasses any group involved in any human endeavour for example, families, workers, students, artists. These communities are viewed as social learning systems, involving doing things together by learning and connectivity. In order to be successful in the joint enterprise participants construct identities in relation to these communities.



Figure 3.5. Components of a social theory of learning Wenger (1998)

These integrated components characterise social participation as a process of learning and are deeply connected and mutually defined.

These components include the following

- **Learning as becoming- Identity:** a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities.
- **Learning as belonging - Community:** a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognised as competence.
- **Learning as experience - Meaning:** a way of talking about changing ability-individually and collectively- to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
- **Learning as doing- Practice:** a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and the perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement and action.

Wenger's theoretical insights envisage that the learner forms an identity to which practices are represented in a meaningful way. Identity formation with specific reference to participation in a practice is a key concept in Wenger's social learning theory. Over time communities of practice develop regimes of

competence, which reflect their social history of learning and to which learners are now accountable. The learner must identify as a participant in the community and as a participant in that community, the constitution of the learner's identity reflects the community, as learning and becoming a learner are not separate. "Because learning transforms who we are and what we do, it is an experience of identity. It is not an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming" (Wenger, 1998, p.215). This process of becoming is not confined to one area of learning or one identity as described by Wenger: "learning happens in time and space and identity itself is a time/space concept, that's why identity is a kind of ongoing work rather than a thing" (Farnsworth et al., 2016, p.149).

Belonging within the community includes understanding what matters and the enterprise of the community, an ability to engage productively with others in the community and an appropriate use of the repertoire of resources accumulated by the community (Wenger, 2010). In the use of technical terms for this theory, knowledge is not used. The term practice encompasses all learning that is developed, shared and negotiated with the community. This theory places negotiation of meaning at the core of human learning as opposed to merely the acquisition of information and skills.

This theory has particular relevance for students in a nursing degree programme. In relation to identity, this cohort of students are required to develop the dual identity of student in a higher education institution with a nursing student in clinical placements, which is a very different learning environment (Carr, 2005). These students therefore are part of two distinct but interrelated communities of practice for which they become accountable. Within these communities the knowledge and skills or practice they acquire must be meaningful to them as they will be utilised in real life scenarios early in the undergraduate programme.

3.8 The research questions

1. How do students pursuing undergraduate nursing degree programmes who had prior experience of study in further education perceive the influence of FE in preparing them for transition to undergraduate nursing courses in higher education?

2. How or to what extent does the experience of further education influence the progression of students within undergraduate nursing programmes in higher education?

The interview questions to explore these research question will be in the domains of the components of the theory, including identity, community, practice and meaning.

Learning as Becoming- Identity

Questions relating to perception and expectations of being a student/nurse in higher education before and after further education are explored including personal development during further education and how has this benefitted the participant entering into higher education on campus and on clinical placement.

Learning as Belonging- Community

Questions based on the participants' relationships with academic/clinical staff, their interaction and participation within the communities of HE on campus and on clinical placement. Their engagement with support staff and their use of support services and resources are considered. The participant's perception of how they integrated socially in higher education, relationships developed with their classmates and their involvement in extracurricular activities within the HEI and how has further education influenced the participants academic and social integration and sense of belonging in higher education on campus and clinical placement.

Learning as Doing- Practice

Questions related to academic work, the participants understanding of course material, their approach to and ability in assessment throughout the undergraduate programme are considered and the extent to which knowledge and skills gained in further education contributed to academic success in higher education.

Learning as Experience- Meaning

Questions relating to the clinical aspect of degree programme, their commitment to the nursing degree programme and the nursing profession are central to this

domain and how has further education influenced the concept of nursing for participants and their future career as registered nurses.

These interview questions were formulated employing Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning but were also informed by a study previously discussed in the literature review (McFarlane, 2018). This study explored how previous experience in an educational setting may prepare students for higher education and begin the process of developing a student identity prior to entering higher education.

3.9 Conclusion

Reviewing the literature has identified important influences on the student experience. The concepts of alienation and engagement are used to understand the process of how the student integrates both academically and socially within the higher education environment. The effectiveness of this integration in determining not only the outcome of the student's journey, but the quality of the student experience as an undergraduate and future life as a lifelong learner are discussed.

The theoretical models of Tinto (1993) and Jones (2018) identify the multifaceted factors that influence the experience of the student in higher education. This provides a framework to inform HEIs of supports required for students prior to entry, on entry and through the undergraduate years in higher education not only to improve the retention of students but the quality of the student experience.

Research such as Briggs & al (2012) emphasises the crucial phase of transition to higher education for the student and discusses the importance of the student's experience prior to the transition. The emergence of learner identities both before and on entry to higher education and the importance of an identity in fostering a sense of belonging in a learning community are positioned as significant in facilitating integration. This is important to educators in secondary and tertiary institutions to ensure the facilitation of the student in developing a learner identity at the earliest opportunity.

This detailed review of the literature pertaining to students in higher education forms the basis for an investigation of the experience of students who progress from further education to higher education nursing degree programmes. It will also

inform the research questions which are designed to explore the influence of further education in preparing students for the transition to nursing degrees in higher education and the extent to which participation in FE may influence the experience of students in higher education.

Following review of the literature, Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning will be the guiding framework which will underpin the research methodology and the discussion of the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this research is to investigate the experience of students who progress from further education to undergraduate nursing degree courses in higher education and the influence of further education on their transition to and subsequent engagement with higher education. This chapter outlines the research design for this study from the underpinning research philosophy to overall methodological approach and research methods.

The research questions:

1. How do students pursuing undergraduate nursing degree programmes who had prior experience of study in further education perceive the influence of FE in preparing them for transition to undergraduate nursing courses in higher education?

The intent behind this question is to explore the student experience of entering the higher education environment and how their previous experience of further education had influenced the transition to HE and their engagement both academically and socially in the HEI.

2. How or to what extent does the experience of further education influence the progression of students within undergraduate nursing programmes in higher education?

The intent of this question is to ascertain whether or to what extent the experience of further education facilitated the progression by such students through the undergraduate degree programme. This research question focuses on changing approaches to learning and belonging through the programme and preparing for life after graduation.

In this section the overall design of the research project is outlined. The methodology will be guided by the aim of the study and by the need to answer effectively the research questions. When describing the research design, it is

imperative to look at the process that constitutes the evolution and execution of the intended steps. This process is the building of the layers and stages that are interdependent in the research design.

4.2 Research philosophy

Research philosophy is the over-arching term relating to the development of knowledge and the nature of knowledge (Saunders et al., 2009) and is generally discussed under the terms of ontology and epistemology. Daniel & Harland (2017) offer the following understanding of ontology and epistemology that ontology refers to the nature of beliefs, views and values that a researcher holds about a specific body of knowledge and particular ways of knowing. In this understanding ontology is concerned with what there is to know and epistemology is about how we can come to know it. Methodology is how a researcher investigates what they believe can be known (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The interrelationship between the building blocks of research

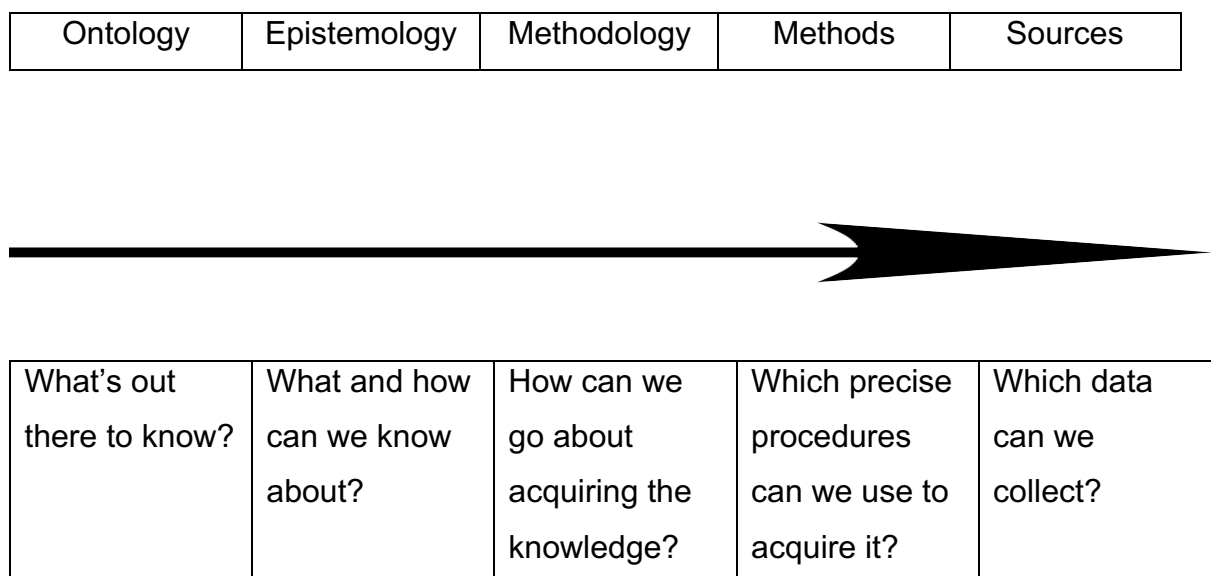


Figure 4.1. The building blocks of research (Grix, 2002)

This model shows the interrelationship between the research philosophy and how it informs the whole methodological process. Identifying the researcher's view or philosophy of what knowledge is and how it develops is fundamental to the

research process. The research philosophy contains important assumptions about the way the researcher views the world and underpins the research strategy and methods chosen. The research paradigm refers to “a set of assumptions about the world, and about what constitute proper topics and techniques for inquiring into the world....it is a broad term encompassing elements of epistemology, theory and philosophy and methods” (Punch, 2005, p.14)

The ontological, epistemological and methodological principles that are adopted by a researcher are referred to as the research paradigm. It is the lens through which the researcher tries to understand a particular situation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Each researcher holds their own view on what they believe knowledge to be. For the most part, they make sense and gather data about their surroundings based on the philosophical stance that they take. With this consideration, it is important that the research philosophy of this study be outlined starting from the philosophical roots.

While ontology refers to one's view of reality, and whether it is dependent or independent of our own practices and understandings, epistemology reveals the nature of this reality, whether it is discovered or created through the process of research namely, the nature of knowledge and how one acquires it (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The belief predicated this study is that we can understand reality through socially constructed meanings between the researcher, who is involved in the production of that reality, and the active role of individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2016) and is therefore situated within the theory of constructivism. Constructivism is a theoretical perspective that posits that knowledge is constructed through social processes and interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). This implies that social phenomena are not just the outcome of social interaction but are also in a constant state of revision (Griz, 2002). In this research, constructivism will guide the investigation into how participants interpret their experiences and how these interpretations are influenced by their social contexts. By adopting a constructivist approach, there will be a focus on understanding the dynamic and fluid nature of social reality. This perspective acknowledges that individuals' perceptions and understandings are shaped by their interactions with others, their cultural and historical contexts, and the discourses they engage with. The research will aim to uncover the multiple and potentially conflicting

interpretations that participants may have about their experiences, rather than seeking a single, unified truth. This position corresponds to the nature and aim of this study, where there is more than one reality as seen from the eyes of the participants.

4.3 Research Approach

The research paradigm of this study adopts an interpretivist approach. A key assumption of this approach is that social science research needs to be different from natural science research as human beings and their social worlds cannot be examined in the same way as physical phenomena. The central difference is that humans create meanings and emphasises the importance of understanding the meanings and interpretations that individuals attach to their experiences. Different people at different times create different meanings about things, therefore different social realities are created and experienced. The research methods used by interpretivists focus on collecting rich, meaningful, complex data from participants which is constructed by mutual negotiation and is specific to the phenomena being investigated (O'Donoghue, 2007). This approach is particularly suited to qualitative research, which seeks to explore the rich, complex, and context-specific nature of human behaviour and social phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This will be accomplished by means of in-depth interviews which permit the co- construction of meaning between the researcher and the participants and provide an element of interpretation of data that offered a meaningful insight into the phenomenon (Mills, et al., 2006). Within this approach, a basic understanding is formed by interpreting what people say they encounter, and how they view their realities. In this approach, researchers need to be aware of the necessity of not imposing their own expectations on interviewees, or allowing their expectations to influence what they hear and see. This requires the researcher to adopt a reflexive stance, continuously reflecting on their own biases and assumptions, and considering how these may influence the research process and findings (Berger, 2013).

4.3.1 Qualitative research

As this study involves investigating the experience of FE graduates in HE it is exploratory, open ended and the voices of the participants are central. From a constructivist perspective, a qualitative methodology is the most appropriate to

capture the uniqueness of the individual and the understanding of their experience.

“Qualitative research allows researchers to attempt to get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.12).

This methodology of inquiry aims to describe, understand and interpret social phenomena as perceived by individuals, groups and cultures. Researchers using qualitative approaches explore the behaviour, feelings and experiences of people and what lies at the core of their lives (Holloway & Wheeler, 1995). Qualitative methods allow participants to express their views and respond to questions in their own words (Barker et al., 2002) and captures the voice of the specific group (Carroll & Rothe, 2010). As qualitative researchers gather information personally this facilitates the understanding of the context of the participants (Crotty, 1998) which acknowledges the role of social, historical and institutional factors in the development of the experience of the participants (Hardiman, 2012).

4.4 Research design

4.4.1 *Samples and sampling strategy*

Data for this research was elicited from students in undergraduate nursing degree programmes who are graduates of further education. As it was not practical to research the whole population of this cohort, a selection process was determined. The method of sampling is referred to as purposive sampling. The students were selected based on the following criteria:

- They are registered students in universities, Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology in the Republic of Ireland.
- They are graduates from a range of FET providers in the Republic of Ireland.

According to the CAO figures, 150 places are reserved for QQI award holders in Nursing degree courses in universities, technological universities, and institutes of technology across the Republic of Ireland for the academic year 2022-2023 (CAO, 2022). This allocation includes students who would be considered mature students.

Table 4.1. Profile of HEIs and participant rate for this study

HEI	Status	Location	Number of participants
1	Technological University	Outside Dublin	3
2	Institute of Technology	Outside Dublin	1
3	University	Dublin	1
4	Technological University	Outside Dublin	3
5	University	Dublin	3
6	University	Dublin	4
7	University	Outside Dublin	1
8	Institute of Technology	Outside Dublin	6
9	Technological University	Outside Dublin	4
10	University	Outside Dublin	2
11	Technological University	Outside Dublin	8

This study required obtaining access to further education graduates who were now in undergraduate nursing programmes in higher education. It was decided to seek permission from the Head of Nursing departments in HEIs to invite participation from the students currently in their undergraduate programmes.

Currently 13 HEIs provide Nursing degree programmes in the Republic of Ireland. Initially four HEIs were contacted, including two universities in Dublin and two technological universities outside Dublin. Permission was sought to gain access to the first and fourth year students in all disciplines of nursing. An email was sent to the Head of the Nursing department (Appendix 4). Attached to this introductory email was a copy of the consent form, participation information leaflet for their perusal and an invitation email which was to be disseminated to the students (Appendix 5). These Heads of Nursing in the HEIs were very positive regarding this study and invitation emails were sent to the first and fourth year students in all disciplines of nursing.

It quickly became apparent that the response rate was low, and the decision was then made to contact all 13 HEIs which provided nursing degree programmes in the Republic of Ireland to gain access to all years of the undergraduate programmes. One HEI did not respond to my request, while another sought full ethical approval from the HEI's own research ethics committee. This was considered too onerous on the part of the researcher and in consultation with my supervisor no further action was taken. This highlighted the role of gatekeepers in research. Gatekeepers are in control of access to research sites and potential participants, play an important role and are crucial to the success of the research study (McFayden & Rankin, 2016). In this instance access to participants was granted for the vast majority of HEIs which provided undergraduate nursing programmes. In all students from 11 HEIs were interviewed for this study

Following the invitation letter by email being disseminated by the HEI, students contacted me directly as requested. I subsequently replied to each one thanking them for their interest and sending them the consent form, (Appendix 6) and participant information leaflet, (Appendix 7). At this time, I encouraged each participant to contact me if they had any queries. On receipt of the consent form being returned to me with electronic signatures, through an email an invitation to a Zoom meeting for a day and time convenient to the participant was also sent through email.

4.4.2 Profile of participants

In total thirty-six students were interviewed who were graduates from twenty two different further education providers and enrolled in eleven different HEIs. Thirty-two students had completed the QQI Level 5 Nursing Studies Award and four had completed the QQI Level 5 Healthcare Support Award (HCS).

All modules in QQI Level 5 Awards have the same credit value but there are marked differences in the depth of content and assessment between courses. The Healthcare Support Award covers all care skills and competencies for caring in a variety of settings and is directed towards students who intend to work as health care assistants in these settings and not to progress to further studies. Students who are successful with this course have many employment opportunities in healthcare settings on graduation. Most further education providers offer both

Healthcare Support and Nursing Studies awards to ensure students have the choice of course which meets both their academic ability and future goals. In some further education colleges this may not be the case and students may find themselves in classes that may not meet their needs.

Twenty eight of the participants had accessed the undergraduate nursing degree programme directly after completion of further education, and eight participants in the following 3-5 years. The mature students were unclear on whether they gained access through the Higher Education Links Scheme or the mature student route as they had applied through both access routes. In the profile of the participants the gender, the HEI attended, the FE college previously attended, the QQI award achieved, the year of undergraduate study and the discipline of nursing are noted. Participants over 23years of age on entry to degree programme are identified as mature students. No information regarding the socio-economic or ethnic background of the participants was obtained.

Table 4.2. Profile of participants

Participant	Gender	HE	FE	Award	Year of undergrad	Status	Discipline
1	F	1	1	Nursing Studies	1	Mature	General
2	M	2	2	Nursing Studies	3	Mature	Intellectual Disability
3	F	3	3	Healthcare Support	4	Mature	Intellectual Disability
4	M	4	13	Nursing Studies	4	Mature	Mental Health
5	F	4	4	Nursing Studies	3	Mature	General
6	F	5	5	Nursing Studies	4	Non mature	Mental Health
7	F	4	6	Nursing Studies	3	Mature	General
8	F	6	7	Nursing Studies	4	Non mature	General
9	F	7	8	Nursing Studies	1	Mature	Intellectual Disability
10	F	8	3	Healthcare Support	2	Mature	Intellectual Disability
11	F	1	6	Nursing Studies	4	Non mature	General
12	F	8	9	Nursing Studies	3	Mature	Mental Health
13	F	1	1	Nursing Studies	1	Non mature	General
14	F	8	10	Nursing Studies	4	Non mature	General
15	F	8	11	Healthcare Support	4	Mature	Intellectual Disability
16	F	8	9	Nursing Studies	2	Mature	Mental Health
17	M	6	12	Nursing Studies	1	Non mature	General

Participant	Gender	HE	FE	Award	Year of undergrad	Status	Discipline
18	F	6	12	Nursing Studies	4	Non mature	Mental Health
19	F	5	10	Nursing Studies	1	Non mature	Intellectual Disability
20	F	9	14	Nursing Studies	4	Non mature	Mental Health
21	F	6	5	Nursing Studies	4	Mature	Integrated General/Childrens
22	M	8	2	Nursing Studies	1	Mature	General
23	F	5	5	Nursing Studies	4	Non mature	Mental Health
24	F	9	15	Nursing Studies	1	Non mature	General
25	F	9	16	Nursing Studies	1	Non mature	General
26	F	9	16	Healthcare Support	3	Mature	General
27	F	10	17	Nursing Studies	4	Mature	Intellectual Disability
28	F	10	18	Nursing Studies	4	Mature	General
29	F	11	19	Nursing Studies	1	Mature	Mental Health
30	F	11	20	Nursing Studies	4	Non mature	General
31	F	11	21	Nursing Studies	1	Non mature	Intellectual Disability
32	M	11	19	Nursing Studies	1	Non mature	Intellectual Disability
33	F	11	21	Nursing Studies	1	Non mature	Intellectual Disability
34	F	11	21	Nursing Studies	1	Mature	Mental Health
35	F	11	18	Nursing Studies	2	Non mature	General
36	F	11	22	Nursing Studies	4	Non mature	Mental Health

18 participants were classified as mature students whose age ranged from 25-55 years. The largest number of participants (15) were in fourth year, the next largest group were first year participants (13). The remaining eight participants were in third year (5) and second year (3).

Participants of the four disciplines of nursing were represented. The largest group was general nursing (15), while a substantial proportion were specialised in intellectual disability (10) or mental health (10). One participant was studying the integrated general and sick children's nursing degree programme.

The participants were overwhelmingly female (32 out of 36) reflecting the composition of nursing as a profession.

4.5 Data Generation – semi structured interviews

Having outlined the philosophical assumptions and the qualitative approach, interviews were selected as the preferred method for collection of data. This involved interviewing students who are graduates from further education and who are currently studying an undergraduate nursing degree programme in higher education. As a choice of research methods interviews were selected for the following reasons. They present the opportunity:

- To explore exactly what someone means, either through their questions or in their responses
- To reduce ambiguity for both interviewer and interviewee, leading to more appropriate, if not necessarily more accurate data.
- To ask probing questions, seek clarification or compare experiences and thoughts, which can result in the interviewee gaining new insights and making more sophisticated interpretations. (Loxley, 2010).

There are three main types of interviews, structured, semi structured, and open interviews. In structured interviews there is a prescribed list of questions for participants to answer. As all respondents are asked the same question this allows for some element of count data when doing data analysis. The structured interview can limit the quality of response as answers tend to be short and do not allow for

expansion. The semi structured interview allows participants to elaborate on answers and can be an opportunity for both interviewer and participants to explore questions and answers and develop new ideas. Unstructured or open interviews can be the most difficult to execute and would be used by experienced interviewers or as an adjunct to the structured or semi structured interview.

Whatever the type of interview employed the researcher should approach the interview with the idea that they are seeking the co-creation of knowledge with informants through a process of mutual discovery and the testing of ideas and theories (Daniel & Harland, 2017) and therefore the data collected is essentially a product of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Loxley, 2010).

The interview may also offer benefit to the participants as it can offer them an opportunity to reflect on their experience in a way that they would not normally do (McCracken, 1989). This may be particularly pertinent with the subjects of this research as they have taken a non- traditional route to higher education, in some cases more from necessity than choice.

Interviews may be conducted in several settings and key issues should be addressed in the pre interview briefing. These include ethical considerations and positions of unequal power. One of the most important aspects of ensuring a productive interview is to develop a rapport between interviewer and interviewee through mutual respect and trust. Issues such as social status, education, age, gender, and ethnic group can affect the dynamics between the interviewer and the interviewee and should be a consideration in the process.

For this study the semi structured interview format was the most appropriate. In the semi-structured interview, the topics and questions are given, but the questions are open-ended, and the wording and sequence may be tailored to each individual interviewee. It also allows the interviewer to give prompts and probes (Cohen et al., 2018).

Prompts allow the interviewer to clarify any topic or questions if the participant needs clarification or guidance. Probes enable the interviewer to ask participants

to extend, elaborate, or provide extra detail to their response. This encourages the collection of rich, in-depth and detailed data.

Beatty and Willis (2007) identify four types of probes:

- Anticipated probes: pre-scripted probes to follow up on initial question.
- Spontaneous probes: not pre-scripted, where the interviewer decides on the spur of the moment what to probe, which is not based on a particular response from the interviewee
- Conditional probe: pre-scripted probes which are only used if respondents answer in a particular way or hesitate.
- Emergent probes: not pre-scripted, where the interviewer decides to probe in response to what the interviewee says, for example an apparent problem.

(Cohen et al., 2018)

Prompts and probes should be used in a discretionary manner to avoid interviewer bias. The prompts and probes should form part of an interview schedule and be used in conjunction with prepared open-ended questions. Prompts and probes were an integral part of the interviews with participants as they allowed the researcher to explore the individual experience of each participant.

4.5.1 Interview Administration

On confirmation of a day and time convenient for the participants interviews were conducted on Zoom. Before each interview I introduced myself and again outlined the nature and purpose of the study and their contribution to the research. I again explained that their consent to participate could be withdrawn at any stage during or after the interview, without giving a reason and without prejudice. Participants were assured that they need not answer any question they felt uncomfortable with, and their privacy and confidentiality would be protected by use of pseudonyms and secure storage of data. I explained how I would use the data and asked the participants if they had any outstanding issues. I then asked for their consent for the recording of the interview and to take notes during the interview.

The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. An interview schedule was prepared (Appendix 8). As this was a semi structured interview I had a series of

prepared questions, but the participants were encouraged to discuss their own individual experience of being a student in higher education and how they perceived the impact of their studies in further education on their transition to higher education and their progression in their undergraduate studies. Prompts and probes were used for clarification and elaboration of information. For example, regarding the use of social media in HE as prompts I asked did they have a class WhatsApp group. This provided clarity for the participants on the nature of questions regarding online communication in HE. Probes were also used, for example when the participants said they did not use any support services in HE they were asked was there a specific reason why they did not use the support services. This enabled me to identify if the participant was not engaging with the staff in HEI or simply did not require the service.

Following the interviews, the participants were thanked for their contribution to the study and asked if they had any questions regarding the interview or study. They were also asked if they would like a copy of the transcript before being included in the study and reassured if they had enquiries or concerns after the interview to contact me. No participants requested a copy of the transcripts. Several participants thanked me for the opportunity to reflect on their experience of transition from further to higher education and their progression through the undergraduate nursing degree programme and for conducting research on this phenomenon.

4.6. Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis concerns how we move from the data to understanding, explaining, and interpreting the phenomena in question (Taylor & Gibbs, 2010). Although qualitative research cannot be subjected to the same criteria as quantitative research robust methods of analysis were applied to the data. After comparison of the various methods for analysis of qualitative data thematic analysis was selected as the most applicable to the data collected from this research. As the name suggests this method identifies, analyses and reports patterns or themes within data. A theme is defined as capturing something important in the data related to the research question and represents a level of pattern in its response. Thematic analysis involves the searching across qualitative

data to find repeated patterns or meaning (Braun et Clarke, 2006). This is outlined in a six-phase process outlined in table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3. Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1.Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2.Generating initial code:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3.Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4.Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5.Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6.Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006)

As identified by the authors some of these phases are similar to phases of other qualitative research and are not necessarily unique to thematic analysis. The process starts when the researcher notices and looks for patterns of meaning and

issues of potential interest in the data. This process began at the data collection stage.

It is recommended that all verbal data is transcribed by the researcher, although this is very time consuming, it allows the researcher to become familiar with and gain an understanding of the data at the earliest stage. Writing is viewed as an integral part of the analysis process beginning in phase one with the noting of potential coding schemes and continuing throughout the process. This initial coding becomes more developed and defined as the process evolves. Coding is a process in which the researcher engages in a thorough reading of the data to capture specific meanings that will be of relevance to answering the research questions. 'Codes both reduce the data content and provide an analytic take on whatever is of interest' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.52). This organising of data into groups can be done manually or with a software package.

Codes are the building blocks of will eventually form themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022.) When all data has been collated and coded the phase of searching for themes begins. This is where the analysis of data begins in relation to the subject of the research and the consideration of how different codes may together form over-arching themes. Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest an approach of creating visual representation for example mind maps to organise codes into theme piles. Some codes may become main themes and others form sub themes. Following this stage, the significance of certain themes will emerge. Themes will then need to be reviewed, refined, and finally defined. This will identify the different themes and how they fit together and tell the overall story of the data. Each theme will require a detailed analysis and then the writing of the report. The report should include an analytic narrative that goes beyond description and make an argument for the research questions.

4.6.1 Process of the data analysis for this study

Using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six stage process the data generated from this study was analysed in the following way.

Following the interview, I transcribed the recordings of each interview. This allowed me to become familiar with the data from the initial stages. I made further notes from the data during and following transcription. This ensured that I had comprehensive notes made during and after the interview and from the transcription process.

[redacted] - Dec - 44k. psych.
 FE - 2016.
 knew I liked psych wanted to do dual.
 HECS
 personality - shy - settled in.
 passionate academic - doing well
 mini college experience
 made friends - still FE.
 Informative
 full potential - ranked no 1.
 poor L.C.
 FE delivered - easy to digest
 push - realised need to put effort in
 not purely academic - could A.O.P.
 no one talked about FE - Grandmother - G.P.
 praise and encouragement - wonder what kind of
 student would be?
 delivered in user friendly way.
 good attitude to academic staff. DFEI
 charged that - valued own place - smaller class
 library / support services / barriers - break
 socially good group of friends
 FE chance to meet new people - different
 background -
 connection got with FE - took for granted
 Confidence - becoming a nurse - academic
 fully committed - reaffirmed psych - different
 options - day centre - not as task oriented
 Masters CNS - self harm - A.D.E - happy where
 I am.
 14k loads of options - L.C. one option
 role models - staff in DFEI.

Figure 4.2. Example of handwritten notes during interview

After the interview I summarised the handwritten notes and added additional information for context in a word document.

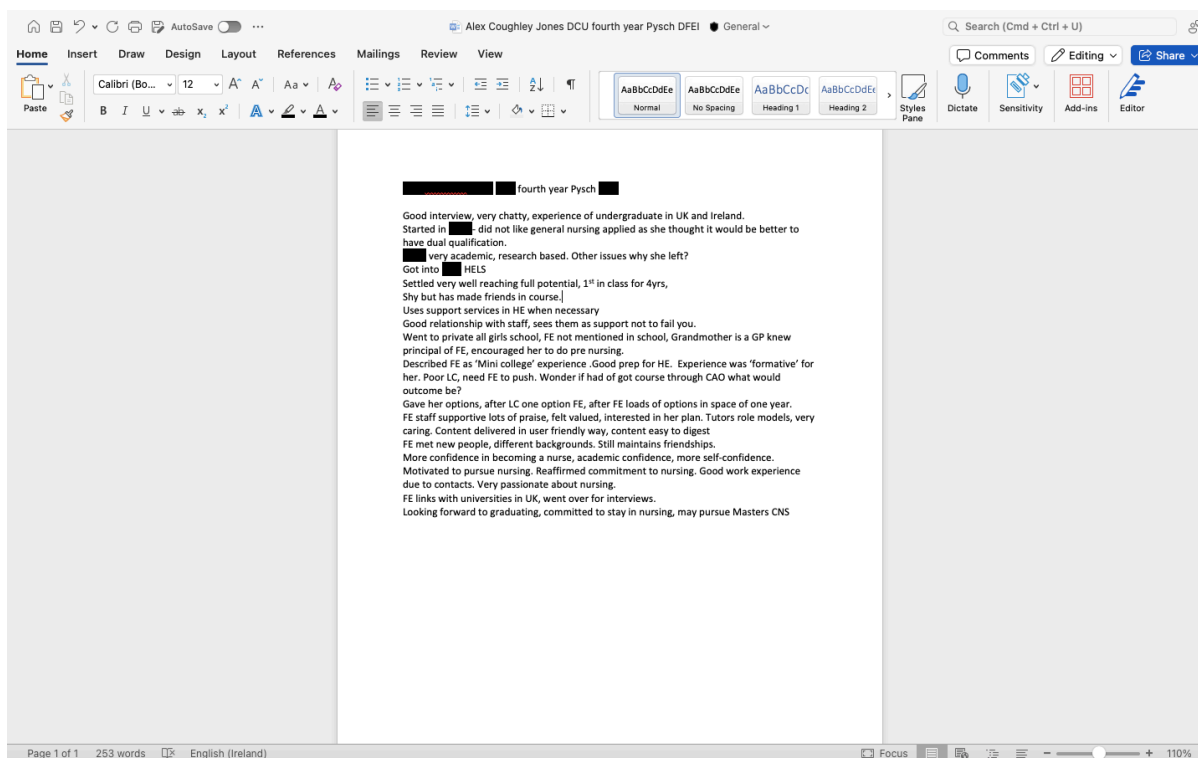


Figure 4.3. Summary and additional information

Interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after the interview and reread numerous times. This enabled me to reflect on the data generated and to develop the questions for further interviews. When all interviews were completed, the transcriptions were reread thoroughly again.

When I was fully familiar with the data the transcripts were reread, and data of interest were highlighted. Key features began to become noticeable, and similarities and differences across the data became apparent. These sections of the transcription data were correlated to the previous notes taken and then coded according to significance or meaning to the research questions. This process involved identifying a feature of the data that drew interest, which could be described as “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon’ (Boyatzis, 1998 as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006). I worked in a systematic way through every line of the transcribed data in the Word documents. Interesting and informative lines were assigned a preliminary code that could inform the development of appropriate themes. The comment function in Word was used for the preliminary iteration of the coding. This enabled working down through the

document highlighting text with the proposed associated code. This phase involved developing a sensitivity to what was emerging from the data. It was not a linear process but required constant rereading of the transcriptions and notes. An example of this process is outlined below

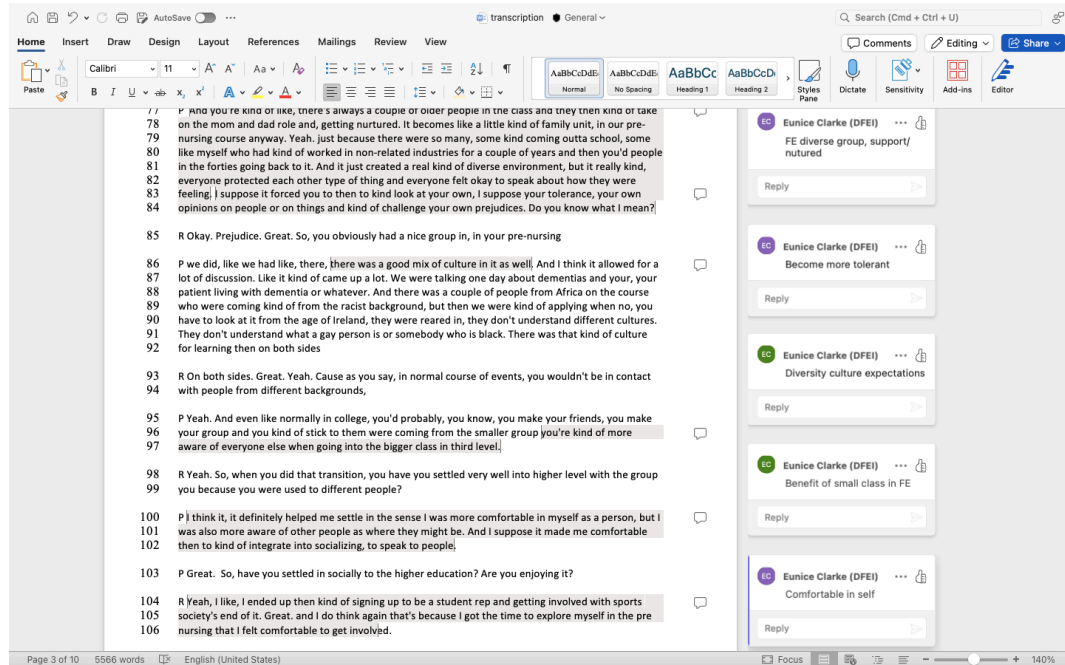


Figure 4.4. Coding

The codes made at this stage were straightforward with codes assigned to data of interest. There was overlapping and double codes assigned to some of the data. Most of the codes were semantic identified through surface or overt meanings of what the participants had said. In later iterations of the coding process, some latent meaning from the data were interpreted to capture more implicit levels of meaning beyond the descriptive level identified at the preliminary stages. An example of the this process is shown below

Table 4.4. Coding interpretation

Participant	Data	Initial code	Reiteration
33	I actually got a job in the nursing home from the placement of the PLC as well. So, I like, it really kind of started my career in healthcare, the PLC.	Started working in healthcare	Created opportunities
13	The lady that was my tutor in level five, she said, just go further because you know, she could see that I had a great interest.	Encouragement from FE Tutors	Support from FE teachers
9	Definitely the teachers, both of the teachers I had were nurses. So, they gave a lot of personal experiences and accounts that they had and you know that made me want to be a nurse even more. You know what I actually looked up to both of them quite a lot and yeah that would probably be my biggest influence.	Influence of FE teachers Past experience.	Inspiring FE teachers
22	I suppose it [FE] forced you to then to kind of look at your own, I suppose your tolerance in your own opinions on people or on things and kind of challenge your own prejudices	Challenge prejudices	Self-awareness
24	I definitely learned last year that I am a procrastinator. So I knew this year that it was like, I got my assignments done in time I had a good few days, like a week or two to spare. I definitely learned how to manage that better."	Procrastinator Time management	Self-awareness Study skills
6	Further education was kind of my only option at the time, but in the space of the year I had so many more options.	FE only option	Created opportunities
1	What definitely kept me going was that I was able to do that for the first year and get the results	kept going	Self-belief Built resilience

Participant	Data	Initial code	Reiteration
	enough to be able to do college, surely, I am than able to do it.		
15	I knew how to study because QQI covered all of that. It taught you how to study. I learned my study technique. I know I studied by colours and numbers.	Identifying learning style	Study Skills
21	The whole harsh reality of working 12 hour shifts and all that, like I suppose the cold hard face of it, it's not all, it's not very glamorous, it's not glamorous at times it can be quite distressing,	Working conditions in nursing	Reality of nursing
19	your own personal development and really puts you in that mindset for going into third level	Mindset of student in HE	Developing Learner identity for HE
20	the nature of the job, it's a very serious job and patient safety is number one. I suppose in terms of that and the responsibility of that but, having done the nursing studies course, I suppose that made me very aware of it and more conscious of it.	Importance of Patient safety	Responsibility of nursing

Following the coding process repeated exploration of all the data revealed a multiplicity of codes. It was then noted that many codes had similarity in meaning. The codes had different facets but collectively captured a central one point.

When the relevant data items had been coded, I reflected on the codes and how they could be combined together to produce an understanding of the data which would answer the research questions. Once satisfied that there was sufficient depth within the data to examine patterns and relationships, I began interpreting meaning across the data to identify overarching themes and sub-themes. Braun & Clarke (2022) write that a theme is 'a pattern of shared meaning organised around a central concept'. (p.77). It is the role of the researcher to identify that concept after interpreting the data. During this process, multiple codes were reduced that shared similar features into a single code. (Appendix 9)

Once the coding process was complete and tentative themes were identified, a review of the theme development was conducted. This step in thematic analysis provides a 'vital check' on the progress of initial theme development undertaken in Step 3 (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 97). Through this process, five themes with sub-themes were identified as being the most appropriate to highlight important patterns in the data which appropriately answered the research questions. An initial thematic map of the themes and sub themes can be seen below

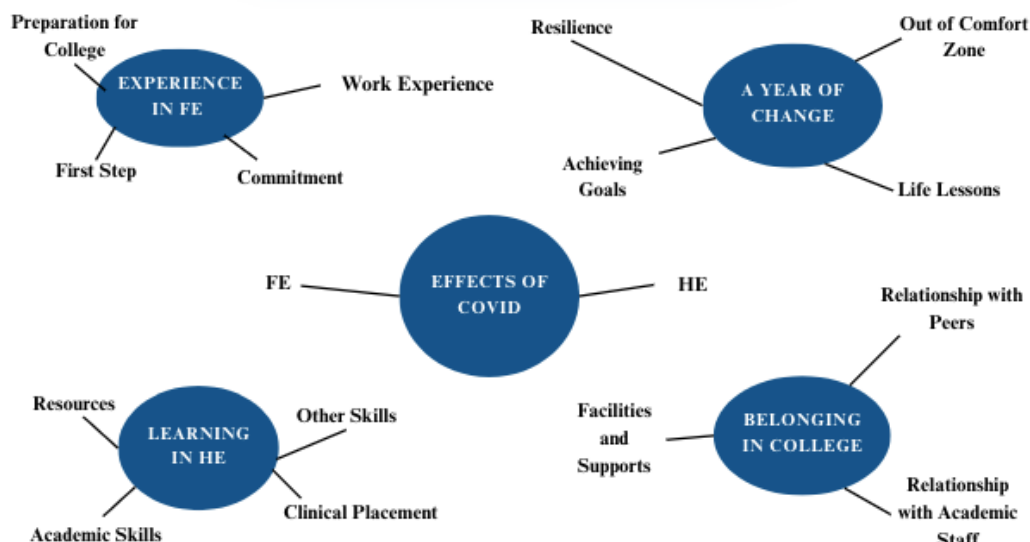


Figure 4.5. Thematic analysis

This step in thematic analysis, gave an opportunity to reflect on the themes identified and fine-tune the analysis ensuring that each theme is clearly defined and relates to a core concept (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Following a review of the initial themes and sub-themes, were refined. The theme of 'Year of change' became the theme of 'Personal growth' as this represented more specifically the formative influence of the participants' time in FE. The role of FE in providing an 'Insight to nursing' was very significant for the participants and warranted a separate theme within the findings. The theme of 'experience in FE' was defined further to reflect the level of preparation for transition to and progression through HE. The supportive influence of FE in developing relationships became one theme. This influence facilitated the participants academic social integration and fostered a sense of belonging in HE. As the process progressed the theme 'Effects of Covid' was reviewed and integrated under other themes. As these steps were

worked, it became evident that to ensure a coherent story about the data, it was best to document the data under the other overarching themes. Other sub-themes were also collapsed, added or amalgamated, for example with another sub-theme of 'work experience' became a sub theme of 'Insight to nursing'. Two new sub themes of 'The role of the nurse' and 'The role of FE tutors' also became part of this theme. The subtheme 'out of comfort zone' became 'gaining confidence' which gave more meaning to the personal growth of the participants. By the end of this stage, it was concluded that these themes could create a narrative consistent with the data and be relevant and informative in relation to the research questions. A finalised thematic map of five themes and sub themes are shown below

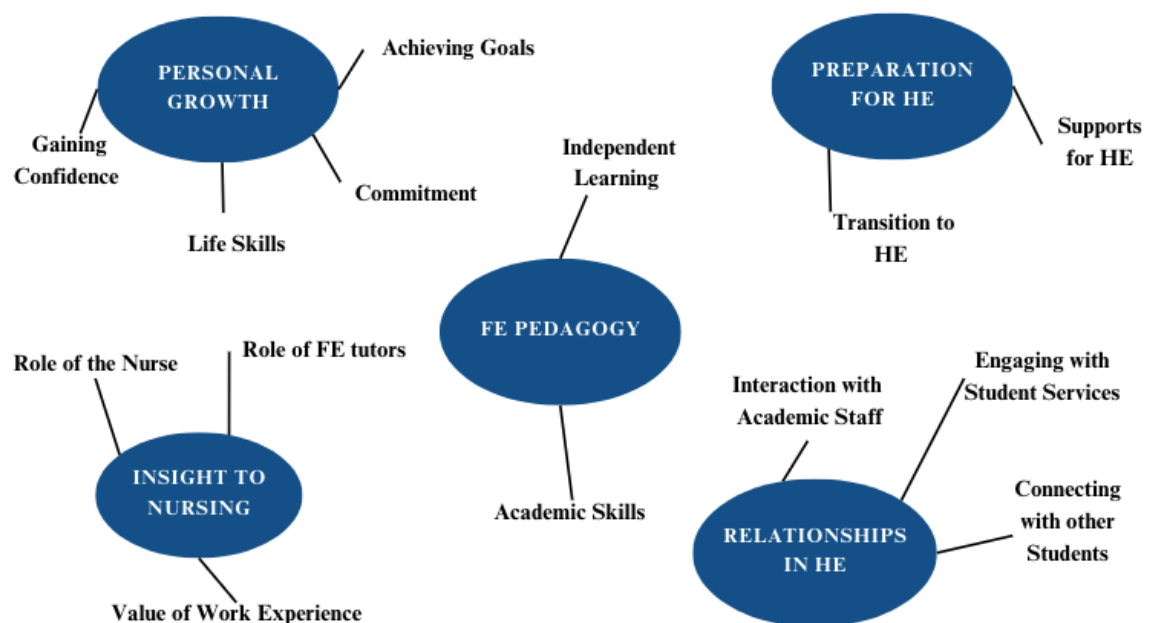


Figure 4.6. Refining, defining and naming themes

During the 'writing up' step of thematic analysis the aim of the researcher is to weave together an 'analytic narrative and compelling, vivid data extracts' to tell the reader a story about the datasets collected that address the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.36). In this study, the formal 'writing up' is documented in the following findings chapters. A discussion of the findings from the study, and their relationships to the research questions are presented in the discussion chapter.

4.7 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of a study refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985) trustworthiness in a qualitative study involves establishment of:

- **Credibility:** Refers to the degree to which the findings of a qualitative study are representative of the participants and their experience.
- **Transferability:** Concerned with the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied or transferred to other contexts or settings.
- **Dependability:** Related to the consistency and stability of the research findings over time and across different researchers.
- **Confirmability:** Refers to the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the data themselves rather than the researcher's biases or preconceptions.

These four principles are commonly used in qualitative research to assess the rigor and credibility of a study and to ensure its value and relevance to the field of study. To ensure trustworthiness for this study the researcher was cognisant of these principles and throughout the research process followed protocols and engaged in best research practice.

Being a nurse and teacher in further education I was aware of the issue of bias and reflected deeply on how my personal experience could affect the research process. During the research process I also kept a journal recording my thoughts, learning and reflections on the experience of the research process. This enabled me to be conscious of the potential for bias in data generation, data analysis and in the reporting of findings.

Before conducting any interviews, all participants were sent a participant information leaflet. This provided clear information on the research study, the role of the researcher and the rights of the participants. This allowed the participant to make an informed decision on their participation and reduced the potential for bias on the part of the participant.

Five pilot interviews were conducted to refine the interview schedule and assist in achieving credibility and confirmability of the study. These interviews provided an early opportunity for me to reflect on and minimise the influence of bias in the interview process, ensure that the findings were representative of the participants and their experience and that the data arose from the findings rather than reflecting the my preconceptions.

For the fieldwork for this study it was important that the participants were representative of the further education graduates attending higher education to provide transferability of the findings. This was achieved as the sample consisted of thirty six nursing students, both male and female, in all disciplines of nursing, in every undergraduate year, and in eleven different HEIs. The participants were also drawn from twenty one further education providers and had achieved QQI Level 5 Awards in Nursing Studies or Healthcare Support. The sample also included mature students in nursing degrees in higher education who had progressed from further education. The data generated from these interviews reflects the experience of the diversity of the cohort of students who are the subject of this study.

With reference to transferability and dependability this study gives a detailed account of the sample group, research methods and data analysis of the study, which allows for the possibility that the methods and findings could be applied to other studies in other contexts and establishes the dependability of the research. Providing a full description of the research process ensures that a future researcher can follow with all of the decisions made related to the study, and also understand why those decisions were made.

4.8 Ethics

Ethical research concerns what researchers should and should not do in their research and research behaviour (Cohen et al., 2018). Although this research does not include potentially at-risk groups, there are important ethical considerations particularly in the areas of access, consent, data protection, confidentiality, and power relations.

Ethical approval was granted from the research ethics committee of the School of Education Trinity College Dublin (Appendix 10). This approval was essential before research began and I was fully cognisant of ethics throughout the research process and implemented the ethical requirements below. Participants were always treated with dignity and respect. Informed consent was sought, with a consent form being reviewed and signed by each participant before the interview. This form was accompanied by the participant information leaflet so that the participant understood that they had the right to participate voluntarily and the right to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. The purpose of the study was outlined so that the participants understood the nature of the research and its likely impact on them and the procedures of the study, so that the participants could reasonably expect what to anticipate in the research process. The participants were aware that they had the right to ask questions, obtain a copy of the results, and that their privacy would be respected.

As previously discussed, developing a rapport with the participants is crucial in the interview process. Loxley (2010) notes that as social encounters, interviews are first and foremost about relationships. This relationship is crucial to the overall experience and the quality of the data produced but also must be governed by ethical considerations.

It is important also to ensure that this relationship has boundaries. Issues such as the interviewer sharing personal information to elicit data can be confusing for the interviewee and may be construed as manipulative. The rapport built up during the interview has the potential for the interviewee to share more information than they are comfortable with. This may lead to the interview becoming an advice or counselling session. The interviewer needs to be aware of the potential for these things to happen and consider how this will be managed.

The avoidance of harm or non-maleficence is the cornerstone of ethical research and neither the participants or indeed the researcher should have adverse effects following collection of data or any part of the research process. Ethical considerations extend beyond data collection to analysis, interpretation and presentation of findings. Though not exhaustive, considerations for this study include:

- how the anonymity of individuals, roles and organisations will be protected
- that the interpretation of the data is an accurate account of the information obtained
- secure the ownership, access and storage of data
- that use of language on research is not biased against person or group
- that there is no falsification of or misrepresentation of findings

4.9 Role of researcher

“A researcher’s background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate and the framing and communication of conclusions” (Malterud, 2001, p.483-484). As researchers and human beings, we all hold opinions and ideas based on our experiences and what we have been exposed to in our lives. Reflexivity is the process of reflecting on oneself as a researcher. It involves examining ourselves and acknowledging the assumptions and preconceptions we may have and how these have contributed to the construction of meanings throughout the research process.

The role of reflexivity in qualitative research has been widely discussed due to the potential for subjectivity in this research methodology where the researcher has been constructed as “the human research instrument” (Cohen et al, 2018; Crabtree, 2006). Reflexivity however is important in all research as it is a tool to be “vigilant about our practice” (Spivak, 1984-1985 p.184). Reflexivity increases attention to the subjectivity of the researcher, it focuses on “the who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affects data collection and analysis” (Pillow, 2003, p.175). This involves an appreciation by the researcher that how knowledge is acquired, organised, and interpreted is relevant to what claims are made (Altheide & Johnson, 1998).

Before commencing this research, I reflected on my background as a teacher in further education in relation to this study. These reflections are presented using the headings for strategies for reflexive practice identified by Pillow (2003).

4.9.1 Reflexivity as recognition of Self

The research I have chosen emanates from my experience as a teacher in further education for thirty-five years. I investigated the experience of graduates from further education as they transition and progress through higher education nursing degree programmes. As a nurse and a teacher, it would appear I am appropriately positioned to undertake this research. From a reflexive perspective, I was aware that “the researcher filters the data through a personal lens that is situated in a specific socio-political and historical moment” (Creswell, 1998, p.182). From this, I looked at what is my “personal lens” and how it could influence my research.

As indicated above I am a nurse and will always consider that to be my first profession. However apart from some volunteering in Uganda in the summer of 2015 I have not actually practiced as a nurse for almost twenty-nine years. Although medical conditions and basic nursing care have not changed so much, clinical settings and treatments, patient management and the role of the nurse have changed immeasurably over this period. The most significant difference between my nursing experience and that of nursing students today is the nursing degree programme in higher education. As I am researching the experience of student nurses who progress from further to higher education, I am very aware that it is almost unrecognizable from the apprentice style programme I followed to receive my nursing qualifications. There is considerable debate on the merits of both programmes, but it was not the subject of this research and should not influence the data generation or analysis.

In my current position as a teacher in further education I am very committed to and invested in this sector of education. Consequently, there may be a tendency to overvalue on my part the benefits of the nursing studies course in FE for students progressing to higher education. I identified this as the most critical area regarding my subjectivity in data collection and analysis.

4.9.2 Reflexivity as recognition of the Other

It is also crucial to recognise the participants as unique individuals. Though they have the commonality of being nursing students, they have undertaken this course of study for many different motives and have varied viewpoints on nursing as a profession. In researching the students’ experience of both further education and

higher education it is required to be aware that this experience could be influenced by many factors. This included the institutions which they had attended previously, those where they are currently studying and factors which may not be immediately apparent such as personal circumstances and life experience.

As participants will be aware that I am a teacher in further education this could influence the validity and reliability of the interview process. It was important that the participants view the research process as collaborative, and that interviews are conducted to the highest ethical standards.

4.9.3 Reflexivity as truth

By being reflexive in our practice there is an assumption that the research is more valid, more truthful and that the voice of the subjects is more easily captured (Pillow, 2003). Research on the role of further education regarding transition to and the student's experience of higher education in nursing degree programmes is limited, although anecdotal feedback from students and higher education institutions reflects very positively on FE. This has led to a culture of belief within many practitioners in further education that completing a QQI course in FE before entering higher education is highly beneficial to both students and the higher education institutions to which they progress. From this basis, reflexivity is very important so that the research truly reflects the experience of the subjects and not what my colleagues and I wanted to believe to be the case.

4.9.4 Reflexivity as Transcendence

The reflexive process can release us from constraints of our cultural context and in doing so enable us to view new possibilities. From the findings of this research, I was reflexive in my own role as a teacher in further education. By listening to the student's accounts of their experience in further education I hope to improve my practice and enhance this educational opportunity for the students.

4.10 Reflective Journalling

A reflective journal is a written record by the researcher and is written throughout the research process. A reflective journal includes the details of what the researchers did, thought, and felt in the research process and the rationale behind those thoughts and perceptions. Jasper (2005) noted that "the purpose of

reflective writing is learning which will precipitate some form of action or change in behaviour... is to facilitate the researcher's discovery and provide a verifiable audit-trail of the research process." (p. 250). According to Russell and Kelly (2002), keeping self-reflective journals during the analysis process is a strategy that facilitates reflexivity by using the researchers' journals to examine "personal assumptions and goals" and to clarify "individual belief systems and subjectivities" (p. 2). This reflective practice encourages researchers to talk about the presuppositions, experiences, actions and the rationales behind their actions during the research process. Reflective writing, also enables researchers to broaden their perspectives and discover new thoughts and research practices and is particularly useful when things did not happen as planned and as one's thinking changes.

One of the main reasons why the qualitative researcher maintains a reflective journal is to achieve a rigorous research process. Issues of rigor in qualitative research refer to the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Smith (1999) highlighted in his study that written reflections on one's own feelings create an audit trail of one's reasoning which contributes to the trustworthiness of the findings. An audit trail also indicates the procedural steps that enhance the transparency of the process.

In line with good practice, I recorded a reflective journal with reflections on the study from the literature review and research design to data generation and data analysis. The following are extracts from this journal at various stages through the research process.

During the literature review I reflected on the extent of the literature and relevance to the research questions.

A lot of literature on the student experience, I feel a lot is relevant to FE students transitioning to HE. How do I capture it all with research questions?

I also reflected on how the literature compared to my own personal assumptions

Very interesting lit on how students who struggle unnoticed in college. Was I unaware because I have not been to college or is it generational? Had a conversation with []. my assumptions of the exciting experience of college dispelled. I wish I had been more aware when they [my children] were in

college. Overall, I feel after the lit review that I have more of an understanding of the holistic experience of college which is very important for relating to participants.

The journal was particularly valuable for reflexivity in the generation of the data. After the pilot interviews I recorded.

Went well, I was surprisingly very nervous! Established a good rapport, they were all lovely. Good practice for listening and notetaking. I need to be mindful of time as I tended to chat away and go off subject. I also have to be clearer with some questions and not ask multiple questions at once.

I continued to reflect following subsequent interviews on the quality of the data and need to communicate clearly with participants.

Getting good mix of participants, I think I am generating good data. A lot of similar findings but everyone seems to have something new to contribute which is great. Tweaking the questions as I go along, still mindful of being clear in my communication, some participants have asked for clarifications.

Other reflections were again on my perceptions compared to student's perceptions of FE and how this may influence the interpretation of the findings.

The issue of the stigma of FE has been raised by some participants. How does this reflect on my role as a teacher in FE? Do I feel less valued than teachers in other sectors?

I have met some really fabulous people during these interviews, people who genuinely love caring for people. It has restored my faith in nursing. Do I have a basis that all nurses are good and are undervalued?

Using the reflective journal also facilitated me in making decisions during the research process, for example in relation to the low level of response for participants.

I think I need to look to other ways of accessing students. I will ask participants if they know any FE graduates that may be interested in participating. Widen the circle, contact colleagues in other FE colleges, ask friends and family. Maybe contact Student Unions in HEIs? I will review invitation email, I will ask my current students for suggestions and make changes

I also considered data analysis

A lot of talk about NVivo in college. I am not sure with my limited IT skills. It would take a lot of time to get used to inputting data, I think I would get more of a feel for the data by doing it manually.

These journal extracts are just some examples of my reflections during this research. These and the other numerous reflections influenced the decisions making for this study and shaped the overall research process.

4.10.1 The insider researcher

Reflecting on their current role the researcher became aware of the different aspects, advantages and disadvantages of being an 'insider researcher'. The term 'insider research' is used when the researcher conducts studies with populations, communities, and identity groups of which they are also members (Kanuha, 2000, p. 439). As discussed previously I was keenly aware that being in the position of a teacher in further education could affect objectivity and create possible bias in the study. The difficulty with insider research is expressed by Bourdieu (1988) when the researcher is required to question and reconstitute their knowledge:

"In choosing to study the social world in which we are involved, we are obliged to confront, in dramatized form as it were, a certain number of fundamental epistemological problems, all related to the question of the difference between practical knowledge and scholarly knowledge, and particularly to the special difficulties involved first in breaking with inside experience and then reconstituting the knowledge that has been obtained by the means of this break." (p.1)

Following reflection on the perspective of being an 'insider' the researcher concurs with Kanuha (2000) that the biases and predispositions that are often attributed to insider research rather than being impediments may prove to be a source of insight.

Having a background as a teacher in further education I am very familiar with all aspects of the QQI Level 5 modules on the Nursing Studies and Healthcare Support awards. I has also gained an insight into the challenges and opportunities these awards have presented to students over many years of teaching. As noted by Clegg and Stevenson (2013) "She is a fish in the water, part of the habitus, with a feel for the rules of the game " (p. 7). This experience was an advantage in important respects, firstly, in the recruiting of the participants. Being a teacher in

further education facilitated the recruitment of participants through the professional network. I also found that the gatekeepers within the HEIs who were approached were very positive in regard to this study and expressed confidence in the conduct of study due to my nursing and teaching background. From the participants perspective they were informed from the recruitment process that I was a teacher in further education which provided an awareness of the my relatable background and experience. From the beginning of the research process I was able to establish a rapport with the participants and during the interviews having a similar background provided an easier understanding between the participants and myself. This experience was broadly in line with reflections by other researchers who found participants to be “more open with insider-researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58).

An important consideration in the data generation process was the nature of being on the ‘inside’ as a teacher is a different perspective than being a student in further education. It was crucial that the data collection captured the perspective of the participants and not influenced by my perspective. I was cognisant that each student had their own perspective of the experience of further education. To ensure trustworthiness of this study participants were drawn from diverse backgrounds and studied in a variety of further education providers. During the research fieldwork it became obvious that while the participants appeared to be a homogenous group, they had different perspectives on their experience and each participant brought their unique insight to the study.

Moreover, on some aspects I, as the researcher was more of an ‘outsider’ than ‘insider’, particularly in the area of nurse education. As discussed previously, I have a nursing background but my nursing qualification was gained through an apprenticeship training model and I have not worked in a clinical environment for many years. From this background I could relate to the participants in aspects of patient care such as empathy but nurse education in the form of the degree programme and the clinical environment where nurses now work is very different from my experience. As the participants were aware of my nursing background they often assumed that I was more familiar in various aspects of nursing, for example the participants often using nursing acronyms during the interviews that I

had not heard of previously. When this occurred, I sought clarity and used the opportunity to gain more knowledge for practice in further education.

Being an 'insider' researcher in terms of further education, while also retaining awareness of being an 'outsider' in relation to the contemporary model of nurse education, has been important for reflexivity during this study and has had implication for the data generation and for the data analysis. As the researcher, I recognised that one does not have to be a member of the group being studied to appreciate and adequately represent the experience of the participants. What was intrinsic to this study is not insider or outsider status but my ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of the research participants, and to be committed to representing their experience accurately and adequately (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009)

4.11 Limitations of research

Among the limitations of this research were that only one research method, the semi-structured interview was used for data collection. A questionnaire to be completed by academic staff in HEIs was considered to add validity to this research but on reflection this method was not pursued. The focus of this study was not to compare further education graduates to other students in higher education but to generate qualitative data drawing from perceptions of students who had progressed from further education to higher education.

As semi-structured interviews were chosen it would not have been possible to interview all students who are further education graduates progressing to higher education. The sample strategy incorporating students in a wide range of HEIs, pursuing different institutional missions and in different regions of the country ensured that as far as possible the research is representative of this cohort of students.

As students self-selected for participation in this study there may be a positive bias in favour of the influence of further education in their studies. The self-selection process was unavoidable, as due to GDPR restrictions it was not possible to access graduates of further education in higher education directly. Furthermore, students may have declined to participate depending on personal circumstances.

This study was conducted during the Covid 19 pandemic. The studies of all participants both in further education and higher education were significantly affected by the pandemic. The numerous effects of this pandemic and the possible influence on the student experience are discussed in the research findings.

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter begins by re stating the research questions and the intent of these questions. The rationale and focus of the study were described and the methodological considerations underpinning this qualitative study were presented. The decision to use semi structured interviews proved to be extremely useful and yielded rich data on the experience of students who progress from further education to higher education nursing degree programmes. The role of the researcher was discussed to identify how reflexivity was achieved throughout the research process and the advantages and limitations of being an 'insider researcher', at least in relation to some of the study, were identified. The use of thematic analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006) although very time consuming, enabled me to identify themes within the data. The coding process and theme development enabled the preparation of a scholarly report on the findings while telling the story of the participants of this research. These findings will be presented under the final themes in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Research Findings – Part 1

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience of students who progress from further education to undergraduate nursing degree programmes in higher education.

The research questions for this study were:

1. How do students pursuing undergraduate nursing programmes who had prior experience of study in further education perceive the influence of FE in their transition to undergraduate nursing courses in HE?
2. How or to what extent does the experience of FE influence the progression of students within undergraduate nursing undergraduate programmes in HE?

From thematic analysis of the findings of this study four themes emerged 'Personal growth', 'Insight to nursing', 'FE pedagogy', 'Preparation for HE' and 'Relationships in HE' The findings are outlined under these themes. Each theme is introduced and discussed under subthemes using direct quotations from participants to exemplify their individual experience.

The following two chapters outline the findings from the interviews with the thirty six students who successfully completed a QQI Level 5 Award in Nursing Studies or Healthcare Support in a further education college and are now undergraduate students in a nursing degree programme. The profile of participants is described previously in the methodology chapter outlining year of undergraduate study, discipline of nursing and participants who are mature students. As discussed previously this study did not include any other information from participants relating to socio-economic or ethnic background.

Sixteen of the participants undertook the QQI course as they did not have the points from their Leaving Certificate to access a place on a nursing degree programme. One participant had not completed a Leaving Certificate and gained access to the QQI Level 5 Nursing Studies Award through the QQI level 4 Youth

Reach Scheme. One participant was engaged in second chance education having left school at fourteen and completed Level 5 as a mature student and started the nursing degree programme at 23 years old. The remaining participants were all in the thirty to fifty year age group and had completed the Level 5 course for a variety of reasons. Four participants expressed the desire to do nursing from childhood but the opportunity did not present itself. Two participants wished to pursue nursing following a personal experience of being in hospital and the care they received from the nursing staff. Two participants were pursuing a change of career following job losses and four participants were seeking more job satisfaction from their current careers. Four participants were already working as health care assistants. While health care assistants are very important members of any health care team, these participants felt they were undervalued and there was no progression unless they completed a nursing degree. Another participant who had previously worked as a social care worker felt that she had reached her potential in that area and wanted to progress to nursing where she felt she could add more value in the area of intellectual disability.

All participants were using the pre nursing course as an access route to higher education but depending on the student's background there were differing objectives. Participants coming through the Leaving Certificate expressed the view that they wanted to ascertain if nursing was the correct career choice for them. Other participants who came from employment in the care area were also undertaking the Level 5 Award to ascertain their academic ability to undertake a Level 8 course or decided to apply for HE when they became more confident in their academic ability due to their FE assessment results. Similarly, other participants who wished to change careers though confident in their academic ability were unsure if they were able to commit to four years in third level due to personal circumstances.

All of the participants had a very positive experience in further education and considered it to be an integral part of their eventual progression to nursing, usually perceiving the Level 5 course as an essential step to the start of their nursing career. A number of expressions used by participants stand out in their perception of this part of their journey. The expression "stepping stone" used by four participants not only conveyed the concept of access and a bridge to the nursing

degree programme but their personal step into further and higher education. The expression “dipping my toes” was also used by three participants. This was a reference to further education allowing the students to evaluate if nursing and higher education was feasible for them before making the four year commitment of an undergraduate programme.

The formative influence of FE in supporting the participants through HE was evident through all the undergraduate years to graduation. For this study sixteen fourth year participants were preparing to graduate in various disciplines in nursing. Participants in the fourth year of the nursing degree acknowledged that the influence of further education remains significant. They spoke of referring back to knowledge and resources from further education throughout the undergraduate years. One participant about to graduate could not distinguish if knowledge and skills gained were from further or higher education. Another fourth year participant (P4) commented that the experience and knowledge gained in further education still makes him more committed to nursing. Many participants in third and fourth year remarked that they would not have progressed through their studies if not for the influence of further education. Their experience in FE provided them with the academic and personal skills, resilience and commitment, to continue and succeed in their studies. Although the fourth year participants had worked in health care settings in one of the most challenging times for the Irish health service at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, they were still as committed to nursing as they were after the QQI Level 5 Award. These fourth year participants were ready to enter the labour market post-graduation having a vocationally relevant degree with the necessary skills and abilities for immediate employability (Jones, 2018) and as graduates of further education these students had significant experience working in the area of their future employment. All fourth year participants who were interviewed as part of this study expressed the intention to remain in the nursing profession and to be employed in Ireland for the foreseeable future. Although this study only represents a very small percentage of nurse graduates in Ireland in 2022, this finding is in sharp contrast to the report by the INMO (2023) that 75% of nursing and midwifery graduates were considering emigrating upon graduation.

An important consideration for me as the researcher when interviewing the participants for this study was the Covid -19 pandemic. As a teacher in further

education I was teaching online during this time which was very stressful as both knowledge and practical skills are part of the curriculum. I also had the experience of being a student at this time during the first and second year of the D.Ed programme. During the interviews the use of the reflective journal enabled me to reflect on my own personal experience and to be aware of how my perspective from this experience might influence the generation of the data. When reflecting on the data generated I perceived that the Covid pandemic did not adversely affect the experience of further education as much as I had anticipated. This provided me as a teacher with the reassurance that under difficult circumstances students continued to have a positive experience in further education and also enabled me to minimise any bias on my part in relation to interpreting the data..

As students from all undergraduate years were interviewed, Covid had affected some in further education and all in various years of the undergraduate programme. This cohort of students had already had online learning for the latter part of their last year of secondary school. They had also missed out a great deal in that period of their lives such as second level graduations and coming of age celebrations. Although further education was offered through online platforms such as TEAMS, teachers engaged guest speakers to provide variety in classes and to give students an insight to nursing practice when students were unable to access work experience. Teachers also continued to prepare students for progression to college by maintaining a classroom environment and by the use of breakout rooms online which also facilitated social integration. These participants remained engaged in learning and succeeded in obtaining the necessary requirements for the Higher Education Links Scheme under very difficult circumstances. These participants who had not completed work experience in further education were able to gain experience in a care environment using their qualification as health care assistant in nursing homes. This was very valuable experience before commencing the degree programme.

All of the participants had experienced some part of their undergraduate studies online. Most of the participants indicated that their preference was to be on campus, particularly the mature students as they felt that they were missing out on the long anticipated campus experience. However, one advantage mentioned mainly by the mature students was that they did not have often long commutes.

They were able to organise their studies more efficiently during Covid particularly where there were gaps between lectures. Three participants felt that they would have achieved higher academic grades if they had been on campus citing lack of motivation while receiving lectures online in their own home, the lack of adequate study space and poor internet connection. The majority of participants felt that Covid had the most impact on their clinical skills and placements and a significant number of participants spoke of the value of modules covered in Level 5 such as *Infection Prevention and Control* and previous work experience in FE during this challenging time in healthcare. When participants were undertaking placements, particularly for students doing the general nursing programmes, the units were extremely busy with very sick patients and staff shortages. All staff were working under stressful conditions and opportunities for learning experiences were limited. One participant commented that in the module *Work Experience* in further education he had learned conflict management and coping skills that he was now using in his first year in college and found it of great benefit during a stressful time.

Lack of social interaction on campus was not a particular issue for these participants. They maintained contact with class colleagues through social media and were working together on placements. Participants were also able to connect in other environments such as working as healthcare assistants at the weekends. Overall the participants indicated that they coped very well during the pandemic and felt that despite the challenges they achieved their potential and were happy with their experience of being nursing students.

In this first chapter the two themes of 'Personal Growth' and 'Insight to Nursing' will be discussed. These themes exemplify the findings of the formative experience of FE for the participants of this study. During their time in FE, participants developed life skills and personal attributes which influenced their transition to higher education and progression through the nursing degree but also had wider long term significance. FE provided the participants the opportunity of time and a nurturing space to continue or return to education and to make important life choices which had implications for many aspects of their lives, in particular self-fulfilment.

5.2 Personal growth

Participants reported that during their time in FE they experienced a period of personal growth. One participant spoke of being 'a better version of themselves' following their experience of FE. Other participants reported that during this period they had opportunities to self-reflect and had become more self-aware which resulted in the enhancement of personal qualities for their professional and personal lives. These participants perceived this personal growth as beginning integral to their decision to pursue further studies. Ten participants spoke of FE as creating further opportunities in their lives not only to develop but continue their personal growth. These opportunities encompassed employment, further studies and extracurricular activities as this P.6 remarked:

"Further education was my only option at the time, but in the space of the year I had so many more options." (P6)

Reflecting on their experience in FE participants reported development in their personal and interpersonal skills through the knowledge and skills gained in class and on work experience. Their interaction with teachers, peers and others over the course of the Level 5 programme facilitated self-awareness and personal growth. This personal growth was perceived by participants as enhancing their attitudes and attributes both as potential nursing students and as individuals. The participants' account of their personal growth emerged as the sub themes of 'Gaining confidence', 'Life skills', 'Commitment' and 'Achieving goals'

5.2.1 Gaining confidence

Participants were asked the question "had you changed as a person after doing the course in further education?" The most common response expressed by participants indicated that they had gained confidence to varying degrees in FE. In this subtheme how, this growth in confidence influenced the personal development of the participants and their perception of its influence on their subsequent experience in HE is considered.

Four participants reported that confidence in their academic ability and self - belief in their ability to pursue a nursing career was influential in their decision to continue with further studies in HE as these fourth and first year participants noted:

"I've been given the confidence now in my own ability and my academic side. And can I do well and can I actually finish a proper undergrad degree and I wouldn't have gone and progressed with nursing if I didn't have that confidence." (P6)

"The PLC, it actually just gave me the confidence. It gave me the boost. I think I needed to actually say to myself, Oh, yeah, right. Let's go. Let's do college. Let's move on." (P24)

One first year participant commented on the confidence she gained in further education and how it was an important learning opportunity for the transition to HE:

"When I went into [HE] I wasn't shocked to feel that you have to get to your place. There's no one to tell you where to go, that kind of independence that you would have as an adult I didn't have before, but that year in [FE] really gave me that, I suppose the confidence to know where to go, to get things done because I know no one's going to do it for me.... That's that was the great best thing about the level five was you did have that opportunity to make mistakes and learn. So that way, when you went to, to like [HE] for your bachelor's degree, you kind of knew what to expect." (P17)

Another first year participant compared how her preconceived experience of HE would have been after Leaving Certificate, to her actual experience of first year in the undergraduate programme following FE:

"I think as well when I was in school personally I was a really shy person. I wouldn't speak up and I'd be sitting at the back of the class with my head down, I'd be whispering nearly and even just doing the PLC and like getting into the work life, I've gained a lot more confidence and I know how like even working in a nursing home, if I had seen something that I didn't agree with, I have more confidence to actually speak up and like voice my concerns and everything and I think that's an advantage to me now in college because if I came from the Leaving Cert, I wouldn't be as confident to speak up in class and I wouldn't be as confident to actually go into the skills labs and demonstrate my skills and stuff like that." (P31)

The benefit of the confidence gained in FE was also reflected in clinical placement as another fourth year participant testified:

"And I just feel like the experience of further education gives you that confidence and that push to say to like a nurse, whatever. Look, I think you should double check this patient's respirations or you can talk to a doctor about a patient or do a handover with a nurse and you just don't feel as nervous." (P25)

This growth in confidence following FE was perceived by participants regardless of age. Three mature participants spoke specifically of the value of giving presentations for the *Communications* module which is mandatory for all QQI awards, speaking in a supportive learning environment benefited these students by increasing their self-confidence in group situations:

“so, presentations were great, some group work, but more on the individual one because it helped me to gain more confidence talking in front of the class and presenting and kind of talking about your own ideas behind your work.” (P7)

“And I suppose the module learning itself and actually standing up and giving the presentation, for the communication module, and standing up in front of the group and doing the report. I hadn't done that in years and getting experience in presentations and just honing my skills in that side of things and interpersonal skills, I've been 13 years in an office of my own.” (P20)

“And talk in front of people, you know? Different people and new people I wouldn't have had confidence do that before.” (P10)

Another mature participant described the experience in FE as a time for self-exploration and increased awareness of others. This facilitated greater social engagement and participation in student representation and societies in HE:

“I think it definitely helped me settle in the sense I was more comfortable in myself as a person, but I was also more aware of other people as where they might be. I suppose it made me comfortable then to kind of integrate into socialising, to speak to people... Yeah, I like, I ended up then kind of signing up to be a student rep and getting involved with sports society end of it and I do think again that's because I got the time to explore myself in the pre nursing that I felt comfortable to get involved.” (P22)

This mature participant commented on how the time to reflect and the diversity of the groups in FE built her confidence and put her in the mindset of being a student in higher level. This is important in facilitating the development of learner identity as a third level student:

“I think it, for me anyway, it gave me time to reflect, I mightn't have been the most confident and I suppose the pre-nursing course had me working with people from different walks of life and who were coming into different stages of life. I suppose it allowed me time to kind of self-reflect and build my own confidence in public speaking in academic writing, and kind of put me then into that mind space of becoming a third level student.” (P22)

Another fourth year participant spoke of how her personal growth in FE was important for her decision to continue her studies to become a nurse:

“and it really helps you develop and you see whether you actually have what it takes to be a nurse.” (P30)

5.2.2 Life skills

Participants reported the development of a range of many different personal and interpersonal skills in FE. The participants discussed how their time in FE was a year of change for them as individuals and how these skills impacted their lives both personally and professionally.

Four participants who had come straight from Leaving Certificate mentioned that they had matured over the year pursuing the FE course and felt they were much more prepared for life as a third level student, having acquired life skills such as independent living and moving away from home for college:

“like I definitely became more independent. When you start college, you do become more independent. You have to, there's no like teachers or there's no parents have to sign your journal saying you won't be in tomorrow. Like it's purely down to you.” (P12)

Five participants reported that the experience of FE had enhanced their motivation. Having worked hard in FE to achieve the requirements of their undergraduate course, they were motivated to progress to and through higher education:

“I think I would have been actually more motivated going into college, then if I went straight in from my Leaving Cert. Because like, what I've gone through during the PLC, to get into college. And then now I'm in college, and it feels like, I've already been two years into it and I'm super really want to do well, on my degree. Get my dream job.” (P19)

“Well, once I put in all of the work and I kind of realized where it was heading, I knew for sure whatever place I ended up in I was going to do it. That this is kind of the career path that I wanted and I knew that when I went to do my Leaving Cert anyway that that was something I wanted. But I just didn't have the points for it in my Leaving Cert so I knew it was going to come later in life, it definitely made me want to do it even more.” (P9)

Eleven participants noted being part of a class in further education with people from diverse backgrounds as giving valuable life lessons. Participant 6 described it

as realising her social privilege. Her personal contacts allowed her to gain work experience in areas that would not be accessible to other students.:

“Everyone kind of went into a nursing home mainly like, they were the only people that would take them. And then I remember I got a place through connections, I got a place in [WE] for three weeks. And I remember it was like, I just really felt bad you don't realize you're in that bubble until you kind of are in that situation...” (P6)

This participant could see how her fee paying school education and family support had given her opportunities that were not available to other students

“It's good from a like development of self like. I feel like I'm definitely a nicer person now and maybe a bit more aware of the situation I grew up in.” (P6)

Another first year participant said the diverse composition of the FE class gave him an insight into different cultures, ethnicities and age backgrounds and greater respect for other opinions:

“And it just helped me understand more the different kind of generational gaps in their values, the different ethnic groups that could be there and how they value something differently too. So, when I went out to work as a carer, I was looking at the bio, the ethnic diversity then, and seeing it from their point of view. But I would not have had that luxury if I didn't do that [FE] so I feel like it's helping me in on my way.” (P17)

The participants felt because of the diverse background of students in further education that they were challenged to evaluate themselves in relation to their interaction with others and those who commented on this aspect believed that they had become more tolerant of people with differing views. This was noted by two mature participants:

“I feel I've become more tolerant of people as well. Because I learned from level five that people have different views. I learned that we don't always see the picture as black and white, it's great that I have a view. And then someone comes up with another view. Like that's what level five actually did, like I became tolerant.” (P15)

“I suppose it [FE] forced you to then to kind of look at your own, I suppose your tolerance in your own opinions on people or on things and kind of challenge your own prejudices.” (P22)

A first year participant who had completed further education after Leaving Certificate also commented that she had become a more caring and empathetic

person after work experience on the PLC. She considered that developing these personal skills were crucial to undertaking a nursing degree programme:

"It just changed like who I am as a person. I think working with people with dementia or even with some people in the nursing home that I worked in, it's changed my whole perspective on how I see people like that. I don't like saying it I wouldn't have even thought about it before I did my course. I think I'm more of a caring person and like I'm kind of more empathetic with people rather than if I didn't do it [FE]." (P31)

Increased self-awareness following the experience of FE was reported also by a first year participant, which certainly influenced their future approach to study in HE:

"I definitely learned last year that I am a procrastinator. So I knew this year that it was like, okay, we've got to buckle down this year, because we know you're going to procrastinate and to be fair, I did like, I got my assignments done in time I had a good few days, like a week or two to spare. I definitely learned how to manage that better." (P24)

Another first year participant's explained how greater self-awareness from FE has helped to manage stress in HE:

"And I suppose I'm more self-aware as in like I know if I don't put the time into something like it's not going to benefit me it's just going to build my stress levels up more. I feel in nursing you realize that quite soon, like if you're stressed clearly something you're doing isn't working for you." (P32)

A fourth year participant also recognised the importance of self-awareness for managing the demands of HE in progression through the degree programme:

"Do you know there is so much expected of you and I suppose if you're not self-aware of yourself and like how things work for you or how you like to learn, it's not going to work for you because the workload keeps on coming but if you're prepared and know to do it right. Okay, like what needs prioritizing to do first and then second definitely after the PLC then I suppose I kind of had the basics foundations of how to learn." (P36)

Four participants indicated that prior experience of further education built resilience during difficult times in higher education, as one mature participant acknowledged:

"If I had done my mature assessment and gone straight into college. I don't think I'd have had the willpower to continue through the tough times or through the evenings where you might have an assignment to do at the end of the week and you just want to throw it all away and think it's not worth it. But it does give you

that extra level of commitment like I've done this for the year. This is what I want to do and I'm committing myself going forward to doing this ... Yeah, that it is OK to say it's tough. But you can do that without falling apart or without, you know, needing a weekend of crying.” (P1)

The ability to understand their capability and having prior achievements was intrinsic to helping them continue and succeed in their endeavours. Successfully completing the QQI Level 5 awards gave participants self-efficacy to continue with their studies. This was acknowledged by two participants who had just completed the first year of the undergraduate programme:

“what definitely kept me going was that I was able to do that for the first year and get the results enough to be able to do college, surely I am than able to do it.” (P1)

“But I cannot understate what the course in level five did for me for this year, it's been my kind of foundation that's kept me going.” (P18)

The supportive nature of FE was described by another fourth year participant as:

“I feel like the QQI helped a lot, it provided like almost a blanket.” (P4)

A fourth year participant credited personal development in FE as being crucial to her progression through the undergraduate programme:

“I think if I had gone straight from school, thinking of the person I was before I did the pre-nursing course, I probably would have let it all get on top of me and maybe have even dropped out in first year. I feel that I wouldn't have had the maturity or the skills to, I don't know what the word is, but staying myself through four years.” (P30)

5.2.3 Commitment

Thirteen participants reported that doing the Level 5 Nursing Studies and Healthcare Support awards reinforced their commitment to continue their nursing studies. Following their academic success and practical experience of the care environment, these participants had an accurate understanding from their experience of FE of what was required to undertake a four year degree programme. This awareness coupled with reinforced commitment to their career facilitated the development of their identities as both learners in HE and nursing students and prepared them for the transition to HE.

One mature participant had interesting observations on how this commitment from the influence of FE may differ from students coming from the Leaving Certificate;

“And I think the QQI, if you're using that as an access route, it's kind of more of a direct reflection on the person, the type of nurse they're going to be. Because they physically put in that work for their distinctions on the subject matter where if you have a good photographic memory, you will do well in the leaving cert....if you're going in as a mature or coming from a pre-nursing, why you want it is probably already more solidified than somebody coming in from Leaving Cert. You're doing it for you, with the Leaving Cert they might be doing it because mom and dad is a nurse.” (P22)

Two participants reported that FE tutors recognising their potential was influential in reinforcing commitment to pursuing studies in higher education. Participant 25 described how a teacher in FE encouraged her to pursue nursing as a career:

“She was our communications teacher, when you'd hear from them like you're definitely in the right line and you're definitely doing what you should be doing you're so suited. That's what kind of put it in perspective for me that I definitely was right for what I was on the road for.” (P25)

Further education also influenced career choice within the discipline of nursing for two participants who subsequently progressed to other areas of nursing than previously anticipated after completing the QQI Level 5 Award. They highlighted that the course offered valuable experience in making a different choice in nursing. These participants referenced enhanced student experiences and career prospects when choosing a discipline that was more aligned to their interest and personal attributes:

“I actually would have never considered doing nursing only for doing the pre nursing course. Where I only wanted to do Midwifery, but then when I came to learn a bit more about nursing ... So that kind of made me re-evaluate what way I wanted to progress in my studies.” (P21)

“I was hoping to get general nursing before doing the PLC. But I kind of decided to do the mental health branch when I got into the nursing course...it helped me transition from having a general nursing mindset to a more mental health mindset going into college.” (P23)

Another participant made a comment that suggests that similarly, academic staff in higher education had expressed positive views regarding FE students:

"that's what our lecturers were saying, we love the QQI girls because they know that it's something that you really want to do, because you've already tested it." (P5)

The reinforcement of their commitment to pursuing nursing in higher education following their positive experience of FE was important not only in preparing students for transition to HE but also the progression through the nursing programme. At the end of fourth year in the undergraduate programme the influence of further education in reinforcing their commitment to a career in nursing was acknowledged by a fourth year higher education student:

"even now the stuff I covered in the pre nursing still kind of gets me more committed into nursing." (P4)

5.2.4 Achieving goals

One of the major findings of this study was the influence of FE for participants in achieving life goals not simply in relation to subsequent study but in terms of self-fulfilment. Twelve participants spoke of how further education had enabled them to achieve their goal of pursuing higher education and self-fulfilment in life:

"I've done really well. Like I'm proud of myself for even getting this far." (P3)

"I thought I'd never make it into third level and I'm there. I thought, no, I wouldn't last more than two, three weeks or an assignment. I'm nearly done my first year and I've met people that I'll be friends with the rest of my life. I just keep thinking if I never did this I would've been missing out." (P17)

A fourth year participant expressed the view that the experience of FE influenced her development as a person in such a positive way so that she had become a 'better version' of herself:

"If I had gotten into college after my Leaving Cert, so I wonder what kind of students or person I would be now and not having gone to [FE], I feel like I'm the better version of myself now." (P6)

A mature participant in second year perceived that she developed her own distinct identity in FE and was fulfilling her own goals at the end of the first year of the undergraduate programme:

"Yeah. I feel like a different person the last two years. Definitely, I Just feel like me rather than a mom or somebody's wife or whatever, I actually feel like me, this is what I want to do." (P9)

Two participants spoke of the influence of further education in changing their mindset to develop commitment to learning for the first time which allowed them to achieve their goals in progressing to HE:

"My Leaving Cert was abysmal. The FETAC course was nearly like a last shot to get into college. It was a kind of a very, like stark realization for me, work efforts, you need to do both to actually get into college. And I knew I wanted to go to college. And so it was kind of the kick that I needed. And it was ... it just kind of like I don't know, something clicked for me." (P6)

Another participant spoke of this shift in mindset enabling her to make an important life choice in pursuing a nursing career:

"I definitely seen a shift in the person I was before I did the course and after I felt much more focused, I had a plan then of what I wanted. After the course, that was the turning point because I knew I didn't want to be a HCA." (P14)

One first year participant explains how she developed an genuine interest in learning for the first time during the course in FE. This change in perception enabled her to pursue education to obtain qualifications for employment.

I feel like it made me a lot ..more interested in education, I think because when I was in secondary school, I used to hate having to do like Irish and my maths and like, just different subjects....So it was just kind of like you're not even bothered, it was like a chore. When I went into the [FE] and it was like I really enjoyed it. So, it wasn't as much of a chore doing stuff. So, I think that when I actually went to university, I'm going in here to learn because I want to get my job or whatever, so it definitely made me more into like studying. " (P19)

Sixteen participants were in the fourth year of the degree programme. They were about to commence or already completing their internship element of the nursing degree programme. At the end of their studies all of these participants were very happy with their career choice and despite the difficulties associated with Covid were overall satisfied with the delivery of nursing degree programmes in the colleges that they had attended. Their commitment to nursing reinforced by further education had sustained them over the four years of undergraduate studies. All sixteen final year participants expressed the desire to stay in nursing and a number of students were currently interviewing for nurse graduate positions. Participants also expressed the desire after gaining more clinical experience to continue with their studies and do post graduate diplomas and Master degrees.

Despite the many challenges encountered over the four years all participants had positive learning experience in third level. Reflecting back on the influence of further education, all sixteen fourth year participants stated that having a QQI level 5 qualification was invaluable to their transition and progression in HE. Eight of these participants expressed the view that without having completed a Level 5 Award that they would have not been able to complete the nursing degree and credited further education as the key to their success in third level education as P34 commented:

“And to be honest, I actually feel that if I didn't go to the PLC course that I don't think I would've had the same chance of succeeding in my studies in college, because they help me a lot.” (P34)

Even more striking was the comment by another fourth year participant:

“I don't think I'd have managed to even think about finishing first year had I not done the course [PLC] beforehand.” (P1)

Other fourth year participants voiced identical or similar sentiments:

“they [FE] really helped me to get where I am today because other than that, I've never made it.” (P3)

“I definitely benefited from doing further education course because I would not have done well going straight into this course. Had I not done further education, yeah, I think I probably would have dropped out in first year.” (P9)

“I think I would have been a mess if I hadn't done the further education. I couldn't have got through first year, even been online.” (P16)

These participants therefore testified to the central role that the Level 5 Awards played in their transition to college and perceived that the experience of the PLC in further education was crucial to their successful completion of the degree course.

One fourth year participant was so positive regarding her experience in FE that she mentioned that it was one of the best decisions of her life:

“I loved it, I would recommend it to anybody. I was awful disheartened when I didn't get my points and I thought it was the end of the world, but I think it was definitely, and I'll still say the PLC was the best thing I ever did and I would say to anybody that has kids or anything that's coming up to that stage, my God do it, it's only nine months.” (P11)

Another first year participant was also felt she had made the correct decision in doing the PLC:

"I genuinely think if I did do my Leaving Cert again right now and I did get the points I would, with the experience that I have now, I would go back and do a PLC again. Even though it would be, it would take the extra year longer to get there. It's worth it because you do so much better when you actually do get to college." (P31)

This first year participant who was a mature student perceived that further education had provided supports that made the experience of HE less difficult for her compared to other students:

"From further ed to higher ed to the degree course, it's definitely been easier because of the further education. I sit in the room and I look around and I think, I don't know how many of those people are getting through that didn't do the further education beforehand." (P1)

Two other participants expressed the view that the experience of FE was so beneficial that they recommended that all students should do a QQI Level 5 award before commencing an undergraduate nursing programme:

"I just think, start to finish everything in it, I feel... that it was very, very important to do it. I think it should be made mandatory that you have to do that before you go on to do nursing, I really do." (P16)

it's just a really good thing to do. I think it should be mandatory to do nursing and you should have to do the FETAC beforehand." (P25)

In relation to this subtheme, participants also highlighted two issues which may have influenced the participants in their decision to undertake the course in FE and to achieve their goal of becoming a nurse. Although only a small number of participants who referenced these issues these findings are potentially significant to this study.

Four participants who came from secondary school to FE expressed concerns about the public perception of FE. They felt that among their peers and the general public, further education was not considered as a credible progression route but as an area of education for students with limited academic ability and educational opportunities:

"There seems to be this view that if you can't get your degree, you settle for further education." (P18)

Another participant made a more pointed observation as she felt let down by her secondary school and that students who wished to proceed to further education were not encouraged or valued:

"I don't think it's encouraged enough, throughout the Leaving Cert. Like it's a lot from what I can remember doing my Leaving Cert, like it was very much, there was a big focus on, we say students that were applying for the CAO or, you know, UCAS and stuff like that. I think people that were considering further education, ... you were pushed to one side because all you needed was your Leaving Cert...and there was more of a focus on your students that needed big points or whatever. There was no kind of encouragement to, there was no kind of like pat on the back kind of to go do it. It was kind of like, oh, keep ye in the corner" (P11)

Two other participants, however believed that it was the negative perception of further education among peers, not necessarily teachers or school authorities, led to the negative connotations associated with further education:

"I felt like I had failed the Leaving Cert. If I had told someone that I was doing a PLC, it was like you failed. Yeah. So, I used to, I never even said that I was doing Nursing Studies. I was just like, I was doing nursing, but technically I wasn't." (P11)

"Even in the first few months, I was mortified to tell anyone I was doing the PLC because it was nearly like you were looked upon on, that girl is not academic, that girl's not smart she had to do a PLC it's terrible, really. It was always like that. Even like when you were in fifth year or TY when you kind of started figuring out what was ahead of you..... It was a bad thing doing a PLC and not so much by teachers. Our teachers always praised them and said, there is nothing wrong going to a PLC. It was students, it was people your age going, God, don't be doing a PLC that's embarrassing." (P12)

Unfortunately for this participant this sense of stigma, driven by the negative perception of FE among peers remained strong, although she acknowledged the positive role of further education in facilitating her entry and successful navigation of higher education:

"probably still to this day, if there was any one particular person to ask me, what did you do after secondary school anyway? I just, I probably just say, oh I worked for two years and then just went into nursing then. Yeah, I probably wouldn't say that I did a PLC even though I had such a great experience and it really helped me when I went into third level." (P12)

Other participants who perceived FE as integral to them achieving their life goals also expressed disappointment in the limited number of places in undergraduate nursing programmes available for students who completed Level 5

Awards. Three participants reported that even after exceeding the required number of distinctions that they had to apply several times through the Higher Education Links Scheme before securing a place on the degree programme. Six participants did not secure a place in their first choice discipline in nursing and two subsequently changed degree programmes. Two participants also reported that they previously taken places in higher education in the United Kingdom to pursue a career in nursing and due to personal circumstances were unable to continue their studies in the UK. This was the experience of participant 35:

"I got no offers for general nursing from the PLC even though I got nine distinctions in the modules. And a good few of the girls I'd say two of the group got places in Ireland and the rest travelled off to Scotland or England or wherever, it was disappointing to say the least after all the hard work.. I wasn't really comfortable in England, I wanted to be home." (P35)

One first year participant felt that further education providers should have flagged these limitations more fully in advance:

"I think further education could have prepared myself and other students that the places are very limited on nursing and that's not possible for everyone to kind of get in. I think a lot of people that come into the course didn't really have an understanding of that. And you know there's a lot of disappointment at the end when you work really hard for a year and then even if you get the results you're not guaranteed a place so that can be very disappointing for people." (P9)

Another fourth year participant said that due to the perception of further education and limited number of places for FE graduates in HE, students, trying to obtain a place on a nursing degree programme were repeating the Leaving Certificate rather than going to FE:

"Like even some of the colleges, like some of the huge universities, I think [HEI] when I was applying, it only had one place reserved. And like the amount of PLC courses that are around the country it's nearly like, why would you do it then? I know some of my friends who didn't get their points, they actually went back to repeat the Leaving Cert because they said it was too much of a risk cause they were afraid of doing the year and not getting it." (P11)

Three other participants also felt that higher education institutions are missing out on students who are well prepared and committed to the choice of course:

"...they don't give very many places out for the FETAC students you've got all the criteria but it's just a random selection. So they just put a number

against your name and if your number comes up, your number comes up and if it doesn't, it doesn't. But they miss out on a lot of good people that way.” (P5)

These findings are important as based on these participants testimonies the poor perception of further education may have discouraged second level students from pursuing their goal of becoming a nurse or discouraged them from pursuing a PLC route in favour of repeating the Leaving Certificate. Moreover, the restricted access for FE graduates to progress to nursing degrees was regarded by a subset of these participants as an obstacle to students reaching their full potential both in education and professionally.

5.3 Insight to nursing

An important aspect of the formative experience of FE for the participants was gaining an insight into nursing as a profession and future career. Having realistic expectations of nursing enabled participants to make the significant life choice of pursuing an undergraduate nursing degree to becoming a nurse.

For the 18 mature participants this constituted a career change and for the other 18 participants it was their first choice of career post-secondary education. Choosing the right career path for all the participants had many implications for them both personally and professionally, having the experience of FE gave them opportunities to make the informed decision regarding their career path.

For the majority of participants, the FE experience influenced the development of the professional identity of a nurse. The facilitation of the development of this identity in FE was invaluable for the participants in their transition to and progression in the nursing undergraduate programme. How this nurse identity developed is discussed under the three subthemes of ‘Role of the nurse’, ‘The value of work experience’, and ‘FE tutor as role models’

Having completed the Level 5 Nursing Studies and Healthcare Support award courses, twenty eight participants reported gaining an insight into nursing as a profession. From the knowledge gained from the modules completed in FE participants had an understanding of the healthcare system in Ireland and equally important the role and the responsibilities of a nurse as part of the healthcare team. In FE they also had developed competency in care skills which enabled

them to participate in caring for patients on early work placements. Participants also developed soft skills such as communication and teamwork from their experience in FE. Participants identified these skills as being invaluable when they were on clinical placements in higher education facilitating a sense of belonging in the clinical setting.

Participants also testified to the role of the tutors in FE being an inspiration to them in pursuing a career in nursing. The tutors by recounting in class their personal accounts from their nursing experience, demonstrated their own passion for nursing. Their caring and compassionate attitudes for their students in FE served as role models for the participants.

Observing the day to day activities of nurses while on work experience exemplified the reality of nursing versus their expectations. Caring for patients in a healthcare setting not only provided practical experience of skills but reinforced their commitment to nursing as a career. Participants were aware of the attributes required for nursing and the working conditions of nurses. This reinforced their commitment to nursing as they were confident in their ability to provide nursing care and the satisfaction they gained in assisting others.

5.3.1 Role of the nurse

A nursing degree is distinctive due to its professional requirements and clinical practice. Nurse education aims to provide professional competencies in both knowledge and skills. Essential requirements for professional nurses also include certain personal attributes and interpersonal skills to meet the challenges and responsibility of caring for another individual. Significant findings emerged from this study in relation to the influence of further education in developing an understanding among students of the concept of nursing or as one student noted, 'The art of nursing':

"And it's not a matter of filling in the forms or filling in the chart. It's actually the vocational skills and the art of nursing and kind of coming around people in general." (P20)

One first year participant describes how she became aware of the different aspects on nursing, which varied widely from the perception she had previously:

“there were so many different aspects of nursing that I wouldn't even thought of before I went into further ed.... But like even just getting to talk to the nurses and looking over care plans and finding out what it that they really do, it was really eye opening ...rather than what I thought from the Leaving Cert.”
(P31)

In the module *Nursing Theory and Practice* on the QQI Level 5 Award the professional role and scope of the nurse are addressed. In this module, students are made aware of the standards required for registration for nurses in the Irish context and the legislative processes involved. This gives the students an insight into nursing as a profession before they commence their degree studies. This is important so that students understand the responsibility of nursing as it is an intrinsic part of the profession. A range of participants testified to the formative influence of further education in shaping their understanding of nursing and preparing them for professional practice when they become graduate nurses as this first year participants commented:

“We kind of went through a lot in the further education, and even just like nursing scope of practice, that was really helpful actually..... Our actual scope of practice and what we can and can't be doing as nurses, in our placements as student nurses and also to know when we're actually graduated how to maintain our pin and things like that. It probably gave you a much clearer view of the role of the nurse of what I would be practicing.”
(P9)

Another mature participant testified that the Nursing Studies course helped him to ‘hit the ground running...’ in terms of being prepared for the professional practice of nursing. He also suggested that students coming from the Leaving Certificate may not have an understanding of the role and responsibility of the professional nurse and how this insight into the caring responsibility of nurses gained from further education has been an advantage for him in higher education:

’“Because you are going to be a nurse and the responsibility or the autonomy of a nurse and the litigation but I suppose again, coming from pre-nursing, you're kind of able to hit the ground running on, where if you're coming from a Leaving Cert perspective, you've this massive challenge of that kind of mindset or whatever, where pre-nursing have prepared you to kind of step into the shoes... And I think the pre-nursing have gotten you ready to put in that foundation for yourself because you understand that if you work in the shop and you're lazy all day, the shelves are empty. Whereas if you apply that into a nursing environment, there is a patient, a person in a bed who is suffering. And I think that's kind of put into you from your pre-nursing that there is that responsibility.” (P22)

Another fourth year participant also spoke about how FE underlined the importance of the role of the nurse, particularly in relation to patient care and safety:

“you’re watching yourself all the time, you know, the nature of the job, it’s a very serious job and patient safety is number one. I suppose in terms of that and the responsibility of that but, having done the nursing studies course, I suppose that made me very aware of it and more conscious of it.” (P20)

Acknowledging this responsibility, three participants highlighted the importance of learning not primarily to pass the course but to ensure the safety and care of the patients. They mentioned the practice of continuously observing and asking questions while on placements. Two other participants also spoke of doing extra reading outside the course to have a more comprehensive view of patient’s conditions and care. This understanding of the important role of the nurse in the care and safety of patients originally gleaned from further education was aptly summarised by a fourth year participant:

“it’s just the nature of what you need to know, though. It’s an incredibly privileged position to be in you have an awful lot of power without realising it. So, you have to, you do have to appreciate it like.” (P4)

5.3.2 The value of work experience

Work experience in a care setting forms an integral part of the level 5 Nursing Studies and Healthcare Support awards. Students in the Nursing Studies Award are required to have a minimum of 60 hours work experience and those pursuing the Healthcare Support award are required to have 120 hours in a healthcare setting. This experience is vital for students to be fully aware of the skills and attributes required for caring for patients. Working as part of the healthcare team students observe the roles of each member of the team. In this study twenty two participants described their experience on these work experience placements. The participants were able to see first-hand the role and everyday activities of the nurse. They worked the same shifts as staff in their placements and gained experience in all aspects of the placement. This enabled students to have a realistic view of the career that they were pursuing when undertaking the nursing degree programme.

One first year participant spoke of the experience of working shifts with long hours highlighting the importance being exposed to what would be a feature of their future career as P33 acknowledged:

“but I was doing the 12 hours and I can't thank the PLC enough for that because when I now go on and do the nursing and I'm doing 12 hours, it's just going to be like every other day to me.” (P33)

Another fourth year participant also alluded to the reality that nursing can be at times difficult emotionally and that the perception of nursing can be different to the reality:

“And I think it just kind of fostered that in us to realise that, and then of course, the whole harsh reality of working 12 hour shifts and all that, like I suppose the cold hard face of it, it's not all, it's not very glamorous, it's not glamorous at times it can be quite distressing, but that's the best part. That's the way to really truly realise it. And I think it's good the QQI shows that's the reality of it like.” (P20)

Participants were exposed to the sometimes harsh reality of nursing but believed that this was balanced by the satisfaction and personal fulfilment that they experienced when caring for patients. P20 highlighted the importance of this experience in opening up a ‘whole new world’ orientated around caring for other people:

“[the experience]..really consolidate for me the fulfilment that you get from caring for someone else and the families that you support, and a whole new world, meeting new people and it's the people you meet along the way and the patients I cared for.” (P20)

This experience in a nursing environment secured for the participants direct experience of what a career in nursing would entail and were confident in their choice of study in higher education, as P33 and P2 noted:

“But just even work experience I think was just the highlight for me. Like just the 12 hours and you're alongside nurse, you're alongside of care, you're looking, it's literally right in front of you, like your career's right in front of you.” (P33)

“So it really prepared me maybe because it introduced me and exposed me to the day to day activities of nurses in the hospital. So, I got to understand if I want to be a registered nurse what is it going to be like. So, it really introduced me to that so it was very useful.” (P2)

This mature participant reported being more confident, less stressed and being able to use their initiative on work placements:

“And from doing and carrying out my work experience, added to my confidence and my abilities, and pushed me out of my comfort zone. And I was using things that I've never used before, not alone use them, but pronounce the names of them... I wasn't afraid to say to the nurse. Yeah. I'll do that for you. I can do that. I wasn't afraid to see something through to the end whereas before I would like to be chaperoned.” (P13)

An important aspect of professional identity is communication. Participants reported that while in further education and on work experience they became aware of the professional communication involved in nurse/patient interaction. This form of communication is a skill that needs to be developed and is not always obvious to students. One participant described her first experience of communication with patients on work experience in further education. This exemplified some of the stresses that were addressed first in further education:

“I've never as a worker, I've never been in a hospital and I had some anxiety to go in and speak to the patients because I just felt that there was a special way of talking to patients because they're in a hospital. I just didn't see that they were meant to be treated the same way as you would just sort of speak to anybody else. It's the same way, just more medicalised, but it's the same way of communicating to them. I just completely lost it. But I just didn't know that there was just a normal continuation of communication between people.” (P7)

Two participants reported developing communication skills in further education which enabled them to communicate with patients in a more effective manner:

“Because you kind of have more of a feel for how to interact with the patient and what's appropriate to say and what's not appropriate to say like speaking to them professionally, rather than like, it's your best friend.” (P21)

“I had like a really, really nice teacher in FE. And she just kind of like explained in a way that you have to be so careful how you communicate with people using proper, nursing terms and stuff like that.” (P19)

Two other participants who having completed the Nursing Studies Award commented that they were more comfortable establishing a therapeutic rapport with patients in a care environment:

“But I couldn't imagine myself not having done that pre nursing course and be able to go in and automatically knowing the basics and sitting down and even making a therapeutic rapport. It was easy, I found that it was easier for

me to sit down and have the chat and especially for the care of the elderly, you kind of make a link with them, you kind of start up a conversation and it was smoother.” (P20)

“So, I feel I was well equipped going into my nursing course then with feeling comfortable with patients, feeling comfortable with the language used things like that.” (P36)

Two participants remarked that having this knowledge, along with practical and personal skills which were acquired in further education contributed to effective performance on clinical placements which was acknowledged by other members of the health care team:

“like I even got comments in my first year asking, had I done PLC and asking, had I like worked as a HCA because I was so able to manage the personal care.” (P18)

“And even the nurses who you'd be working with would kind of say that to you oh, are you a carer somewhere else or things like that.” (P8)

These testimonies highlight that work experience as part of FE was a key formative influence for the participants to develop relationships with patients in a professional way and served as a grounding for clinical placements in HE.

5.3.3 FE tutors as role models

This study also underlined the formative influence of FE tutors for participants. Fourteen participants spoke of the influence of FE tutors in inspiring and reinforcing their commitment to a career in nursing. They acted as role models for these participants in modelling caring and responsible nursing practice.

Having nurses as tutors on the course was very beneficial as the tutors had extensive nursing experience. Two participants noted that the recounting of personal experiences by tutors influenced commitment to pursuing nursing:

“Well, you know, we had a great lecturer in that she was a nurse herself She was amazing and had the stories to tell us, it was a huge help having a nurse teaching us basically what to be do in terms of nursing. And then of course when I went into first year in actual college, when you went out on placements, you were nearly referring back to her stories.” (P12)

“Definitely the teachers, both of the teachers I had were nurses. So, they gave a lot of personal experiences and accounts that they had and you know that made me want to be a nurse even more. You know what I

actually looked up to both of them quite a lot and yeah that would probably be my biggest influence.” (P9)

Two other participants also commented on the passion and dedication of health care professionals who were perceived as role models and conveyed enthusiasm for the nursing profession which inspired the participants:

“I think in that sense, they kind of motivated me to get into that level of, I guess, dedication into my studies of nursing even when they were teaching, they were very passionate in what they were doing. It wasn't just for the sake of teaching, it seemed as if they loved what they were doing, that kind of helped me get stuck into the course itself and I guess, pass on that same passion in nursing.” (P23)

“The tutors were very engaging with the students. They were very positive and excited about nursing. So, then you felt the same when you were doing it. When you were taking part in the module. So, I definitely think that was a big influence. They made you excited to be going into that career.” (P18)

A fourth year participant also spoke of the continuing influence of a teacher from further education in her progression through HE in modelling a caring and respectful approach to patients:

“I found the lecturer herself was brilliant, so much of what I learned was from her, I still refer back to a lot of my just basic patient care building rapport. All it's drummed into my head about respecting patients, individuality, their dignity, working collaboratively.” (P36)

5.4 Summary of findings Part 1

- **Personal growth:** Participants discussed how they experienced personal growth in FE and testified to its formative influence in their participation in HE. Their increased self-confidence was expressed in terms of communication with teachers, students, patients and members of the healthcare team. Most importantly, participants became confident in their academic ability and potential for success moving forward. Following their experience in further education they were more confident in their career choice which both motivated and provided resolve during difficult times in college and on clinical placement. Participants spoke of the life skills of becoming more independent and maturity which helped them cope with the challenges of HE. Personal attributes such as being more caring and tolerant following the experience in FE were an asset in both college and on clinical placement. Participants reported FE as a time for self-reflection and

increased self-awareness which enabled them to address issues that may have presented difficulties when they progressed to HE. Participants perceived that their experience of FE was integral to their success in HE and achieving their goal of pursuing education and gaining a qualification for the career they aspired to and to find self-fulfilment.

- **Insight to nursing:** The role of the nursing and healthcare course in further education proved equally formative in enabling participants to gain an insight into nursing as a profession and develop or reinforce their commitment to pursuing nursing as a career. This was in part due to the inspirational teachers in further education, who were also nurses. By sharing their experiences, teaching and role modelling students gained an appreciation of the role of the nurse and the attributes required to be a nurse. The *Nursing Theory and Practice* module for the QQI level 5 award comprehensively covered the professional role of the nurse and the scope of nursing practice. The work experience element of further education was also crucial in this context. Participants were exposed to the responsibility and working conditions of nurses in the workplace at an early stage. This was significant in the formation of a professional identity but importantly through this experience, which was certainly transformative for some, participants could give meaning to what is involved in becoming a nurse. This underpinned realistic expectations for the nursing degree course and consolidated, for many participants the commitment to pursuing a nursing career. This enabled participants to begin to develop the dual identity of learner and nurse which is required for a nursing degree programme which is both theory and practical based.

Chapter 6: Research Findings – Part 2

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter the three themes of 'Preparation for HE', 'FE pedagogy', and 'Relationships in HE' are presented. Under these themes the participants' perceptions of the influence of FE on their transition to and progression in the undergraduate nursing degree programme are explored further in the context of how the experience of FE prepared the participants for HE and 'bridged the gap' (Jones, 2018) between previous educational experience and HE and facilitated the development of positive relationships and a sense of belonging in HE.

6.2 Preparation for HE

An emerging theme from the research participants of this study was the influence of further education in preparing them for the transition to HE and the subsequent engagement with the undergraduate programme. During their time in further education participants mentioned that teachers regularly discussed progression to college and referred to higher education as 'moving forward.' Participants felt that further education prepared them for college and they were psychologically ready for the transition to HE as this mature student reported:

"Definitely ready for it. No, it didn't cause any worries or anything... moving forward from that one space especially from not having studied for a very long time. I actually found that an easy step to make. The discussion was always around moving into college so everything that we did, it was it was about moving forward." (P1)

Another participant described her perception of moving to HE following FE as a bridge:

"There was like a bridge from one to the other, so I was able to work with the basics and go from there." (P19)

One participant mentioned that the tutors in his FE college consistently asked the students if they needed assistance in any area to facilitate them in their progression to further studies. Two participants said that they attended open days in the college they are now attending, with their visits being organised by the teachers in further education, they were able to meet the academic staff and tour

the campus. Another participant reported that in FE when classes were online that the teacher endeavoured to simulate a college environment and organised talks online from academic and clinical staff from HE. These practices helped develop learner identity as participants were able to envisage themselves as nursing students in HE.

This fourth year participant spoke of the how the expertise of tutors in FE prepared her for assessment in the first and second year of HE:

“I feel that they definitely prepared me. The tutor definitely was familiar with what was expected of us in the level eight course. So, I feel I had a good practice run at those exams. I felt those exams that we went through in the nursing studies course were similar to the ones that we did definitely in first and second year of this course anyway.” (P36)

Participants made references to further education as being a preparation for college in various ways from the physical environment to the academic and social aspect. Participants who had come from secondary education found FE an intermediate stage between educational experiences in respect of structure and being a more independent student. They had secured experience of an environment where students took responsibility for their own learning and knew what to expect going into third level education.

“Secondary and the PLC, they were a bit similar. Like you had just the one class, but like you also had assignments and stuff, so it was a bit of both. And then you went into first year in [HE] obviously it's a lot bigger, but you kind of had a bit of an idea how to do assignments and going to different like rooms for lectures and stuff. You kind of had a bit of an idea, like it wasn't going from secondary school to no rules or to loads of rules to then college, no rules.” (P8)

Moving from secondary school can also be difficult, especially in terms of social interaction as participants were often adapting from a social circle of the same people for six years to a completely different social circle. One participant explicitly identified further education as a formative experience for learning to adjust to a college environment:

“I think [FE] was my first experience of that, like mini college, of like going into environment when I literally don't know anyone and it was a really nice way to kind of settle in... It was formative shall we say in my years of academia, definitely.” (P6)

Another notable finding from two participants where English was not their first language was that the PLC gave them confidence in their language skills and prepared them for moving forward to higher education:

“...that also helped me being from a different culture. It helped that I was able to be exposed to the English language on an everyday basis. So, when I went in the university, I was much more prepared for that.” (P28)

From this theme of preparation for college a two subthemes emerged including ‘transition to HE’ and ‘supports for HE’

6.2.1 Transition to HE

Seventeen participants reported that the experience of FE eased their transition to HE. Participants were confident in their ability to succeed and were prepared academically and psychologically for the transition as this third year participant commented:

“I don’t know if confident or cocky is the word, but I went in knowing that I had a good bit of experience behind me from FE, first year I was very comfortable.” (P12)

The transition was described as “blending” into higher education with a large degree of overlap in first year:

“And in first year, when I was in college I felt like it was a really smooth, nice continuation....I suppose it helped me greatly, because my first year flew, fast and smooth, like there was no issues understanding the context or the contents of the course, it just felt like it was an add on level six going from level five. That’s kind of how it felt.” (P7)

“the majority of my first year in HE I’d actually covered a lot of the course already so it was a lot easier when I was going to study for tests and stuff. I already knew most of the material because of my exams in HE.” (P19)

Their experience of FE supported the emotional well-being of participants reducing stress and anxiety for participants in the first year of the undergraduate programme. Having covered some course content previously enabled participants to concentrate on other aspects of the course and to settle into college life more easily:

“So I was very scared coming in but I once I got into first year, I realized that I had a lot of foundation and knowledge on the things we would be covering in first year. It was less scary after the first month or so.” (P9)

Eighteen participants in this study perceived that the experience of Level 5 supported them in having a 'head start' from other students transitioning to the degree programme as they already covered important course content. Having the overlap with knowledge from the modules from further education and the experience of academic writing and referencing not only prepared the participants for HE but gave them an advantage for their progression through HE.

One fourth year participant contributed their enhanced academic achievement to this perceived advantage:

"I guess a lot of the information from the pre nursing course, were transferable then to my studies in [HE] So I felt like it did give me a head start and it did contribute to me getting better grades. So, it really was a benefit in that way as well." (P21)

This perceived head start or advantage was noted by two participants in relation to FE students and students coming directly from Leaving Certificate. These participants felt they had an advantage over students coming from Leaving Certificate. This was identified in both knowledge and skills:

"what I learned in further education really gave me foundation and knowledge and then university just covered those gaps that were there. I definitely felt like I had an advantage over people coming straight from the leaving Cert." (P9)

"you just see it more from like your communication, your soft skills. It's only when I'm on placement with, let's say someone in my class who is coming in from the Leaving Cert whatever that you actually see. I wouldn't have counted some of the stuff of me having an advantage until you hear someone else speaking to a patient and you're kind of like, okay. it just clicks in." (P22)

This advantage of having knowledge and skills starting HE was not only related to comparison with Leaving Certificate students. Two participants mentioned being able to support mature students who were struggling in HE:

"I did use some of my background knowledge in PLC in college, I guess just helping some of my classmates or college mates, I guess even with the mature students, and I think they had a hard time settling into college so I think it was helpful that way." (P23)

"some of the mature guys over in college they're like, oh my God, we're so stressed because it's so hard to do, the Harvard referencing there's so much to it, and you know how to do it. And I'm actually able to offer some support to them as well, which is great." (P34)

Ten participants also perceived that FE prepared them in relation to organisation and time management skills which meant less stress in the initial transition period in HE. Participants were aware of the time scale needed to plan, research, construct and edit assignments before submission:

“Similarly, this year just making sure I get things in on a timely manner and try and get them done straight away, which I learned from the mistakes in further education, leaving it too late and trying to panic do them the night before.” (P9)

“I knew what to expect. I knew what I had to do and I knew how much time I had to apply myself... it was helping you put your life in perspective with regards to, or having to been better organized. I then knew exactly what I was facing into after doing the pre-nursing.” (P13)

For participants, in particular mature students, they found that having completed a fulltime course previously enabled them to organise family and personal life prior to starting a four year undergraduate programme. It was important to have systems in place so they could prioritise their studies at critical times and have a work life balance to give themselves the best opportunity to succeed as this mature participant commented:

“... also, it helped me manage other things, when I was in further education, I had kids, I had some work as well going on. So, a few things so it's just how to best plan and allocate time to all of the different things that you're involved in it.” (P7)

6.2.2 Supports for HE

Having the support of prior knowledge of course content was perceived by participants as being invaluable for their learning and understanding of course content in HE. Learning in FE familiarised participants with medical terminology and nursing concepts which were now being taught in HE.

“it's like I couldn't go into like an A&P class and be like I know everything, but when you're sitting and you're listening to a lecture you understand a lot more than you would coming out of like secondary school or even like just not doing the PLC. It's the terminology of anatomy and physiology the PLC really... like helped in a way. I don't know everything but I understood what a lecturer was saying through the lectures this year. Like definitely.” (P33)

Six participants also identified that having previously covered skills from the FE Nursing Studies Award not only supported them in their learning it also enabled them to support others in HE. These two participants described how they were able to support other students in clinical skills:

"I was able to help some of my friends, the other nursing students with blood pressure and taking vital signs because I'd already done it before." (P18)

"So, it's great that I had the experience before that I could get over that kind of barrier, they would come to me and they'd ask me for help just to teach them how to do things and to help them understand words they don't know or help them do their paperwork that they wouldn't know." (P17)

Two other students mentioned being able to support mature students using knowledge and skills from FE as this fourth year participant remarked:

"I did use some of my background knowledge from PLC in college, just helping some of my college mates. I guess even with the mature students, I think they had a hard time settling in to college, so I think it was helpful in that way." (P23)

Twelve participants in this study also discussed how knowledge covered in further education supported them in their everyday nursing practice. This knowledge may not have yet been covered or in certain cases would not be covered in the degree programme. For example, palliative care was not covered until year three, although students would be caring for dying patients in their first clinical placement. Participant 22 said that in further education he had studied and completed assignments for the module *Palliative Care*. Having knowledge in this subject is crucial as it is a situation that the students may well have to cope with in very early on in the degree programme as this participant explained:

"I was speaking to a fourth year there on the ward and she's doing her research proposal on the effect of death and dying on the first year student nurse. And it was only kind of when we were chatting, like you don't cover that as a module, I think into your third year of your nursing degree where, you do nearly an assignment on it in Pre nursing. Death and dying is something you get introduced to straight away, especially on a medical ward." (P22)

Participant 4 used information he had learned in the module *Care Support* in the QQI Level 5 Healthcare Support Award to support clients and family members

by advising on resources available in the community. He found that this has been very beneficial for patients with mental health issues in relieving anxiety.

“it was stuff that we hadn't covered in college but did in further ed and it's been it's been really valuable... And I found that the modules were great. And that was focus learning for stuff that I would have needed, and not realised...I actually went back to it and went through the folder again... they're actually entitled to a lot of stuff, this is very useful information.” (P4)

Knowledge from the module of *Nutrition*, which is an elective module on the Nursing Studies and Healthcare Support awards was cited by a participant as being supportive for his own wellbeing but also to understand the importance of good nutrition in nursing care. This topic is currently not covered in the nursing degree programme but was recognised by the participant as important knowledge when caring for patients.

“we did a nutrition module when I did mine in FE college which at the time I thought was absolutely ridiculous and I hated it, but having been out in the wards as a nursing student and seeing how nutrition has a valid part and even just how their protein levels affect their wound healing and didn't realize how relevant it actually was.” (P22)

Other knowledge from FE also supported students' personal wellbeing during the Covid pandemic as these two participants commented:

“the infection control module in FE...that definitely helped me out there, it meant I was protecting myself when I was studying as well.” (P18)

“we did a lot of coping skills in the Work Experience module with stress management. That was great because it was a very stressful year, it helped me a lot.” (P7)

Background knowledge from further education was very useful for one participant in clinical placement empowering her to maintain good practice. Participant 15 testified that having legal knowledge from FE supported her to be assertive in a challenging situation on a clinical placement:

“because I had the legal side knowledge as well, it was easier, I knew it was wrong. Yeah. And I could deal with conflict better as well. So I could say no, sorry. I'm not doing it. The law is the law.” (P15)

The availability of resources from FE was also a support for participants in this study. Material used for learning in FE became a resource for participants during

their time in HE. Two participants spoke of using text books from FE throughout their undergraduate degree:

"The anatomy and physiology, that was a help, there's not much difference in the level five and the level eight book only that it certainly it does go into a little bit more detail." (P13)

"I was cleaning my room the other day and I found all these other books for communication. I was like, we literally did that the other day. That would be so helpful for me. Then I found another book, like all these books that I had from the PLC like oh my god, they will go so far in my degree now." (P32)

Two other participants mentioned that they used notes from further education for references and for studying for exams particularly in first year but in some cases throughout the four years. P19, a first year student noted that:

"A lot of my notes that I wrote out from when I was in college, and I was able to reuse while I was studying, so a lot of notes I would have taken down, I was able to reuse and add to them. Instead of having to rewrite the whole thing, I will kind of look as I was going along, and it was a lot of the same stuff and then obviously add stuff more in depth, but it was way easier going over the same notes just adding a little bit more on to them." (P19)
first year participant

P.15, a fourth year participant, made a similar comment about the usefulness of resources from PLC

"I still have folders here with my papers that I printed off. I still would've used that as referencing, I would still go back to them." (P15)

Another fourth year participant who was about to graduate also mentioned she was now using skills she had acquired in FE:

"We did a module called Communications and you went through how to do a CV and how to do an interview, so those skills are useful for anytime in life. So, it was nice to have that background as well." (P18)

Further education also prepared participants for using resources in HE to achieve academic success. Participant 21 mentioned using the library to study after lectures as this was a practice she had started in further education:

"I had like a feel of the kind of studying environment, I felt more comfortable immersing myself in it in [HE] And like I used to stay back in [FE] and I used to do some work there after class. I'd spend the whole day it might be late by the time I'd be going home. But I found that was more beneficial. And yeah, that kind of helped me then going forward." (P21)

Another first year participant also mentioned that her experience in further education influenced her to manage time and use resources effectively in the library:

“From further education, I've learned like how to actually use the library and use different journals and all and like actually make use of my time rather than sitting there not knowing what to do.” (P31)

6.3 FE pedagogy

6.3.1 Independent learning

An important aspect of preparation for HE is becoming an independent learner (McFarlane, 2018). Sixteen participants reported that the pedagogical approach of teachers in FE facilitated their development as independent learners. Participant 31 contrasts the experience of secondary school and further education and how it prepared her for transition to HE:

“In secondary school you're handed papers and all this stuff that the teachers actually printed out and researched themselves and it's just given to you. Whereas in college you have to do your own research and you have to find everything yourself, no one's handing it to you, so I feel like in the PLC they really prepared us for that. They really preferred us to do our own research and that we had to go out and find it and this is what it's going to be like in college. So they're doing it that way now as well.” (P31)

Another significant finding from the participants was how the pedagogical approach in FE resulted in a different approach to learning for the participants. This contrast in learning between secondary school and further and higher education was described by three participants who had come straight from Leaving Certificate to further education as this participant exemplifies:

“In secondary school you're kind of just, you're learning for an exam. In your Leaving Cert you're learning off questions, whether you understand the question or not. But in the PLC, in a nursing perspective, you have to understand why you're doing something and why you're learning something.” (P33)

A more critical appreciation that the knowledge is being acquired to be put into practice in clinical placements and is vital for the welfare of the patient was referred to specifically by one participant:

“I need to know that for myself, for my practice you're learning it for you, you're not learning it for somebody else. And I think you're kind of taught

that from your pre-nursing. That you're learning this information for your own clinical practice. Whereas in, I suppose, even going back to my own days in school, you're learning this for a question to put it on the paper and then it's gone out of your head.” (P22)

The different learning approach between FE and second level education reported by participants in FE facilitated an interest and more in-depth engagement in learning which is required for academic integration in HE. This change in attitude to learning is described by Participant 30:

“But like just sitting there and being interested in what you're learning, like it's just totally different. I think it's just you're not kind of sitting there waiting for the class to be finished. Like you're engaging in the classes.” (P30)

Active learning approaches in FE also prepared participants for learning in HE. Previous experience of group work in further education was mentioned by one participant as being similar to the learner approach she experienced when she transitioned to higher education:

“We broke into groups and you'd be given scenarios and there'd be a spokesperson and another individual, they would write down the comments and then we'd all have to give our point of view on it. So, there was loads of that. Yeah, and it's the same in level eight.” (P13)

Developing critical thinking for learning in HE was mentioned by a mature participant who perceived that she was more prepared for critical thinking and independent learning in HE following her experience in FE:

“I definitely would say I was a different person coming out of my PLC, because I suppose nursing, there's so much expected of you that like you have to be an independent learner, you have to be, like, a critical thinker.” (P36)

Being an independent learner who is engaged in learning with critical thinking skills is an invaluable asset when entering HE. Participant 32, a first year student highlighted how the experience of further education gave her valuable insight into how being an independent learner, which was crucial to success in the nursing degree programme:

“it gave me an insight into like what it's like to be doing your own self-directed learning as in like the basics, the foundation of, if you don't work you're not going to succeed, no one else is going to push you. And I feel like when I had that momentum like going into college I was like, I had

learned from my PLC that I'm only going to get my distinctions and I'm only going to get through college if I put in the work and stuff.” (P32)

6.3.2 Academic skills

Participants also identified skills in academic reading and writing acquired in FE that prepared them for transition to higher education. Continuous direction and encouragement from FE tutors improved their writing skills and built confidence in academic ability. Constructive feedback on assignments and simple techniques encouraged students who may have struggled with assignment writing:

“Because this tutor that I had she said that's while I only sent in the five sentences, if you sit down every day for 20 minutes and write a few sentences by the time the assignment is due in you'll have a book written by you. So now, what I do is, I just sit down and I read through what I'm doing or I write a few sentences, whatever is there and it has helped me, who is not very academically minded and to get over that.” (P1)

Five participants also mentioned that they discovered their unique learning style which was a great advantage in preparation for studying in third level as these two participants reported:

“I knew how to study because QQI covered all of that. It taught you how to study. I learned my study technique. I know I studied by colours and numbers.” (P15)

Another fourth year participant reported using visual aids and mind maps for learning:

“in further ed they told me to use Mind Maps that helps me because they were talking about people who are visual learners or different types and she asked us to figure out which one we were and make Mind Maps. So now I do Mind Maps for all my assignments.” (P.28)

Understanding what was expected in assignments such as layout, terminology and referencing were identified as invaluable by participants in transitioning to the nursing degree. This fourth year participant commented on how helpful FE was in teaching her how to structure academic assignments:

“yeah, it [FE] would've definitely given me an idea of like what, how to start, how to do main bodies and stuff like that. Other than that, I would've never have had a clue.” (P3)

Another fourth year participant remarked that she was still influenced by the skills learnt in further education which were valuable for her progression through HE:

“when I’m actually doing an assignment, focusing on something that kind of the basic, nuts and bolts of how to formulate an essay and assignment, those basic skills that I learned back then [in FE] and how to start the project and to get stuck into that kind of project planning.” (P20)

Participants also became familiar with concepts such as reading briefs, word counts, weighting of marks and submission for deadlines. Participant 22 noted that his previous experience of FE encouraged a greater strategic sense of how to prioritise academic work as the modules for QQI have a range of learning outcomes and assessment techniques:

“I think that the pre-nursing gave you kind of that exposure to different modules and each module might require something different so you had that kind of experience already.” (P22)

Another aspect of assignment writing which was very relevant to a nursing degree regarding confidentiality was mentioned by one mature participant:

“And I suppose just being aware of GDPR and confidentiality, when you’re writing your assignment that you’re not naming names you become very aware of all that. That’s all part of the guidance thing for the competency frameworks, your mission and dignity and respect of the person.” (P20)

Developing expertise in academic writing and referencing was mentioned by nearly all participants. Depending on the QQI Level 5 Award, the further education institution and the extent to which referencing systems were applied for submitting course work, participants became proficient in this skill and found this a major advantage in third level. When participants had completed the Healthcare Support Award which has different learning outcomes from the Nursing Studies Award or when the Nursing Studies Award was not specific to students intending to transition to the nursing degree, students had only a basic knowledge of plagiarism. Though this was helpful in some respects these students believed that they would have benefited from more knowledge in this area.

Participant 21 describes the difficulties students who did not have this skill experienced in HE and how this skill acquire in FE was of benefit to her:

“And just because of the workload and even say to Harvard referencing that was a big help for me, because I know some students in my year that when we were in third year, they were still stuck on the Harvard referencing, they were still unsure and how to actually reference their assignment properly. So, I think that was a big help for me from PLC.” (P21)

Other practical skills acquired in FE were beneficial for participants in HE. Familiarity with technology and the practice of using IT skills for research and layout of assignments as well as proficiency in typing in completing assignments were also cited as being important for students entering third level as these two participants remarked:

“And then, having to use the internet, I had the computer experience and the referencing already behind me and then when we started with assignments in first year, I mean, it was the first week boom, there, you have it.” (P15)

“typing was a really big thing... I think that really helped going in we actually had a computer class every week [in FE] to help us.” (P14)

6.4 Relationships in HE

One of the most significant findings of this study was the influence of FE in supporting integration in HE. Having an established base of skills and subject knowledge allied to previous positive learning experience in FE, facilitated both academic and social integration in HE. Participants reported developing good relationships with academic staff and fellow students. A positive perception of other support staff encouraged effective use of the facilities and services on campus. This indicated a sense of belonging in HE which was facilitated by the supportive influence of their experience in FE. This theme is presented under the subthemes of ‘interaction with academic staff’, ‘engaging with student services’ and ‘connecting with other students’

6.4.1 Interaction with academic staff

All participants reported good relationships with academic staff in HE with those participants from FE colleges with smaller intakes and where there were fewer lecturers across the modules were particularly content with the relationship with lecturers in HE. Four participants described being on first name basis with

lecturers and having frequent informal interactions outside of class as this fourth year participant describes:

"We are very lucky in [HEI] because it's an institution that the classes are smaller...and we would be on first name basis, and we'd be walking out to the car after college together." (P21)

Participants generally underlined the extent to which the formative experience of FE influenced the development of their positive relationships with academic staff in higher education, indicating that the experience of student and teacher relationships in further education was influential in their favourable perception of lecturers in higher education institutions. One participant described a change in her negative perception of teachers in secondary school to her positive perception following the experience of teachers in FE:

"it's not as like teacher studenty relationship as like secondary school obviously is. So, I think that even in the further ed where it wasn't really like student teachery, it was that... kind of allowed me to believe that like you can just go up and talk to them and like they're there to help. They're not like your enemy like they sometimes seem in secondary school. So, I think that was a really good experience as well to just kind of remind you these people are human." (P29)

Two participants referred to the power dynamic of teacher and student in secondary school and how FE changed this perception:

"I feel like in secondary school you kind of have that kind of like hierarchy, like your teacher is your teacher... Then once you kind of go into further education and see that you're kind of equal enough." (P33)

"So, [in FE] you are able to just approach them if you need help no problem. You can send them an email, you can meet them in their office. Whereas I think coming from school you have that teacher student kind of dynamic where you might not feel as confident in approaching a teacher." (P36)

Another fourth year participant referred to FE as supporting the concept of teachers as a resource and the importance of students feeling valued as individuals by teachers:

"...So, I felt like I think some people can think that college is against them and college wants them to fail and they're making it really hard on purpose. But like they're there for you, teachers, God forbid, they actually liked to teach, so use the resource. We had such a relationship with our teachers or lecturers in FE it was really nice. It was lovely. It really felt like you were

valued there, the teachers were interested in your own plan for yourself.”
(P6)

Participant 23 also discussed the importance of this perception of support in relation to receiving feedback from lecturers in HE:

“I suppose like that you felt comfortable to kind, or even to know, to just do a draft and to approach the lecturer and feel comfortable having the constructive criticism.” (P23)

One fourth year participant described how the influence of further education encouraged her to approach academic for support during Covid:

“They were lenient with extensions...they were really, really supportive and I felt I could approach them about the additional time and asking for help from previous experience in further education, I felt more comfortable.” (21)

The transition from small classes in FE to larger classes in HE did not seem to be an issue for the participants as they still felt comfortable seeking guidance from lecturers:

“They're very easy to talk to and again, I think the QQ I gave me that you know, because you're so close even though the class size has expanded, I still feel you can have that conversation with the tutor and feel like it's OK to ask the stupid question, it doesn't feel stupid.” (P1)

Another mature participant once again identified a contrast between herself and students coming from Leaving Certificate in their approach to teaching staff:

“We were very close [in FE] because our class was so small. We'd a very close relationship with our teacher so I was comfortable asking questions that passed on with university as well. I noticed a lot of the girls in my [HE] class that were, you know, straight from the Leaving Cert, definitely weren't comfortable with that, with talking to their teachers and even just answering questions during lectures, that was hard for them.” (P12)

Three participants mentioned that when talking with lecturers in HE there were issues relating to lack of current knowledge with lecturers who were not in nursing practice. This was evident for one participant when nursing during Covid and for these participants in the area of disability:

“I had a teacher, we were talking about goals. I was mentioning something about goals because goals is a huge thing in intellectual disability nursing, he didn't know what I was talking about. Never heard of it.” (P15)

“The reality is very different and sometimes what we're taught in college can be a little bit outdated, we kind of go, you haven't been on the floor in a long time and it really shows.” (P27)

These observations were the only negative comments regarding academic staff and did not appear to impact on the supportive relationship with the students in HE

6.4.2 Engaging with student services

Utilising support services in higher education can be of benefit for students who are facing challenges academically or personally. Two participants spoke of previous experience in further education that broke down the barrier between institution and encouraged them to use support services while pursuing the undergraduate nursing degree in college:

“we just talked [in FE] about how like, kind of like just me and how I was feeling. So, if I did need support in the college [HE], I wouldn't be afraid to go there at all because I've seen the benefits of not just keeping it all to yourselves because you're not going to get anywhere if you're just keeping it in.” (P33)

“students services. I remember going to them before. I was interested in starting counselling but what I wanted to see if there was anything available in [HE] first. And so, like I didn't feel weird approaching them. Yeah, definitely [FE] breaks that barrier of like of them against us. I mean, we're the other, we're the students versus the college like.” (P6)

One first year participant spoke of the positive relationship he had with his student advisor:

“my student advisor is brilliant, she always makes sure to email, she does mediation classes, stress reduction. She went out of her way the other day when we were doing exams, just to make sure we were ok” (P17)

Eight participants cited the library as valuable resource for support as this first year participant acknowledged:

“I would go into the library and there is support there for like exams and writing centres which are especially good for help to word your assignment.” (P17)

Two other participants mentioned the library staff being of great assistance in accessing and utilising information for assignments and examinations in person and online. This second year participant commented.

"The lady in the library is very good for library training, how to use different resources on the library website" (P35)

One fourth year participant also mentioned receiving valuable support before graduating:

"There was a CPC in the clinical area in the hospital that I'm on internship in and she looked at my CV and she told me what to add and what to take out. She also did a mock interview with me." (P14)

Eight other participants mentioned receiving supports for a number of issues during their undergraduate years. This fourth year participant was aware of the supports available in HE and would use them if required:

"they constantly send me emails, there is a lot of stuff available. I haven't felt I needed to use the but it is nice knowing they are available." (P28)

This mature student cited how students without the supportive influence of further education may not access supports that are available:

"I think just even looking at some of the Leaving Certs in the small [HE] campus and seeing how they can get lost, I think if you were to do pre-nursing and then you were in a bigger Institute, your pre-nursing would give you the confidence to utilize supports available. Whereas if you're to go straight from Leaving Cert I think you can very easily get lost in the whole small fish, big pond type of scenario." (P22)

6.4.3 connecting with other students

Social integration and is important in fostering a sense of belonging in college. Twenty participants spoke of how the experience of socialising in a classroom setting in further education was significant to their social integration in third level. The ability to chat generally with colleagues and not being self-conscious when speaking in class was cited. This participant describes developing these social skills as a grounding which supported her for the transition to HE:

"that skill of meeting others and then transferring that into college as well because I definitely brought that with me to college, to university because it was like a grounding in knowing how to react in the class and not being afraid to ask questions, I suppose." (P20)

Another first year participant described these skills for social interaction she developed in FE:

"Because you have to go in and speak to people you don't know when you go into the PLC, you have to learn to do small talk and make conversation." (P24)

Four other participants mentioned that the previous experience of making friends in a new course in FE made the transition to higher education less daunting as participant 31 testifies:

"like even just doing the PLC, it's like I've already had that experience, like coming into a new course for the first time and making friends and then I can do it again now and it's a bit easier for me." (P31)

This first year participant expressed the view that social integration was enhancing her student experience:

"I'm really loving it, the course is brilliant and I have just made so many friends so far, it's great." (P31)

Another mature participant referred to having made strong connections with class colleagues in further education and wanting to have similar experiences in third level:

"in further ed, that's what we would've done and that has continued now in our own little mature student group, we all help each other out in different things." (P1)

Participant 32 spoke of how she connected with another student who had completed a PLC and how they support one another:

"we can relate, the two of us are constantly in the library. We're always like pushing each other on because we know how hard we have worked to be here.. So, I think we keep each other going." (P32)

Another fourth participant said that when she started in college she met other students from the same further education college that she had attended. She found this very reassuring in the early period of transition to higher education:

"Actually, two of the girls from my class in [FE] are in my class in [HE] ...So I knew a few people when I started and we'd say hello and meet each other which was great especially in the first few weeks." (P21)

From the experience of further education participants were able to support other students in the degree programme. This was very valuable for social integration:

"I ended up meeting a really fabulous group of girls and it's really helped... me knowing things from doing the PLC, because a lot of the girls that I am friendly with, even though I'm a bit older than them are coming from Leaving Cert. They come to me about things they'd ask me questions, or if we're on the ward, or like, where's this? Or you'd know, because you've been in hospitals before you've been in nursing homes and stuff. Like it really, really helped in that sense." (P25)

Nine participants identified that having experience of diversity of age, gender and background in further education helped them to integrate socially in higher education:

"probably the mix of age and genders as well in the PLC course, it's good because then you didn't feel intimidated when you started college to have a chat with, there's a man in our course who's 58 now and we're all friends, everyone gets on with him and we're all equal and it's just good. It's probably been a help... I just think in general, the PLC course definitely benefited me just from having more experience that can only ever help you." (P36)

Four mature participants felt having experience of being in a classroom in further education with younger students gave them an understanding of the perspective of younger students. This was very beneficial them in facilitating the transition to higher education:

"It sort of got you ready, going to be in a class with younger people, and how they behave and to learn to pass no remarks, which I wouldn't pass any remarks anyway.... but I can see in mature nursing where that could be an issue. You know, having younger people in the class, some of them will be very sassy and childlike sort of things. So further education for that reason, too, is a good way of for mature students to get ready for higher education." (P16)

Another mature participant commented that engagement in FE fostered greater empathy with younger students:

"I think it was great as well like, kind of coming back through further education that like, we didn't just sort of land in one day, after all working for like 10 years or something and then the next thing, you're going to chat to kids whose only form or most form of socialising with each other, has always been through academia and stuff..... I suppose it just kind of brought back the importance of what they were going through. So even that in itself, it was just great for being able to relate to people and connect with them." (P4)

This mature participant also described her experience of the collegiality among her classmates and how they support each other:

“And just the friends you make and you have great chats from every age group young and old. Young ones texting me and ringing me and its’ just lovely. And we’re not two groups, you know, mature students versus the younger students, we all mix together and we all realise that we all need each other.” (P26)

Ten participants reported that use of social media was important to communicate with class colleagues and the HEI. This was particularly important during Covid and when students were out on clinical placements. Media platforms such as Facebook provided information for students when they were not on campus and WhatsApp groups connected students with each other and were a valuable resource for support as these two participants described:

“We’ have a Facebook one where it is all the students, but then we have a WhatsApp group, that’s just the hospital for different things like oh have you been on this ward or does anyone know this CPC or things like that, that’s really helpful actually.” (P8).

“Thank God for WhatsApp, just send it out and see when someone comes back with a message.” (P23)

The formative supportive influence of FE in developing positive relationships and promoting social integration in HE was evident by the findings from the participants. But other challenges to social integration was also noted by five participants. Socialising outside the classroom was affected by Covid. The lack of social events on campus was not conducive to an active student social life. However, a large group of the participants were mature students with busy family lives who were also commuting long distances to college so the social aspect of college was not of major significance to their student experience:

“...in regards to the nights out and different events of that kind plus I have kids as well so I have a lot of other commitments apart from college, and as I said I’m always between the two towns, I’m just kind of driving commuting between [HE] all the time.” (P14)

“there’s only like three matures in my class. So, we would kind of sit together because we were the older ones and the younger ones would all sit together because they were the ones that would go partying, but we had responsibilities. We couldn’t do that.” (P2)

Similarly, another participant who was a mature student remarked that the social aspect was not a priority for her in higher education:

"I went back at 23, which was mature. And as far as socialising that wasn't really, for me, I had done that previously, before going back. So, I was ready to just settle and study and dedicate myself into my nursing because it was something I really wanted to do and really wanted to achieve my best possible outcome." (P18)

Other participants noted that the intense nature of the undergraduate degree programme with clinical placements and part time jobs left little time for socialising in college:

"societies, we did join them, I think in the first year. And you know, you paid a fee two or three euro or whatever it was, but I mean, because we were so busy, we actually never got to attend them." (P2)

"And it's very full on the nursing. It's very hard to get involved in things like that and because all of our part time jobs are all in nursing homes or in hospitals or in 12 hour shifts where you don't have the time to socialise with people from college." (P20)

6.5 Summary of findings Part 2

- **Preparation for HE:** FE was a significant influence for the experience of the transition for the participants. They reported being more confident, less stressed and adapting easily to HE. They also cited using knowledge, skills and resources from FE throughout their progression through the undergraduate programme which supported them in their studies, patient care and personal well-being. Having competency in clinical skills was not only useful for participants but allowed them to support other students in HE throughout the course. Skills of time management and organisation learned in further education were effective in meeting deadlines and reducing stress. Self-awareness and resilience developed during further education allowed participants to meet the challenges of higher education. Participants also perceived that both academically and in clinical placement that they had an advantage in comparison to other students which enhanced their academic success in HE. The preparation in FE for HE facilitated the participants to be in the mindset of being a third level student and to develop the identity of a learner in higher education prior to transition to HE which significantly increased the success of students in HE and their academic and social engagement.

- **FE pedagogy:** The pedagogical approach in FE facilitated the development of academic and transferable skills prior to entering HE. One of the findings that is often implicit but significant is how the participants became independent learners capable of engaging critically with academic courses during the period in further education. Participants commented on being self-motivated to learn, thinking critically and having a deeper understanding of concepts in nursing. Having the skills of academic writing and referencing were constantly reported as invaluable for participants for assessment throughout the undergraduate years in HE
- **Relationships in HE:** One of the most important influences previously not considered was how the experience of FE supported the social integration of participants in HE. The experience of FE facilitated positive relationships with academic staff and encouraged the participants to use support services and resources in HE. The participants engaged socially with other students in the HE and developed connections which were supportive throughout their undergraduate years.

6.5 Conclusion

From the interviews with the participants a range of findings emerged that were both unexpected and significant. The purpose of this research was to ascertain the influence of the completion of a Level 5 QQI Nursing Studies or Healthcare Support Award in a further education college for students in their transition to undergraduate nursing degree programme and subsequent progression within higher education. As the interviews were semi structured, participants reflected on their own experience which revealed findings previously not considered and explored the extent of this influence which has many aspects.

From the findings of this research the influence of further education was identified in the four components of Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning. The key factors for the evolution of HE learner identity: academic skills, independent learning, social relations, personal skills, engagement and belonging (McFarlane, 2018) were evident to varying degrees in the experience of the participants. The socialisation of the participants in class and on work experience in FE encouraged the development of the professional identity of a nursing student which was invaluable for clinical placements in higher education.

The early formation of these dual identities was a significant factor in the development of a sense of belonging in the communities of practice incorporated in the nursing degree programme. Participants described an ease of transition to, and generally effective academic and social integration in higher education. Participants reported engaging productively with others in the community, academic staff and peers, and using the resources within the community (Wenger, 2010).

The academic and independent learning skills developed in further education facilitated the participants to engage actively in learning and practically apply this knowledge. Participants described adopting a deep learning approach to their studies and reading outside course material. Due to the influence of further education participants were aware of the importance of not merely learning material but securing an in-depth understanding of the knowledge and skills they were learning during the degree course as it would be applied in real life situations.

Chapter 7: Discussion of findings

7.1 Introduction

Chapter seven discusses the main research following the analysis of data in chapter four and presentation of findings in chapter five and six. The aim of this research was to investigate the experience of students who progress from further education to undergraduate nursing degree programmes. This was achieved by qualitative research in the form of semi structured interviews with thirty six further education graduates currently in the undergraduate years of a nursing degree programme. Their experience of the influence of further education on their transition to higher education and progression through undergraduate degree programmes were presented under five themes- 'Personal growth', 'Insight to nursing', 'Preparation for HE', 'FE pedagogy' and 'Relationships in HE'.

This chapter seeks to achieve an in-depth, critical analysis of the main themes of 'Personal growth', 'Insight to nursing', 'Preparation for HE', 'FE pedagogy' and 'Relationships in HE' which emerged from the data, which are presented and discussed in the context of scholarly research in the field including literature pertaining to the traditional and non-traditional students to reflect the cohort of participants of this study.

The theoretical framework of the four interconnected learning components of Wenger's theory of social learning (1998) serves as a guiding framework that inform the interpretation of the research findings. In Wenger's theory of social learning (1998) 'identity- learning as becoming' is considered a key concept to learning. Becoming a learner is essential to learning as you cannot give people knowledge without having an identity where this knowledge is meaningful. Construction of this identity enables the learner to understand what is of importance to the community of higher education in which they are engaged, interacting productively with the members of the community and using the resources of the community (Wenger, 1998). Learner identity refers to an identity where the student has developed attributes and attitudes to facilitate integration with the higher education environment and foster a sense of belonging and engagement with the higher education community. McFarlane (2018) describes

HE learner identity as a social as opposed to a personal phenomenon and proposes six key factors in its evolution - academic skills, independent learning, social relations, personal skills, engagement and belonging.

In much of the literature (Huon & Sankey, 2002; Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Temple et al., 2014) the formation of student identity has been viewed as developing on entry to higher education and the emphasis has been placed on the role of HEIs in supporting the student in this regard. The role of the HEIs is highly relevant to support students entering higher education but the findings of this study suggest that many of the participants had started to develop a learner identity before entry to higher education. A key finding from this research was the influence of further education identified by the participants in facilitating the development of the dual identity of a student in a nursing degree programme who is studying both on campus and in a clinical setting. This influence on the formation of the dual identity of the nursing student underpins the four main themes of the analysis.

7.2 Personal Growth

This theme captured the formative experience of FE for the participants of this study. Participants reported developing life skills and personal attributes which influenced their transition and progression through the nursing degree. They described their time in FE as a period of personal growth and voiced a perception that this growth enhanced them as individuals and potential nursing students.

This recognition of learning in FE as not only as an educational endeavour but a life experience is consistent with Wenger (2009) who proposes the concept that learning is not only an intellectual or cognitive process but is intertwined with the lived experience of individuals. Learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but a process of meaning making where individuals make sense of their experience by interpreting the information and constructing an understanding of the learning or “meaning-learning as experience.” By emphasising the experiential aspect of learning Wenger highlights the potential for transformation in personal growth and development and refers to the learning experiences of an individual in all aspects of daily life. This was evident in the findings where participants described a growth and development in self-confidence, caring and empathy through the experience of further education which was

invaluable to them in their undergraduate years. In the component 'Learning as becoming -identity' of the social learning theory, Wenger (1998) describes learning as changing who we are and who we become in the context of our communities. This opportunity for personal growth in FE and its importance in developing a student identity for the community of HE was expressed by this participant :

"I suppose it allowed me to self-reflect and build my own confidence in public, in academic writing and put me in the mind space of becoming a third level student." (P22)

7.2.1 Personal growth in developing self-confidence

The most significant aspect of personal growth identified in the findings was increased self-confidence following the QQI Level 5 Nursing Studies Award which was mentioned consistently in the participant interviews. This finding was consistent with McFarlane (2018) as 100% of the participants of her study reported an increase in self-confidence as an outcome of completion of the pre university programme. An increase in self-confidence is advantageous for all students but particularly for students from under represented socio-economic groups. In the study by Reay (2009) of working-class students transitioning to HE in the UK it was reported that this cohort of students experienced a crisis of confidence that in some cases persisted until the end of first year. Having achieved the academic requirements for QQI level 5 entry to the nursing degree, the participants had the self confidence in their academic ability transitioning to higher education. Having previously covered many aspects of the first year of the degree programme also contributed to this self-confidence and eased the transition to higher education. Five participants spoke often of how motivated they were after further education to progress in their studies. They had achieved academic success through their efforts and had proven to themselves that they were capable of continuing to higher education. Participants spoke of further education as an opportunity for them to assess their capabilities before embarking on a four year undergraduate nursing programme in HE. On completion of the QQI Level 5 Award they described themselves as being highly motivated with self-belief in their ability to progress and that success in higher education was within their control. This reflects 'self-perceived confidence' as described by Fazey & Fazey (2010) namely the extent to which a student holds the expectation that they are competent enough to meets the demands of higher education.

These findings are also consistent with Bandura's (1975) theory of self-efficacy. Developing self-efficacy, or one's belief in ability to achieve, is closely linked to mastery experiences. Previous experience of success instils a sense of self belief in one's ability to succeed in the next task. Success in further education for the participants of this study helped to develop self-efficacy and greater confidence and resilience in pursuing nursing in HE. Other sources identified by Bandura (1975) were evident in the student's experience of further education. Social persuasion, encouragement and support from the tutors in further education were mentioned by many participants as significant in their decision to progress in their studies. Having self-efficacy strengthens resilience which is important for emotional and psychological wellbeing: Bandura (1975) highlights the link between self-efficacy and positive mental health, as stress and anxiety can undermine one's self belief, while self-efficacy may contribute to positive mental health.

7.2.2 Personal growth which built resilience

The development of resilience in further education was mentioned by the participants. When they were faced with challenges in higher education, reflecting on how much they had achieved and how far they had come enabled them to persist with their studies. Stress is a realistic experience for university students but this can easily lead to distress depending on the level of resilience or coping mechanisms the student may possess. If the student perceives that they do not have the ability to achieve their potential stress will inevitably lead to distress (Xuereb, 2015). One participant of this study described how her commitment to the undergraduate nursing programme following further education helped her not to become distressed:

"This is what I want to do and I'm committing myself going forward to doing this ...Yeah, that it is OK to say it's tough. But you can do that without falling apart or without, you know, needing a weekend of crying." (P1)

7.2.3 Personal growth which reinforced commitment to moving forward.

Another aspect of the formative influence of FE perceived by thirteen participants was the reinforcement of their commitment to nursing as a career, largely as a result of their academic experience at PLC level and practical experience of the

care environment. The positive influence of the support and interaction between FE students and staff was also evident from this study. Briggs et al (2020) describes staff relationships with FE students or encounters with HEI staff in FE as having 'tipped the balance' in enabling them to identify themselves as students in higher education. Two participants, (P13 and P25) mentioned that particular comments by tutors in FE on their suitability for nursing and potential ability for higher education reinforced their commitment to progressing to a nursing degree.

Participants expressed the view that without the experience of further education they would not have continued with the degree programme and therefore FE was a formative experience which helped them to progress through their studies. They spoke of the coping strategies that they developed in further education such as time management and use of available resources and highlighted how they were able to use these coping skills in higher education to prevent distress. These findings indicate that the participants have developed skills in further education for reformative self-control as part of learned resourcefulness (Rosenbaum, 2001). Also, important for the participants was the self-belief in their abilities to cope and succeed with the workload of college and personal life when transitioning to higher education and progressing through the degree course. This does not mean that the participants experienced less stress than other students in higher education but that they believed that they had the resources to deal with such stressors effectively (Kennet, 2009).

Research studies suggest that nurse education is found to be more demanding physically and psychologically than any other forms of higher education (Meachin & Webb, 1996). It comes as no surprise therefore that participants spoke of the demands of learning in an academic and clinical environment. This involves long days in college and on placements with the stress of challenging patients and difficult working conditions. Participants acknowledged this aspect of the degree course but were still highly motivated in their studies and career choice. Development of self-efficacy and resilience along with reinforced goal commitment from their experience in further education was noted by participants as providing this motivation. This commitment and motivation enabled participants to succeed in pursuing a nursing qualification, in some cases in a circuitous manner. Due to the restricted places and the lottery system governing entry to higher education for

QQI Level 5 nursing students, four of the participants had previously accepted places in HEIs and particular disciplines of nursing as they felt it was the only option for them for a nursing career. The students subsequently left these undergraduate nursing programmes due to a number of circumstances such as long commutes, homesickness and preferences for other disciplines of nursing. Fortunately, these students remained committed to nursing following further education and were able to continue their studies in other institutions and disciplines of nursing. This, however, highlights the importance of students being prepared for the type of nursing degree course and the practicalities of attending a particular HEI. A connection or commitment to the HEI is described by Tinto (1975) and Berger & Braxton (1998) as being part of the goal commitment which can determine retention of students in higher education. In these studies there is an emphasis on how the institution is perceived by the student in terms of staff, teaching methods, facilities and qualifications. Students who have a poor perception of the institution will have less goal commitment and are more likely to withdraw. From the findings of this study it appears that there were multifaceted reasons for the students who withdrew from the first institutions for example homesickness. In different circumstances the participants felt that they would have been committed to the first institution that they had attended. In his discussion of attrition of students from higher education Tinto (1975) was cognisant that students who withdraw from programmes may do so for valid reasons other than academic failure or lack of goal commitment and this reflects the experience of participants in this study. Tinto (1975) notes that such students may also continue higher education in other institutions, which once again reflects the experience of the participants of this study. This creates an awareness that statistics for attrition rates in higher education may not be as straightforward as a simple analysis of non-persistence might indicate.

7.2.4 Personal growth which facilitated overcoming barriers

Although, FE students may wish to pursue further nursing studies there may be barriers to their transition. In the report by Sartori & Bloom (2023) barriers for students from FE to progression to HE were identified. These barriers included apprehension around differences between FE and HE such as class size and less

contact with staff. The findings of this study suggest that these participants had overcome some of these barriers. Participants were aware of differences in HE compared to FE such as class size and supports as this second year participant remarked:

“I would feel that there is a difference between third level and further education where teachers really do take you under their wing. Whereas in third level, you are dealing with such a wider range of people they don’t have that time. So, take advantage of what you are given in further education before you go into third level but don’t be expecting the same treatment.” (P16)

A realistic expectation of these differences and the ability to face these challenges is important before transition to HE. In the study by Tett et al (2016) students reported that due to these differences their confidence was undermined when they transitioned from FE to HE. Continued anxiety surrounding the transition to HE persists for many FE students and other factors such as financial considerations influence the decision not to continue their studies in HE. The participants of this study, however, perceived that following the experience of the PLC course that they had confidence in their academic ability, motivation for the transition to HE and life skills to progress in their studies.

The challenging nature of barriers to successful transition from FE from HE was not the only issue explored by Sartori & Bloom (2023). The negative public perception of FE and its effects on the students was also highlighted. This negative perception of FE was also identified by the participants of this study. Though this was a challenge for the participants their personal growth during their time in FE mitigated against their initial misgivings on entering FE and participants credited FE as being instrumental in achieving their goal of becoming a nurse as this fourth year participant reports:

“It really helped me to get where I am today because other than that, I would have never made it.” (P3).

Notwithstanding this, four participants considered it important to highlight this issue as they are conscious of its impact in secondary school and noted that it may preclude other students from pursuing further education as a pathway to higher education.

7.3 Insight to nursing

An important aspect of the formative experience of FE for the participants was gaining an insight into nursing as a profession and future career. This was integral to facilitating the participants in developing the professional identity of the nurse and acquiring a commitment to the nursing profession, which proved invaluable in their transition to HE and progression through the undergraduate nursing degree programme. The aspect of time and space concept for identity proposed by Wenger's (2009) theory of social learning is discussed in Farnsworth et al., (2016). Wenger proposes that developing an identity or 'becoming' is not confined to one area or one identity and is ongoing. This view of identity is particularly applicable to the nature of the nursing degree programme. Student nurses not only have to integrate into the community of the academic institution where they are studying but integrate into the various clinical placements through their undergraduate years. They are required to adapt to learning in both academic and clinical settings at an early stage in their undergraduate studies. They are required to 'become' a student in higher education and a nurse in clinical practice. This requires students to develop the 'dual identities' of student and clinician on entering higher education (Boyd & McKendry, 2012). Student nurses going on clinical placement must develop the professional identity of a nurse. This identity is formed through professional socialisation where the student nurse learns the skills, attitudes, values, and behaviours necessary to fulfil and understand the professional role, gaining an identity that displays the characteristics, knowledge, and skills of the chosen profession (Holland, 2002).

7.3.1 Insight to nursing as a profession

In this study twenty eight participants spoke of how their experience in further education influenced their insight into nursing in a professional context, which in turn encouraged the development of professional identity. Participants remarked on the importance of the grounding offered by FE, particularly in the areas of patient safety and communication in the clinical environment. Modules covered in the QQI Level 5 Award comprehensively cover the scope and responsibility of nursing practice. Participants gained a clear insight into what was required to achieve an undergraduate Level 8 Award and more importantly the role of the nurse in practice. These findings suggest that the participants had experience from

FE of the 'shared repertoire' (Wenger, 2009) of HE and the nursing profession which facilitated their engagement in further studies.

Recent scholarship (Brown et al., 2012; Baldwin et al., 2014) discusses the influence of tutors as role models for nursing students in professional socialisation. Several participants in this study spoke of the importance of having nurses as tutors in further education. Participants were inspired by the tutors' nursing experience and professional approach to nursing and teaching. Participants spoke of being more motivated to progress to further studies through the encouragement of tutors in further education who became respected role models.

An aspect of nursing recognised by participants from further education was its uniqueness. One participant articulated this as the 'art of nursing' and it was described in another nursing study as the details or essence of nursing that is not often obvious to people (Carr, 2005). These comments aim to capture the complexity of nursing encompassed by Holland's (2002 p.147) description of the profession "Each nurse will carry out nursing actions in a unique way with each patient and at different times with the same patient. Each one has a different way of working, yet each one is, in their own way nursing". This unique aspect of nursing requires particular skills which students developed while doing the further education course. These soft or transferable skills which are more implicit than practical skills were reported by participants as being invaluable for learning in clinical placement in higher education. Skills such as communication, empathy, caring and team work were developed by the participants in the classroom and while on work experience in a care setting. These skills reflect the learning through experience proposed by Wenger (2009) where students in FE were learning not only clinical skills and course content but learning from the experience of interaction with peers, patients and staff on work experience.

7.3.2 Insight to nursing through work experience

Seventeen participants spoke of the immense value of work experience in FE. The transformative impact of work experience on their world view, allowed the participants to be confident and assimilate into a clinical environment and to start the formation of the dual learner identity for nursing students. On work experience in FE students through practical experience were making meaning of information

by understanding and interpreting this knowledge when caring for patients (Wenger, 2009). Learning in a clinical setting is described by Meyer & Land (2003) as learning to behave as nurses, as it is not enough to teach students mechanical processes and behaviours, they need to experience it in the clinical context where the learning is more tacit than explicit and learning is through engagement with clinical practice. A study of student nurses by Andrew et al (2008) found that the end of a three week placement represented a benchmark for students. At this point students appeared to understand the type and nature of evidence required to satisfy clinical criteria of the module, understood terminology and were introduced to major practice based concepts. It is not being suggested that students on work experience in further education would have attained the same outcomes as students in Andrew's study, but it is notable how much learning may be achieved in a such a short time span. The minimum requirement for work experience for the QQI level 5 Nursing Studies Award is two weeks but many of the participants had well in excess of the minimum requirement.

The first placement in the nursing undergraduate programme has been described as pivotal (Last & Fulbrook, 2003) and a positive first clinical placement can boost confidence and commitment (Boyd & Kendry, 2012). It can also influence progression and attrition, as Pitkeithly and Prosser (2001) suggest that many nursing students leave from second and third year because of events that occur in the first year, often in clinical placement. Participants of this study said that there had been a dropout of students from their course, particularly following the first clinical placement when students were faced with the reality of nursing in a health care setting as this fourth year commented:

"there was 80 something of us when we first started out and now there's only 42.

A lot of people, they didn't expect it to be this hard. Like a lot of people have, dropped out in second year when they realized, oh ... it's getting serious. And then there's people just dropped out just before placement and then people dropped out a lot after first placement." (P30)

On work experience in further education students gained a clear insight to the professional practice of nursing and the role of the nurse. Not only did this experience begin the development of their professional identity as a nurse but it also gave an opportunity for students to observe the day-to-day working conditions

of a nurse. Several participants mentioned experiencing the more challenging aspects of working twelve hour shifts and often the more distressing aspects of the job while on work experience in further education initially. This was important in setting their expectations before they commenced clinical placements in higher education and pursued a career in nursing. This is significant as unrealistic expectations of nursing was identified as a factor in the attrition rates of nursing students (O'Brien, 2007).

FE students on work experience in clinical settings were actively participating in caring for patients and using the clinical and caring skills that they had learned in the classroom. The students were forming a nurse identity as their practice was being represented in a meaningful way, which is a key concept of Wenger's social learning theory (1998). This experience facilitated the FE graduates to identify as a participant in the communities of clinical placements during their undergraduate years. This was noted by other health care professionals, two participants reported that other nurses and doctors had subsequently remarked that it was obvious that they had prior knowledge and experience in a care setting from further education.

"I find a lot of the nurses and healthcare assistants and doctors that I've met on placement with college have said it's so apparent you did the PLC, you worked full time, because you just know, it's a great way of building communication." (P25)

For the participants having an insight to nursing and the development of both practical and interpersonal skills were significant for developing a sense of belonging in the communities of HE and clinical placements. Wenger (2010) in the component of 'community - learning as belonging' identifies having an understanding of what matters and the enterprise of the community and an ability to engage productively with others in the community as important to a sense of belonging in the community. Participants reported having an understanding of nursing as a profession and the role of the nurse in healthcare which is fundamental to the enterprise of nursing. They also had the knowledge and skills to engage productively in the academic and clinical placement communities. This not only facilitated them integrate to HE but enabled the participants to support other students on the nursing degree programme.

7.4 Preparation for HE

An important finding concerned the extent of the influence of FE in preparing students for the transition to HE and progression through the undergraduate nursing programme. As well as the essential academic preparation in terms of content and skills participants acknowledged the importance of the support and encouragement from tutors in further education in reinforcing their aspiration to continue their studies. This included not only continuous positive feedback but practical supports in line with the recommendations of Briggs et al (2012) to facilitate the development of the formation of learner identity in HE while in FE. Students were given guidance on CAO and UCAS applications and financial supports available. Tutors in further education frequently spoke of progression to higher education as an inevitability for students and affirmed self-belief in their choice of career. In further education organised visits were made to HEIs and staff from HEIs attended further education colleges to speak to potential students. Students who subsequently went to these HEIs found this particularly valuable in identifying with the HEI from the early stages. Past pupils of further education who were now undertaking nursing degrees in Ireland and the UK were invited to return to the colleges to speak of their experience of undergraduate nursing to current students.

7.4.1 Preparation for HE and the development of learner identity

The importance of both academic and social integration in fostering a sense of belonging in HE has been recognised by numerous studies (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1993; Jones, 2018; Van Herpen et al., 2020). A range of literature (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay 2009; Scanlon et al., 2007; Thomas, 2002) acknowledges that students entering HE from lower socio-economic groups may experience additional difficulties in entering and progressing through HE, resulting in a decreased sense of belonging compared to other social classes. The concept of belonging and the importance of developing a learner identity has been identified in the literature of the student experience (Hussey & Smith, 2010; Briggs et al., 2012). The emergence of a distinctive learner identity in FE, was reported by the participants as easing their transition to HE. Participants spoke of their initial experience of HE being a continuation of FE as they had a foundation of knowledge and skills. This not only reduced stress in the initial period of transition

but allowed the participants to begin to participate fully on entering the HE environment. This suggests that FE exerted a significant formative influence on students making the transition to HE, which is widely acknowledged as a critical point in the student experience (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Briggs et al., 2012; Jones, 2018). The degree of success in transition influences retention, progression and graduation from higher education so for these participants a positive experience of transition to HE is fundamental for success in the four years of their undergraduate programme. This ‘head start’ in terms of course content and academic skills could account for participants who perceived that the experience of FE gave them an advantage over other students, in particular Leaving Certificate students, during the progression through the nursing degree programme. Participants reported that the knowledge and skills acquired in the QQI award was not only invaluable to them academically but also enabled them to support other students which encouraged social interaction with classmates in HE.

7.5 FE pedagogy

The findings suggested that pedagogical approaches in FE had significant influence in developing independent learning, critical engagement with coursework and academic skills and the role of FE tutors was cited by participants. The testimonies from fourteen participants of the extent of the influence of tutors in FE underlines that the FE tutors adopted a student centred approach as advocated by Carl Rogers (1983). This pedagogical approach in FE, involving the teacher being a ‘facilitator of learning’, is evidenced by the development of the skills of independent learning for the participants. The participants spoke of becoming independent learners through their FE course which proved invaluable in higher education. McFarlane (2018) considers independent learning as one of the key factors in the formation of a learner in higher education. Participants commented that in further education, especially in relation to clinical skills, they were encouraged in their learning to understand not just the how but the why. This learning how, why, when and where to ask questions has been described as indispensable for any student in higher education (Roberts, 1996).

7.5.1 FE pedagogy facilitating independent learning

Wenger (2009) when referring to the component of 'practice-learning as doing' focuses on the concept that learning is not just acquiring knowledge in isolation but engaging and connecting the knowledge to practice. This involves active participation in the learning environment and practical application of knowledge. Learning becomes more effective when it is applied to real life situations, rather than memorising information (Wenger, 2009). Participants reported that due to the influence of further education particularly following their work experience placement, they realised the importance of understanding and analysing information to provide the highest quality of patient care. Participants were also acutely aware of being fully cognisant in clinical practice to ensure that there were no adverse effects to patients due to lack of knowledge or understanding of skills. Participants reported that having a background knowledge in nursing studies from further education gave them a better understanding of course content in higher education. Thirteen participants mentioned in particular, that having previously studied the module *Anatomy and Physiology* was very advantageous for their undergraduate degree course. Other participants also spoke of doing further reading outside course material to have a better understanding of patients' conditions and care, which has been referred to as 'intrinsic motivation', an attribute of an autonomous learner (Fazey & Fazey, 2010).

How learners approach learning is discussed by Mann (2001) who identified the two approaches of surface and deep learning. The deep learning approach which means being active and engaged in learning was described by Kelly (2004) as being more commonly used by mature students. The findings of this study indicate that a significant proportion of participants in this study regardless of age were engaging in deep learning.

This type of deep learning is in stark contrast to the superficial approaches to learning in post primary education, experienced by at least two of the participants (P31 and P33) of this study, who spoke of learning answers in a superficial way to questions for the Leaving Certificate examination. Their experience tends to support research by Keane (2013) in a report of widening participation to higher

education which reports that many school leavers or traditional entry students to higher education experience severe “academic culture shock” and require ‘deconstruction’ from the dependent learning approach in schools. Keane (2013) contrasted this with students who attended pre university access courses and who are now in higher education. These students had a different learning experience before entry to higher education and felt subsequently that they “hit the ground running” when they progressed to their respective courses. A similar sentiment was expressed by participants of this study who felt that they were well positioned after further education for the autonomous learning required in higher education.

7.5.2 FE Pedagogy developing academic skills

As McFarlane (2018) points out, it is important for students to have academic skills entering higher education as the skills of sourcing, reading, presenting and discussing material are essential for students to be autonomous learners. Participants indicated that they developed these skills in further education as research and presentations are part of the assessment for many of the modules. The participants in this study who mastered academic referencing reported this as being an invaluable skill in higher education. Having acquired these academic skills in further education contributed to their academic self-confidence, which is widely recognised as a significant factor in student’s performance and progression through higher education (Lotkowski et al., 2004). Lack of academic self confidence in higher education can increase the risk of attrition and diminish the student experience for students who persist but struggle through their studies (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Tinto, 1975).

7.6 Relationships in HE

Wenger’s theory of social learning (2009) references the component of ‘community - learning as belonging’, highlighting the significance of belonging and identity formation in the process of learning within a community of practice. This sense of belonging is integral to becoming part of a community, such as a HEI or a professional health care setting. When students participate and engage in the activities of a community they become connected to the community and the sense of belonging fosters a deeper level of engagement and commitment, creating a

supportive learning environment (Wenger, 2009). Belonging in a community is the ability to engage productively with others in the community and the appropriate use of the repertoire of resources accumulated by the community (Wenger, 2010). The participants reported that the influence of FE supported their social and academic integration and feeling of belonging in the HEIs they were attending. Participants reported engaging productively with others in the community and developing a range of positive relationships with academic staff, professional staff and peers, as well as using the resources within the community.

7.6.1 Relationships in HE with academic staff

All participants reported being satisfied with the relationship with academic staff particularly in the HEIs with a smaller campus where they would meet academic staff on an informal basis such as in the car park. HEIs where the class numbers were smaller also facilitated more interaction with academic staff and the academic staff were more likely to know students' names and other personal details. A number of studies (Spady, 1971; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Tinto, 1998) also emphasise the importance of multiple interactions between students and academic staff not only in lectures but with tutorials and seminars which can be more informal and personal.

One of the most notable findings from the participant interviews was the extent to which tutors in further education inspired students to succeed and progress in their studies. The development of a trusting relationship between participants and FE tutors indicates that the core attributes identified by Rogers (1983) of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding were demonstrated by the FE tutors. A number of participants spoke of FE tutors recounting their personal accounts of their nursing experience in class. This is an example of congruence or being 'real' Bryan et al (2013) with students which encourages positive interpersonal relationships between FE tutors and participants and fostered a sense of belonging in the FE environment. Participants perceived that their positive experience of tutors in further education contributed to developing positive relationships with academic staff in higher education and encouraged an understanding among participants that tutors are supportive and

not gatekeepers of progression (Longwell, 2008). Following the experience of supportive tutors in FE participants were more confident in approaching academic staff in HE if they required assistance academically or personally. This could be described as students gaining “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1977) that is knowledge as a form of wealth. Another concept from Bourdieu (1977), as discussed by Thomas (2002), relates to “institutional Habitus” of HEIs. Students may find it difficult to feel a sense of belonging in educational institutions that are culturally very different from their social background. The role of academic staff in their teaching and interaction has a vital role in ensuring that all students feel valued and welcome in the institutions. Thomas (2002) states that students are more likely to feel that they are accepted and valued by staff if lecturers and tutors know their names and exhibit other signs of friendship. The findings of this study reflected Thomas’ analysis of the importance of this type of informal relationship with tutors in HE, speaking of simple things like encounters with staff in campus car parks and being on a first name basis with staff. The use of first names with academic staff was also highlighted by McFarlane (2018). The less formal relationship with academic staff prior to entry to higher education encouraged maturity as students felt they were treated with dignity and respect (McFarlane, 2018).

In the discussion of relationships with academic staff participants mentioned that staff in HE knowing and valuing the student experience in a care setting was particularly important in the student staff relationship. This was discussed in relation to learner identity by Weil (1986), in a study of non-traditional learners, students found that their learning outside the classroom was not valued and students were expected to conform to the structural norms of the institutions. In a more recent study Clark & Hall (2010) found that nearly half of those interviewed for that study felt their contribution was not valued by tutors in higher education. This was consistent with the experience of three participants who spoke of a tutors in HE who had not worked in a clinical setting for many years and who were unaware of current practices. Yet, these findings were exceptional as they were the only negative aspects of interaction with staff in HE mentioned by the participants in this study. In contrast, one participant mentioned that academic staff in HE have commented that they “love QQI girls” which would reinforce the perception that they valued the students’ experience in further education. This also

demonstrates that academic staff recognised the FE graduates' competence in participation in the HE community which is a key element of the component learning as belonging (Wenger, 1998). This suggests that the experience of FE may well contribute to increased competence facilitating a sense of belonging in HE.

7.6.2 Relationships in HE as engaging with student services

The report by Thomas (2012) highlights the underutilisation of support services by students in higher education but this was not reflected in this study. As well as having good relationships with academic staff participants reported other professional staff in their HEI being very helpful during their studies. Eight participants expressed gratitude to the library staff for their assistance in accessing information both in person and online during the Covid 19 pandemic. The library was the most used facility by all participants, who also attended the library for writing and other workshops. Eight other participants availed of other support services such as counselling. These findings would be in contrast with the study by Quinn et al (2009) which found that only 7% of students in a UK university accessed counselling services in the HEI they were attending. Three participants spoke of the influence of further education in supporting them to access support services when they were required in HE. Participant 22 mentioned that without this prior supportive influence other students may not have the confidence to seek help in HE. He expressed the view for example that students coming from Leaving Certificate may become "lost" in bigger campuses and may miss out on useful resources within the HEI.

7.6.3 Relationships in HE with other students

Social integration in higher education has been cited as integral for students' success in higher education by much of the literature on the student experience. Tinto (1993) in his model of student attrition considers social integration of equal importance to academic integration for retention of students in undergraduate

studies. Similarly, Astin (1993) concluded that the student's peer group is the most potent source of influence on the student's growth and development.

From the findings of this research the majority of participants acknowledged that the relationships with other students was of major significance both in college and on clinical placements. Buote et al (2007) outlined the key functions of friendships in college and from these findings, the participants acknowledged that the relationships they developed were not only supportive but enhanced their enjoyment of the undergraduate years. Ten participants mentioned that having experienced the benefit of peer support in further education had encouraged them to foster relationships with their classmates in higher education. All participants reported good social integration with class colleagues in higher education, although the level of integration depended on the personal circumstances of the student.

Studies of mature students have found that social integration in higher education was not as relevant as with traditional students due to factors such as other commitments of family and work, external supports, and strong goal orientation by mature students (Brennan & Osborne 2008; Bean & Metzger 1985; Scanlon et al., 2007). This lack of social integration can lead to feelings of isolation (Moran, 2012) but this did not appear to be an issue for the mature student participants in this study. Although many of these participants reported that they tended to socialise mainly with other mature students, which is in line with a common phenomenon identified in the literature (Scanlon et al., 2007; Moran, 2012; Keane, 2009), the mature student participants still felt that they had good relationships with all their class colleagues. Keane (2009) and Inglis & Murphy (1999) identified that differences of age groups in a learning environment can cause conflict, but this contrasted strongly with the experience of participants in this study. Although differences between younger and mature students in the learning environment were identified by the mature students in this study, these differences did not cause conflict. Participants spoke of reciprocal sharing of skills such as IT and supporting others to develop study skills, which promoted harmony in the learning environment in higher education. Several of the mature student participants said that having the experience of being with younger students in further education mitigated against potential feelings of negativity towards younger

students in higher education. The mature student participants spoke of being more empathetic to younger students and that they could relate to their different approaches to learning and social interests, following their experience of being class colleagues with younger students in further education.

The influence of further education in facilitating social integration was also noted by younger participants. The experience in further education of being in a diverse environment following second level school allayed the fear of being unable to make friends in higher education which can be a concern particularly for working class students as reported by Scanlon et al (2020). The participants had developed friendships in further education that they still sustained and were more familiar with social interactions with students of different genders, age, ethnicity and social background following their PLCs. Their experience reflects the argument advanced by McFarlane (2018) that the experience of meeting people from different backgrounds with a similar mindset contributes to a new sense of self, which promotes an identity in higher education and fosters social integration. Another contributing factor to social integration among the participants was self-confidence. Their increased levels of self-confidence following the QQI Level 5 course in further education was a major factor in the participants feeling socially comfortable in the higher education environment as they were more positive around their ability to interact with people and make friends with their peers.

The use of social media for social integration was addressed by many participants. Vaughan (2010) discussed how the use of technology collaboratively in the learning environment can have positive effects on student performance and retention but emphasised that it's use outside formal teaching and learning cannot be underestimated. Participants reported that social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook were often very beneficial for various reasons and at various times during their undergraduate years. Social media served as a platform for communication between the college and students for academic purposes and the practicalities of student life but it was also used as a private arena where students could access emotional support from other students as indicated in studies by Selwyn (2009) and Madge et al (2009). The use of social media was of major importance during the Covid pandemic when students were unable to meet face to face. Its use is still of particular significance for nursing students as when they are

on placements they do not have physical contact with all of their class colleagues and are not in the college environment.

Although several participants in this study discussed the “stigma” associated with further education within secondary schools and their previous peer groups this did not translate to their experience in higher education. Keane (2013), in a report of widening participation in higher education found that students entering higher education through access courses were often reluctant to disclose to other students and staff their entry route to higher education. These students, not having obtained the same Leaving Certificate points as their traditional entry peers, were concerned about their academic ability and that they would be perceived by students and academic staff as not being academically able for the course. They also experienced negativity and resentment from some students who felt that access students had obtained places unfairly. Yet, this did not reflect the experience of vast majority of the participants in this study - indeed none had such negative experiences on their entry to HE after completion of the FE course. On the contrary, participants commented that the knowledge and skills acquired in further education enabled them to support other students in course modules, clinical skills and on placements both practically and psychologically, which facilitated social integration with their peers. This underlined the influence of FE in developing cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) in the form of knowledge and skills which were invaluable in supporting the participants and indeed their classmates in their academic and social integration in HE.

7.7 Summary of discussion

From the findings of this research the influence of further education was considered in relation to the four components of Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning. The key factors for the evolution of HE learner identity: academic skills, independent learning, social relations, personal skills, engagement and belonging (McFarlane, 2018) were evident to varying degrees in the experience of the participants. The socialisation of the participants in class and on work experience in FE encouraged the development of the professional identity of a nursing student which was invaluable for clinical placements in higher education.

The early formation of the dual identities of learner in HE and nursing student was a significant factor in the development of a sense of belonging in the communities of practice incorporated in the nursing degree programme. Participants described an ease of transition to, and a 'head start' in higher education and generally testified to effective academic and social integration in higher education.

The academic and transferable skills developed in further education facilitated the participants to engage actively in learning and apply this knowledge at a practical level. Participants described adopting a deep learning approach to their studies and reading outside of course material. Following their engagement in further education participants were aware of the importance of not merely learning material but securing an in-depth understanding of the knowledge and skills they were learning during the degree course as it would be applied in real life situations. Previous knowledge and skills from further education gave the participants self confidence in their abilities motivating them in their studies.

Wenger (2009) proposes that individuals learn through experience, making meaning or sense of the world outside formal learning in the classroom. These experiences encourage personal growth and development. Based on these findings, participants describe a growth and development in self-confidence, caring and empathy through the experience of further education which was invaluable to them in their undergraduate years. The formative experience of the work experience placement in further education also gave the participants an insight into the professional practice of nursing and the role of the nurse in the health care system. This was significant in beginning the formation of a professional identity and through this experience, which was certainly transformative for some, participants could give meaning to what is involved in becoming a nurse. This underpinned realistic expectations for the nursing degree course and reinforced for many participants the commitment to pursuing a nursing career.

In the analysis through the lens of Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning the findings of this research were complementary to or supported the conclusions of the literature reviewed in many aspects such as the development of learner and professional identities (McFarlane, 2018, Boyd & Kendry, 2012) and belonging in college (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1993; Van Herpen et al., 2020). Yet, in other areas the

participant's accounts of their experience in HE as FE graduates differed from previous studies discussed in regard to the influence of FE pedagogy (Tett et al., 2016; Myhill 2020) constructive relationships with academic staff and the relative success of social integration (Scanlon et al., 2007; Moran, 2012; Keane, 2009).

From the discussion of the findings in the context of the literature, a number of implications and recommendations are suggested for further and higher education. These recommendations for further research, policy and practice are intended to enhance the experience of both FE and HE for students and to provide improved outcomes for FE students for their transition to and progression through HE.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Principal conclusions

The subject of this research evolved from my experience as a teacher in further education. The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions and beliefs of students, who were graduates of FE courses pursuing undergraduate nursing programmes in HE, regarding the influence of further education on their transition to undergraduate nursing degrees in higher education and the extent to which participation in further education may have influenced their experience in higher education.

In this qualitative study FE graduates across all four years in undergraduate nursing degree programmes in the Republic of Ireland were interviewed about their experience of transition to HE and for some their progression through the undergraduate programme. The data generated was analysed through the process of thematic analysis. The findings of this research were presented under the themes which emerged from this analysis.

Using Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning as a theoretical framework these findings were discussed with reference to a range of scholarly literature. This study provides significant empirical evidence of the influence of further education on the transition to HE and the student experience for students pursuing nursing degrees in higher education. This study also provides an important insight to the distinctive experience of this group of FE students and gives them a voice on how their educational journey has progressed.

The study has highlighted issues such as the negative perception of further education and limited number of places for FE graduates in higher education degree courses. It has also given an insight to the challenges faced by Post Leaving Certificate students and mature students in further education and higher education. This can inform educators in both sectors on best practice and the supports which may be required for students.

The findings of this study suggest that further education had a formative influence to varying extents for the participants. The significant findings from this

study largely reflects and complements much of the extensive literature of the discussion of student experience in higher education, although some findings also challenge or at least qualify the arguments of studies on mature students and other traditionally under-represented groups.

Increase in self-confidence following further education was cited by the majority of participants. This gain in self-confidence was beneficial both for academic integration (Nora, 1993; Lotowski et al., 2004) and the social integration (Buote et al., 2007; Astin, 1993) of the participants in higher education. The increased self-confidence was also a factor in the development of resilience for participants which prevented distress due to perceived stress in higher education (Xuereb, 2015). Participants described being confident in their ability to progress and achieve success in higher education following their achievements in further education. This concurs with the Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy where mastery of experiences and, the achievement of goals contributes to the perceived belief in one's competence and effectiveness in a situation.

Many participants reported that the invaluable insight into nursing as a profession due to their experience of professional practice in further education reinforced their commitment to pursue their studies and equally important, facilitated their development of a professional identity (Brown et al., 2012; Anteby et al., 2016). The formation of a dual identity (Boyd & McKendry, 2012) is vital for students in undergraduate nursing degree programmes as clinical placements are integral to the teaching and learning in the nursing degree programme. The concept of forming identities in multiple environments (Wenger, 2009; Weil, 1986) had particular relevance for the participants as they studied in both academic and clinical settings progressing through their studies and undertaking placements in various healthcare settings.

Many participants spoke of FE tutors as being role models. As well as teaching the curriculum for the QQI Award they inspired the participants to pursue a nursing career by demonstrating an empathetic and professional approach to caring. The FE tutors also provided invaluable encouragement, support and guidance to the participants and were described as instrumental in their transition to higher education. This was an important finding of the study as it illustrates the role of FE teachers in the students' success.

FE pedagogy was significant in the formation of learner identity in HE (McFarlane, 2018; Briggs et al., 2012). This facilitated the participants to integrate academically in higher education. This integration was viewed by the participants themselves as critical for their persistence and success in higher education (Tinto, 1993; Jones, 2018; Lowe & Cook, 2003). Study and academic skills acquired in FE were invaluable for the students as they can be used at any stage of lifelong learning. Moreover, acquiring the transferable skills of empathy and communication are important for both progression in higher education and employment in any area.

The participants reported positive relationships with academic staff, professional staff and classmates of all ages and backgrounds and this fostered a sense of belonging in the community of the HEI they were attending (Van Herpen et al., 2020; Meehan & Howell, 2018). The positive relationships with teaching staff in FE influenced the participants perception of academic and professional staff in HE. The participants viewed these staff as supportive and were comfortable seeking assistance if required. Participants reported forming good relationships with their peers in HE, indicating that this collegiality was invaluable when making the transition to HE and throughout the undergraduate years. The isolation of mature students (Moran, 2012) and students from working class backgrounds (Scanlon et al., 2020) cited in various studies was not reflected in this study.

Further education and training has been providing education and skills to learners all over Ireland for over a century. The role of further education in providing access to higher education has been increasingly recognised in the last three decades. Based on the findings of this study this role has provided the participants with an opportunity not only to pursue a qualification in higher education but an opportunity for self-growth, the acquisition of a range of academic and transferable skills and to determine a career choice.

Following the findings of this study a number of recommendations are made for further research and practice and policy in further and higher education. A personal reflection on the learning from conducting this study and its implication for future practice of the researcher concludes this chapter.

8.2 Recommendations

From the findings of this study and analysis in relation to policy and the literature on the student experience this section presents the recommendations for research, practice and policy that have emerged from this study. The findings from this study show that based on the experience of the participants, further education was a significant formative influence on their successful transition to higher education and at least for some participants, progression through the undergraduate programme. Following the QQI level 5 Awards, the participant perceived themselves as being better prepared and more committed to pursuing the undergraduate nursing degree programme than if they had not achieved this award

8.2.1 Further research

Further research should explore the experience of further education graduates who progress to higher education and the traditional entry student entering nursing degree programmes on a comparative basis. This could provide comparisons on key findings of this study such as college preparedness and formation of learner and professional identity.

For this research participants from all years of undergraduate study were interviewed regarding their experience of transition to the nursing programmes in higher education and their progression at various points of the undergraduate programme. As the participants were in some cases recounting their past experience from three or four years earlier, a further longitudinal study of different cohorts would be of interest particularly in exploring further the influence of further education on progression through higher education.

Due to the objectives and design of this study, the experience of FE students who did not proceed to HE or did not complete the undergraduate nursing degree programmes was not explored. Further research on these cohorts of students could provide important insights about the impact of further education for students who have completed the QQI level 5 Nursing Studies Award.

8.2.2 Implications for nursing programme in further education and FET sector

The findings of this study underlined the high value of work experience for FE students in securing expertise in professional practice and in adapting to clinical placement in higher education. While on work experience placement as part of FE, the students developed practical and interpersonal skills. They also gained an insight into the professional role of the nurse, which facilitated the development of professional identity. Their knowledge of and an increased commitment to the nursing profession in turn was very beneficial for a sense of belonging on clinical placements in higher education. As part of the *Work Experience* module the onus is on the student to obtain the work experience placement. It can be difficult for individual students to obtain a placement where they can experience quality care provision and learning opportunities. This was acknowledged by one participant who found it easy to secure a placement through family or professional connections, but was aware that some of her classmates were not so fortunate. It is important based on the findings of this study that where possible FE providers should develop links with health care settings for students on work experience. This would ensure that FE students have the best outcomes from their work experience placement. This could also be beneficial for the health care setting as a number of FE students work part time as health care assistants during their studies and having students on placement could be a valuable source for recruiting employees who have prior experience in the health care setting.

The significant influence of the role of tutors in FE in preparing and supporting the participants in their transition to and progression through HE has been identified in the findings and in the literature. The practice of having nurses as tutors in FE for modules on the QQI Nursing Studies award should be maintained and extended as they provide role models for students who intend to pursue nursing as a career. The practice of tutors recounting their nursing experience was particularly inspiring for the participants of this study. Nursing tutors in FE should be encouraged to share their experiences and be conscious of how important their behaviour and attitudes are as role models for students.

Participants mentioned various aspects of career guidance in further education as being supportive in their progression. These were described by Briggs et al (2012)

as influences which assist the formation of higher education learner identity. These supports included assistance in CAO/UCAS applications, talks/visits by former students and visits by staff from HEIs to FE colleges. The importance attributed to these activities by the participants of this study should be noted by further education providers who could usefully encourage more formal arrangements for interaction between further education colleges and higher education institutions. FE staff should also make students aware of, and encourage attendance at college open days.

Based on the findings of this study it would also be worthwhile to raise an greater awareness among FE students regarding the differences in the disciplines of nursing such as mental health and Intellectual disabilities. These disciplines are unique and students applying for these programmes should be prepared for the specialist nursing approaches in these areas. This could be facilitated by organised talks from practitioners in these fields and/or visits to these placements. This will enable students to make informed choices prior to applying for nursing degree programmes through the CAO.

Four of the participants made the transition to higher education following completion of the QQI level 5 Healthcare Support Award. Although the participants found that the knowledge and experience gained from this award was beneficial their engagement with academic writing and other academic attributes was significantly more limited than the engagement of students who achieved the Nursing Studies Award. The Healthcare Support Award is intended to provide a qualification for students who wish to pursue a career as health care assistants, therefore the assessment and learning outcomes of this award are necessarily different from the Nursing Studies Award, leading to lesser emphasis on academic writing and referencing of sources. These skills were mentioned by the large majority of participants as being invaluable in higher education. A small number of students who had completed the Nursing Studies Award also felt the emphasis on their particular course was for employment as health care assistants rather than progression to higher education and they were less well prepared for some aspects of the undergraduate courses. It can be difficult for FE providers for logistical reasons to ensure that courses best meet the needs of the students but where possible students whose intention is to progress to undergraduate nursing

degree programmes in higher education should be supported and teaching staff should endeavour to facilitate the development of relevant academic skills for higher education for this cohort of students.

The issue of the negative public perception of further education was identified as a concern by participants in this study, although it did not impinge adversely on their own experience in FE, this reflected issues raised in the literature. This perception has a historical basis in the Irish educational system, due to the higher status traditionally accorded to academic disciplines and careers over practical skills and disciplines and has persisted despite initiatives by statutory bodies (SOLAS, 2022) and favourable analysis of the value of FE in sections of the media (O'Brien, 2020). Further education colleges need to be cognisant of this in their advertising and marketing of courses. The findings of this study suggest that further education is an invaluable preparation for higher education for both school leavers and the mature student. Career guidance teachers from all schools and parents and students from all socio-economic groups should be made aware of this undervalued avenue for preparation and personal growth before embarking on any undergraduate programme in higher education.

The concept of further education colleges being reconfigured as a 'College of the Future' (SOLAS, 2020) is another step to changing the perception of further education and importantly ensuring more transparent pathways for FE students who wish to continue their studies in HE. The model of a 'College of the Future' under Kerry ETB is being positioned as the changing face of FE nationally in the future.

8.2.3 Implications for higher education

As discussed in chapter two the progression of FE graduates to higher education has been part of a number of strategies and initiatives by authorities in further and higher education and government departments (SOLAS, 2020; ETBI, 2021; DES, 2011; HEA, 2022; DFHERIS, 2021). The issues of transparent pathways from FE to HE has been recognised and the need for continued collaboration between FE and HE has been acknowledged. The development of the Tertiary Degree programme is an example of such a partnership.

As discussed earlier these programmes for nursing students are only available through Technological Universities and there are currently no TUs offering nursing programmes in Dublin. Also, unlike other tertiary degree programmes graduates from the FE Nursing studies are only eligible to transition to the first year of the undergraduate programmes. Participants reported a considerable overlap in the course content from the QQI Level 5 Nursing Studies Award to the first year of the nursing degree programme in HE. When expanding the tertiary degree programme for nursing degree programmes across a wider range of universities, HEIs could consider the possibility of FE graduates receiving recognition for prior learning on entering HE. This would reduce the demands of making the transition to HE particularly for mature students.

While these new tertiary programmes are a significant step in access, transfer and progression for FE graduates to HE, this study suggests that more remains to be done in terms of policy formation and implementation by all stakeholders to facilitate the access of FE graduates to HE. This should apply to all HEIs and in particular university degree programmes in HEIs where FE graduates are underrepresented. This will help to establish equity of access to HE and better reflect the contribution of FE to education in all areas of society in Ireland.

Many HEIs have “taster weeks” for transition year students and this concept could be extended to FE students during the course of their studies, as familiarity with the HEI campus was found to be beneficial to students in the first few weeks of transition. On transition to HE, specific support for FE graduates should be provided as recommended in the report by Sartori & Bloom (2023). These additional supports such as a culture of welcome for FE graduates may be required by FE graduates to facilitate the best outcomes through their undergraduate years. Financial support is particularly important as FE graduates who have already completed a year of fulltime study and are now committing to a further four years in an undergraduate programme that is both physically and psychologically challenging.

Although this is only a single study including a relatively limited number of FE graduates, this research has provided strong empirical evidence to support the case for increasing the quota of places for further education graduates in undergraduate nursing degree programmes. This has been a topic of discussion

for many years but the quota of places for this cohort of students has remained relatively unchanged. The findings of this study provide significant evidence that FE students adapt effectively to HE. Moreover there is considerable frustration among successful PLC students at the very limited quotas, which are in reality an obstacle to the stated Government objectives of access, transfer and progression, at least between FE and HE. It would be worthwhile for HEIs, in consultation with the government, to increase the quotas of places for FE students for entry to nursing undergraduate degree programmes in higher education. There have been advances in this area recently with Maynooth University announcing that 50% of the places on the newly established nursing degree programme will be reserved for mature and FE students. At present there is no breakdown of these places within the new programme so it is difficult to ascertain how many places will be allocated for FE graduates.

Extending the practice of allocating a percentage of places for FE students on nursing degree programmes to all HEIs would provide transparency and equity for FE students who wish to progress to higher education. It would also ensure that as more places on nursing degree programmes are made available that there will be increased accessibility for FE students. When implementing this practice the percentage allocation across all HEIs within a specific range, for example 25-33% should be applied. This would provide a consistent approach to pathways for FE students to higher education and acknowledge the commitment to nursing demonstrated by students who have completed further education.

An interesting finding of this study was that FE was influential in facilitating the transition to HE and the progression through the undergraduate programme for mature students as well as younger entrants. Mature student participants in this study noted that having practical experience in a care setting was significant for them in making the commitment to pursue nursing as a career and knowledge of modules such as Anatomy and Physiology were invaluable in supporting them in the progression of their studies. This would suggest that HEIs could consider mature students who are FE graduates as a priority group for reserved places on nursing degree programmes

As stated previously nursing in Ireland as with many other countries in the world is facing significant challenges. Nurse education is an area which requires nurse

graduates who will provide the highest standard of care in a demanding healthcare environment. The attrition rate on certain nursing degree programmes, the reduction in applications for nursing degrees and the commitment of nurse graduates to continue to practice nursing in Ireland is of concern for nurse educators. The most recent review of undergraduate nursing programme (NMBI, 2023) recommended more places for further education graduates to widen access to nursing degrees. The findings of this study suggest that the implementation of this recommendation will ensure that more students who obtain places on nursing degree programmes will not only be well prepared for HE but will be committed to the nursing profession and have realistic expectations of nursing as a career.

8.3 Personal reflection

From the data generated there was clear evidence that further education was a formative influence in various aspects for the participants who had progressed to higher education. The purpose of the study focused on exploring the influence of FE in the transition to higher education and investigating their experiences in higher education but the extent of its formative influence in the personal development of the participants was unexpected. Participants described their experience in FE as “life changing”, allowing them to achieve life goals such as becoming a nurse. By using a reflective diary throughout this research, I have become aware of numerous implications for me as a practitioner in further education.

In my practice I always encourage and support students. This study has reinforced to me the importance of this for students. Continuous positive feedback along with support and guidance can change the student’s perception of their ability which can both encourage and motivate the student. I am now mindful that each interaction between student and teacher is significant and as a role model for nursing students, empathy and caring should be reflected in individual and collective interactions with students in and out of class. In my practice now, as well as covering the curriculum I will ensure that study skills and instructions on Harvard referencing are regularly incorporated in class. These academic skills

were identified by participants as being valuable for their transition to undergraduate programmes and progression through the course in higher education.

I have also reflected on my own skills and attributes. From listening and transcribing the interviews with participants I have become more aware of my own verbal communication skills. My interviewing skills improved immensely over the course of my research, not least due to the experience of pilot and even a few initial interviews where I discovered that in many instances I tended to repeat myself, ask several questions at once and a number of my questions were ambiguous to the participant. Following this learning experience, I was able to be more succinct and clearer in verbal communication in my teaching and interaction with students and other staff members. Now, when there is a misunderstanding in my practice with a class or students I am aware that the fault may involve miscommunication on my part. I now actively encourage students to seek clarification when necessary.

Another aspect of communication that has become of greater interest to me from my experience of being a student is the influence of language in education. In the D.Ed. programme, there has been a lot of discussion around inclusivity in education. From my personal experience, language can be the greatest barrier to feeling included or excluded in an educational setting. A major element of how we are perceived by students is through our language. I now recognise that the power of language has many facets. In my use of language with students, I may use language to be considered more 'respected' and give me 'authority'. Language spoken in specific disciplines is not questioned (Foucault, 1973). Though the use of academic language is an important aspect of developing academic skills for higher education I realise now, that there is a cautionary tale in the over use of academic language in my position. In doing so, I could be speaking a language alien to most of my students. In fact, it may have the effect of students disengaging from my subjects. My language, and that of many of my colleagues, has the potential to create an elitist system in education and maybe already excluding the very people we wish to include.

In this thesis the concept of the student feeling a sense of belonging in an educational institution has been discussed many times. I am now even more

conscious that students in my college should have a sense of belonging and that I as a teacher can be instrumental in promoting that sense of belonging for every student in my class. Simple gestures such as knowing the student's name and informal out of class interaction have taken on a new significance in my practice due to the importance attached to such informal social interaction by the participants in this study.

Another important reflection from the findings of this study is that it validates the role of teachers in this often under recognised sector of education. This validation further motivates me in my position as a teacher and encourages me to promote further education to students, parents, career guidance teachers and the general public.

The most profound learning for me and which will have the most significant impact for my practice, arose from my reflection on my own personal experience as a mature student, which came to the fore many times in my reflective journal. Although I have participated in continuous professional development over my years of teaching, the D.Ed. programme has been a major undertaking for me academically and personally. I have enjoyed many aspects of the programme but I can now really empathise with my students and in particular mature students.

Over the four years of this programme I have experienced the difficulties identified for many mature students such as work and family commitments. Poor time management, lack of commitment and procrastination have been features of my D.Ed. journey. I have also experienced unexpectedly high levels of anxiety and stress accompanied by the most disconcerting feeling of incompetence and inadequacy. I had heard of "imposter syndrome" and in my years of teaching students had referred to this but now I can relate to the phenomenon of internal feelings of doubt despite achieving success. Many times, in my practice while encouraging and supporting students I have dismissed these feelings expressed by students. I now realise that these feelings are valid, often for the most capable students and should not be dismissed but acknowledged and the student should be offered any supports applicable.

Often, when a student had left the college I felt a sense of responsibility and I would question my approach and teaching methods. As an educator there can be

a tendency to overvalue formal education and qualifications. Now I recognise that despite all the encouragement and support students will leave courses. Instead of being perceived as 'giving up' or 'dropping out' the student may have prioritised important relationships and their mental health which should be seen as a courageous decision. Now, when a student opts not to continue with the course I will respect that decision. Students may return to formal education at a later stage or find fulfilment in employment, what is important is that they do not feel pressurised to continue or leave further education with a sense of failure.

For the students who complete the QQI level 5 Award and progress to higher education, following my research I have a deeper appreciation of the scale of this achievement. Listening to the participants recounting their experiences of overcoming challenges personally and academically to achieve their goal of becoming a nurse has been truly inspiring. It was a both a pleasure and a privilege to meet all thirty six participants who contributed so much to this study.

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Appendices Appendix 1: Attrition rates for nursing students

The screenshot shows a Gmail interface on a desktop. The email is from EducationandGuidance@nmbi.ie, dated 24 Sept 2024, 13:30. The subject is 'EducationandGuidance'. The email body contains the following text:

Good afternoon, Eunice,

2023 was the first year that the annual report template included a student census, we are unable to provide a comparison to previous years.

Please find the table below.

Kind regards,

[Redacted signature]

Attrition Rate by Undergraduate Programme				
Undergraduate Programme	Class of 2022 (1 st to 2 nd Year)	Class of 2021 (2 nd to 3 rd Year)	Class of 2020 (3 rd to 4 th Year)	Class of 2019 (Full programme)
General	7%	10%	10%	8%
Children's and General	12%	11%	13%	8%
Intellectual Disability	6%	15%	14%	22%
Mental Health	12%	13%	15%	9%
Midwifery	5%	12%	4%	15%

The email is from Eunice Clarke (eunice@nmbi.ie) and is dated 1 Oct 2024, 14:18. The email is marked as read and has a status of 'New Chrome available'.

Appendix 2: CAO points for Nursing and Midwifery programmes in Ireland

Points for applicants (Leaving Certificate)

The table below shows the final Central Application Office (CAO) points in recent years for Nursing and Midwifery programmes in Ireland's Education Bodies (EBs).

*Not all of these points may have been offered a place (i.e. where random generated scores occurred).

#Test/Interview.

END OF SEASON POINTS REQUIRED FOR NURSING AND MIDWIFERY
DEGREE PROGRAMMES 2017-2021 AND 2022 (FIRST ROUND).

Education Body and Programme	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022 Round 1
Athlone IT General	398*	418	410	422	440	420*
Athlone IT Psychiatric	378	377	387	394	431	379
DCU Children's & General (Integrated)	473	473	467	498	521	521
DCU General	425	420	414	433	456*	447
DCU Intellectual Disability	376	367	347	370	382	381
DCU Psychiatric	369	380	368	403	420	414
Dundalk IT General	388	380	392	397*	433	415
Dundalk IT Intellectual Disability	332	301	300	336	347	320
Dundalk IT Midwifery	419	400	398*	440	470	432
Dundalk IT Psychiatric	356	339	356	356	391	377*
GMIT General	387*	399	391	422*	440*	412
GMIT Psychiatric	353	336	346	367	369	371
MTU General	408	401	407*	414	463	433
MTU Psychiatric	376*	389	368	378	412*	388
Letterkenny IT General	369*	373	388*	400*	429*	408*
Letterkenny IT Intellectual Disability	270	297	297	328	342	266
Letterkenny IT Psychiatric	317*	318	321*	357	361	308
NUIG General	440	445	442	473	476	462
NUIG Midwifery	424	445	429	495	507	462
NUIG Psychiatric	397	401	388	440	412	415
St Angela's College General	397*	388	397	419*	422*	400
St Angela's College Intellectual Disability	307*	328	319	317	348*	320
TCD Children's & General (Integrated)	463	463	480	499*	529*	532
TCD General (Adelaide)	#396	399	#389	414	473	#422
TCD General (Meath & James)	403	408	398	429	454*	434
TCD Intellectual Disability	378*	368	346	378	401	387
TCD Midwifery	431	455	440	473*	520	498
TCD Psychiatric	370	382	360	360	432	400
UCC Children's & General (Integrated)	498	510	499*	533	565	554*
UCC General	433	440	443*	454*	495*	464
UCC Intellectual Disability	378	409	369	400	429	419
UCC Midwifery	434	440	454	473*	509	495
UCC Psychiatric	408*	414	413	408	452	430
UCD Children's & General (Integrated)	467	475	475	499	532	531
UCD General	403	402	398	421	462*	451
UCD Midwifery	462	454	440	473	507	520
UCD Psychiatric	359	387	387	393	441*	443
UL General	440	455*	440*	475*	474	463
UL Intellectual Disability	398	430	381*	440	433	351
UL Midwifery	430	430	429	469	498*	466
UL Psychiatric	388	402	388	419*	440	393
Waterford IT General	402	414	413	422	446	421
Waterford IT Intellectual Disability	337	356	338	377	390	378
Waterford IT Psychiatric	350	378	361	3	414	367

Appendix 3: Programme Structure for Level 5 Nursing Studies Award

Within the programme Nursing Studies programme there are a number of combinations of programme modules for certification in this major award. The following table outlines which modules which are compulsory, and which are optional to achieve the major award.

Certificate Requirements

The total credit value required for this certificate is 120. This will be achieved by completing:

Minor Awards			
Code	Title	NFQ Level	Credit Value
All of the following component(s)			
<u>5N0749</u>	Anatomy and Physiology	5	15
<u>5N1279</u>	Human Growth and Development	5	15
<u>5N4325</u>	Nursing Theory and Practice	5	15
A minimum credit value of 15 from the following component(s)			
<u>5N2705</u>	Care Provision and Practice	5	15
<u>5N2770</u>	Care Skills	5	15
A minimum credit value of 15 from the following component(s)			
<u>5N0690</u>	Communications	5	15
<u>5N0972</u>	Customer Service	5	15

Code	Title	NFQ Level	Credit Value
<u>5N1367</u>	Teamworking	5	15
<u>5N1390</u>	Personal Effectiveness	5	15
A minimum credit value of 15 from the following component(s)			
<u>5N1356</u>	Work Experience	5	15
<u>5N1433</u>	Work Practice	5	15
A minimum credit value of 15 from the following component(s)			
<u>5N0758</u>	Care Support	5	15
<u>5N1370</u>	Social Studies	5	15
<u>5N1652</u>	Intellectual Disability Studies	5	15
<u>5N1764</u>	Child Development	5	15
<u>5N1765</u>	Child Health and Well Being	5	15
<u>5N1794</u>	Safety and Health at Work	5	15
<u>5N2006</u>	Nutrition	5	15
<u>5N2668</u>	Exercise and Fitness	5	15
<u>5N2706</u>	Care of the Older Person	5	15

Code	Title	NFQ Level	Credit Value
<u>5N2746</u>	Biology	5	15
<u>5N3734</u>	Infection Prevention and Control	5	15
<u>5N3737</u>	Caring for Children in Hospital	5	15
<u>5N3746</u>	Maternity Care Support	5	15
<u>5N3767</u>	Operating Department Care Skills	5	15
<u>5N3769</u>	Palliative Care Support	5	15
<u>5N3773</u>	Recovery in Mental Health	5	15
The remaining credit value of 15 can be obtained by using vocationally relevant component(s) from level 5. A maximum of 15 credits may be used from either level 4 or level 6. (QQI, 2020)			

The grading system for QQI awards

Distinction: 80%-100%

Merit: 65%- 79%

Pass: 50%- 64%

Unsuccessful: %-49%

The optional components for this award are selected by the individual providers. This selection reflects the current needs of the health care system and the expertise of the teaching staff. To achieve this award students are also required to have current certification in First Aid, and Manual Handling and Patient Moving. This certification is provided by outside specialist agencies.

Work experience is an integral part of this programme. Students are required to have completed 60 hours placement in a health care setting and a satisfactory supervisors report to pass the *Work Experience* module which is mandatory for this award.

Appendix 4: Access letter template

Eunice Clarke
Address
Tel +353863288300
Clarkeeu@tcd.ie

To:
Date:

Re: Request permission to access Name of HEI BSc Nursing students

Dear Name

I am currently undertaking the Professional Doctorate Programme in Trinity college Dublin.

The subject of my research is to explore the experience of students who progress from further education to higher education nursing degree programmes in the Republic of Ireland.

This study has received Trinity College Dublin Faculty of Education ethical approval.

This qualitative study will require conducting a semi-structured interview with students who have progressed to higher education nursing degree programmes using the Higher Education links scheme following successful completion of a QQI LEVEL 5 Nursing Award from a further education college.

I would like to request permission to invite participation for this study from first and fourth year students currently studying nursing degrees at your university/ Institute of Technology.

I would also like to request if you could arrange for a member of personnel within your department to act as gatekeeper for this study.

Should access to students be granted the participants will receive an electronic letter of invitation via the gatekeeper.

The names of the students, your school, university, institute of technology or technology university will not be identified in the final study report.

Please find attached letter of invitation, the participation information leaflet and consent form. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information.

Yours Sincerely,

Eunice Clarke M.A.Ed., RGN, RSCN, RM.

Appendix 5: Invitation letter via email

clarkeeu@tcd.ie

Subject: Invitation to further education graduates to participate in research study.

Dear Student,

As part of a research study **I wish to interview students who have progressed to nursing/midwifery degree programme having graduated from a further education college.** This will involve an informal chat for approximately 30 minutes. This will be conducted on Zoom at a time convenient for you. We will discuss your personal experience of higher education having completed a QQI Level 5 Nursing Studies or Health Care Support Award. This information will be completely confidential and you will not be asked anything of a personal nature, you can also withdraw from the study at any time.

I am a Nursing Studies teacher in further education and I am undertaking this study as part a Professional Doctorate Programme in Trinity College Dublin. Further education is well known as an access route to higher education but there is little information on the influence, if any, of further education for students during their undergraduate studies.

If you are a graduate of further education I would be very grateful if you would agree to participate in this study. It is an opportunity for you to share your experience and be part of research in an area that is of importance to many and is currently under represented.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me by email clarkeeu@tcd.ie. I will respond with full information on the study and discuss any concerns you may have.

Kind regards,

Eunice Clarke, M.A.Ed., RGN, RSCN, RM.

Appendix 6: Consent Form



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Research Title

An investigation of the experience of students who progress from further education to higher education nursing degree programmes.

Consent Form

There are X sections in this form. Each section has a statement and asks you to tick the box if you agree. The end of this form is for the researchers to complete.

Please ask any questions you may have when reading each of the statements.

Please leave the box blank if you do not agree.

Thank you for participating.

General	Tick box
I confirm I have read and understood the Information Leaflet for the above study. The information has been fully explained to me and I have been able to ask questions, all of which have been answered to my satisfaction.	
I understand that this study is entirely voluntary , and if I decide that I do not want to take part , I can stop taking part in this study at any time without giving a reason.	
I understand that I will not be paid for taking part in this study ¹ .	
I agree to take part in this research study having been fully informed of the risks, benefits and alternatives which are set out in full in the information leaflet which I have been provided with.	
I know how to contact the research team if I need to.	
I agree to being contacted by researchers by email/phone as part of this research study.	
I agree to take part in an audio recorded individual interview as part of this research study	
Data	Tick box
I understand that any identifiable information about me (personal data), [will be protected in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).	

I understand that anonymous information from this study may be shared with third party academics worldwide for research and learning purposes.	
I understand that the audio recording of my interview will be retained by Trinity College Dublin for 13months after examination process for use solely by Trinity College Dublin, and then destroyed.	

Appendix 7: Participation Information Leaflet

Thank you for your interest in participation in this study. I have outlined below some information you may find relevant. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me

1. Title of study:

An investigation of the experience of students who progress from further education to higher education nursing degree programmes

2. Introduction:

I am a student on the Professional Doctorate programme at Trinity College Dublin. The subject of my research is to explore the experience of students who have completed a further education QQI level 5 Nursing Studies Award and subsequently progress to higher education nursing degree programme. The aim of this study is to explore to what extent the experience of further education has influenced the transition and progression through the course of study for this cohort of students.

Further education is an excellent access route to higher education but its role and influence in preparation for higher education has not been explored. This study aims to give graduates of further education an opportunity to discuss their experience of progressing from further education to higher education. This will give valuable insight into this progression route and will be of interest to students and staff of further education and higher education.

Your participation in this study is of course totally voluntary and if you choose not to participate it will not have any effect on your progression throughout your course.

3. Research

Graduates from further education undertaking undergraduate courses in Nursing in Higher Education institutes in the Republic of Ireland are invited to participate in this study.

Participation will involve an informal semi structured interview of approximately 30 minutes conducted online on a date and time of your convenience. An outline of questions will be sent to you before the interview. They will be broadly based on your experience of transition and progression through the nursing degree programme. This will include how you integrated both socially and academically in higher education. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Participants will be given an opportunity to review the transcription before it is included in the research.

4. Benefits

There is no guarantee that you will benefit by participating in the study, but by sharing your experience it is envisaged that you will have contributed to an enhanced understanding of the experiences of graduates from further education

progressing to higher education. This may inform policies of further education colleges and higher education institutes in the future.

5. Risks

In the interview you will not be asked for any sensitive information but In the highly unlikely event that recalling your experiences causes you distress please contact your college student support service.

6. Confidentiality

Your identity, the further education college you attended and the HEI where you are currently studying will not be disclosed in the research study. The use of pseudonyms known only to the researcher will be used. All data will be stored according to GDPR guidelines. Audio recordings will be deleted 13 months after thesis examination.

Consent forms will be retained for 7 years after completion of research.

7. Voluntary participation

Participation in this study is voluntary, if you decide not to participate you will not be penalised in any way. You have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason or prejudice.

8. Permission

This study has Trinity College Dublin Faculty of Education ethical approval.

9. Further Information

You can get more information or answers to your questions about this study, your participation in the study, and your rights, from me

Eunice Clarke 0863288300 or clarkeeu@tcd.ie

Or the Supervisor for this study - Dr John Walsh, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. Email- Walshj8@tcd.ie

Thank you for taking the time to read this information leaflet.

Your participation in the study would be greatly appreciated.

Eunice Clarke

Appendix 8: Interview schedule

Opening

Introduce myself

Thank the participant for taking part in study.

Ask permission to record and take notes

outline storage of data as per ethical approval.

Explain purpose of study the interview contributes to the research.

Outline format of interview: Approximate duration of interview, structure of questions.

Reassure the participant of confidentiality and that if they are uncomfortable with any questions they may not answer and they may end the interview at any stage.

Ask the participant if they have any questions before we begin.

Transition

General questions: Year of undergraduate studies, discipline of nursing, further education institution attended and year of study, award achieved, HEI where they are currently attending.

Body of questions for first year students

The influence of further education in the preparation of students for transition to higher education.

1. Overall how do you feel you have made the transition from further education to higher education?
2. Has the experience of being in higher education been different from what you expected after school? After further education?
3. Are you happy with your experience in college so far?
4. Do you feel you part of the college/have a sense of belonging?
5. Do you think FE influenced this?

Academic integration

1. Academically how do you feel you have integrated to higher education?
Prompts –confidence level regarding academic standard, completing assignments, clinical skills.
2. How do perceive your relationship with academic staff?

Prompts- feedback, seeking assistance/guidance, tutorials, approachability.

3. How do you perceive facilities for teaching and learning in the HEI?

Prompts- library, study areas, IT.

4. Have you accessed any supports services in the college?

Probes- which services? if not why?

5. Having completed the first year how do you feel about the nursing degree programme? Probe- is it similar/different than you expected? In what way?

Social integration

1. Socially how do you feel you have integrated in to higher education? Probes- friendships with students on the same course and on other courses. Confidence in social interactions in higher education.

2. Has FE influenced your integration? Prompt -People from different backgrounds/ages/abilities/doing group work/peers as support.

3. Are you a member of any societies within the HEI? Probes - if so which? why did you join this particular society? If not why?

4. Do you attend any events organised in or by the HEI? Probe- - if so which? If not why?

5. Do you use any social media related to your HEI? Prompt – student

WhatsApp

Reflecting back on further education

1. Do you feel you changed as a person after FE?

Prompt -Perspective/lifestyle/relationships/personality

2. What at the time did you find most useful in FE? Probe-why?

3. Does this help now you are in HE? Probe- how? if not why?

4. What has been the most helpful thing from FE for your transition to HE?

Probe- skills, competences, generic skills, modules

5. Are they still useful?

6. What has been your biggest challenge in HE?

7. Did FE help in any way with this/these challenges?

8. Was there any negative aspects of FE that have influenced your experience of HE?

9. What suggestions would you have for FE providers to prepare graduates for progression to higher education?

10. What were the major agents of influence in further education curriculum?

Prompts - Staff support, Career guidance, Talks/visits from HEIs, Past graduates, Health care professional visits the during course? Other?

Additional questions for students in subsequent years of undergraduate study

What is the influence of further education in the progression of students in higher Education?

Academic integration

1. Academically how do you feel you have progressed through higher education? Prompts – confidence level, academic standard, completing assignments, clinical skills,

2. Do you feel that you have reached your full potential academically? Probe- if not why?

3. Having completed the two/three/four years how do you feel about the nursing degree programme? Probe- is it similar/different than you expected? In what way?

4. Did further education influenced your goal commitment to pursue a nursing degree programme? Probe- in what way?

5. Do you feel the same commitment to nursing now? Probe - if not why?

Preparing for graduation

1. What are your plans after graduation. Prompts -further studies, travel

2. Have you had any assistance from the HEI to prepare for graduation? Probe- was this useful?

3. Reflecting on your experience is there anything you would do differently? Advice for prospective nursing students?

Closing

Summarise and clarify data generated.

Thank the participant for their contribution to the study.

Ask the participant if they have any further questions or would like to add anything further.

Ask the participants if they wish to review transcript of interview outlining time frame and reiterate protocol for storage of data as per participant information leaflet.

Appendix 9: Theme: Insight to Nursing

Subthemes

Role of the nurse	Value of work experience	FE tutors as role models
Codes	Codes	Codes
Art of nursing Theory of practice Professional identity Responsibility of nursing	Bedside manner Working as a team Reality of nursing	Passion for nursing Communication Empathy and Caring
Key words	Key words	Key words
Different aspect of nursing	Eye opener	Inspirational
Nursing theory and practice	Career in front of you	Committed
Clinical skills	12hr shift	Personal experience
Health and safety	Not glamorous	Motivation
Scope of practice	Satisfaction from caring	Supportive
Maintain pin	Rewarding	Interested in you
Care plans	Rapport with patients	Felt valued
Autonomy of nurse	Developing soft skills	Engaging
Position of privilege	What nurses do	Dedicated
Background knowledge	Confidence for HE placement	Great teacher
Learning for practice	Realistic expectations of nursing	Caring to students
litigation	Working collaboratively	Basic patient care
	Managing conflict	Respect
		Patient dignity
		Biggest influence
		Recognised potential

Appendix 10: Ethics Approval

