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Contents

Editorial Comment

ROSEMARY MORELAND, EDITOR

Following an open call for articles for the 2023 edition of *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner*, the papers presented this year represent the myriad approaches and practices that comprise the field of adult learning. Section One comprises seven papers; whilst Section Two comprises four Policy and Book Reviews. Postigo Alvarez and Sullivan's paper draws on findings from a master's research study focusing on the experiences of neurodiverse students on a Post Leaving Certificate course in Ireland. They argue the need for further research on the challenges faced by neurodiverse students, particularly with regard to informing teacher training. Whilst recognising the benefits of Universal Design for Learning in developing awareness of different learning styles, used in isolation, its effects appear to be very limited. The authors argue that we need to move from the principle of promoting *equality* to one that promotes *equity*, recommending adopting the Q10 framework to best meet the needs of all learners.

Nicholson's paper focuses on the use of Socratic dialogue to develop critical thinking skills in ESOL classes in England. Based on a core belief of the Danish Folk High School of the importance of the spoken word, this project sought to explore how Socratic dialogues could enable learners from different backgrounds and cultures to build trust and mutual respect, through dis–cussion on topics of mutual interest, that also enabled students to develop their language skills. Key learning from this project suggests that this method is not only highly effective in developing learners' confidence in language acquisition, but also promotes collaborative and inclusive learning. Malone and Cox discuss the importance of engaging family carers in higher education, using a case study in South East Technological University to highlight areas of good practice. Working in partnership with Family Carers Ireland, this project offered carers the opportunity to participate in a fully-funded bespoke

Certificate in Family Caring. Co-creation was also an important element of this programme, ensuring that the learning was relevant to the needs of learners, whilst meeting academic quality standards. This case study highlights the positive impacts which higher education institutions can make on civic society, particularly when collaborating with community and charitable organisations.

O'Sullivan's paper focuses on Youthreach, an alternative educational pathway for early school leavers, and investigates its impact on the career paths of former students. This small-scale qualitative research identifies areas of good practice, that clearly align with adult education principles, and recommends broader-scale research on this under-researched area of alternative education. Malone and Mahon's case study on online learning in the insurance sector highlights the role of adult education in up-skilling the workforce, particularly with regard to technological skills and in the aftermath of COVID-19. Adopting a co-creation model from the start, a key innovation of this programme is its agile design, offering multiple entry and progression pathways from non-accredited through to master awards. Founded on core adult learning principles, the programme takes seriously the Learner Voice and meaningful active participation in the learning process.

Brennan and O'Grady's paper exploring recent policy changes in FET and their impact on adult education practice raises a number of concerns around policy implementation, not only on adult education practitioners but ultimately on access and participation of adults experiencing educational disadvantage. Given the rise in online learning, in particular post-COVID-19, Sheridan provides a timely critique of the QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes (2018). Whilst highlighting the potential benefits of such guidelines, he warns that the prioritisation of performativity and accountability may reduce educator autonomy, leading to low staff morale and restricting innovation.

Whilst exploring the many facets of adult education practices, these papers highlight some of the key concerns facing adult education practitioners across Ireland and beyond. Small-scale research projects across the spectrum of adult teaching and learning offer many insights into ways of improving practice and innovation is often driven through the cross-fertilisation of ideas. However, large-scale research offers opportunities to take a bird's eye view and produce more generalisable results that enable comparisons to be made at a broader level. AONTAS has long been at the forefront of carrying out significant ground-breaking research in the Republic of Ireland on many facets of adult and community education. Having published the Community Education

Network Census 2020 on community education provision in the Republic of Ireland, AONTAS has now partnered with the Forum for Adult Learning Northern Ireland (FALNI) to carry out the first-ever census of community education in Northern Ireland. The report was launched in September 2023 in Belfast, and establishes a baseline of community education provision in the North. It provides valuable data to support the work of community education providers to advocate on behalf of adult learners. This long-awaited and welcome research is, I am sure, of much interest to our readership and we encourage you to visit the AONTAS or FALNI website for more details.

In Section Two, Glanton's review of the *Further Education and Training Funding Model Review Final Report* (SOLAS, 2022), whilst recognising several advantages of the move to an outcomes-based funding model, raises some very pertinent questions with regard to educational inequality and social inclusion, and in particular how the model will impact on harder-to-reach learners. In her review of *Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality. Creating a University for All* (Kelly, Padden and Fleming, 2023), Hughes highlights the range of viewpoints and honesty of the authors and editors, in sharing their journey in the Education for All Initiative. She commends this book as a highly useful resource for those in higher education and beyond, wanting to make education truly inclusive and accessible for all.

O'Kelly's review of *Poor* (O'Sullivan, 2023) conveys the honesty of the author's testimony in adopting a personal narrative approach to share her experience of poverty, not just in material goods but a 'poverty of worth'. She stresses the value of this book as a poignant and emotive inditement of the inequality and inequity that still exist in the education system in the UK and Ireland today. Koulaouzides' review of Nicolaides' (2023) *Generative Knowing: Principles, Methods, and Dispositions of an Emerging Adult Learning Theory* outlines the key concepts and principles discussed by the author, commending the importance of this emergent adult learning theory for all educators interested in learning for transformation and liberation.

Editorial Board

Contributors

MARI-CARMEN POSTIGO ALVAREZ is an Early Learning and Care Teacher in Further Education with over 18 years of teaching experience in a myriad of disciplines, primarily with adult learners within the Lifelong Learning Sector and Spanish and ESOL learners of all ages. At present, Mari-Carmen is responsible for delivering modules in Waterford College of Further Education in Early Learning and Care and other modules such as communications, work experience, personal development, etc. Prior to teaching in Further Education and while teaching languages at night at Waterford Institute of Technology, Mari-Carmen worked in Montessori and Steiner schools and preschools. Also, Mari-Carmen is the founder member of the Dyslexia Association Workshop in Waterford, where professional support is provided for children and families of neurodiverse learners. Mari-Carmen holds a Higher Cert in Admin and Finance from Spain, a HDip in Early Childhood Education and Care, a Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and Learning in Further Education, and a Master of Education in Teaching and Learning from South East Technological University.

TALISA SULLIVAN has been an educator for more than 20 years, serving students, teachers, staff, parents, and the community across five large counties in Southern California, USA: San Diego, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Orange. She specialices in serving marginalised people who have experienced intergenerational inequities and marginalisation and has built a rapport as an equity leader for county offices, comprehensive and alternative schools, and programmes throughout the Greater Los Angeles Area. Talisa earned a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and a Teaching Credential in Health Science from Cal State Dominguez Hills, a Master of Arts in Educational Administration from Cal State San Bernardino, and a PhD in Education with an emphasis on Urban Leadership from Claremont Graduate University. In addition to serving as a teacher and administrator in K-12 public education, Talisa serves as an Adjunct Professor in the School of Education for the Teacher Education Program, Ethnic Studies Certificate Program, as well as the Doctoral in Education Leadership Program at local Universities. She is the creator of the Quantum Ten (Q10) Framework and Educational Conference. Talisa is passionate about working with educators who prepare students for 21st-century college, careers, and success.

GARRY NICHOLSON is an adult learning and skills manager for Newcastle City Council's adult learning service and an academic tutor with the Faculty of Education and Society at the University of Sunderland. Previously, he has taught in the school sector in the United Kingdom and the Middle East. His research focuses on adult development, praxis, Socratic dialogues, folk schools, and the philosophical concept of Bildung (self-formation).

LINDSAY MALONE is the Director of Further Education and Training with the Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board. Lindsay previously held the position of Deputy Head of Faculty of Lifelong Learning at SETU Carlow. Lindsay has lectured across Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts programmes for almost a decade and holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Applied Social Studies (Professional Social Care), a Master of Arts in Teaching and Learning in Further and Higher Education and is currently a PhD in Education and Social Justice candidate with Lancaster University. Lindsay is passionate about lifelong learning, social justice, and widening participation and access to higher education.

CATHERINE COX has worked within Family Carers Ireland for over 20 years. She holds qualifications in Social Care, Human Resource Management, and Digital Marketing and has worked with family carers for many years in an effort to highlight the challenges that they face, influence social policy for family carers, and support them in lobbying for better services and recognition for their invaluable work and contribution to our society. Her interest in family care stems from her own family situation as her mother cared for her father who suffered a number of strokes over a 20-year period. The family experienced first-hand the gaps in support, services, and information provision for family carers throughout their caring journey from early stage diagnosis of their loved one's illness right through to life after caring. She is the national spokesperson for Family Carers Ireland and engages with family carers, policymakers, political representatives, and media at a local and national level in an effort to highlight the challenges that family carers face and influence positive change in their lives throughout their caring roles.

DAN O'SULLIVAN is the Course Director for the Professional Masters of Business Education at the University of Limerick. He has worked in Youthreach for 12 years and has been involved in a range of adult and community education projects. His areas of interest include Business Studies Education, Critical Pedagogy, Educational Disadvantage, and Bourdieusian theory.

AIDAN MAHON is a Manager in the Faculty of Lifelong Learning at SETU Carlow. Aidan previously held the position of Manager for the Insurtech Network Centre (INC) at SETU and worked as an insurance broker for 10 years. Aidan has lectured as an Associate Lecturer for 14 years and holds a Master's in Business Studies (by Research), a Bachelor of Business Studies (Specialising in Economics and Finance) and APA (Comm. Ins.) Professional Certificate in Insurance. Aidan is keen to foster collaboration between academia, Insurance Incumbents and Insurtech Startups, as well as facilitate access to the Research and Innovation resources of SETU and develop focused training and educational content that bridges the gap between theory and practice.

AISLINN BRENNAN is a VTOS Co-ordinator at Waterford Wexford ETB and completed a Doctorate in Business Administration in 2017 at Waterford Institute of Technology. Her work examined the influence of leadership on employee engagement and the mediating role of employee optimism in the Irish FET sector. Aislinn previously held the role of Manager in the Literacy Development Centre of The School of Education and Lifelong Learning at Waterford Institute of Technology. Her master's research examined the role of CPD in professionalising the Irish adult education sector and Aislinn's current research projects explore the impact of leadership, psychological resources, and job crafting behaviours on employee wellbeing in the education sector. Aislinn has served as an External Reviewer for the HRM journal Personnel Review, published by Emerald Publishing, since 2017.

MAEVE O'GRADY, retired Senior Lecturer in the Literacy Development Centre of The School of Education and Lifelong Learning in Waterford Institute of Technology, is a founder member and trustee of Waterford Women's Centre and a board member of Women's Collective Ireland. Maeve's doctoral research is a qualitative exploration of women's community education, identifying the different forms of capital provided in a Freirean and feminist learning culture. Her master's research identified the developmental model of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a means of building on the strengths of educationally-disadvantaged adults exploring progression from informal adult education into formal adult education or employment.

GAVAN SHERIDAN is a teacher with City of Dublin ETB at Liberties College. For a number of years, he also worked as a VTOS co-ordinator there. His interest in curriculum development began in 2004 when he worked with colleagues from TCD and the Curriculum Development Unit of CDVEC to devise a strand of the Trinity Access Programme to be delivered in the

Further Education context. He is also a QQI Subject Matter Expert in Social Studies. Throughout his career he has written locally devised modules and has endeavoured to interpret official guidelines in the best interests of the learner. In 2021, he took a Postgraduate Certificate in Programme Design and Validation in FET at Maynooth University. He teaches full-time and part-time QQI modules in both the face-to-face and blended modes. This is the first time Gavan has written for publication.

NUALA GLANTON is an Adult Education Officer with Cork Education and Training Board managing Youthreach, adult literacy, community education, and English for speakers of other languages provision in the North Cork area. Nuala has over 20 years of experience as an adult education practitioner and is a member of the Adult Education Officers' Association (AEOA) and the editorial board of the *The Adult Learner* Journal. She is also a PhD student at UCC's School of Education, completing doctoral research on the values of Further Education and Training in a neoliberal policy paradigm.

CHARIS HUGHES is Head of Impact and Engagement at AONTAS. She has a background in intercultural education and exchange programmes, and has authored two studies on the impact of European work placements on FET students from Ireland.

JANE O'KELLY is an Assistant Professor at DCU Institute of Education. Her research interests include teaching in further education and training, neurodiversity, learner support, and inclusion in education and training.

GEORGE KOULAOUZIDES (IACEHOF Class of 2019) is an Assistant Professor of Methodology of Adult Education and Director of the Lifelong Learning Center at the Hellenic Open University. His research interests are adult learning theory and practice, transformative learning, educational biography, and critical reflection. He is a member of the Management Board of the European Association for Adult Education, an active member of the International Transformative Learning Association, and co-convenor of the Transformation and Emancipatory Adult Education network of ESREA.

SECTION ONE

Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning

Exploring and Developing Pedagogies for Neurodiverse Students in Further Education and Training in Ireland

MARI-CARMEN POSTIGO ALVAREZ AND TALISA SULLIVAN

Abstract

This paper draws on the qualitative findings of a Master's research study which focused on the unique voice of neurodiverse students' lived experiences in Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses in Ireland. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with neurodiverse learners in 2021 and these findings, with relevance to the Further Education and Training (FET) sector, are discussed in this paper. The findings relate to the holistic experiences of neurodiverse adults. The article presents several frameworks relevant to teaching and learning in neurodivergent environments. Finally, recommendations are made to create a more equitable learning environment in FET for neurodiverse students.

Keywords: Neurodiversity, Further Education and Training, Teaching-Learning Environments, Quantum Ten (Q10) Equity Framework, and Pedagogy

Introduction

The Further Education and Training (FET) sector in Ireland is characterised by a higher-than-average diversity in its student populations when compared to mainstream education sectors. Guerin and Dulee-Kinsolving (2019) identified that 5% of the student population presents with reported disabilities, of whom only 56.4% reach certification in their chosen education and training programmes. Contemporary literature asserts that there is a need for effective FET teacher training to accommodate the neurodiverse student population by integrating inclusive pedagogies (Breakey, 2006). However, there is a lack of research on how to prepare teachers to implement inclusive lessons in FET (McGuire-Schwartz and Arndt, cited in Reynor, 2019).

Moreover, a knowledge gap was identified in the complex teaching and learning environment (TLE) in the FET sector in Ireland. There is a dearth of research

in relation to neurodiverse students' experiences. A more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by neurodiverse students is necessary to inform teacher training and the provision of high-quality education, with the aim of providing high levels of learning for neurodiverse students, and potentially to all students (Chown and Beavan, 2012; Fovet, 2018).

Armstrong and Humphrey (2009) warned that the absence of provisions in support of neurodiverse students in the FET sector places them at risk and can ultimately lead to negative outcomes and non-progression. These risks include negative self-evaluation, self-defeating strategies, reduced self-esteem, and negative emotions (Burden, 2005; Riddick, 2010). Figures published by An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS) in 2019, the state agency commissioned to 'build a world-class FET sector for Ireland's future', show quite concerning figures in *FET in Numbers 2018 Learners with Disabilities*. The report featured the first release of figures referencing students with disabilities in FET in Ireland. Guerin and Dulee-Kinsolving (2019) identified that 5% of the student population presents with reported disabilities, of whom only 56.4% reach certification in their chosen education and training programmes. Prior to this report, no empirical data was available that recognised this particular cohort within the FET sector. Also, it should be noted that autism was not included in this report.

In addition, research shows that the rate of students with disabilities in third-level education has doubled in the last five years, but this may reflect better identification and reporting (O'Brian, 2017). Likewise, it is estimated that the number of neurodiverse students attending FET is increasing every year. The data suggests that there were 70 students with autism in further education in 2004/05; 105 in 2006/07; and 80 in 2007/08, which is about 0.5% of all disabled learners (a lower number than reported by the colleges themselves). Also, if more had diagnoses, the numbers could be higher (National Assembly for Wales, 2010). These numbers highlight an apparent need to respond to the growing population of neurodiverse young adults who are currently transitioning to FET education in Ireland – allowing them to have the high-quality learning experience they deserve (Gallagher and McKernan, 2011; Moriarty, 2018).

The results of this study are intended to complement The National FET Strategy 2020-2024 and highlight the importance of introducing an inclusive educational framework as part of FET practitioners and Irish FET teacher qualification programmes. The Quantum Ten (Q10) Equity Framework was introduced as an integrated model that is inclusive of research-based

educational theories, practices, and frameworks. The elements of the Q10 Framework are: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Growth Mindset, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Trauma-Informed Practices, Response to Intervention (RTI), Restorative Practices (RP), Culturally Responsive Practices, Positive Behaviours Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Inclusive Practices, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

This research aims to bridge that gap by listening to the voices of neurodiverse students who are currently attending or have previously attended PLC courses in Ireland. It focuses on the meaning of people's lived experiences of learning from neurodiverse perspectives.

The increasing rates of students identified as having dyslexia both internationally and in Ireland merit consideration, as it may be attributed to improved diagnosing and reporting practices in recent years. This is evidenced by the rapid increase in the diagnoses and the high percentage of students with dyslexia. This includes at least one in 10 people of any population, approximately more than 700 million children and adults worldwide (Dyslexia International, 2014). Likewise, rates of autism have been on the increase globally for some time (Fombone, 2005; Lindsay et al., 2014). Prevalence figures range between one in 36 children in 2023 (Maenner et al., 2023) and one in 54 children in 2020 (Maenner et al., 2020). This research also seeks to shed light on identifying elements and components of high-quality student learning and propose enhanced FET pedagogical practices including a framework designed to support neurodiverse and neurotypical learners.

The next sections will present the research context, methods and methodology, and findings which are discussed in relation to the Q10 Equity Framework along with other pedagogical frameworks. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of all learners through the use of the Q10 framework, an integrated educational framework that embeds the students' identified desire for pedagogical practices in FET in Ireland.

Research Context

The FET system in Ireland has undergone radical change in the past number of years, including a complete restructuring of the sector, its awarding body, and the introduction of formal FET teacher education qualification (McGuinness et al., 2014). This background of complex change informs the research study and serves to explain some of the pressures and constraints operating within

the sector, including the marketisation of education and social inclusion. Thus, teachers have a significant role to play in the success of inclusive education practice in their classrooms (Leseyane et al., 2018). This study is focused on the PLC teaching and learning environment of FET, a full-time programme that caters to both young people who have completed their Leaving Certificate and adults returning to education (DES, 2020).

According to the literature, there are explicit challenges that diminish inclusive practices in FET. In PLCs, there are standardised requirements that must be met in order to achieve certification, which may pose difficulties for neurodiverse students (Grummell, 2014; 2016; Grummell and Murray, 2015). Additionally, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is an outcome-based educational model for learning whose linear, and somewhat rigid approach may not be appropriate for all students – or their teachers. In addition, staff supporting neurodiverse learners may be inadequately trained or may not have adequate access to professional development (Moriarty, 2018).

Furthermore, of equal importance, Simmons and Thompson's (2008) research stated that the pressurised working environment under which FET teachers work is persistent. Therefore, teachers' efforts are geared mainly towards 'finding ways of coping and complying with the rigours of performative demands in FET rather than in developing approaches conducive to enhancing teaching and learning' (p.614). It is evident that the role of teacher training is a key component in encouraging the successful inclusion of students; however, there is a lack of training on neurodiversity in FET teacher training (Fenstermacher and Richardson, 2000; Abarbanel, 2017).

Unfortunately, the key issue to be considered is that many neurodiverse students are registered in courses and are not provided with an environment suitable for their holistic development (Moriarty, 2018). Therefore, it is no longer enough to provide access to education: quality and inclusive service is key to encouraging success for every student (Kelly and Padden, 2018).

The literature has also highlighted that there is a gap between inclusive pedagogies in theory and their implementation in practice, which this research aims to address (Stentiford and Koutsouris, 2021). The current climate of FET in relation to neurodiverse students lacks clarity; teachers do not appear to have the support or training on inclusive pedagogies, nor is there a clear framework of inclusion in FET institutions (Moriarty, 2018). In addition, there is very little direction on funding to provide services to neurodiverse students, yet 'neither schools nor higher education institutions are faced with

this predicament' (Moriarty, 2018, p.18). Consequently, FET students who are not considered and awarded the right supports are disadvantaged, which is in conflict with what the 'service description' implies, that the primary goal is to respond to the needs of persons with disabilities (SOLAS, 2020). This generates insecurity and increases isolation and discrimination, thereby expanding the gap between disabled students and non-disabled students (Moriarty, 2018).

Neurodiverse Learners

There is much commentary in the literature that neurodiversity is a complex concept wherein many definitions exist (Armstrong, 2010; Baron-Cohen, 2017; Griffiths, 2020). However, neurodiversity refers to a naturally occurring variation of the human brain. Neurodiversity celebrates the positive aspects of individual differences. While this concept explicitly pertains to individuals whose everyday thinking and behaviour deviate from the majority, it firmly opposes the assumption that these differences are dysfunctional and require curing. Instead, in order for their inherent potential to be fully realised, there is a social responsibility for others to make appropriate adjustments and accommodations (Pollak, 2012).

Moreover, the neurodiversity concept is primarily a call to include and respect people whose brains work in different ways; it reflects both the difficulties that neurodiverse people face and also suggests that we focus on the strengths associated with each rather than on the deficits (Armstrong, 2012; Silberman, 2015; Doyle, 2020). Likewise, neurodiversity has its origins in the social model of disability, a model rooted in the belief that it is the environment that disables the individual (Oliver, 1990; Beardon, 2017). *Figure 1* represents the overlapping strengths associated with neurodiversity.

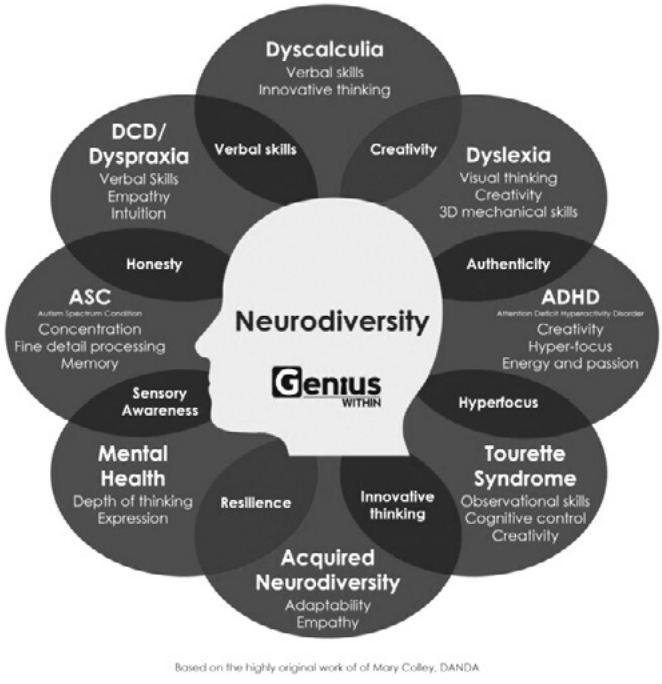

Figure 1. Neurodiversity overlapping strengths (Source: Doyle, 2020)

Contrastingly, the literature identifies that the term is used primarily in education to refer to brain variations as a disability (as represented in *Figure 2*), emphasising deficits, disabilities, and dysfunctions while disregarding strengths, talents, and aptitudes (Howard, 2003; Armstrong, 2012; Fovet, 2018). Unfortunately, this seems to be the most accepted way of categorising people in educational institutions. Through labels, neurodiverse individuals are seen as needing special treatment outside the classroom, where they follow a linear, hierarchical and reductionist route to education through individualised educational plans (Goddard, 1997; Fovet, 2017; Moriña, 2017). This is due to the medical model of education, whose primary goal is to cure and normalise the individual to meet prescriptive outcomes (Developmental Adult Neuro-Diversity Association, 2005; Comberrousse, 2019). The term 'neurodiversity' is used in this study as a counterpoint to the dominant narrative of disability in current educational systems (Shevlin, Kenny and McNeela, 2004; Griffin and Pollak, 2009; Armstrong, 2012; Mc Guckin et al., 2013).

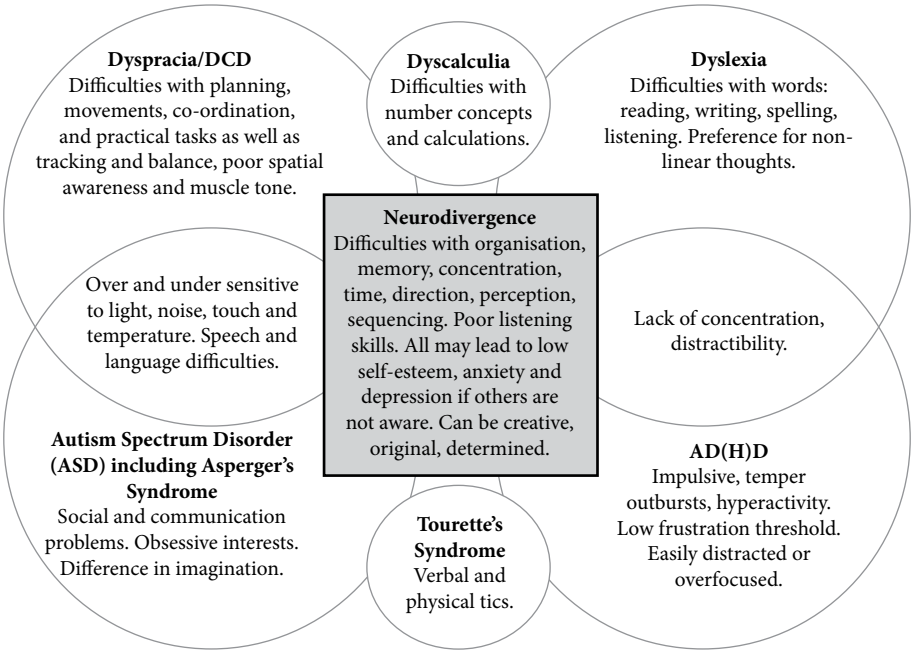

Figure 2. The make-up of neurodiversity (Source: Developmental Adult Neuro-Diversity Association (DANDA), 2005)

Neurodiversity in the Teaching and Learning Environment (TLE)

Building on from the definition of neurodiversity, this section illustrates that FET seems to be struggling to rise to the challenge of providing inclusive education for all. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) – a set of guidelines that aims to provide equal access to learning for everyone – has now been rolled out across the FET sector through the most recent FET strategy. However, its failure to mainstream inclusive practices has too often resulted in displaced students who learn differently availing of learning support tutors (Armstrong, 2012; Pollak, 2012; Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014). This can create a lack of belonging and identity in students in such segregated environments (Maslow, 2012; Banks and McCoy, 2017).

In addition, there are explicit challenges that prevent inclusive practices in FET as previously mentioned, such as pressurised working environments for teachers and inconsistent support among others. According to Florian (1997), the pedagogical process of teaching, learning and assessment needs to be redesigned in order to account for the differences in the learning of *all* students (Chown and Beavan, 2012; Fitzgerald et al., 2018).

Forlin and Chambers (2011) assert that teachers have a significant role in the success or otherwise of inclusive education practice in their classrooms. However, while the need for greater training and awareness of neurodiversity in FET has been stressed (Harpur, Lawlor and Fitzgerald, 2004; Breakey, 2006), the FET sector still appears to be less developed than other educational sectors. Specifically, there is a lack of established formal support structures for neurodiverse students in comparison to other sectors (McGuinness et al., 2014; Dyslexia Association of Ireland, 2021). Of greater concern is that in FET policies, disability and neurodiverse supports appear to be largely neglected (SOLAS and Department of Education and Science, 2014), while research has revealed significant inconsistencies nationally (Mc Guckin et al., 2013).

Therefore, the current FET provision to accommodate neurodiverse people may not be the most optimal, nor does it seem to provide the equitable and excellent support that this cohort of students deserve in order to succeed (Reeves, 2003; Breakey, 2006; Chown and Beavan, 2012).

It has become apparent that understanding and awareness of the value of neurodiversity is lacking in the practitioner milieus (Beardon, Martin and Woolsey, 2009; Beardon, 2017). Moreover, neurodiversity continues to be recognised as an issue to be fixed more so than an individual asset (Armstrong, 2010). Regardless of these points, neurodiverse students continue to constitute a challenge to educational institutions. Nevertheless, adequate equitable education should be paramount for all; if barriers to learning are eliminated, disability may cease to exist for many neurodiverse people (Pollak, 2012).

The next section presents an education framework developed in the United States for equity in education settings that may have relevance for teaching in FET settings.

Quantum Ten (Q10)

Q10 is an education framework developed by Sullivan, co-author of this article, in the United States. She proposes a multi-tiered, integrated, holistic system based on principles of equity that advocate for pedagogical instruction focused on reaching and supporting the diverse needs of every student. It prioritises and strengthens equity in education through leadership training (Sullivan, 2020). Thus, Q10 (*Figure 3*) can be visualised as a student-centred systemic framework that is designed to have the potential to positively impact every student regardless of their neurodiversity. According to Sullivan (2020), in Q10, teachers are trained to support systemic change through the intentional integration of the Q10, which are overlapping elements.

Figure 3. Quantum 10 (Source: Sullivan, 2020)

The elements are evidence-based approaches that are intentionally integrated, interrelated and aligned, and claim to provide a high-quality TLE (Sullivan, 2020). Q10 aims to create a sustainable and equitable system that eliminates gaps by providing every student, through the core 4 (*Figure 4*) of the framework, with access, opportunities, engagement and success. Each person is recognised within the framework of Q10, allowing the best possible TLE to be provided for students so they may be prepared for future success (or so its proponents claim).

Figure 4. The Core 4 (Source: Sullivan, 2020)

It is comprised of three integral parts: the elements, the core 4, and the continuum. According to Sullivan (2020), if educators are trained to support systemic change through the intentional integration of the overlapping elements of the Q10, teachers will be better equipped to support student learning and students will be better equipped academically, socially, and emotionally.

The continuum seems to be particularly suitable as it provides a continuation of analysis and evaluation of the implementation of the elements (see *Figure 5*) and aims to build an adaptive and cooperative leadership team to continually review practices, procedures, and professional learning (Sullivan, 2020).

Figure 5. The six-phase continuum (Source: Sullivan, 2020)

Q10 and its Potential Integration in FET

The vision of *The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy - Future FET: Transforming Learning* is to provide pathways for everyone, thus empowering learners to participate fully in society. It intends through active inclusion to ensure that 'consistent learner support' (SOLAS, 2020, p.45) and good practice is implemented. It aspires to include all learners with learning strategies mainly underpinned by UDL and current research on 'good practice' (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020; SOLAS, 2020).

Research has highlighted that despite current efforts in multiple educational systems worldwide, neurodiverse students are less likely to graduate and are less likely to gain employment (NDA, 2009; Gobbo and Shmulsky, 2019). Q10 aligns with the aim of FET in terms of its vision and its latest strategy. Both seek to serve all students, including those who do not fit in the traditional educational system, by providing consistent student-centred education, support, and opportunities for success in terms of enhancing graduation and job-acquisition rates.

However, the implementation of 'consistent learner support' and 'good practice' in the strategy is vague and does not provide clear guidelines for what good implementation looks like. Thus, the FET strategy does not include a robust framework for leadership training. Q10 is inclusive of a leadership component. If leaders and teachers are not clearly aware of the diverse students' needs and strengths, it will be more challenging to provide what they need, when they need it, in order to succeed (Black, Weinberg and Brodwin, 2015; Scott et al., 2017).

Furthermore, while empirical studies on the impact of UDL promise to support all learners' progress (Schelly, Davies and Spooner, 2011; Novak, 2016), research is yet to show that by applying only this pedagogical approach, learning can be made accessible to *every* student (Capp, 2017; Reynor, 2019). UDL does not provide a means of measuring the intervention's effectiveness (Reynor, 2019). This implies that more research is needed on whether the use of UDL as a pedagogy in isolation will be sufficient to provide success for every student as the FET strategy implies (Reynor, 2019; SOLAS, 2020).

There are further limitations to using UDL in isolation in the strategy. Other holistic elements of student development are not addressed, such as mental health, social-emotional learning, wellbeing, and academic achievement support to name a few (Katz and Sokal, 2016; Anderson, Stephenson and Carter, 2017; Sullivan, 2020).

In order to 'empower educators to lead from the front' (Sullivan, 2022, no pagination), the ethos of Q10, if integrated into FET teacher training, could address the current deficits that exist for every student, including neurodiverse students (Sullivan, 2022). Such an approach recognises students' strengths and reinforces and nurtures them through the environment rather than isolating them (Armstrong, 2010; Beardon, 2017). This principle is congruent with the ethos of the Q10 framework and, if implemented, could empower FET educators to prioritise and strengthen equity in education with the integration of the strong synergy of its 10 elements. This could lead to an empowering, holistic approach to addressing systemic inequities (Unwin and Huddleston, 2008; Murray, Grummell and Ryan, 2014; Grummell, 2016; Sullivan, 2020).

Methodology and Methods

The neurodiverse adult student voice was at the core of this investigation. A qualitative strategy was chosen to understand neurodiverse adult students' experiences and perspectives in PLC Courses in Ireland to inform pedagogical decisions for the future holistic development of FET (Crotty, 1998). To date, this kind of research in the FET sector has not been carried out in Ireland. Internationally, and in Ireland, the rapid increase in neurodiversity diagnoses and the high percentage of students with dyslexia (Dyslexia International, 2014) may require a more accelerated research focus. Therefore, a requirement for input from education professionals, guardians and neurodiverse individuals in this sector is key for student academic and lifelong learning success (McCormack, 2018).

The research perspective of neurodiversity enables the focus on features that are individual, unique, and qualitative (Crotty, 1998). After a rigorous ethical approval process, the sample was purposively selected. The interview participants were sourced via engaging with three relevant gatekeepers in three identified organisations in Ireland. These organisations advertised a short description of the project on their social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and four neurodiverse respondents were selected. Therefore, four online semi-structured interviews were carried out to obtain information. The questions, developed in advance, were chosen consciously to gather information and understand the experiences of neurodiverse adult students in PLC courses. This method adopted a neurodiverse-friendly design using jargon-free language. It was anticipated that, due to COVID-19, some neurodiverse respondents might have found Zoom too anxiety-provoking and might not be functioning well enough to take part in the interviews.

The results were reported thematically (Cohen, Lawrence and Morrison, 2018). Above all, the ethical obligation of respecting participants as whole persons underpins this research project (Cascio, Weiss and Racine, 2020). Each participant was made aware that they had the right not to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable answering (British Educational Research Association, 2019). The themes emerged through the comparison of findings among transcripts of the interviews by hand (Sargeant, 2012). The data was reviewed by the researcher. It was deconstructed and categorised into themes using the 'constant comparative method' (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014; Thomas, 2017, p.402).

Findings and Discussion

The research aimed to explore neurodiverse adult students' learning experiences in the FET sector. It intended to identify the elements and components that underpin success for neurodiverse students in FET. At the same time, the study attempted to understand the constraints that affect the quality of learning in the FET sector. The findings and the discussion in this section are the results of the analysis of four semi-structured interviews of neurodiverse adult PLC students across Ireland.

Furthermore, relevant gaps in the Teaching and Learning Environment (TLE) for neurodiverse students are identified. The Q10 framework is proposed as a solution to bridge the identified gaps. It holds the potential to establish a multi-tiered support system for FET in this context. First-hand narratives and direct quotes from the participants will mainly be used for the presentation of the fieldwork findings to honour the authentic participants' voices on their experiences in FET, while including literature, and the elements of the Q10 Framework (Bertilsdotter, Chown and Stenning, 2020).

Culturally Responsive Practices Inclusive of the Neurodiverse Learner

Culturally responsive practices (CRP) are the usage of the cultural perspectives, understandings and characteristics of diverse students as a channel for effective teaching and enhancing their sense of identity and belonging. It is a pedagogy that recognises the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Crosby, Howell and Thomas, 2018; Muñiz, 2020).

The participants' voices support the need for culturally responsive practices as participant 4 stated that, 'There was no awareness about Asperger's as far as I could tell'.

Neurodiversity is characterised as a cultural difference (Silberman, 2015). As a result, it becomes crucial to emphasise practices that embrace the inclusivity of all students. This is reinforced by Entwistle's 'inner' TLE that draws attention to the importance of students' cultures and social-psychological aspects relating to staff-student relationships. Culturally responsive practices are an integrated element of the Q10 Framework.

Likewise, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, an element of the Q10 Framework, highlights the importance of identities and affective quality relationships for high-quality learning (Gay, 2002; Entwistle, 2003; Maslow, 2012). In addition, educational institutions must move away from *equality* practices, treating everyone the same, and provide educational *equity*, giving students the resources they need in order to equip them to be successful while embracing their identity and their culture (Prahlad et al., 2017).

The Need for Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in FET

The need for UDL is supported by participants' accounts of their lived experiences. Participant 1 stated that, 'everyone learns differently [...] provide different ways for people to learn, not everything has to be written'. International research asserts that students with dyslexia and autism at all levels are not receiving equitable teaching strategies to compensate for their needs (Brede et al., 2017; Sarrett, 2017; Goodall, 2018).

Likewise, participant 3 also stated, 'everything is in writing[...]there is nothing made audio, nothing is accessible'. Participant 2 affirmed:

> Everyone learns differently [...] record every lesson, provide different ways for people to learn, not everything has to be written, give extra time for reading or provide alternatives.

Participant 1 expressed that their learning environment was challenging due to a 'lack of accommodation for different types of learning styles'. The extant literature suggests that by applying the UDL principles to the TLE, a more inclusive learning environment is created, potentially improving learning for everyone (Black, Weinberg and Brodwin, 2015; Capp, 2017).

It has been highlighted in the literature the need for UDL, a strength-based framework that aims to improve and optimise learning and teaching for everyone. Like the aforementioned elements, UDL is also integrated into the Q10 Framework. This approach claims to be vital for some, like neurodiverse students, and valuable to all (Gaudion and Pellicano, 2016). Furthermore, UDL

utilises flexible learning pathways, making the curriculum work for students rather than the other way around, a characteristic that is key to neurodiverse students' success (Breakey, 2006). The evidence shows that UDL aims to suit the needs of every student following a student-centred approach to teaching and learning (Pollak, 2012; Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014). However, the usefulness of UDL as an inclusive approach will be dependent on how teachers use it and perhaps we should not regard it as a panacea (Reynor, 2019).

Neurodiversity recognises the wealth and complexity of the human brain and human nature; this aligns with the principles of UDL (Armstrong, 2012). However, we live in a society that has made reading the key tool of learning. Therefore, dyslexic students are at a disadvantage in our culture and are discriminated against by the format in which the educational system primarily presents its learning materials (Von Károlyi et al., 2003; Pollak, 2012). The evidence suggests that this is disabling and unnecessary and, in fact, what is necessary is the ability to understand this information and put it into practice (Pollak, 2012). The detrimental effects of the inadequate provision in the TLE on neurodiverse students are acknowledged in the existing literature (Anderson, Stephenson and Carter, 2017; Mills and Clarke, 2017; O'Byrne, Jagoe and Lawler, 2019).

Another essential point is that the environment that surrounds the neurodiverse person, and the availability of adequate support, determines the educational outcomes of the person to a large extent (Beardon, 2017). Therefore, according to Mills and Clarke (2017), there is a real urgency to enhance training for educators at all levels to work with neurodiverse students intentionally to provide what they need, when they need it, in a holistic manner.

Student-centred Culture vs Curriculum-centred Education

The participants stated that they experienced a curriculum-centred education rather than a student-centred culture. Participants detailed the following: participant 4 stated, 'I think the focus is always on education, well, I think it should be more on people', participant 2 asserted that 'when things are not going well, it feels you can't turn to anybody', and participant 1 stated, 'I hated the PLC course and I thought it was too much, too intense, too school like'. Likewise, participant 1 also affirmed 'I think really the main focus was on just work [...] on the social side of things you were pretty much on your own'. Participant 4 stated, 'when things are not going well, it feels you can't turn to anybody, because everything is left to you and that's when it stops becoming enjoyable'.

These responses suggest that a student-centred approach in the classroom is desired, however, a curriculum-centred approach is prevalent. The impact of this approach to education on neurodiverse students is significant, as it implies that they conform to what is available to them and not to what is within.

Education is now treated as a social market. Finnegan (2016) highlighted that students are perceived as customers in educational institutions, especially in FET, to justify what they can do in marketised terms. Gurtler and Smith (2005) further state that education is seen primarily as preparation for economic productivity, with the ultimate goal being employability skills rather than a strategy that would promote a 'society that can allow for the expansion of capabilities of persons to lead lives they can value and have reason to value' (Sen, 1999, p.18).

Contrastingly, evidence has specifically highlighted that best practices in the TLE to support neurodiverse students' success are student-centred (Anderson, Stephenson and Carter, 2017; Fitzgerald et al., 2018; Laurian-Fitzgerald et al., 2018; Griffiths, 2020). According to Pollak (2012), greater awareness and understanding must be created systemically to provide a pedagogy inclusive of all through a student-centred approach, such as UDL. Neurodiversity, as previously described, is considered as a difference with its difficulties and challenges. Depending on the way we teach, these differences can be either heightened or diminished (Beardon, 2017).

Consequently, it would be recommended to create clear and consistent student-centred support guidelines to meet the needs of neurodiverse students in FET, whereby students can make informed decisions.

Lack of Access, Opportunity, Engagement, and Success

Participants reported a lack of access, opportunity, engagement and therefore success, participant 3 affirmed, 'This course is not working for me at all. I am hoping to go later [...] to college after my PLC [...] I'm hoping there is better support at third level'; participant 2 indicated 'Teachers do not accommodate [...] for people with learning difficulties'.

Likewise, participant 1 mentioned that in class:

> There is nothing personalised, we are all treated the same [...] I said all your books they're like on written format [...] anything on audiobooks? They [...] said [...] you have to go and do all that yourself [...] I was on my own [...] people do not care. I find it difficult to extract information from what I read, that's my difficulty.

According to the Disability Act 2005 (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2005), students with disabilities must have access to education, employment and training, and to be able to maximise their potential. However, it can be concluded from the participants' responses that it is not enough simply to provide access to education (Barrett and Padden, 2017). Armstrong (2010) suggests that through environmental modifications based on students' strengths, a positive niche construction to learning can be created, unique to each student.

The need for Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed Practices

The research findings suggest that social emotional learning (SEL) is very important as pressure and anxiety can hinder students' academic achievement. Likewise, the participants appealed for caring communities, a flexible curriculum, UDL, a warm atmosphere, and a real connection to college and practical life. Additionally, participant 1 affirmed that:

> The mental health side of things related to learning is totally neglected [...] I couldn't keep up with the demand and there wasn't really much support. So that was so frustrating.

Participant 2 stated that:

> There's no understanding, compassion, empathy [...] you have to explain yourself and it's just frustrating, there is no awareness at all [...] So I prefer not to go through that so I say nothing. Almost ashamed of myself.

Also, participant 4 asserted that 'the mental health side of things related to learning is totally neglected, there isn't any consideration towards the pressure of time, assignments or mental issues'. Participant 3 also affirmed, 'I feel really awkward asking lecturers to explain stuff because [...] I might get judged for it, and then it gives me anxiety'. Lastly, participant 1 expressed her anger, frustration and pressure at not being able to comprehend the theory as fast as others:

> I couldn't keep up with the demand and there wasn't really much support [...] that was so frustrating, I was so angry at myself [...] so emotional and I hold that issue with me today.

Thus, research indicates that SEL is trauma-informed, necessitating educators to acquire the ability to recognise instances where learners' responses are influenced by traumatic experiences (Pawlo et al., 2019).

Also, anxiety is a common and recurring theme among neurodiverse people, creating debilitating psychological distress in the educational setting. As stated by participant 1:

> I felt anxious and pressured a lot of the time [...] I had issues, emotional stuff going on, and not just dyslexia, I've got anxiety as well.

Furthermore, it is common that help and support are not sought, meaning that anxiety remains undiagnosed and untreated, affecting the quality of learning, participation and overall academic achievement (Department for Education, 2016).

Social and emotional factors represent some of the most common hidden obstacles to effective learning (Hendren et al., 2018; Brackett et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2021). Many neurodiverse students in the system are dealing with mental health issues, anxieties, traumas and emotional distress that affect their quality of learning. This is supported by the findings of a number of studies (Svetaz, Ireland and Blum, 2000; Department for Education, 2016; Fisher and Frey, 2019; Hollocks et al., 2019). In recent years, research has identified how such environmental factors affect students' health, behaviour, wellness and lifelong learning (Brackett et al., 2019).

Furthermore, neurodiverse people are perceived as 'different' in their characteristics and behaviours, which can make them susceptible to being severely bullied (Breakey, 2006). Heinrichs (2003) found that 94% of students with Asperger's face torment from their peers. All these issues generate extra stress and anxiety for neurodiverse students, creating trauma in their lives as adults and impacting their academic achievement (Whitby, Ogilvie and Mancil, 2012).

Consequently, to support more equitable learning environments, it is recommended to integrate SEL and trauma-informed practices in FET as a potential positive, evidence-based tool to provide a student-centred approach to learning (Beardon, 2017). This premise aligns with the ethos of the Q10 continuum and thus it could be integrated into the FET environment to address the current deficits that exist for leadership efficacy (Sullivan, 2020).

Request for Flexibility in Contact Hours and the Importance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

The participants suggested more flexibility in full-time courses, in contact hours, and flexibility in the curriculum and subject choice to meet their needs. For instance, participant 4 said:

> If something is going bad and you can't handle the workload of FET work on top of what you're dealing with personally [...] you shouldn't be forced to fail.

According to Breakey (2006), in FET for students with autism, courses should be designed and adjusted to suit the academic abilities of the student's neurodiversity, leading to choices, flexibility and non-standard courses to create opportunity, access, engagement and ultimately success (Beardon, 2017).

Regrettably, many students are still poorly served by the system (Pollak, 2012; Sullivan, 2020). Equity is an action and a mindset. It is not a goal that needs to be achieved at a certain time in a certain way as a 'one-off' event. Many students feel alienated from the system, the traditional mainstream curriculum and the predominant textual delivery in the TLE. This creates anxiety in many learners who develop a sense of not belonging and not being good enough (Maslow, 1943; Stentiford and Koutsouris, 2021). Likewise, the findings of this study suggest that failure to provide appropriate accommodations for neurodiverse students can lead to further negative outcomes (Breakey, 2006; Chown and Beavan, 2012).

It is worth noting that student progress is often disrupted by a struggle with academic needs, motivation and support for coursework demands. Students stated the following: participant 4 stated, 'If I had issues during my course in FET [...] I would have just had to drop out as there wouldn't have been any support for me'. Participant 2 affirmed:

> I struggle with academics [...] I get anxious when we have open-ended essay questions[...] Everything should be accessible, not just because [...] I have to come out and say [...] listen I have dyslexia.

Participant 1 stated, 'I can read perfectly, but I don't take in the content of what I'm reading so the PLC course [...] didn't work for me'. Participant 3 stated:

> I had my interview, they asked if I have any difficulties [...] and I was like [...] I'm dyslexic and I've dyspraxia [...] I just don't seem to get [...] support, so I find it stressful.

Therefore, it is critical that teachers are trained to read the signals and support students holistically in their educational process through being intentionally aware of the importance of Maslow's hierarchy of needs; in terms of safety and security, identity and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation, (Gobbo and Shmulsky, 2019; Sullivan, 2020). This aligns with the Q10 Framework and the importance of guidance and support for learning and the effective quality of relationships (Entwistle, 2003; Sullivan, 2020). As a result, it is advisable to incorporate flexibility into the curriculum to align it with the students' needs and strengths. This includes options for subject selection, adaptable scheduling, variations in sequencing, and diverse pathways within specific study programmes (Breakey, 2006; Chown and Beavan, 2012).

Training Needed for Teachers to Support a Growth Mindset

It has been highlighted in the literature that students with learning differences tend to have a fixed mindset; they believe their intelligence is finite and unchangeable. This is due to the barriers they continuously face in educational settings (Yeager et al., 2013). This aligns with the research findings of this article as participant 3 stated, 'It's just my generation of thinking that you either can, or you can't [...] I have not formally disclosed my dyslexia', participant 1 affirmed:

> All the experience [...] even into my degree now I'm still struggling with that association with education now [...] it didn't work for me. I didn't finish it [...] It was too much for me.

The counterpart to a fixed mindset is a growth mindset, the belief that intelligence can be developed (Romero, 2015). It is a concept that interrelates with a strength-based approach to learning, culturally responsive practices, and UDL, but educators rarely receive formal training on this (Sullivan, 2020). Teachers' beliefs, conceptions of teaching and reflective practice have a direct impact on staff and students' relationships, choice and organisation of content, teaching methods, and their assessment and feedback (Entwistle, 2003; Novak, 2016; Dweck, 2017).

The research highlighted that the mindsets of students, teachers and institutions have major impacts on how students grow and learn in educational institutions (Yeager et al., 2013; Dweck, 2017; Rhew et al., 2018). Educators, when properly

trained, serve as key role models for their students in addressing the needs of the whole person (Sullivan, 2020). Furthermore, it has been recognised that the growth mindset can be used as a tool to teach teachers so they can embed it in their own pedagogical approach (Dweck, 2017). This would have an effect on students' growth and increase outcomes beyond social-emotional learning, academics and behaviour (Dweck and Yeager, 2019).

Support and Accommodations

The importance of relationships in the TLE is acknowledged in the extant literature as a key element in high-quality teaching and learning (Entwistle, 2003). Evident in the findings, however, is an inconsistent framework of accommodations and supports across FET. Participants emphasised the lack of information and the continued need to inform teachers about their neurodiversity. Participant 3 stated:

> I asked my tutor about my support and she was like[...] oh I don't know why they haven't organised it yet [...] it's very stressful [...] now I have stopped asking. I do it on my own.

Participant 1 stated, 'The only accommodation that I got was the spelling and grammar waiver'.

The teacher-learner relationships hold significant importance within FET, being widely acknowledged for their capacity to empower students, as highlighted in the findings. Participant 4 stated:

> My teacher was a huge part in me getting through it [...] she was used to try driving me forward [...] she helped a huge amount with helping me get outside my comfort zone.

The Sensory Environment: The Third Teacher

It is evident from the findings and the literature that the sensorial environment has a direct impact on the quality of learning experienced by neurodiverse students. Students requested the need for space to relax from the overload of college life, as participant 2 stated:

> The sound, the noise or distractions [...] in the classroom [...] to be aware of the sensitivity to sound and how it affects your cognitive ability.

Participant 4 believed that 'a sensory room in every college would be amazing in enhancing the quality of learning', participant 1 stated, 'Within the [...] educational setting [...] quiet spaces help'.

Also, participant 2 continued:

> Sometimes when we have to read something in the class, the lecturers are talking, and to me that is [...] so stressful [...] I [...] need quiet and I really get frustrated and anxious.

Participant 2 requested 'a place where you meet for time out [...] a place with silence, to relax out of the stress of college'. Beardon (2017) stated everybody needs time to be themselves, but this is particularly important if you have a sensory difference.

The environment is known colloquially as the 'third teacher', the invisible teacher that has a major impact on our everyday lives and in particular on those with neurodiversity (American Psychological Association, 2013; Mostafa, 2015). In addition, as the individual and the environment determine the results (Beardon, 2017), awareness needs to be heightened in relation to the impact of the physical environment on academic achievement as one basic need for neurodiverse students (Maslow, 2012). It is worth noting that one element that is not explicitly mentioned in Q10 is the sensorial environment and its impact on neurodiverse student learning (Mostafa, 2015).

The research highlighted that if environments are not made more accessible and inclusive for neurodiverse students, a detrimental effect on the person's wellbeing may follow, leading possibly to 'meltdowns', anxiety and an inability to cope with the environment (Pollak, 2012; Lowe et al., 2014; Bell et al., 2017; Lorenz, Reznik and Heinitz, 2017).

Teacher Training and Adaptive Leadership

The study concluded that students indicated a need for teacher training with a set of underpinning values based on respect, compassion, neurodiversity awareness, and support. Participant 2 stressed that what would improve their learning would be:

> Training teachers and students to know how to just make the environment a holistic learning environment, so that all the needs are being met, without having to single somebody out [...]and make them feel that [...] there is something wrong with them.

Participant 1 stated, 'I don't think teachers understand dyslexia and how [it] is different for every[...]person', participant 1 would recommend 'Awareness and education about dyslexia for everybody, and definitely teacher training', participant 4 affirmed 'There was no awareness about Asperger's as far as I could tell', and lastly participant 3 specified:

> Teachers don't really accommodate [...] people with learning difficulties [...] I had to actually explain to a few of my lecturers that I'm dyslexic and [...] how they can help me.

Also, participants reported a lack of understanding of their needs and strengths by staff, teachers and peers. Participant 1 liked the least 'The lack of accommodation for different types of learning styles [...] there is lack of awareness and appropriate support', participant 2 stated:

> I just wish that everything would be accessible [...] Teachers should just know that not everybody's [...] strong point is writing essays[...] record all of the lectures [...] so [...] everything can be reviewed. It shouldn't have to take me to say hey I need extra support [...] should just be there.

Participant 3 stated, 'I feel like lecturers [...] rush through the work and don't break it down; don't even think that there are people [...] with learning difficulties in the class'.

Although the literature highlights neurodiversity as a culture, there is a lack of understanding of neurodiversity (Ortega, 2009; Silberman, 2015; Gobbo and Shmulsky, 2019). If neurodiversity is embraced and understood as a culture, this will facilitate understanding that the responses of neurodiverse individuals will differ from those of neurotypicals, including the need for more natural acceptance and respect of stimming – repetitive movements or sounds – as a self-regulating behaviour (Harpur, Lawlor and Fitzgerald, 2004; Martin et al., 2008; Beardon, 2017; Sarrett, 2017). Consequently, the embracement of a culture affects the way teachers teach and it enhances the student's sense of identity and belonging as they feel understood and accepted (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 2012).

Neurodiversity could replace the current 'disability' prevailing discourse in today's educational systems with a discourse that supports neurodiversity as something to be proud of. This would trigger awareness and teaching practices that welcome diversity as a positive enhancement to our mainstream culture. Through the positive embracing of neurodiversity as a culture and inclusive practices, students' sense of belonging and identity would be supported

(Armstrong, 2010; Pollak, 2012; Beardon, 2017; Lorenz, Reznik and Heinitz, 2017). This is evident in the students' narrative as they emphasised the need for teacher training in awareness and understanding of neurodiversity as a culture, as well as a means of providing a student-centred approach to teaching and learning.

Therefore, to support more equitable environments in FET, it is recommended to respect neurodiversity through conscious awareness and specific teacher training. Also, it is recommended to embed inclusive teaching and learning practices in continuous professional development and initial teacher training that will extrapolate directly into the classroom, respecting diverse cultures through awareness.

The themes identified in this paper are relevant to the overall understanding of neurodiverse students' experiences in the TLE of FET. The implications of teachers' perspectives of neurodiverse students have a direct impact on the student's success in the TLE (Entwistle, 2003). Therefore, we need to train our leaders and invest in teacher training to provide the most favourable conditions that will allow teachers to reach every student in our classrooms equitably.

The elements of Q10 were identified as critical, evidence-based, and aligned with the new FET strategy to enable equity in education (Quirke and McCarthy, 2020; SOLAS, 2020; Sullivan, 2020). Moreover, Pollak (2012) and Breakey (2017) stressed that to provide a high-quality inclusive experience of learning, the curriculum has to be accessible and flexible, leading to a diminishing need for reasonable accommodations. This would enable more teacher autonomy and a student-centred culture (Pollak, 2012; Sullivan, 2020). In summary, through the creation of an equitable multi-tiered leadership, training and environment, every student may be better supported and equipped to have what they need educationally and holistically through an evidence-based approach as advocated by Sullivan (2020).

Therefore, it is recommended to pilot the implementation of the Q10 framework (which includes integration of SEL and trauma-informed practices) in a FET institution in Ireland in order to achieve equity and excellence for neurodiverse students.

Conclusion

As is evident from the literature, the FET Sector is a complex TLE whereby a high proportion of neurodiverse students fail (Guerin and Dulee-Kinsolving, 2019). This research sought to answer the questions; what influences high-quality learning? and what are the best framework and pedagogical practices to achieve equity and excellence for neurodiverse students in FET?

The study strongly suggests the need for an equitable, multi-tiered systemic framework that encompasses every one of the students' suggestions. Therefore, the identification of the Q10 elements is proposed as an evidence-based framework that may contribute to the betterment of FET effectiveness for neurodiverse students' self-actualisation. Educators need tools to empower them to serve their students with high-quality, research-informed, and evidence-based pedagogical practices. The research and the literature suggest that the elements of the Q10 framework appear to be necessary to address inequities in FET, closing the gaps in our systems and empowering each and every student (Sullivan, 2020). These are suggested frameworks and possible ways forward that would complement the existing frameworks in FET.

According to the literature and the findings of this study, an appropriate sensory environment and teachers who are aware and responsive to their students' needs are key to academic achievement for neurodiverse students (Mostafa, 2015). Lastly, students welcome mentorship from teachers and collaboration with peers and other neurodiverse students. In summary, through the creation of an equitable and holistic multi-tiered supportive environment, every student potentially could be provided with what they need, when they need it, through an evidence-based approach as advocated by Sullivan (2020).

Lastly, the findings support the contention that diversity is a characteristic of normal human existence (Armstrong, 2012; Sousa, 2017). We can no longer legitimately segregate students because of their needs or differences, as it is those differences that make them who they are (Sousa, 2017). Robinson (2017) stated that a new educational paradigm is to be developed, whereby teachers and colleges adapt to students as much as students adapt to college.

It can be concluded that a student-centred approach is part of such a paradigm shift, enhancing interconnectedness with the person, the curriculum, and the teachers (Armstrong, 2012; Abarbanel, 2017). In addition, teachers and students could develop positive and inclusive mindsets about working, learning, supporting each other, and being flexible and strategic about curriculum and assessments (Dweck, 2017; Fitzgerald et al., 2018; Dweck and Yeager, 2019).

Thus, if the Q10 framework is applied in FET teacher training, it has the potential to provide valuable tools for leadership to create an environment that could be conducive to individual flourishing. Moreover, Pollak (2012) and Breakey (2017) stressed that in order to provide a high-quality inclusive experience of learning, the curriculum has to be accessible and flexible, leading to a diminishing need for reasonable accommodations (Pollak, 2012; Abarbanel, 2017).

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The Thinking Folk Project: Using Socratic Dialogues as a Pedagogical Construct to Develop Language and Meaning

GARRY NICHOLSON

Abstract

The Thinking Folk project introduced Socratic dialogues as a pedagogical construct to develop critical thinking skills by drawing on the lived experiences of learners in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. The resulting conversations were soon described as 'real' talk by learners, which, in a process that not only developed the authentic use of the English language but also enabled them to recognise the common bonds that make us all human. The project led to a curriculum rethink and a commitment to dialogical and participatory learning activities aimed at giving participants the opportunity to develop their English fluency, whilst finding commonality and meaning in their own and others' experiences.

Keywords: Socratic Dialogues, Praxis, Meaning Making

Introduction

The Thinking Folk project introduced Socratic dialogues to develop learners' critical thinking skills. Data from adult learning lesson visits during the academic year 2021-22 highlighted that critical thinking and questioning were potential areas for development. From the collation of feedback comments, the most frequent development point was to encourage tutors to ask more 'analyse' and 'evaluate' questions. In addition to this, there was a desire to draw upon the rich resource of learners' personal histories that so often emerge in adult learning classes. Rather than critical thinking and questioning as a technique to use in general teaching, the key aim of the project was to explore the philosophical construct of Socratic dialogues as being a vehicle for their facilitation.

When writing about creating his paintings in *I Work Like a Gardener*, Joan Miró wrote that 'what matters is that it should have sown seeds on earth [...] A picture must be fertile' (2017, p.251). This is in many ways a perfect analogy for the project. Socratic dialogues are a type of constructed conversation and, as such, the project at its simplest level was based on a strategy akin to Miró's quote: encourage as many tutors as possible to scatter Socratic dialogues like seeds, and reflect on what grew out of the conversations. The remainder of this article details how 'fertile' the project was in the growth of mutual understanding and language development. It also aspires to stimulate discussion about the terms *praxis* and 'meaning making' as philosophical and psychological terms that are highly relevant to adult learning and education in general.

The Background

The stimulus for the project was a similar venture implemented by Danish adult educators to counter isolation during the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown by creating multiple discussion groups (The Danish People's Education Council, 2020). Engaging in conversations that explore life's 'big' questions has a long tradition in Denmark due to the Danish Folk High School movement making it a central pillar of their pedagogy. Inspired by the Danish writer, poet, philosopher and pastor N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), the Danish Folk Schools were founded as an antithesis to formal education, with the aim of providing a 'popular' education based on the spoken word and a belief that education should promote the development of life enlightenment, democratic education and popular enlightenment (The Danish People's Education Council, 2022).

Since the first school was founded in Rødding in 1844, they have remained largely undocumented outside Denmark, despite generally being acknowledged as the Free School Movement that made a significant contribution to Denmark's transformation from being one of Europe's poorest nations to the prosperous nation it is today (Anderson and Bjorkman, 2017). It is only when one becomes familiar with his ideas that it becomes apparent that if Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and Eduard C. Lindeman represent an educational philosophical tradition that falls squarely into the radical liberal school (Liechtenstein, 1985), then Grundtvig may well be considered to be one of the original radical liberal educational philosophers along with his predecessors John Amos Comenius, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The choice of Socratic dialogues aligns with one of the core beliefs of Grundtvig and the Danish High Schools in emphasising the importance of the spoken or 'living word' (Korsgaard, 2012).

Grundtvig's belief that life, popular, and democratic enlightenment can be achieved through the commonality and conversation promoted in what he called 'schools for life' has parallels with Dewey's suggestion that truth is an experienced relation, particularly one that is socially shared. In *How We Think*, Dewey writes that 'truth, truthfulness, transparent and brave publicity of intercourse, are the source and the reward of friendship. Truth is having things in common' (1910, p.67). It is this final sentence that formed a key aim of the Thinking Folk project, which was to encourage mutual understanding and commonality. As such, the project was conducted in the spirit of finding what Paulo Freire referred to as 'unity in diversity'. In *Letters to Cristina*, Freire writes:

> Our struggle as women, men, blacks, workers, Brazilians, North Americans, French, or Bolivians, is influenced by our gender, race, class, culture, and history, conditionings that mark us. Our struggle, nevertheless, departs from these conditionings and converges in the direction of being more, in the direction of universal objectives. (Freire, 1996, pp.164-165)

As I will discuss later, the project was also a large-scale exercise in 'meaning-making' through reflecting on reality. Baumeister (1991) proposed a definition of the word 'meaning' as a 'mental representation of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships. Thus, meaning connects things' (p.15). What each dialogue aspired to create is a platform in which participants could make 'global meaning', which refers to individuals' general orienting systems (Pargament, 1997). These consist of beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings (Dittman-Kohli and Westerhof, 1999) on broad views regarding justice, honesty, and respect, among others. These form the core schemas through which people interpret their experiences of the world (Mischel and Morf, 2003).

As a precursor to the project, a pilot Socratic dialogue was conducted in which a small group of ESOL learners discussed the topic 'Should people get COVID-19 vaccinations?' Findings from this discussion suggested that the participants could not only recognise the impact on their language development but also identified that 'trust' is an essential moral value and one that is needed in any just and stable society (Nicholson, 2022). In doing so they used a shared dialogue to find 'meaning' in their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and, despite being from diverse backgrounds, formed what might be considered to be a shared 'truth' and 'universal objective'. With these concepts in mind, the ambition became to explore the impact of such dialogues on a wider scale.

The Setting

The project took place in a large local authority adult learning provider located in a North-East England city. The learner demographic encompasses over 50 nationalities, with the Bangladeshi community being the largest group represented. Around 11% of the city's total population are black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME), which rises to 24% among school-age children (Newcastle Council, 2021). With a fluctuating teaching staff of, on average, 75 tutors, the findings of this research activity were contributed to by four tutors and over 20 learners.

The Thinking Folk project mostly focused on developing working practices within the ESOL department but also stimulated wider appeal across the service, with CPD (continuous professional development) sessions attended by tutors from a range of subject specialisms. In total, approximately 30 tutors attended sessions, along with external stakeholders who work directly with the black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) community, including the local authority's 'City of Sanctuary' active inclusion team who take a lead role in coordinating the multiple agencies who welcome and support asylum seekers and refugees into the city's community. Records were not kept of the exact number of Socratic dialogue conversations that took place, but it is estimated that from January to July 2022 more than 350 learners participated in more than 100 conversations across multiple venues.

The Socratic Method

The structure of Socratic dialogue chosen followed the characteristic steps of the Leonard Nelson (1882-1927) and Gustav Heckmann (1898-1996) tradition. In Ancient Greece, these dialogues were known as *maieutics*, from the Greek for 'midwife'. After some initial feedback from tutors that suggested that the term 'Socratic dialogues' was somewhat intimidating, the project title 'Thinking Folk' was introduced to reflect both the philosophical and folk school origins of the project.

The dialogues follow a deceptively simple process. First, a selection of questions is chosen by the participants, using ethical terms, such as 'What is honesty?' Or, alternatively, an open question, such as 'Why is time important?' Questions are chosen on the premise that participants are afforded an opportunity to reflect on their lives and those of others, whilst feeling comfortable with the topic chosen. Next, the dialogue participants are invited to give a personal memory-based narrative, in which they once experienced the topic at stake.

In the next phase, these narratives are reflected upon and investigated to make initial definitions about what the topic means according to each one. One tutor, reflecting on these narratives, noted that:

> A student gave an example of a country he'd lived in where he thought people were too focused on the past and another country where people live more in the present. He said that living in the present is better for mental health because you can't change the past, but you can decide what you do now in the present.

This stage is repeated until time has run out or a definition or conclusion has been mutually agreed upon from the different narratives and reflections that have been shared (Krohn, 2004, pp.17-20).

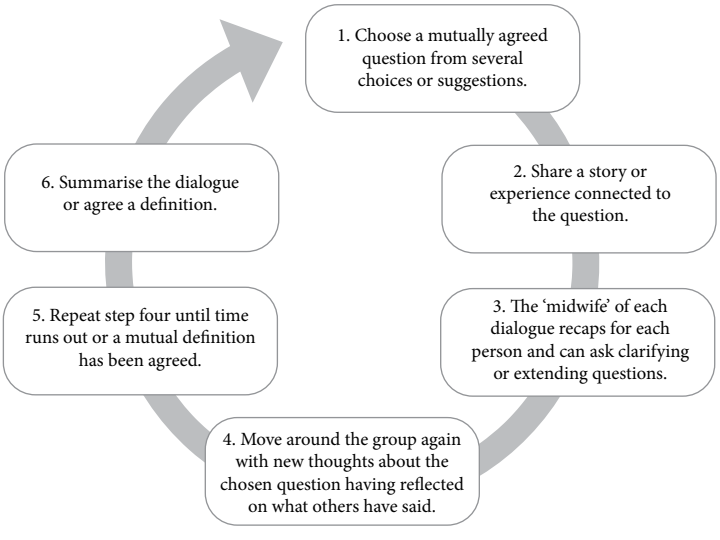

Figure 1. Steps of a Socratic Dialogue

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected was composed of verbatim quotations gathered from five tutors and 10 learners who had previously participated in two to six Socratic dialogues. Research participants took part in one of three semi-structured group discussions which were then recorded and transcribed using AI

technology. Each discussion started with the question, 'What did you learn from taking part in the dialogues?' To achieve generalisability the sampling strategy for participants was of maximum variation by ensuring that a mix of ages, gender, race, and teaching experience were represented in the groups. Further sources of data included tutor reflective journals and case studies.

The choice to record interviews was to provide a source of data, whilst also enabling my full engagement in the conversations without the need to take constant notes. Tuckett (2005, p.33) suggests that the use of a recorder is necessary to counter criticism that qualitative research is 'prone to systematic bias'. While acknowledging this, I was also fully aware of the negative influence a recording device might have on an interview as an inhibitor of dialogue (Rapley, 2004). However, this did not prove to be the case as many of the participants requested copies of the recordings afterward to help them improve their listening skills.

Finally, each participant received a discussion summary identifying the key phrases, sentences, and paragraphs so that they were able to confirm that they were being represented fairly in this research.

Outcomes and Impact

ESOL tutors quickly realised that the Socratic dialogues they were leading were conversations that replicated the 'Production' element of the Presentation, Practice, and Production method of language acquisition. Research indicates that expecting people to use 'presented' and 'practiced' language effectively in the 'production' phase is unrealistic. As Willis points out:

> It is difficult to see how activities can be regarded as truly communicative if the learners' main objective is not to achieve some outcome through the use of language, but to demonstrate to the teacher their control of the target form. (1990, pp.4-5)

Instead, learners need to be given the opportunity through task-based activities to simply throw all their language together and mutually strive for meaning 'since risk-taking is an important ingredient of natural learning and the search for perfection and fully defined linguistic goals does not allow for variety' (Willis, 1993, p.8). As one tutor commented, 'students were so keen to express themselves that they used any words they knew to get their point across to the group.' This striving for meaning without feeling anxious about grammatical errors built confidence and esteem in the learners. One tutor noted:

> Everyone in the group spoke, even the least confident student. She is a new student who worries about making mistakes when she speaks. I could see her becoming more confident as the discussion went on and she realised that everyone was listening to what she was saying and not how she was saying it. She has been more confident in class since the Socratic dialogue too.

Tutors also commented on how the conversations generated mutually supportive relationships and shifted the learning dynamic from being tutor directed to one of collaborative learning: 'If someone didn't understand a word, the other students automatically explained the meaning of the word to help each other to understand.' Likewise, a tutor commented: 'I found that the students were naturally turn-taking because they were genuinely interested in hearing the opinions of others in the group.' The ensuing development of mutual understanding and respect helped with the creation of what another tutor described as 'a positive classroom environment where everyone can relate better to each other as individuals.' Simply put by a learner, 'it's good to speak to different people and learn about different countries.' Perhaps the most telling feedback, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all our lives, came from a learner who believed that the conversations impacted their mental health and wellbeing: 'It helps me to feel more connected to others again.'

The project provided a platform in which social and cultural diversity could be shared, understood, and celebrated. Despite following a procedure, the resulting dialogues mirrored the 'café' conversation of everyday life, bringing authenticity to learning that brought learners and tutors together in greater mutuality. The process of sharing glimpses of learners' lives resulted in participants reporting that they tangibly felt closer and understood each other better. Importantly, the positive relationships were built on equality and in some ways were a naturally-occurring by-product of each dialogue. The project gave tutors the opportunity to talk about and evaluate learning differently. In a profession that is increasingly perceived by some as being bogged down by data and administration procedures, the project allowed tutors to think with greater professional reflexivity and talk instead about the 'tangible immeasurables' or the usefulness of what Alan Tuckett (2014, p.5) called 'seriously useless learning'.

The promotion and celebration of different perspectives and insights were integral to our research activity. What was most striking was the significant impact on how tutors viewed 'talk' as a learning activity. Rather than 'talk' as a

means to an end, those tutors who participated began to understand its value as an end in itself. Despite initial scepticism from some colleagues and subject specialisms, the ease of 'giving it a try' dispelled initial beliefs that the activity might only be suitable for certain subjects or with linguistically competent English speakers. The idea of 'giving it a try' fed directly into an organisational priority to develop more pedagogical risk-taking and was taken up in other curriculum areas such as digital skills and programmes for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Through the sharing of experiences, it became apparent that tutors, regardless of their specialism, could acknowledge that the dialogues led to positive and collaborative relationships that promoted mutual understanding and inclusion. As one tutor commented, 'I've never learned so much by feeling that I've done so little.' Another theme from these cross-specialist conversations was the shared experience by many of continuing to think about questions after dialogues had concluded. A number of tutors reflected that the conversations 'got inside their head', whilst one learner put it as 'I keep on thinking afterwards.'

Discussion

Numerous participants expressed surprise at how 'deep' the conversations became considering the simplicity of the activity. Certainly, the project data suggests that within each conversation there were instances of a developmental 'motion' or 'actualisation', both personally and, in the case of some tutors, professionally. Admittedly such claims are highly subjective, yet if truth is 'having things in common', then the testimony of numerous participants adds some weight to the formation of such a 'truth' within the boundaries of this project. The following discussion looks briefly at this emergent truth through a philosophical and psychological lens.

The Socratic method used is considered to encourage a respondent to formulate latent concepts through a dialectic or logical sequence of questions and philosophical discussion in general. Peukert's view is that such ethical conversations are a form of transformational *praxis* that can act as a catalyst to bringing about 'justice in large anonymous modern societies' (2003, p.114) and the 'self-transformation of society' (Habermas, 1999, p.228).

Reflection on the importance of connected and caring societies was a particularly prevalent theme in the conversations. One such example came from a Kurdish refugee, who explained:

> I was very nervous because it had totally changed for me the language and environment and everything. Then my neighbours were really kindly and they made me feel welcome even though my English was not good.

The term *praxis* often appears in educational literature as an alternative to 'practice'. As this project is essentially a large-scale exercise in grassroots philosophy, it is important to understand what *praxis* is as a philosophical term. Eduard Lindeman expressed the view that many educators are involved with *praxis* but that it is often not part of their vocabulary (Smith, 1994). It is necessary to understand the Aristotelian root of the word *praxis* to understand why it is akin to an emancipatory view of education. The term *praxis* can be translated as the act of 'doing' but it is important to note that Aristotle was explicit in his reasons for distinguishing the term *praxis* from the act of *poiesis*, or 'making', writing that:

> [...] doing and making are generically different [...] since making aims at an end distinct from the act of making, whereas in doing, the end cannot be other than the act itself (Aristotle, cited in Balaban, 1986, p.163).

This difference between 'doing' and 'making' was expressed well by one tutor who commented that 'it was so enjoyable to teach without the pressure of preparing them for the next exam […] They probably learned more because I stopped stressing and joined in.'

In psychology, 'meaning-making' is the process by which people make sense of life events, relationships, and the self. Educational critics and proponents of inquiry education, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, published a chapter entitled 'Meaning Making' in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969), where they wrote that 'the meaning maker has no such limitation. There is no end to his educative process. He (sic) continues to create new meanings' (Postman and Weingartner, 1969, p.91). They suggest similarities with constructivist learning theory, which posits that knowledge is something that is actively created by people. The term was also used by the developmental psychologist Robert Kegan when writing that 'human being is meaning-making. For the human, what evolving amounts to is the evolving of systems of meaning' (Kegan, 1982, p.374).

Bruner (1990) argued that to be human is to be a storyteller and that stories are a way to create meaning from our experiences. The project conversations involved sharing stories of experience and as such gave participants the

opportunity to find meaning in their own, and each other's, motivations, emotions, commitments, and values.

One example of meaning-making in the project was revealed by a tutor in a case study about a learner who had come to the United Kingdom for political asylum and who sought meaning in past and present experiences:

> It was so moving when he explained that he felt liberated to be able to talk freely about the situation in his country […] He now comes regularly because he wants to talk with like-minded people.

Such statements suggest that Socratic dialogues can offer asylum seekers a space in which they can find meaning in the disorientation that challenges a person's sense of identity when undergoing the process of immigration (Douglas, 2018).

Conclusions

In the adult learning service, the term 'Thinking Folk' is now commonly used without any further explanation being needed. From being a project title, it is now more of an accepted pedagogical term which perhaps shows that some of the seeds from the project have taken root in fertile ground. The following are two concluding observations that may well be worthy of future inquiry.

Life is full of 'big questions', and this project suggests that within a simple dialogical construct, they can be used to great effect in adult learning. One of the residual traditions of adult learning is that it should be grounded in, and respectful of, the lived experience of learners, and the 'Thinking Folk' project highlights this. It also reveals that such conversations can be emancipatory both in terms of the confidence in speaking that learners gain when participating but also the opportunities for meaning-making and commonality the conversations afford.

Several tutors commented that the conversations frequently created an atmosphere of what they described as 'being in the moment', along with an absence of pressure. One tutor even commented on the liberation they felt from feeling less in control because of the tendency the conversations had to 'meander and surprise'. Feeling less burdened with the 'making' process of exam preparation, the project might well be perceived as a large-scale exercise in 'thinking that is concerned about reality' (Freire, 2005, p.77) and as such an opportunity for all participants to engage in *praxis* through critically reflecting upon their reality and, by committing to further participatory learning and taking action.

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Engaging Family Carers Across Ireland in Higher Education: A Case Study of a Collaborative Initiative Between Family Carers Ireland and the Faculty of Lifelong Learning at South East Technological University

LINDSAY MALONE AND CATHERINE COX

Abstract

This practice-based paper provides a case study on co-creating a programme between a university and the voluntary sector. It analyses practical aspects of working in partnership to co-create an accredited programme to improve access to higher education for first-generation learners. In 2018, the Faculty of Lifelong Learning at South East Technological University set about working in partnership with Family Carers Ireland to focus on creating a transformative and holistic educational experience for family carers across Ireland. Working closely together, South East Technological University and Family Carers Ireland jointly developed and delivered a Level 6 Certificate in Family Caring aimed at formally recognising the role family carers play in the lives of their loved ones across Ireland. Importantly, from an equality perspective, for the overwhelming majority of participants (94%) this was the first time that they had participated in a higher education course.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning, Family Carers, Co-creation

Introduction

In 2018, the Faculty of Lifelong Learning at South East Technological University (SETU) set about working in partnership with Family Carers Ireland (FCI). The aim was to create a transformative and holistic educational experience

for family carers across Ireland. Together, SETU in partnership with FCI co-created and delivered a Level 6 Certificate in Family Caring in order to formally recognise the role family carers play in the lives of their loved ones across Ireland. This paper will begin by presenting the contextual background to the overall project. It will then examine the existing literature regarding family carers which informed parts of the development of the programme. The partnership approach taken by SETU and FCI will be examined before addressing the agile delivery schedule for the national project. To examine the effectiveness of the programme in meeting the needs of family carers, qualitative and quantitative feedback will be analysed before reflecting on the key learnings from this innovative project.

Background

SETU partnered with FCI in 2018 to develop and deliver a Level 6 (10 credit) Certificate in Family Caring for family carers throughout Ireland. FCI is a national charity that supports more than an estimated 500,000 family carers who care for loved ones such as children or adults with disabilities, frail older people, the terminally ill or those suffering from chronic illnesses or addiction (FCI, 2022a). In financial terms, it is difficult to make an accurate estimate of the savings that might accrue to the State as a result of the unpaid contribution made by family and friends engaging in caring duties on a voluntary basis. Undoubtedly, however, due to the scale of the numbers of people involved it is likely to be very significant. An investigation by FCI correlates with the Central Statistics Office (CSO) figures that the profile of family carers reflects a very broad spectrum, with 52.7% aged between 40-59 years and with a further 67,000 young carers aged between 10-17 years (CSO, 2023). Approximately 57% of family carers juggle their caring responsibilities with other paid employment. In addition, family carers in receipt of the Carer's Allowance are only allowed to work or study for a maximum of 18.5 hours per week, which limits their potential income and their ability to access full-time education (FCI, 2022b).

The Project

SETU proactively sought out and fostered a rewarding partnership with their local, regional and national family carers through FCI. The Certificate in Family Caring was a national project between FCI and SETU. The aim of the project was to support family carers from across the country to effectively engage in educational equality by providing access to a fully funded Certificate in Family Caring. The project was funded by the Dormant Accounts Fund

administered by Pobal. Pobal is a state-sponsored organisation in the Republic of Ireland with responsibility for administering and managing government and EU funding aimed at supporting social inclusion. The programme provided access to a third-level programme to family carers who are often pushed into low-income brackets due to having to leave the paid workforce to care and simultaneously high costs associated with their caring roles (FCI, 2022c). Therefore, funded part-time third-level opportunities, such as the Certificate in Family Caring, are a viable and attractive higher education option for many family carers. This funded six-week programme was delivered in nine different regions across Ireland in 2019 and 2020.

Partnership Approach

The partnership approach taken by FCI and SETU created the opportunity to work together in a meaningful way to co-create a Certificate in Family Caring. The project began in 2018 through the shared interest in developing an innovative and bespoke programme for family carers. Having identified that there were no accredited programmes specifically designed for family carers, the project aim was to co-create an accredited programme for family carers across Ireland. Members of FCI, and academic and management staff within the Faculty of Lifelong Learning in SETU, worked together to form the programme team. From there, the Certificate was co-created to ensure that the programme met the needs of family carers in their roles of providing care for their loved ones. Following that, the QQI Level 6 accredited Certificate in Family Caring (10 credits) was validated in 2019. The profile of learners is presented in *Figure 1*. Of particular note is that the project enabled 94% of the learners to enter higher education for the first time, which equated to 162 learners in total.

DESCRIPTION	METRIC
Percentage of participants on a higher education course for first time	94%
Total number of participants completing the course	162
Number completing the course in face-to-face format	61
Number completing the course in online format	101
Female : Male ratio	156 : 6

Figure 1. Profile of learners

Existing Research

The learners who engaged in this project reflect the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population as the learners represent family carers who are providing intimate, physical, and emotional care to loved ones with acquired brain injuries, dementia, mental health problems and their own children with special needs. This project specifically addresses the areas identified as part of the *Independent Review to Identify the Supports and Barriers for Lone Parents in Accessing Higher Education and to Examine Measures to Increase Participation* (Murray and Byrne, 2017), which focused on 'extending the existing special provision for carers to lone parents caring for someone other than their child' (p.31). The review did not report on any targeted mechanism to target mature carers in the higher education sector. The report also noted that 'part-time/ flexible provision is likely to facilitate increased participation in HE for lone parents' (Murray and Byrne, 2017, p.32). Though the *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028* (Higher Education Authority, 2022) specifically names students as carers (p.52), it also does not refer to them as mature ones and so the focus may again in this context be more toward young carers. This project specifically addressed this lack of a targeted approach to this cohort which encompasses 500,000 (FCI, 2022) individuals in this country, many of whom are mature, lone parents providing intimate care to loved ones and have never had the opportunity to access higher education prior to this programme. According to Lafferty et al. (2022), balancing employment with unpaid care can be incredibly challenging for family carers and COVID-19's health and

social protective measures meant that working family carers had to provide additional care without the usual formal and informal supports. Their research confirmed that boundaries between work and caregiving became increasingly blurred during the pandemic, presenting a host of new challenges for family carers. They recommend innovative ways of supporting family carers remotely and increased levels of outreach and communication to alleviate anxieties and avoid them becoming isolated and unsupported. This project exemplified this in its approach to engaging learners in a supportive environment where they felt valued, secure and had a sense of belonging. Similarly, Phillips et al. (2020) suggest that measures should be created that would offer robust and effective support to family carers and that they should receive greater recognition for the significant role they play in society by providing essential care and alleviating the strain on health and social care systems, both during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that the programme was developed with the very clear ethos that it was for family carers specifically to recognise the role they play in the lives of their loved ones, it demonstrated a sense of recognition of their role and contribution to society by providing an opportunity to accredit this learning through formal higher education. More specifically, rather than an accredited healthcare programme, it was specifically designed for and with family carers, with a focus on the role of the family carer, rather than the professional carer.

The Delivery

The delivery schedule for the Certificate in Family Caring was agreed with FCI and the locations were based upon the Health Service Executive's model of Community Health Organisations (CHO) areas (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2. Location of delivery

The programme was advertised by FCI directly to the family carers. This approach was taken as FCI already has a relationship with their carers, and so a programme that is being advertised by them was more likely to attract applications. The six-week programme was delivered nine times, as per *Figure 3*, from December 2019 to July 2020. The project had commenced prior to COVID-19 and in lieu of the restrictions during the pandemic, SETU recognised the absolute value of continuing the project through the pandemic, so it pivoted to online delivery to facilitate the remaining programmes. This meant that the mode of delivery of each programme differed due to COVID-19 restrictions (*Figure 3*) between face-to-face delivery and emergency remote teaching online. A total of 162 people completed the course, with 61 completing it in a face-to-face format and 101 completing it online.

DELIVERY NO.	AREA	LOCATION	MODE OF DELIVERY
1	CHO 3	Limerick	In person
2	CHO 7	Kildare	In person
3	CHO 6	Wicklow	In person
4	CHO 4	Cork	In person
5	CHO 9	Dublin North Central	Blended learning: 50:50 in person & online
6	CHO 1	Cavan	Online
7	CHO 8	Laois	Online
8	CHO 2	Roscommon	Online
9	CHO 5	Clonmel	Online

Figure 3. Mode of delivery

Outcomes

Both FCI and SETU acknowledged the importance of engaging learners in evaluation and feedback throughout the project. For this reason, both qualitative and quantitative feedback was sought from learners throughout the project. From a quantitative perspective, evaluation forms were returned by 36 face-to-face course participants (59%) and by 40 online participants (39.6%). Over 83% of participants rated the course as excellent on four key aspects in both face-to-face (*Figure 4*) and online delivery modes (*Figure 5*).

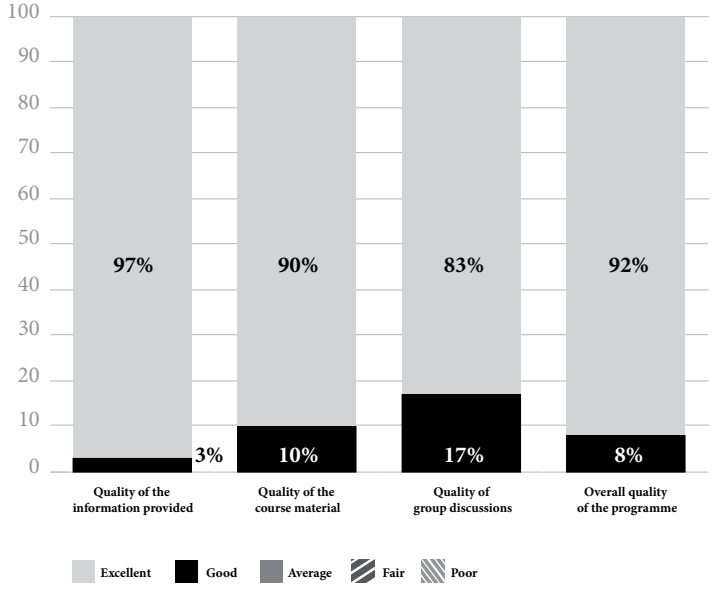

Figure 4. Face-to-face satisfaction levels

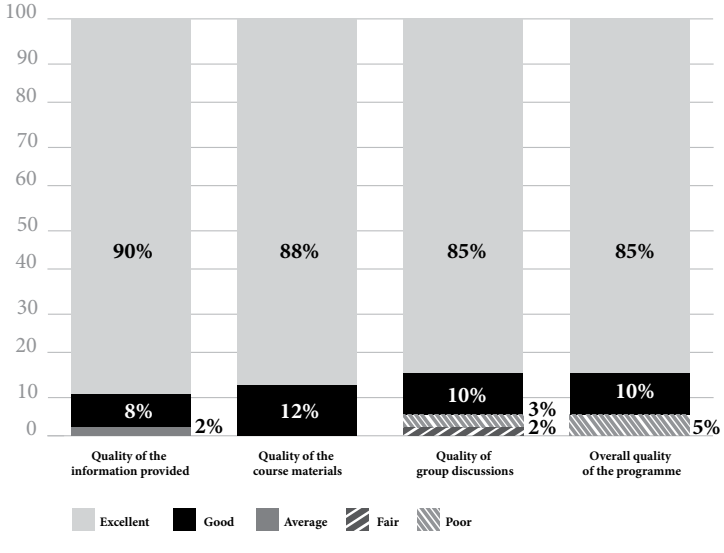

Figure 5. Online satisfaction levels

When asked whether the programme met the learner's expectations, almost all of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that the programme met their expectations and gave them new skills or insight (*Figure 6*). It is also important to note that 94% of course participants were first-time higher education learners.

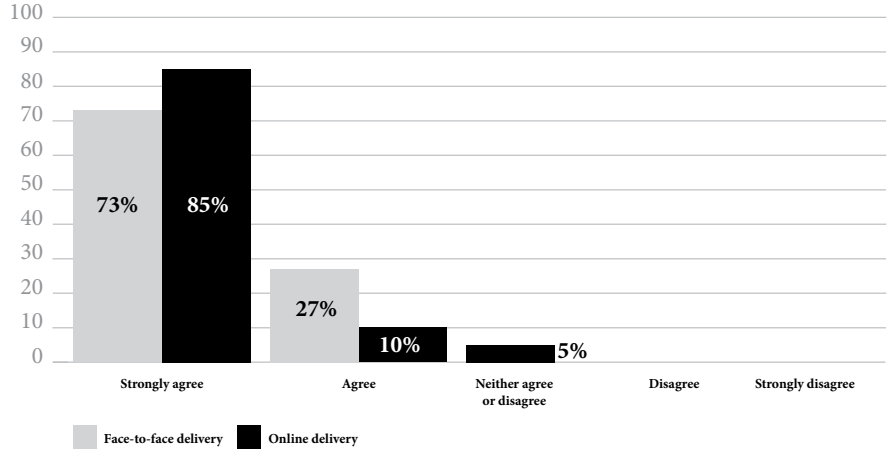

Figure 6. Expectation level rating

From a more qualitative perspective, feedback from learners demonstrated that the project has fostered an inclusive and positive environment that valued and supported learners in achieving their highest potential. One learner stated, 'I also loved checking in with everyone as it made me feel like I wasn't alone. We all connected and for me, the course was a safe place to speak and not feel judged'. Social integration was a key theme too and participation in the course achieved a reduction in social isolation for family carers, as well as giving them self-care techniques to support them in their role:

> I felt it gave me a better understanding of how to incorporate the needs as well as the aspirations of the people I care for to provide the best care now and moving forward in their future through understanding legislation and advocacy and the importance of my own self-care to ensure I can provide the best care for them.

Social integration is further evidenced when another participant stated that:

> I enjoyed the honesty of the participants in sharing what their daily life was like as a carer. It brought solidarity. There was solidarity in hearing about the challenges and rewards in carrying out this role.

Lastly, self-care was also an emergent theme as evidenced when one carer reflected that:

> Self-care, family care plan and coping with loss were three topics that not only hit home for me but gave me something to really think about. I've made improvements in both the care of myself and for those I care on based on this already with excellent results.

More qualitative feedback is available in *Figure 7*.

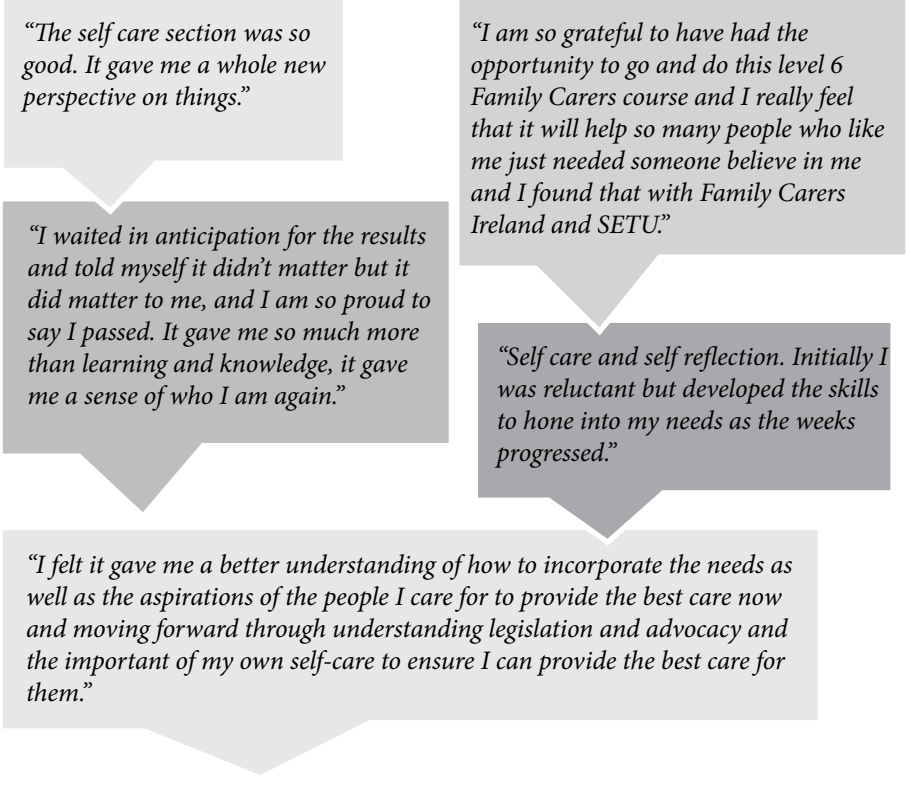

Figure 7. Qualitative feedback

Co-creation in Higher Education

This project focused on increasing accessibility for family carers to engage in higher education through the provision of innovative, agile and flexible provision. In the context of co-creation between higher education institutes and industry, there is minimal literature on how to best achieve this process, despite growing recognition that industry involvement can, and should, play an integral role in higher education in general (Shrivastava et al., 2022). A primary concern of the co-creation process was ensuring the development of a suitable and relevant module for family carers whilst marrying academic rigour to caring relevance and application of theory to practice (Shrivastava et al., 2022). In essence, this meant that the content needed to be constructively aligned to a Level 6 Certificate on the National Framework of Qualifications whilst maintaining significant focus on the learning that occurs outside of the conventional classroom, and within the communities the family carers care for loved ones in. From an assessment perspective, this meant recognising the learner's transformative learning journey through weekly reflective journals, incorporating opportunities for the learner to implement changes in their practice, reflecting on this and identifying solid learning outcomes (Dempsey et al., 2022). The co-creation process began with a series of consultations with family carers in order to determine what their needs were. What became apparent was the need for a focus on self-care, reflection and communication. Following this, consultations were held with FCI to identify what other needs the programme could address. The need to focus on advocacy and communities of practice emerged from these consultations. Next, the programme team was formed, which reflected academic and management staff from SETU's Faculty of Lifelong Learning and representatives from FCI. The programme team was led by the Deputy Head of Lifelong Learning who convened fortnightly meetings with the programme team over a three-month period. The programme team worked very well together as the role of FCI was to advocate for the needs of family carers and the role of the academic staff from SETU was to draft the subsequent learning outcomes. The programme team then jointly worked on and agreed on the programme content. The programme team then drafted the proposed programme and submitted it to the SETU senior executive and Academic Council's programme planning. Once approved, the programme team then developed the relevant documentation needed ahead of the validation panel. The programme team then attended the validation panel and successfully defended the programme. As the project was borne from a genuine desire to work together to develop an innovative programme for family carers, the co-creation process was a respectful and enjoyable one where all members learned from one another and contributed to the successful validation of the programme.

Key Learnings

There are several key learnings from this case study that other higher education institutions can incorporate into their strategies to target sections of Ireland's population that are underrepresented in higher education. Firstly, this project demonstrates the merit of higher education institutions being proactive in seeking collaborations with charities and other organisations that represent sections of the population that have less engagement with higher education or have a high proportion of first-generation learners. Coupled with this, the project reflects the importance of designing tailored programmes that are specific to the needs of the learners, and not just offer generic programmes. It represents the importance of co-creating programmes with partner organisation(s) to make them as relevant as possible to the targeted learners. It also represents the vital need to offer flexibility in the delivery of courses. This was essential for this particular cohort of the population who so often have other commitments during normal nine to five hours or travelling to the university may be difficult or impossible. Lastly, it reflects the importance of creating connectedness with the community as this is vital for the long-term success of the programme through the communities of practice which were established throughout the project.

Conclusion

This project focused on a partnership approach to creating a transformative and holistic educational experience for family carers across Ireland. This paper has illustrated how this project is reflective of adopting an innovative approach of co-creating programmes with the voluntary sector to support some of the more marginalised groups in Irish society. It demonstrates how both organisations fostered an inclusive and positive environment that valued and supported learners in achieving their highest potential. It exemplifies how an inclusive approach was taken as all learners, irrespective of where they accessed the course, had the full SETU student experience with a consistent and supportive learning environment throughout. It also demonstrates an agile approach to programme delivery by pivoting to emergency remote teaching during COVID-19 to ensure the project continued to support family carers throughout the pandemic, arguably at a time when they needed it most.

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Youthreach Learners, All Grown Up

DAN O'SULLIVAN

Abstract

This article investigates the career paths of learners who attended Youthreach education centres. Youthreach originated in 1989 as an alternative pathway for early school learners experiencing disadvantage. Youthreach is an under-researched sector of the education system, even less is known about the career progression of Youthreach graduates. This article investigates the career paths of these learners in detail by combining themes from current literature and policy with themes identified in the data obtained from qualitative semi-structured interviews with eight former learners. Themes identified by former learners include work experience, career planning, life skills, and a culture of high support.

Keywords: Disadvantaged Groups, Educational Disadvantage, Youth Work

Introduction

Youthreach was set up to address the educational needs of early school leavers in 1989. This paper critically examines the career progression of Youthreach learners. Learners in Youthreach generally come from backgrounds of disadvantage and as a result, can have a negative view of themselves and of their place in society. Brown (2005) comments, 'trainees often present with a profound sense of rejection, alienation, low self-esteem and behavioural problems' (p.22). Learners in Youthreach sometimes seem to exhibit signs that they feel as though school is simply something for other people. Stokes (2003) has identified a morbid stereotype being attached to Youthreach learners. This morbid stereotype may have negative effects on learners in Youthreach. If this stereotype is internalised they may write themselves off and believe that any academic efforts they make will be wasted. Marx (1932) has commented on alienation and estrangement being brought on through the division of labour and allocation to the lower strata of the social classes. Lamont (2000)

comments on the phenomenon of the working-class loser. Internalising these stereotypes and the belief that they are true can have devastating effects on a learner's psyche and have a major influence on a learner's motivation at school or in pursuit of a career. Durkheim (1893) refers to anomie as a condition of instability brought about by rapid social change. Alienation, anomie and the internalisation of the stereotype of the 'working-class loser' may cause a sense of hopelessness and reduce the motivation of the Youthreach learner. While these stereotypes exist, there is little data available about what happens to Youthreach learners after they finish the programme.

Haase (2010), Comiskey (2003), the Health and Safety Authority (2008) Mc Garr (2010), National Advisory Committee on Drugs (2014), National Economic and Social Forum (2002) and Barnardos (2009) suggest a correlation between anxiety, depression, high levels of substance misuse and lower levels of mental health and wellbeing and early school leaving. What is being achieved by the Youthreach programme to combat the effects of these issues on their learners? Youthreach learners who experience these difficulties need to develop life skills that can help them deal with and overcome these issues. The findings section of this paper indicates that there is much being done to combat these issues and also offers a sample of success stories as far too often the sensational narratives of maladaptation are the dominant narrative.

Methodology

Qualitative research is a type of research methodology that is concerned with exploring and understanding the experiences, perspectives, and behaviours of individuals or groups. It is a subjective approach that seeks to interpret and analyse data in a way that captures the lived experiences of those being studied. In the context of early school leaving, qualitative research can shed light on the reasons why students drop out of school, the impact of early school leaving on their lives, and the factors that contribute to their educational success. By using qualitative research methods, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex social, cultural, and psychological factors that influence early school leaving.

Cohen et al. (2018) suggest that the quality of research depends on the chosen methodology, instruments of data collection and sampling. Data was collected by recording semi-structured interviews using the recording function on Microsoft Teams where the interviews were held. The purpose of the research was to investigate the career progression of former Youthreach students. A purposive sample of eight former Youthreach learners was used.

Purposive sampling involves intentionally selecting respondents based on their experience, knowledge, and position (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The disadvantage of this sampling method includes the disregard for the validity and reliability that random sampling offers as it does not represent the wider population (Cohen et al., 2018). Robson (2007) proposes that this disadvantage can be unavoidable in niche studies where the results reflect the opinions of a meaningful population and argues that it is acceptable once it is acknowledged in the study.

Participants were recruited through gatekeepers, Youthreach coordinators who met regularly with other coordinators at networking events and at coordinator meetings, who maintained the researcher's distance from the potential respondents (Cohen et al., 2018). It is recommended for small research projects to include eight to ten participants for an interview, therefore the researchers interviewed eight former students (Fugard and Potts, 2015). Following the approval from respondents accessed through the gatekeepers, the researcher initiated contact by directly contacting participants requesting their participation in the interview process and supplied a detailed volunteer consent form (Bryman, 2012).

Participant Pseudonyms	Age	Year Graduated	Work	Qualifications after Youthreach
Bill	31	2012	Hotel Management	Yes
Conor	21	2018	Retail Assistant	No
Dermot	20	2020	Retail Assistant	No
Andrew	22	2019	Warehouse Technician	No
William	22	2018	Kitchen Fitter	No
Mary	27	2013	Care Assistant	Yes
Laura	19	2021	Looking after her child	No
Greg	23	2020	Retail Management	No

Table 1. Former Student Participants

Once the sample of eight former students was recruited, anonymity and confidentiality were discussed and ensured, each participant was briefed on the aim of the research, why they were chosen as participants, how the interview would be recorded and where and how long the recording would be kept (Bell and Waters, 2014). It was decided that interviews would be carried out on Microsoft Teams. This platform was familiar to participants as it is the chosen medium for communication in the Education and Training Board which governs all Youthreach centres in Ireland. The interviews took place between March and April 2022 and were transcribed by the researcher after each interview.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Creswell (2018) refer to data analysis metaphorically by comparing it to layers of an onion that are peeled back in the process. Creswell and Creswell (2018) urge the researcher to approach data analysis as a sequential process of five steps. These five steps were used as a structure throughout the data analysis process:

1. Organise and prepare the data for analysis
2. Read or look at the data
3. Start coding the data
4. Generate a description and themes
5. Present the description and themes

After the semi-structured interview data was transcribed, it was examined to identify key concepts and ideas. The researcher then coded the data by marking segments of text that relate to each concept. Finally, the data was analysed to identify overarching themes that emerged from the coded data. Thematic analysis can help researchers to understand the experiences and perspectives of participants, and to identify common themes or patterns that may shed light on the research question.

Validity and Reliability

The value and trustworthiness of research are assessed in terms of reliability and validity (Thomas, 2017). Validity determines whether the research has accurately assessed the meaning of the concept that was initially researched. In this case, the provision of guidance counselling in Youthreach education was investigated (Babbie, 2021). Reliability is determined by the repeatability of the

data gathering procedure, meaning it produces the same result for a person each time it is used (Coaley, 2010). Interviews can give varying results on different days as respondents are faced with variables on any given day changing their mood, behaviour, outlook, or experience which is why Thomas (2017) discounts reliability as a measure for assessing the rigour of a qualitative study. Small-scale qualitative studies on early school leaving have certain limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the findings from a small sample group may not be generalizable to a larger population. Secondly, the data collected may be limited in scope and depth, and may not fully capture the complexity of the issue. Thirdly, the researcher's own biases and subjectivity may influence the interpretation of the data. Lastly, small-scale studies may lack the resources and time to conduct rigorous data analysis and verification. Despite these limitations, small-scale qualitative studies can still provide valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals affected by early school leaving.

Although repetition of an interview may not produce the exact same transcript on any given day, it is unlikely that results would skew away from the true meaning and opinion of the respondent (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Factors that can increase reliability in the context of interviews are pre-planned questions, a uniform interview environment, arranging a time well in advance and postponing if it is not suiting the interviewee due to unforeseen circumstances, and the interviewer maintaining a non-biased and non-judgemental stance throughout the interview (Coaley, 2010). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased approach to thematic analysis was the tool adopted by the researcher to ensure an interpretive perspective was adopted throughout:

1. Began with the researcher listening to the audio recordings and transcribing the interviews

2. Involved familiarisation of the data and documenting interesting findings within the data

3. Comprised of linking and identifying data that related to the research questions and 'generating codes' across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.207)

4. Began when the researcher analysed the codes and coded data to identify 'broader patterns and themes' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.224)

5. Resulted in the assembly of a thematic map of provisional themes and subthemes

6. Defining and naming the themes and subthemes outlined below.

In small-scale qualitative research, generalisability and transferability are important concepts to consider. Generalisability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be applied to a larger population beyond the sample studied. Transferability, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts or settings. Small-scale studies may not always be generalisable or transferable due to the limited sample size and specificity of the research focus. However, researchers can enhance the transferability and generalisability of their findings by providing a detailed description of the study context, participants, and data collection methods. Additionally, researchers can use a purposive sampling strategy to select participants who are representative of the larger population and use triangulation to validate their findings across multiple sources of data.

Findings

Four themes were identified from the analysis of data collected from former students. After the transcribing phase, all participants were assigned pseudonyms to anonymise their participation. In total there were eight participants in this study, all were former students who had attended Youthreach centres in the greater Munster region.

Key Themes from Former Learners

Theme 1: Work Experience

Work Experience undertaken was seen by former students as a crucial element in their career journey. Of the eight former Youthreach learners interviewed, three were still working the job that they took on as part of their work experience. All of the former students attributed part of their career success to their time in Youthreach, and in particular, the work experience they had to undergo as part of their programme:

> Well since we left anyway I have been working in the day care centre and we got that job through work experience when we were in Youthreach. The work experience side of it. You get longer work experience, one for two weeks and then a month in the summer. This enables you to see what you want to do. Work experience from Youthreach started me

> working in the day care centre and then we were just working in the kitchen and stuff but then I knew after a while that I kind of did want to work with the elderly – Mary

Mary's career was strongly influenced by the work experience that she undertook as part of her time in Youthreach. She continued in this employment for some time after her time in Youthreach had ended and decided to progress her career with additional qualifications as her working hours were cut during COVID-19. Greg's story is similar to Mary's in that they got their first job through the work experience programme in Youthreach and stayed in that employment for a number of years after finishing in Youthreach:

> There were maybe five or six different work experiences I had to do during the time I was there. I am still in the same job I got from work experience in fifth year. The last term of fifth year we had to go on work experience through one of the modules. They offered me a job then three or four months later and four and a half years later I'm still there, and I am actually a manager inside there now. Look to be fair it was a great stepping stone. It got me in the door of an actual job and gave me the basic experience of working. I'm grateful for that – Greg

Greg has been promoted and now works as a manager in the job he got as part of his work experience. Dermot reports a similar story:

> When I was in Youthreach I did work experience here and that got me the job, so to be honest I can't be more thankful to them because if it wasn't for Youthreach I probably wouldn't have this job. I am doing this job for three years. I graduated from Youthreach in 2020. I am 20 years old now – Dermot

The successful work experience that these students underwent has kept them in employment long after their time in Youthreach has ended. All of the former students interviewed were grateful for their time in Youthreach and reflected positively on the experience:

> Youthreach set me up for my early adult years if it wasn't for Youthreach I wouldn't be where I am – Bill

Theme 2: Career Planning

The constant focus on career planning across the curriculum was identified as being of value to the former students' career paths. Career planning is integrated into the Youthreach programme in a cross-curricular way:

> We did things along the way like computer lessons. We were making CVs and stuff like that to help us get a job when we get out. All those computer lessons definitely helped me anyway because my CV and stuff because if I didn't have all that from [REDACTED TEACHER'S NAME] and all them inside in Youthreach I wouldn't be able to type up a CV – Conor

Most Youthreach students follow the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) curriculum or undertake Level 3 and Level 4 QQI programmes that closely mirror the curriculum of the LCA. There is a strong focus across all subjects on gaining employment and life skills:

> Youthreach helped me to write my own CV, how to do interviews. We did kind of mock interviews and that. When I used to pronounce my words, I used to pronounce them differently. Youthreach really kind of helped me with my speech – Andrew

Andrew and Conor report similar experiences, career planning is so integrated into the Youthreach programme that its effects last long after students leave the centre:

> We were coached for interviews so much that, I gave advice to people in my own family about interviews, their CVs, how to present themselves correctly at an interview. There have been great successes with it. In my own career today, I am involved highly with human resources, recruitment and helping people within their career path within the company and seeing where they fit within the company and I believe that is something that I was taught in Youthreach or maybe not taught but it was brought out of me – Bill

Bill undertook many work experiences during his time in Youthreach and was also working evenings and weekends while he attended Youthreach. He credits Youthreach with practice interviews and a strong focus on preparing students for the world of work, so much so that he felt he could offer advice to others. He also comments on a deeper experience in that he was not so much taught but the teachers in Youthreach could recognise and bring something out of him that he may not have even been aware of himself.

Theme 3: Life Skills

The development of essential life skills in Youthreach was identified as especially useful to former students. There is a good deal of time devoted to preparing students for the world of work, and the development of life skills and career planning in Youthreach centres are crucial to the learners' long-term success:

> Youthreach was like the foundation, anything that I learned I was able to take forward with me in my working life, like communication skills, like confidence, when it comes to interviews, the interview process and all that – Greg

Greg credits Youthreach with building his communication and confidence skills, this is echoed by Dermot's comments:

> Youthreach pushes us to do work experience and teaches life skills that I don't think normal schools would. I came out of my shell completely in Youthreach. It taught me to be more of an active member of society more than normal schools would. Like, normal skills teach you how to do maths and stuff whereas Youthreach teaches you how to be a person. Realistically they showed us how to get a job and how to live after school – Dermot

Dermot focuses on the holistic nature of the education he received within Youthreach and credits Youthreach with teaching him how to be a person. Many of the former students interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with their previous mainstream secondary schools as preparing them only for a points race to enter third-level education. For many learners enrolled in the Youthreach programme, progression to higher-level education is undesirable. Former students even suggest this as a push factor from mainstream schools as their teachers seem myopic in their belief that their job was to prepare their students for the points race and progression to university or college:

> I didn't want anything serious like being a doctor or anything like that. I am very hands on, like I like manual labour and stuff so it didn't affect me in that way. If you want to go away some place and do something like I don't think Youthreach would be the place if you wanted to be a doctor or something like that. You would want to be sticking to the mainstream for that – Conor

Conor indicates that Youthreach allowed him to focus on his own strengths rather than any perceived lack derived from not being suited to higher education. Youthreach is set up to cater from early school leavers like Conor, but many of the former Youthreach students interviewed felt that within the senior cycle of mainstream schools, the focus seemed to be only on progression to third-level. It is possible that mainstream schools in the Irish secondary school system are focused largely on preparation for third-level and are neglecting their responsibilities to students whose talents lie elsewhere.

Theme 4: Culture of high support

Smaller learner cohorts allow teachers in Youthreach centres more time to get to know the learners resulting in a highly supportive environment. The less formal approach in Youthreach centres, where learners call teachers by their first names, allows for better interpersonal relationships between learners and teachers. The quality of these interpersonal relationships allows Youthreach centres to develop a culture of high support that is significant to the career paths and personal development of the learners:

> I suppose they were always there to see what it was we wanted to do job wise and the focus was on that rather than actual exams. That made it more fun rather than saying well you have to pass this exam to do xyz. I don't regret not finishing off sixth year and I never regret going to Youthreach. People would have asked me but I said no. I still got my education out of it. If we had a problem with a subject or anything it was much easier to ask teachers in Youthreach rather than ask a teacher in my old school. I kind of felt the teachers didn't like us and they were strict whereas Youthreach was easy going – Mary

Mary recalls the focus of Youthreach was to prepare her for the world of work and that the teachers in Youthreach were more approachable. Mary's sentiments are echoed by Laura, the focus on progression to third-level was an issue for her in Youthreach and would likely have been inappropriate to her needs and may have acted as a push factor contributing to her exit from mainstream schooling:

> Being a mother to my two-year-old child, I left in May 2021, about a year ago. I haven't really had a chance to get a job because my child is so young but I am going to get a job somewhere I like. Youthreach helped me to be more active in myself, more social and more confident.

> In Youthreach they were very supportive. Easy to understand. Anytime I wanted help, they gave it. They told me if I didn't understand the task that I was to ask. It's too hard to learn in a big class for me anyway – Laura

Progression to third-level would have been difficult in Laura's case, her childcare issues aside. Laura indicated that she had no interest in college. She did however credit Youthreach with helping her develop as a person, becoming more active, social and confident. The culture of high support is again evidenced in her comments. Greg credits the culture of high support in Youthreach as well as the expertise Youthreach teachers have in dealing with students who didn't have a positive experience in mainstream schooling:

> In the Leaving Cert years, you are becoming more mature, you are starting to understand, this a bit of a serious situation in your life. It's good to have that support there in general. I got more time from the teachers in Youthreach because they had seen this before. They had seen people drop out of school, not get on well in school, go different roads in life and come to Youthreach and at the end of the day they were there to do a job and their job was to make sure we stayed in education. They were used to it, they had seen it every day – Greg

The Youthreach programme from its outset was designed to cater for students who fall through the cracks of the mainstream education system and to provide a safety net for them. Conor recognises the difference in approach and is especially grateful for the support of the Youth Advocate. The role of the Youth Advocate is to provide support in key areas such as education, health, housing, employment, and relationships. The Advocates help learners find work experience but also provide emotional support:

> I think Youthreach improved my people skills there are less people in Youthreach so it improved my people skills and my social skills. I used to get nervous talking to people, I would have been a bit shy about talking to people. When you are put into a smaller class it would boost your confidence. You'd be less afraid to ask questions and stuff. The Advocate is there to listen to you. Any problem doesn't matter what it is, could be stuff you're going through or you could be after hitting someone with a car she would listen to you all day long. You were never the bad guy in her eyes. There was always some bit of good seen by the Advocate. It's a different ball game altogether. You're not calling them miss or sir,

> they tell you to call them by their name. It is a very informal learning experience. You can have conversations about other stuff, it doesn't have to be all the PG stuff you would normally talk about at school, you can talk about other stuff too – Conor

Rogers (1969) highlights unconditional positive regard as being crucial to building healthy interpersonal relationships. The support received by Youthreach learners within the centres they attend may play a positive role in combatting alienation, anomie and dismal stereotypes that Youthreach learners contend with, as outlined in the opening paragraph. Though teachers in Youthreach may not all be familiar with Rogers' concept of unconditional positive regard, it is clear from the comments of former students that they seem to practice it. Conor recognises the support he received from the Youth Advocate. Conor clearly indicates that the support of the Youth Advocate and the culture within Youthreach as contributing to him having a second chance at education. Brian's comments expand on this concept further as he acknowledges the experience of his teachers in dealing with learners who may be struggling with complex issues:

> The teachers there, they treat you different, nothing seemed to shock them either. I didn't have any major problems in comparison with other people around me there. There were students there with X Y Z issues going on at home and nothing ever seemed to shock the teachers there. They would hear things that are totally bizarre, that anyone else would be taken aback by, and they would just take it as normal. I remember one situation certain teachers they would just nicely question it they wouldn't agitate a person, 'and why would you do that, why would you take that', so they are very supportive in many aspects. Emotionally too, you could come in some days and the teachers mightn't ask you what is going on at home but they would know enough to realise that student is having a bit or an off day. I remember one student never wanted to part take in class but they always managed to get him to partake in class, even though he didn't want to. There was one particular student, I don't know what was going on at home but he would come into class and the first thing he would do was throw his hood up, and his head in his arms and he would start going to sleep, he was always tired. Clearly he wasn't sleeping at all at home. They always managed somehow to get the best out of him too and everybody around me – Bill

The expertise and dedication of the staff within Youthreach centres was identified and appreciated by the former learners. Though a small sample size of former students was used, those interviewed recognised the dedication and experience of Youthreach staff. Furthermore, they credit the teachers in Youthreach as being influential in their growth as individuals and the trajectory of their career paths.

Conclusion

According to her Special Educational Needs and Inclusion (SENI) initiative research study, Gordon (2013) claimed that teaching staff were responsible for the delivery of guidance subjects such as work experience and career planning which were reinforced with access to a guidance counsellor and support from external counsellors. Mentoring is delivered by all Youthreach staff including teachers, resource people and coordinators and although there is no official training for this role, original staff who were present during its introduction trained the new staff when they joined. Non-SENI centres do not receive the additional €58,500 funding per year but are expected to function to the same standard though with considerably less funding. This study was small in scale and a broader national study would provide greater insights, the results of this indicate that in spite of the challenges in their lives outlined at the beginning of this article, the former learners seemed happy with the education and career preparation they received within Youthreach. This paper indicates that there is much being done to combat alienation, anomie and the internalisation of the stereotype of the 'working-class loser' within Youthreach centres. Learners go on to have successful working lives and careers. A culture of high support, a focus on work experience, career planning and the development of life skills were identified by learners as being important to their development after their time in Youthreach.

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The Centre for Insurance, Risk & Data Analytics Studies (CIRDAS): A Case Study for Flexible and Agile Online Adult Education for Work-based Learners Across the Insurance Sector in Ireland

LINDSAY MALONE AND AIDAN MAHON

Abstract

This paper explores the Centre for Insurance, Risk and Data Analytics Studies (CIRDAS) as a case study of online adult education which offers flexible upskilling and reskilling opportunities to employees across the Irish insurance sector. It explores how CIRDAS's agile programme development enabled flexible entry, exit and progression routes for work-based learners. It took an innovative approach to the co-creation of programmes with industry representatives and the granular transversal nature of micro-credentials they offered. The experience of learners is shared to demonstrate the effectiveness of CIRDAS in meeting both employer and learner needs for flexible, stackable work-based learning.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning, Work-based learning, Co-creation

Introduction

This practice-based paper will present a case study that is focused on the development of the Centre for Insurance, Risk and Data Analytics Studies (CIRDAS) through the Faculty of Lifelong Learning at South East Technological University (SETU). This paper will present an overview of how this project, funded through the Human Capital Initiative, is agile and innovative, and it will also share examples of good practice. It will show the evidence of why CIRDAS is needed, before addressing how CIRDAS is aligned to national and international adult learning policies. It will then engage in an analysis of the practical aspects of developing CIRDAS, which involves co-creating programmes with industry representatives and delivering the programmes in an agile and innovative way. The focus of CIRDAS is to increase access to higher education programmes through the provision of online adult learning and work-based learning opportunities. The paper will conclude with a review of the feedback from the learners who engaged with CIRDAS and a summary of the main learnings from this project.

The Centre for Insurance, Risk and Data Analytic Studies

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) launched the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 3 in December 2019. The €206 million call invited proposals for projects that promoted innovation and agility across the higher education sector. The Faculty of Lifelong Learning in SETU were awarded €1,725,343 to develop and deliver their proposed five-year HCI project. The project was to establish CIRDAS as part of SETU and in partnership with colleagues at Atlantic Technological University (ATU).

CIRDAS was agile in its approach to programme development as it enabled flexible entry, exit and progression routes for work-based learners and it was innovative in its approach to the co-creation of programmes with industry representatives and the granular transversal nature of the micro-credentials on offer. CIRDAS was developed around four key pillars: design thinking, business thinking, data science and equality, diversity and inclusion (see *Figure 1*). The pillars were informed by extensive engagement with industry representatives, which will be addressed in detail later in this paper.

CIRDAS Delivery Pillars

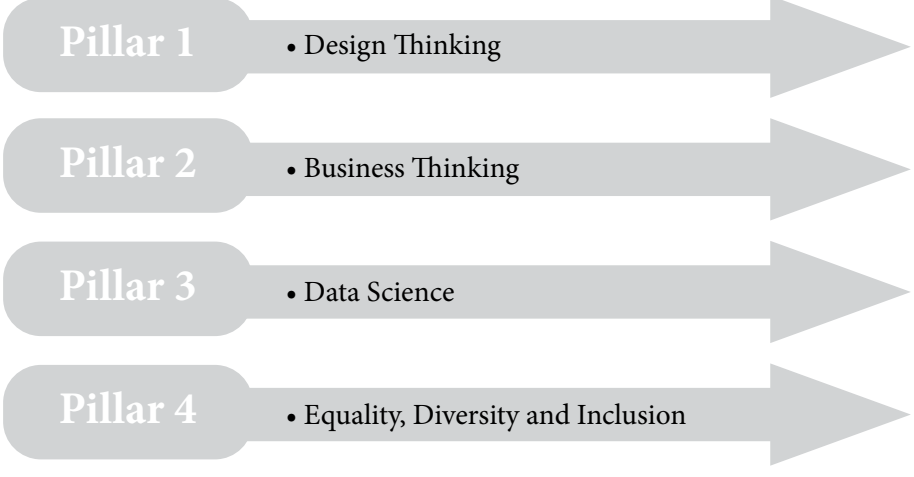

Figure 1. CIRDAS Four Pillars

Evidence of Need

The development of CIRDAS was framed around clear evidence of the need for upskilling and reskilling of the insurance sector. This sector (from broker to multinational insurer) has witnessed a dramatic change in recent years due to numerous challenges and opportunities including Brexit, low interest rates, a challenging claims environment, increased competition, increased regulatory burden and oversight, increased automation, and use of artificial intelligence. More recently, COVID-19 has focused attention towards the need for new approaches to underwriting, delivery, customer service and indeed employee upskilling, as evidenced by the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report from 2019 (PwC, 2019a). Insurance Ireland commissioned the 2019 PwC report, which found that investment in upskilling and creating the workplace of the future is of critical importance to the sector.

It also highlighted the need for significant development in employee upskilling to address gaps in the existing employee skillset of insurance companies. Traditionally, these deficits were addressed through mainly hiring new staff or outsourcing. This view is amplified in the insurance sector, where 47% of CEOs (versus 30% of other CEOs) indicated that training and upskilling were the most important factors needed to close the skills gap. However, most companies in the insurance sector are not confident in their current capability in this respect, with just 12% of respondents scoring their upskilling programme overall as very effective (PwC, 2019b).

On a macro scale, the insurance industry in Ireland is a vital component allowing for risk pooling among citizens and is a large employer of approximately 28,000 people both directly and indirectly. SETU recognised that this developing situation was resulting in a significant peak in interest and demand among industry representatives not only to look to the insurer of the future but to look in a practical way at the workplace of the future. This workplace presents challenges in dealing with a remote, disparate workforce and managing data, workflows, team structures and dynamics in this environment. The *Future Jobs Ireland* (2019) report under Pillar 3 states that people need to have accessible upskilling options and that Ireland's education and training providers must offer relevant and up-to-date courses that meet the needs of enterprises and workers.

Alignment to National and International Policies

In response to the objectives and ethos of the HCI Pillar 3 call, the project leads co-created with the industry a novel framework that is transformative regionally and nationally, scalable and replicable across other HEIs. This approach, labelled Lifelong Learning 2.0, challenged traditional models of industry and learner engagement, skills discovery, course and Faculty development, and course delivery and accreditation. CIRDAS encompassed learner-centred design and evidence of engagement with these learner cohorts. It was co-created with industry through deep engagement with collaborative and industry partners.

In conjunction with the Faculty of Lifelong Learning, CIRDAS developed and delivered granular transversal courses, from Masterclass up to Masters, with multiple entry, exit and progression routes under the four broad disciplines. This approach was informed by the *National Strategy for Higher Education 2030* which outlines the need for open and flexible learning through creative timetabling and delivery mechanisms, and increased off-campus and workplace provision. CIRDAS is also integrated with national education and enterprise policy objectives and performance frameworks. It fits with national, regional, social and economic current and future needs as it is aligned to *The National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 and Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 – Ireland's Future*. Further to this, the development of CIRDAS and the Lifelong Learning 2.0 model have been extensively informed by innovative international best practice including international research by MicroHE (2020) and Deakin University Framework (2020).

Co-creation with Industry

CIRDAS was co-created with industry to meet their identified current and future skills needs. It provides internationally informed best practice approaches to upskilling through the flexible online provision of unaccredited and accredited programmes to existing staff across the industry in Ireland. The ethos of CIRDAS is underpinned by the importance of working with industry representatives, and so the programmes incorporated unaccredited Masterclasses and accredited Certificates (Levels 8 and 9), Higher Diplomas (Level 8) and Masters (Level 9) programmes.

The range of stakeholders engaged in the consultative process is presented in *Figure 2*. The consultative process was initiated through the co-lead's role as Insurtech Network Centre Manager, a collaborative insurance industry

platform part-funded by Enterprise Ireland, which has an extensive array of contacts in the industry. All stakeholders were invited to take part in consultative online meetings. The co-leads also used the existing South East Financial Services Cluster. The Cluster Manager engaged the Cluster members in further consultative meetings. Similarly, the South East Regional Skills Forum members were also consulted through the South East Regional Skills Forum Manager.

Figure 2. Industry Partners

This process identified that the primary focus of the programmes needed to be on adapting to managing a changing workforce and workplace in line with the recent rapid increase in remote working, the development of skills to adapt to increasing digitalisation of insurance processes and customer behaviours, updating and increasing relevance of skills as industry roles change, and upskilling to enable existing employees to apply for future roles. Based on extensive industry feedback, it was identified that the focus needed to include staff who are already in middle management roles, managing small teams of experienced professionals, and more junior staff members who also require upskilling. The staff members concerned were aged between 30 and 60 some of whom had no previous higher-level education (with the exception of the

Certified Insurance Practitioner [CIP] exams). Others already held degrees and the insurance exams (such as Advanced Diploma in Insurance). As CIRDAS developed, an additional requirement for upskilling senior executives also emerged. The range of stakeholders engaged in the consultative process is presented in *Figure 2*.

Following consultations with industry representatives, it became clear that education provision in this area in the main is either technical (like the Chartered Insurer route provided by the Insurance Institute of Ireland) or broad (such as general business degrees). This has resulted in a large number of employees failing to progress and upskill upon attaining CIP qualification.

The focus of CIRDAS, then, was to collaborate and work in partnership with enterprises to be transformative in facilitating the insurance industry and staff to respond in a flexible, agile, and innovative manner to a rapidly changing workplace and role. The insurance sector nationally and regionally is a major employer across all channels of delivery from brokers, Managing General Agents (MGA) to insurers. In addition, the HCI Pillar 3 call stipulated the requirement for the development of an Industry Advisory Group to oversee the direction, development, and performance of CIRDAS (see *Figure 3*). A formal feedback loop was developed and utilised to ensure the offering is in line with industry requirements and elicit suggestions for continuous improvements (see *Figure 3*). CIRDAS is managed by the Programme and Development Manager and overseen by the Advisory Group and two co-leads. This facilitates SETU's continuous link with enterprise and enables it to develop ways to incorporate research outcomes into taught provision.

Industry Advisory Board Composition

	Name	Organisation
1	Mr Declan McGill Chairperson	UNUM
2	Ms Donna Tilson	Sun Life
3	Mr Aidan Shine	South East Business Innovation Centre
4	Ms Linda Roberts	Wrightway Underwriting Ltd
5	Mr Brian Fives	Enterprise Ireland
6	Ms Elizabeth Hore	Wexford LEO
7	Dr Declan Doyle	Institute of Technology Carlow and INC
8	Mr Aidan Mahon	INC
9	Mr Kieran Comerford	Carlow LEO
10	Dr Greg Doyle	Institute of Technology Carlow
11	Mr Hesus Inoma	Grant Thornton
12	Mr Ciaran Hayes	VHI Healthcare
13	Mr Damian Rossiter	CIRDAS
14	Ms Anne-Marie O'Leary	Zurich
15	Mr Gerard de Vere	InsurTech Ireland

Figure 3. Industry Advisory Group

Programme Development

Once CIRDAS was established, the Advisory Board was in place and the CIRDAS Manager appointed, the process of engagement around programme development was initiated with industry representatives. From these consul–tations, the need for flexible programmes was established offering work-based learners the opportunity to upskill or reskill through unaccredited and accredited programmes. From the accredited perspective, the initial step was to establish the programme teams. These were comprised of industry representatives from *Figure 2* and academic and management team members

from the Faculty of Lifelong Learning. CIRDAS co-leads led the programme teams through four validation panels in December 2021, where the following programmes were successfully validated: Master of Science in Business Risk Management; Master of Business in Executive Leadership; Higher Diplomas in Business in Innovative Data Generation; Analytics and Management and Equality; Diversity and Inclusion.

A key component of each of the validation panels was the programme team's need for minor awards to also be extracted from the major award programmes, so 27 minor award certificates were validated at Levels 8 and 9 minor award postgraduate certificates were validated from the Master's programmes (see *Figure 4*). This represents the flexible entry and exit points that work-based learners require. The breadth of programmes validated was reflective of the complex and varied needs of the insurance industry and the development of programmes at Levels 8 and 9 enabled progression opportunities for those who already held qualifications at Levels 7 or 8.

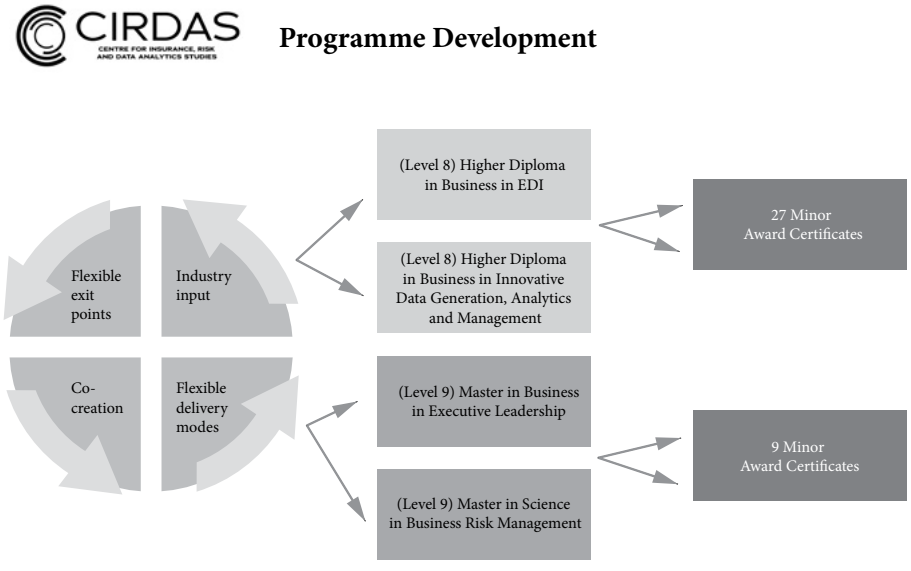

Figure 4. Programmes Development in CIRDAS

As discussed, the industry partners also expressed the need for unaccredited options for upskilling for staff. This informed the development of the Master–classes, which were facilitated by knowledgeable colleagues across the four pillars of CIRDAS. The Masterclasses included different topics developed from

CIRDAS pillars, such as: a 'Great Minds Like a Think' series, which engaged with the industry and offered opportunities to learn and share as well as a network of fellow professionals; a 'Governance, Compliance, and Data Protection in Fin Services' Masterclass with Insurance SETU Carlow; an 'Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion' series in conjunction with Inclusio; and a 'Demystifying Data' series (see *Figure 5*). In total, 47 Masterclasses have been delivered to 2,100 insurance industry employees. Turning then to the accredited programmes, 167 learners have completed Level 8 awards and 145 are registered to Level 9 awards from across the sector.

Masterclasses

Jan 21	Mar 21	Apr 21	Jun 21	Sep 21	Oct 21	Nov 21	Dec 21	Q1 22
Masterclass for SAI 'Building a data analytics framework' Nsurely masterclasses building AI empowered alternative to motor risk rating platform, Central bank innovation hub 'An intro & what you need to know' webinar	Unconscious bias masterclass delivered to Insurance Ireland with Dr Alisson Kinneally	Unconscious bias (II) masterclass delivered to Insurance Ireland with Dr Alisson Kinneally	'Great minds like a think' masterclass series launched 'Economics of usage based insurance' with insurtech start up Nsurely CEO Aravind Ravi	'Race & Ethnicity' masterclass delivered by Dr Susan Flynn to to Insurance Ireland	'Cross industry standard for data mining (CRISP DM) for SAI' delivered by Dr Greg Doyle, 'Great minds like a think' masterclass 'Data enrichment for non-life insurance' delivered by Geoinsure CEO Jonathon Guard	'Strategic design for innovation' masterclass to be delivered to Irish Life by Lynn Whelan of Design+	'Great minds like a think' masterclass series 'Consumer Insurance Contract Act (CICA)' to be delivered by Insurance fellow and Senior QA with Zurich Denise Kent	'Great minds like a think' masterclass series 'Strategic design for innovation' to be delivered by Lynn Whelan EDI masterclass series with Sandra Healy CEO of Inclusion

Figure 5. Range of Masterclasses

Agile and Innovative Pedagogy

From a pedagogical perspective, CIRDAS provided multiple entry, exit and progression routes from Masterclass, Certificates, Higher Diplomas and Masters. It also operated within the SETU Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy to formally recognise prior experience for work-based applicants. CIRDAS is built upon the direct links and partnerships with collaborative partners Insurtech Network Centre, the South East Financial Services Cluster, the South East Regional Skills Forum, and industry representatives. So much so that industry representatives were the co-creators of the programmes and formed an integral part of the programme teams. CIRDAS displays

pedagogical agility through its dual learning approach, where learners engage in part-time online study while working in the insurance industry, so they have a combination of e-classroom-based learning and the practical application of their learning in the workplace. All programmes were timetabled in consultation with industry to ensure that the delivery schedule was flexible in order to fit with the business needs of work-based learners. The Associate Lecturers who delivered the accredited programmes represented a blend of industry experts with academic experience, who taught with the Faculty of Lifelong Learning on a part-time basis while working full-time in the industry themselves.

Learner Voice

Learner Voice in education means that learners should have a say in decisions about their own education. It means that those who learn, not just those who teach, should influence the educational experience (AONTAS, 2023). To incorporate this approach and to continually evaluate the effectiveness of the programmes delivered through CIRDAS, learners were invited to give regular feedback to continually reflect on and incorporate research outcomes into taught provision. This feedback is captured on an ongoing basis through the Advisory Group as well as the ongoing consultations with industry partners. More specifically, feedback was sought at the beginning of each programme, in the middle and at the end using online surveys. A snapshot of feedback from one of the micro-credential certificates demonstrates the usefulness of the programmes for the work-based learners (see *Figure 6* and *Figure 7*).

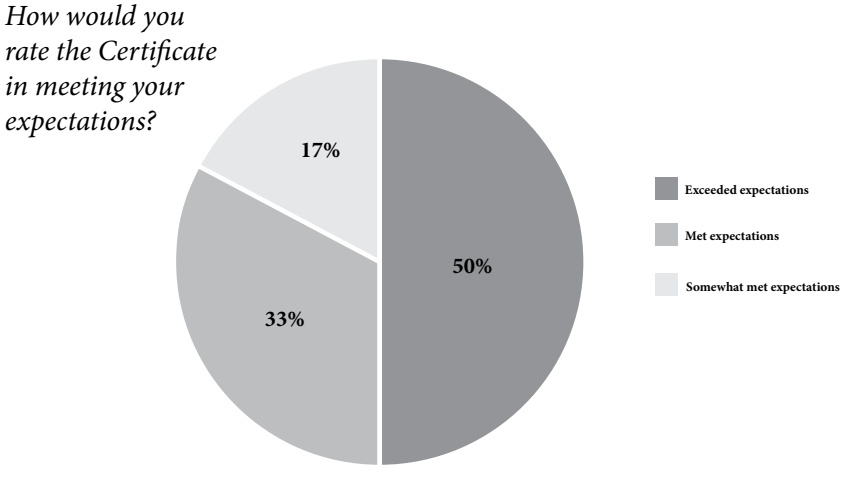

Figure 6. Learner Feedback

How would you rate the usefulness of the Certificate to your current or future roles?

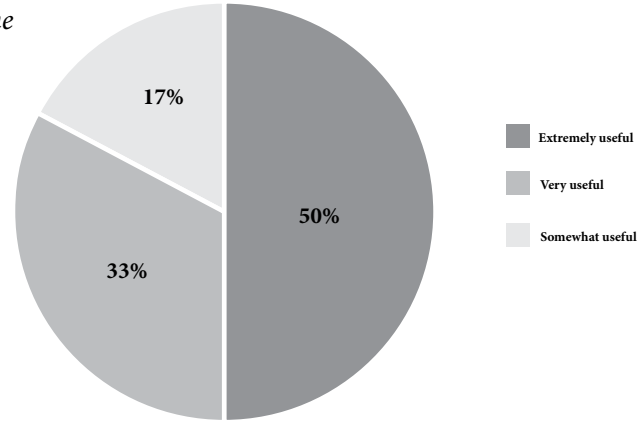

Figure 7. Learner Feedback

Figure 8 also gives a sense of the ongoing feedback received for the unaccredited Masterclasses.

Qualitative Findings

EDI Leadership & Management

"Great topic and really great to offer the level of certification to go along with it."

"Great course which I very much enjoyed but also found very useful in terms of stimulating further thought and research in this very important area."

Learner Feedback

EDI Leadership & Management

"I really enjoyed the course. EDI is new to me, but Karen covered everything and explained everything very well. Coming from a startup this EDI course will be very beneficial to our business and we have already discussed at board level enacting an EDI strategy."

Learner Feedback

Figure 8. Learner Feedback

The Application of Adult Learning Theories and Concepts

The approach to co-creating CIRDAS programmes was modelled on lifelong learning as a theoretical construct (Carlson, 2019). It was also modelled on London's (2012) definition of lifelong learning as development after formal education, the continuing development of knowledge and skills that people experience throughout their lives. The focus was to create online adult accredited and unaccredited learning opportunities to give maximum flexibility in the type of learning available for learners in the insurance sector.

CIRDAS is framed around the concept that learning is 'an evolving, contin–uously renewed set of relations' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, pp.50). More simply, it is a process of social participation where the nature of the situation impacts significantly on the process itself. Communities of Practice (CoPs) enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need, and recognise that, given the proper structure, they are in the best position to do this (Wenger, 2015).

This social participation underpinned CIRDAS and its approach to adult learning. The programme team adopted the principles of andragogy to ensure the programme was focused on adult learning (Knowles, 1975). This is evident as the programme team ensured that learner voice was captured through ongoing evaluations while also ensuring the content was focused on group work. This enabled learners to apply their own experiences to the concepts discussed. The work-based learning focused on real work problems which learners could reflect on and develop their assessments around.

The work-based learning element was further underpinned by research conducted by Advance HE in 2006, which reported that practitioners who engaged in delivering work-based learning strongly felt that there is still a need to develop and fund a credit-based system for learning at a higher level. Such a system would enable greater transparency, transferability and consistency across the higher education sector.

CIRDAS developed major awards ensuring that all modules were validated as minor awards in their own right, to afford maximum flexibility to learners and the opportunity to stack their credits towards one of the major awards. Though work-based learning is growing in demand, particularly in the area of lifelong learning, more attention is needed in relation to digital pedagogy and the effective use of online methods to support work-based learning with corresponding implications for staff development. There are institutional implications in terms of ensuring that systems and structures support what is,

particularly for work-based learners, likely to be a permanent move towards digital, blended and online learning (Lester and Crawford-Lee, 2022).

On a global scale, micro-credentials have increasingly become positioned as a solution to a wide range of economic, labour market, and social challenges. Broadly defined, they are stackable, industry-aligned short units of learning designed to help individuals form specific skills and signal those skills to employers. Stemming from the economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, micro-credentials appear to have catapulted to the foreground of policy and industry discourse (Robson, 2022). In fact, skills-focused courses, like the ones developed through CIRDAS, are a fast, flexible, and accessible way for individuals to up or re-skill to meet immediate skills gaps and position themselves competitively within challenging labour markets. In addition, micro-credentials are increasingly emphasised as a means of democratising access to and through labour markets, enabling employers to select or promote applicants based on actual skills rather than the signalling power of degrees or institutional prestige (Robson, 2022).

Key Learnings

The programmes offered through CIRDAS engaged all levels of employee learners on a share-and-learn platform. For example, the Masterclass sessions accommodated a high volume of learners. This share-and-learn platform was promoted to learners as a useful support network for their lifelong learning journey and career development, offering easy sharing links for other platforms such as LinkedIn. The Masterclass sessions also had live networking opportunities and access to relevant industry expert speakers. The content was delivered in a granular fashion, with multiple entry, exit, and progression routes allowing for the combination of disciplines and awarding of a hybrid qualification. This is consistent with industry demand for transversal upskilling.

In addition, the content was delivered in a flexible, blended, and industry-responsive manner which focused on dual learning opportunities for work-based learners. Taking such an innovative and agile approach to programme creation has meant that 2,100 learners have engaged in unaccredited programmes and 312 have engaged in accredited programmes through CIRDAS. The key learning is the value of engaging in a meaningful way with industry partners and to situate them as co-creators of programmes and as part of the programme teams. This ensures that agile, innovative, and responsive lifelong learning programmes are created to meet the needs of industry as the world continues to evolve after the COVID-19 pandemic and towards the workplaces of the future.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the creation of CIRDAS in response to the HCI Pillar 3 call for innovative and agile projects. The focus of the project was to work in partnership with industry stakeholders to co-create programmes that focused on upskilling and reskilling employees across the insurance sector in Ireland. The mode of delivery was online to ensure maximum flexibility for learners to access the programmes across the country and to create delivery schedules that could fit around the varying business needs of the sector. The creation of the programmes was guided by both national and international policies and key research in the area of micro-credentials and work-based learning through higher education.

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Reading Between the Lines: Exploring the Implementation of Irish Further Education and Training Policy at Practice Level

AISLINN BRENNAN AND MAEVE O'GRADY

Abstract

Adult Education in the Republic of Ireland has experienced exponential change. Since 2013, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector has developed and implemented a range of strategies and policies transforming the landscape. Policy implementation is a complex process and as the 16 Education and Training Boards work to interpret FET policy and transform their offerings, practitioners are concerned that policy implementation may misalign with policy intention and compromise philosophies. This article aims to explore implementation in action. It describes the policy context, actions being taken to implement policy, the concerns of practitioners, and provides questions for consideration and reflection.

Keywords: Adult Education Policy, Policy Implementation, Change Manage–ment, Adult Education Values

Introduction

Over 10,000 people currently work in the Irish Further Education and Training (FET) sector catering to almost '200,000 unique learners per year' (SOLAS, 2022a, p.14) and in March 2023 the 16 Irish Education and Training Boards (ETBs) celebrated ten years since their formation. Over this period, adult education in the Republic of Ireland has experienced significant transformation and development under the umbrella of FET. ETBs were established to provide the functions formerly fulfilled by the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and Fás, the state training authority. SOLAS, the state's further education and training agency, was created and simplified the context. Since its inception, SOLAS has led out on the development of FET policy and past developments have catalysed substantial gains in the field of adult and further education. More recently SOLAS's strategy and system development includes a

Revised Funding Model for the new Strategic Performance Agreements (SPAs) with each of the 16 ETBs. Each ETB has autonomy around implementation at a local level. At present, there are escalating concerns among FET practitioners that in leading sectoral change ETB management is signalling approaches that threaten to sacrifice adult-only educational environments, programmes, adult educational philosophies, and ethos. This presents a dilemma in that the theory and experiences of best practice in adult education (especially for learners who have experienced disadvantage in their first experience of mainstream schooling) and those gains and learning achieved over decades of development in adult education could be lost, 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'. With funding tied to outcomes, there is a risk of a myopic focus on outcomes at the local level rather than considering the achievement of outcomes within the full context and intention of FET policy.

Both authors are involved in initial teaching qualifications for adult and further education, and both are active practitioners in the adult and further education sector, both statutory and non-statutory, in Ireland. We have experienced the landscape change from a marginal adult and community education sector to its incorporation into the new further education and training structures, particularly the availability of accessible vocational qualifications for adults and a growing emphasis on FET for labour market activation. A number of assumptions are made in this article. Firstly, we consider that adult education practitioners are open to change that is not in conflict with their adult educational philosophies and ethos. Secondly, we consider adult and further education pathways as offering excellent opportunities for the populace in general and for educationally disadvantaged learners in particular. FET and adult and community education can facilitate transformational learning for adults (Brennan and O'Grady, 2022). Thirdly we consider that the desire to hold onto good practice is shared by the provider, funder, and practitioner and this requires all stakeholders involved to work in partnership. A further assumption is that many practitioners may feel themselves in the position of policy takers and be negatively affected by implementation actions that seem to be aligned with policy intentions but have the effect of riding roughshod over previous good practices and innovations.

This article draws on current FET policy, Murtagh's (2021) policy review of the current FET Strategy, and the concerns of practitioners around the implementation of policy. This provides the reader with a snapshot in time from different perspectives. It is anticipated that the timely identification of risks will help mitigate them and offer possibilities for practice.

Context

The inaugural national Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 was published by SOLAS in 2014. During the lifetime of this strategy, the FET landscape underwent a transformation, and many substantial developments were made in the sector. However, concerns were also raised about the impact of some changes to adult and community education (Grummell, 2014; Fitzsimons, 2017). They located the move to mainstream adult education developments funded by the state as neoliberal in nature, if not a manifestation of new managerialism, and viewed this as a means to control the sector rather than simply funding it.

The current FET strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning 2020-2024*, is the second strategy to be published and aims to build on the developments and achievements over the life of the first. This strategy addresses three core pillars in FET: fostering inclusion, facilitating pathways and building skills. Published in 2020, the timing of the second strategy coincided with the COVID-19 global pandemic – a time during which FET organisations and practitioners were grappling to effectively respond to the educational needs of learners in an online environment. This issue of timing is noted by Murtagh in his 2021 review of the FET Strategy for *The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner* who pointed out that the launch of the strategy received limited attention due to COVID-19 and Brexit. Murtagh notes the ambitious nature of this strategy, describing its 'recognition of community education and the broader purposes of learning [as] laudable' (p.144) and sees it as reflecting a move away from a neoliberal focus in the earlier, first strategy.

SOLAS stated in the FET strategy (2020) that the existing funding model would be reformed:

> …to move away from approaches that reinforce programme silos, to reflect the outcomes and performance of ETBs, and to facilitate strategic investment in long-term priorities (2020, p.56).

In June 2022, the *Further Education and Training Funding Model Review* was published, bringing with it a change from a funding allocation to the 34 programmes based on estimated numbers of learners, to an allocation of funding to a general FET pot for each ETB based on the previous years' figures. This modified funding approach is noted as being necessary to realise the commitments of 'easier access, simplified pathways, a consistent learner experience and a more powerful identity,' in the Strategy (SOLAS, 2022a, p.3).

In late 2022 the Strategic Performance Agreements specific to each of the 16 ETBs, covering the three-year period from 2022-2024, were published. These agreements are intended to build upon the preceding 2018-2020 agreements and act 'as the second realisation of The Transforming Learning strategy at the regional level' (Brownlee, 2022, p.205). It is noted in the *Transforming Learning Strategic Performance Agreements Report* that these agreements set 'out the future plans for development and innovation across the FET system' (SOLAS, 2022b, p.1). They outline each ETB's commitments to achieving targets under five themes and their contribution to national system targets relating to supporting jobs; learning pathways; facilitating inclusion; upskilling through life and careers; and targeting key skills needs, as agreed with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

A Snapshot: On the Ground

It is clear from the ETB profiles and performance from 2018, mapped in the current Strategic Performance Agreements, that each ETB is at a different stage of implementation and development in their FET transformational journeys. This is particularly evident in relation to buildings, estates, and staffing. Some ETBs operate each of their FET programmes from individual buildings, with programme-designated and contracted staff, essentially a stand-alone silo, e.g. designated Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) centres managed by VTOS Co-ordinators. Others work as individual programmes, with programme- designated and contracted staff in shared FET centres e.g. Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), staffed by BTEI Co-ordinator, Adult Educators, Teachers and Tutors; VTOS by VTOS Co-ordinator, Administrators and Teachers, and Literacy with Adult Literacy Organiser, Adult Educator and Tutors etc. Each staff member can be operating in a shared physical space, but their role is specific to the delivery of their programme. It is important to note that the contracts in each programme also differ, with terms, conditions and remuneration being programme specific e.g. a teacher contract, or an adult educator contract with teaching responsibility, or a BTEI Co-ordinator having a different contract to an Adult Literacy Organiser. Essentially this model sees silos operating in a shared space, although in some settings programme Co-ordinators work collaboratively with one another to create learner pathways and opportunities across programmes (often this is largely dependent on personal relationships). Others are further along the path of a unified approach to FET delivery and operate in shared FET centres, with a designated FET manager (at present often having a contract assigned to a particular programme but working beyond their initial role description with local agreements in place) e.g. centres managed by VTOS Co-ordinator or BTEI Co-ordinator with Adult

Educators from a range of programmes and full centre administration in place. In these instances, from the learner perspective, they do not see programme-specific offerings but are rather presented with a menu of full-time and part-time programmes across the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). All of these offerings are adult-centric and underpinned by adult educational philosophies and approaches.

It is our observation that to date the majority of Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses NFQ Level 5 and 6 have been offered in second-level school settings with a small number being offered in stand-alone PLC colleges. The tuition is delivered by teaching staff on teacher contracts. The philosophies and ethos underpinning this provision have emerged from second-level education and are at odds with adult education philosophies.

The Issues

If we are to successfully transform our FET sector to effectively address the pillars in the strategy of facilitating FET learner access and inclusion, offering pathways in FET and from FET and upskilling learners, then a number of essential areas and legacy issues must be considered. These are explored below:

Communications

As of April 2023, a structure has yet to be introduced to disseminate the strategy to practitioners and facilitate discussion and exploration of the content and implications of the current policy: the Strategy, the Strategic Performance Agreements and the new funding model. Trust is a prerequisite of change and communication is critical to building trust. It is imperative that FET Leadership teams disseminate the critical information and facilitate opportunities for all FET staff to engage in meaningful collaborative dialogue and input into planning, development and implementation.

Philosophies

An adult-centric philosophy and ethos is a fundamental requirement of incorporating adult education into FET provision, and this is understood in the FET strategy in its positioning of 'The Returner' (SOLAS, 2020, p.13). However, there is no other mention of adult education philosophies and processes in the Strategy. As ETBs move towards harmonising their FET offerings, it is critical that the approach adopted is in alignment with, and driven by, these philosophies. Varied transformation approaches are being adopted to implement the policy by ETBs at a local level. Such approaches

include working towards integrating PLCs into FET centres; relocating adult education provision to standalone PLC Colleges and changing reporting structures from adult education officers to principals; and exploring moving existing full-time adult education provision from FET centres to PLC in secondary school settings. FET practitioners consider the first approach to be consistent with FET strategic and policy intention and view the latter two approaches, particularly the last, as being inconsistent. There is concern that these approaches compromise adult education centric philosophies and approaches and run counterintuitively to realising the intentions under the pillars to forge pathways within FET.

Shared values have the potential to enable stakeholders to work together to achieve strategic goals: however, these are absent in the structure of the SPAs. What is also missing in the SPAs is a description of the process by which strategic goals and targets will be achieved.

Buildings/Locations and Resourcing

FET transformation requires dedicated, adult-friendly environments that are appropriately staffed and resourced. The existing educational environments, buildings and staffing structures described earlier have been determined and shaped by the previous funding mechanisms and parameters based on funding for the 34 different programmes. ETBs locating FET provision across NQF levels (full-time and part-time), provision in shared buildings, and resourcing it appropriately, not only dismantles programmatic silos, but also offers the opportunity to deliver enhanced access, and develop pathways within and from FET. Designated FET centres incorporating adult education offerings have evolved and established an identity that is underpinned by adult-centric philosophies. They are effective in enabling learner access. Unlike the approach of putting adult education into school settings described above, we suggest that locating and integrating PLCs within these FET centres would offer more scope for the opportunity and be less likely to muddy or dilute the adult-centric nature of service delivery and also ensure that buildings and settings contribute to the Strategy's intention of scaffolding a positive and coherent identity for FET and the vision for 'The FET college of the Future' (SOLAS, 2020, p.38). To date, 10 ETBs have been selected by SOLAS to receive funding and support for FET Colleges of the Future.

Roles

The legacy of the previous funding model means that currently FET management, teaching and administrative staff structures and contracts are programme specific. Some programmes have teaching staff, others have tutors, and co-ordination and management contracts differ.

Outcomes

There is a risk that, in the desire to satisfy those outcomes and the statistical reporting mechanism in the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS), the wider breadth of outcomes articulated as desirable in the strategy but not yet measured will be ignored or given a diluted priority when ETBs are considering the implementation of policy at local level. Alternative ways of measuring outcomes, for example, are available but not widely known or deemed relevant outside of adult and community education (Brennan and O'Grady, 2022).

Possibilities for Action

If trust between stakeholders is established and maintained in the process of aligning with current policy directions, there is potential to catalyse more engagement and help to reduce resistance and low morale (Brennan, 2017). As mentioned in the 'Communications' section above, trust in the leader-staff relationship is a key condition for transformation: trust that the learner will not only benefit from this transformation process, but that all transformation will be underpinned by the commitments to the learners; trust regarding the protection of philosophies and ethos; trust in relation to communication and opportunities for staff to engage and collaborate as part of the transformation (professional respect); trust around it being a priority to maintain integrity and values tied back to philosophy; trust in relation to environments conducive to empowering learners; trust that the focus will be on outcomes/measures that are broader than just accreditation and progression.

Values and philosophies can underpin the approach to transforming FET by adopting a facilitative approach to implementation at a local level with the support of SOLAS, the policymaker. The values not identified in SPAs can be the foundation for effective transformation by being identified, reflected on, shared, or even challenged.

Conclusion

While current FET policy offers significant opportunities to transform our sector and an understanding of change management is reflected in the performance agreement processes, we have presented some areas that merit further consideration. Policy implementation will have major implications for access and participation for educationally disadvantaged adults, and the staff who design and deliver the educational programmes. There are signs that positive elements of these policies will be lost in translation, as ETBs work under the new funding model towards realising their commitments under the Strategic Performance Agreements in alignment with the National Strategy.

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Caveat Lector: A Critique of the Current Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Blended Learning Programmes (2018)

GAVAN SHERIDAN

Abstract

This is a critical reflection upon the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2018) guidelines on blended learning from the perspective of a Further Education and Training practitioner. The purpose of the guidelines is set out and it is suggested that there is much to be welcomed here. The contested meaning of the term blended learning is explored and it is noted that the definition proffered by QQI is a false one. It is argued that the neoliberal language of these guidelines is contributing to performativity. Finally, there is comment upon how the guidelines address equality of opportunity.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Contested Meaning, Performativity, Diversity

Purpose of the Guidelines

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 requires providers to have due regard to the Quality Assurance (QA) guidelines of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in the development of programmes and training. Providers developing programmes in the blended learning mode are thus required to have regard to QQI's *Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines* (2016) and the QA guidelines on blended learning. The purpose of the guidelines on blended learning is three-fold: to provide 'guidance to providers on quality assurance and enhancement of blended learning'; to be used by providers 'when designing, establishing, evaluating, maintaining or reviewing quality assurance procedures for blended learning'; and to be used as the 'basis for the approval by QQI of a provider's relevant QA procedures' (QQI, 2018, p.4). This purpose is then explored in terms of the organisational context, the programme context including development and assessment, and the learner experience context. The focus throughout the guidelines

is on recognising issues that are pertinent to blended learning. Within the organisational context, issues include administrative and infrastructural management of information technology, staffing, and compliance with relevant legal or regulatory obligations. The focus of the programme context is upon provider responsibility for ensuring quality in curriculum design, delivery and evaluation. Finally, provider responsibilities towards the learner centre upon support, monitoring progress, and equality of opportunity.

In Favour of the Guidelines

Accountability in public service when viewed as a tool to support professional work is to be welcomed. Coming to the Further Education and Training (FET) sector from nearly a decade of teaching in secondary schools, the author was surprised at the level of autonomy individual FET teachers had over the delivery and assessment of modules. It was exciting to work with colleagues who had come from industry and were able to talk from real-life perspectives. However, with autonomy came less well-defined accountability than was characteristic of the post-primary sector. The FET sector in Ireland 20 years ago was characterised by a culture of high teacher autonomy that was low in professional guidance.

There is much about the QQI guidelines on blended learning to be commended, not least that they exist. The guidelines state that a decision to deliver some provision through blended learning should be a 'considered one and form part of a provider's vision, supported by an approved strategy' (QQI, 2018, p.8). Thought must be given to appropriate staffing and continuous professional development, and to the provision of fit-for-purpose IT support. It is important that a blended learning approach would entail procedures that clearly demonstrate the 'need to ensure the value of online learning is enabling learners to meet intended learning outcomes' (QQI, 2018, p.15). QQI advises that these guidelines should be read in conjunction with their core policy on QA guidelines, and there we are told that 'QA is [also] used to describe the enhancement of education and training provision and the standards attained by learners' (QQI, 2016, p.2). Yet nowhere in the guidelines on blended learning is the impression given that a blended approach to teaching and learning should be adopted because it may be a better way to teach and learn.

Though much of the debate and theoretical development on what blended learning means may have peaked 15 to 20 years ago (Hrastinski, 2019), the recent experience of emergency remote teaching across the FET sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have piqued interest amongst

teachers. Blended learning, however, is a contested concept. The 'widely untapped potential' of blended learning lies in the fact that it means different things to different people (Driscoll, 2022, p.1). An overly prescriptive definition of the concept would serve to dampen this untapped potential. The definition of blended learning provided by QQI in the guidelines is very clear. 'For the purposes of these guidelines, blended learning is "the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" as defined by Garrison and Kanuka (2004)' (QQI, 2018, p.3), and QQI are clear that the guidelines are not intended 'to prescribe ***how*** [my emphasis] providers are to operate blended learning programmes' (QQI, 2018, p.5). Yet Murray cautions that:

> Practitioners must be aware that any definition offered by either policymakers or theorists is a product of power and interest and therefore, should never be construed as self-evident or even 'truth'. (Murray, 2014, pp.103-104)

The definition of blended learning proffered by QQI is an attempt to construct a new truth and to neuter debate. Garrison and Kanuka define blended learning as 'the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences' (2004, p.96). QQI have removed the qualitative term 'thoughtful' yet maintains this is the original definition. Hrastinski cites a number of writers who believe in such a *quality conceptualisation* of blended learning where 'face-to-face and online teaching and learning should complement each other, by combining different advantages' (2019, p.566). QQI's claim that they are not prescribing how providers are to operate in this regard is a falsehood when their truncated definition already prescribes so much about how providers are to behave. The blended learning model being encouraged in these guidelines is 'focused on physical or surface-level characteristics rather than pedagogical or psychological characteristics' (Graham et al. 2014 in Hrastinski 2019, p.565).

The Power of Language

As mentioned above, accountability when it serves the public good is to be commended, however, when it is driven by a neoliberal agenda it needs to be resisted in order to serve the public good. While unprofessionalism can never be condoned, the best way to assess the health of a plant may not be to shake off the soil in order to examine its roots. The neoliberal nature of the language in these guidelines is striking and it is suggested that this may further the creep of performativity in the FET sector in Ireland. Performativity is concerned

with power relations that are tied up in language, and in education it refers to the use of criteria of accountability to pass judgment on programmes, teachers and institutions. Stephen Ball maintains that:

> Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). (Ball, 2003, p.216)

These guidelines are replete with the language of accountability, monitoring and evaluation with the aim of improving effectiveness and efficiency. 'As with all types of learning/delivery, providers will look for the most effective and efficient means to support learners in achieving intended learning outcomes' (QQI, 2018, p.6). For Gross Stein (as cited in Sugrue, 2011, p.60), 'the paramount sin is now inefficiency. Dishonesty, unfairness, and injustice – the sins of the past – pale in comparison with the cardinal sin of inefficiency'. However, Gross Stein, who is well disposed towards public accountability, identifies increased risks of malpractice when the drive for efficiency has become an end rather than a means for good quality (Solbrekke and Sugrue, 2011). A drive for cost efficiency has created a new vocabulary for her that leaves little room for asking the necessary questions: For what purpose and for whom the services are effective? The guidelines on blended learning require providers to have in place mechanisms 'that monitor and/or moderate standards (both in terms of learner outcomes and teachers [*sic*] and/or assessors' practice)' (QQI, 2018, p.23). The danger inherent in such a low trust culture is the nurturing of what Peter Gronn (2011) terms Svejkism, or simply working to rule at the cost of teacher professionalism. 'Svejkism is a form of disengagement and antithesis of the exercise of professional judgement' (Gronn, 2011, p.97). Reading these guidelines, how and why would a teacher risk innovation?

Early in the document, we are told that the guidelines apply to providers of all blended learning that leads to QQI awards and that providers offering blended learning that does not lead to an award recognised within the National Framework of Qualifications are advised to be guided by them as this 'may mitigate the risk of reputational damage' (QQI, 2018, p.4). It is the 'responsibility of providers to offer a good learning experience, and the potential reputational risk of not doing so, is significant', (QQI, 2018, p.8). This is the lexicon of performativity at work: what Ball (2003) refers to as the terrors of performativity.

When one reads that the learner must be 'made aware of all terms and conditions relevant to that programme' (QQI, 2018, p.21), it is hard not to wonder if the value of their investment may go down as well as up in this marketplace. In this business model where 'accountable key roles have been identified' (QQI, 2018, p.8), the term 'fit-for-purpose' is used ten times. It is concerning where such language may bring the FET sector in Ireland. Ball's warning of the dangers of performativity expresses this well when he adapts Cameron's (1963) famous quote: '(*in education*) not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts' (Ball, 2016, p.1054).

The truncated version of Garrison and Kaunka's (2004) definition has been adopted unquestioningly into the City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB) Guidelines on Blended Learning (2019), and the impact of the language used in QQI's guidelines is to be heard in the discourse surrounding discussion and training related to blended learning at ETB level. This author has attended a number of ETB sponsored training events on this topic over recent years. Chief among the stated benefits of a blended programme is greater flexibility in access to learning, echoing the *Learner Experience Context* in the guidelines. It is certainly of benefit for learners to be able to plan where and when they choose some of their learning, to suit their busy lives. Learner travel time and travel costs have also been cited in this regard. Yet, we should remember the reputation of the Open University is not founded on saved bus fare, and unless QQI guidelines define blended learning as an opportunity to enhance teaching and learning, those who follow the guidelines unquestioningly are in danger of walking in the wrong direction. Those in the privileged position of designing FET programmes in this country should take note of Simmons and Thompson's observation that further education in England is 'a sector which has proved to be particularly fertile ground for performativity' (2008, p.601).

Supporting Diversity

One final area worthy of consideration when discussing the potential impact of these guidelines is the area of respect for diversity. The minister for Further and Higher Education reminded the first cohort of Programme Design and Validation in FET graduates that 'FET crucially fosters inclusion for all in society (Harris, 2021, no pagination). Yet the final section of the guidelines (*5.2. Equality of opportunity*), which these graduates are obliged to follow if designing programmes in a blended mode, is by far the shortest and least informative. It reads like a bland add-on and is surely a missed opportunity to tap into the full potential of blended learning to address issues of equality of opportunity. The final sentence of these guidelines is vague and offers little by

way of guidance in this regard, stating that providers should have procedures in place including: 'Arrangements that make a reasonable effort to ensure blended learning experiences are accessible to all learners, including learners with disabilities' (QQI, 2018, p.23). The placing of this little section at the end of the document is emblematic of QQI's decision to produce guidelines that are technocratic in nature and lacking in empathy and vision.

Conclusion

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 confers power to those who devise QQI QA guidelines. Providers of FET programmes and those who design those programmes must adhere to the relevant guidelines. Learner-centred educational practitioners concerned with social justice should welcome guidelines because teacher professionalism cannot always be relied upon. However, the neoliberal language in QQI's guidelines on blended learning is of concern as it is likely to further the creep of performativity in the FET sector in Ireland.

These guidelines, it is suggested, should be read in terms of three elements fundamental to teaching and learning that are conspicuous in their absence: the substantive of qualitative i.e., quality; the exercise of practitioner professional responsibility grounded in trust; and respect for learner diversity.

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SECTION TWO

Book and Policy Reviews

Policy Review: *Further Education and Training Funding Model Review Final Report – Final Report by the Independent Expert Panel*

SOLAS (2022)

The publication of the Further Education and Training Funding Model Review Final Report in June 2022 was a key milestone in the development of Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland, delivering on an initial commitment to an outcomes-based model of funding (SOLAS, 2014). An Independent Expert Panel conducted an extensive review and found that to meet the objectives of the new FET strategy (SOLAS, 2020) a 'robust, efficient and data-driven funding model' is needed, similar to the model used for HE (higher education) funding (Hartley, Rutherford and Owens, 2022, p.22). The current complex, legacy model of funding 34 separate programmes will be replaced with five new pots of funding: (1) Core Funding, (2) FET Pathways, (3) Provision for Employment and HE Transitions, (4) Apprenticeships and (5) Discretionary Funding. This will give ETBs greater autonomy and flexibility and will incentivise ETBs to increase efficiency.

The need for a more equitable funding system is highlighted by the disproportionate levels of funding per learner across ETBs. The new funding model will move 'from a funding allocation model to a recoupment of costs-based approach' model (p.44) and be 'simpler, fairer and more transparent' (p.48). This new model will apply to FET Provision for Employment and HE transitions and will involve six core shared targets outlined in the Strategic Performance Agreements (SPAs) between SOLAS and the ETBs. Funding will be based on a full-time equivalent (FTE) measure of learners completing programmes, with proportionate funding for part-time learners and additional weightings for courses with higher costs. Wisely, funding for FET Pathways (including Adult Literacy, English for Speakers of Other Languages, community education and Youthreach), will remain largely the same and 'will include a core grant with associated agreed service levels, set out within SPAs' (p.35). This decision follows the funding models for similar programmes in the seven countries reviewed, and recognises the specific target group of these

programmes as raised in the consultation process. There are several advantages to the new model of funding, including investing in the core capabilities of the ETBs, reviews of staffing, and allowing cross-year funding and multi-annual budgets. The new funding model will be introduced on a phased basis by 2025 to allow for programme harmonisation, standardisation of financial data and improvements to the SOLAS Programme Learner Support System (PLSS). Measures are also in place to guard against funding shocks for ETBs.

However, the report is short on detail in some areas. For instance, it is not clear how the new system will ease the 'administrative burden' on ETBs while enhancing 'tracking and reporting' at the same time (p.22). While the new system 'is designed to promote strategic delivery driven by learner demand' (p.3), the report does not explain how this will happen. Is it simply by counting them, as this quotation indicates: 'The learner will be at the centre of the new funding model. Funding allocations will relate to the number of learners served by each ETB in a given year' (p.34)? The report does not review the appropriateness of the outcomes established by SOLAS, and whether they reflect the social and economic objectives of FET. For example, social inclusion is measured by the number of learners receiving certification at Levels 1 to 3, and the measure for lifelong learning does not include learners aged under 25 or over 64. As Biesta (2015) points out, what gets measured often starts, and remains, focused on what is easily measured, and what gets measured gets valued. The report acknowledges the need for 'a qualitative tool for capturing the wider benefits of learning' (p.20) but, again, there are no details of how this will happen. As the report notes, FET was 'assigned a particularly central role in reigniting and renewing the economy' (p.23) and this is reflected in the new funding model focusing on the quantitative outputs of progression to employment or further education rather than the more qualitative, wider benefits of education.

It is not clear how educational inequality will be addressed under the new funding structure. The panel did consider additional weightings for learners with disabilities or from economically disadvantaged areas; they decided against this as 'the fact that the entire FET system was driven by an ethos of providing access to education for all, meant that this was unnecessary' (p.45). While programme harmonisation will reduce the complexity of ETB provision, it is important to ensure that the objectives of particular programmes will still be met. An outcomes-based model of funding could lead to a selection bias towards those learners more likely to succeed and achieve targets than harder-to-reach, underprivileged students, which could increase educational inequality. Also, if the better-performing ETBs continue to get more funding,

how can the chances of a learner in a less well-performing ETB improve? A new culture is being created which focuses on data collection to meet targets and to improve an ETB's ranking, rather than the learner-centred ethos of adult and community education.

In the press release announcing the plans to move to this outcomes-based model of funding, Minister Simon Harris said, 'The move to a simplified funding model will enable and empower ETBs to harness what is so special and valuable about FET and expand it to meet the future skills needs of Ireland and its people' (Department of Further and Higher Education, 2022, no pagination). We need to reflect on what is so special and valuable about FET before counting what is easily measured.

NUALA GLANTON,
Adult Education Officer

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Book Review: *Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality. Creating a University for All*

ANNA M. KELLY, LISA PADDEN AND BAIRBRE FLEMIN (EDS) (2023)
ROUTLEDGE, LONDON & NEW YORK
ISBN 987-1-032-18259-9
DOI 10.4324/9781003253631

Very occasionally, you can judge a book by its cover. The just-bitten apple that appears on the front of *Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality* is strongly evocative of two core concepts that run through the volume: that the process of mainstreaming participation and inclusion of underrepresented groups in higher education is both incremental and ongoing. The apple is also emblematic of the practical and relatable focus of the book itself. Its main concern is guiding an active, whole-institution approach to making universities more accessible – illustrating the 'how' – rather than arguing the (one hopes, now widely accepted) 'why'.

The editors draw on their own extensive experience working in University College Dublin's University for All initiative and in Access and Lifelong Learning to curate an insightful, rigorously evidenced and highly readable collection of articles. The book is divided into clear sections that cover different aspects of fostering a genuinely inclusive educational environment. Articles cover case studies, lived experience and data analysis, as well as reflection and analysis. Subjects vary from the expected – the importance of moving beyond traditional approaches to teaching and learning, and to prioritising universal design – to the perhaps less familiar. For example, there is sustained attention paid to the significance of on-campus services, and to physical and IT infrastructure. Articles come from a wide range of national and international contributors who have varied backgrounds and disciplines, not all of which are academic. This multiplicity of viewpoints makes for an encompassing and refreshing approach to the topic.

The other great strength of the book is its honesty. The editors state that one key take away for creating a University for All initiative is 'have courage and expect imperfection' (p.217), and they are consistently true to this principle. They provide or refer to many of the key documents, toolkits and implementation

frameworks central to the initiative, a generous act that will be of immense benefit to anyone who wishes to implement something similar in their own organisation. They also share case studies and examples that show how efforts can sometimes fall short and need to be refocused. In her enlightening article, on *The structures and status of student support*, Dr Bairbre Fleming relates how student responses at a University for All Welcome event 'illustrated a disconnect between the capital we thought they would want and the aspirations they had for themselves' (p.132). In this case, staff had prepared detailed and apposite orientation material, but the students' immediate concern was to build up connections and make friends. Subsequent Welcome events were co-created with Student Leaders, and switched focus to establishing social networks – through which the same information could later be shared, when the students felt more ready for it. Concrete examples such as this both help to make the work tangible and provide reassurance that making mistakes and learning from them is a core part of the process.

As can be expected in a book of this range, some chapters are more successful than others. An examination of the responses of public research universities in the United States to anti-Black violence, for example, collects interesting data on public commitments issued through institutions' websites after the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. However, it does not explore how, or whether, these institutions turned their commitments into meaningful action. A sharper focus on the 'how' might have illuminated the need to ensure that policies and commitments are backed up by meaningful action.

It is also something of a missed opportunity that no contribution comes from an early-stage student. There is no doubt that the University for All initiative recognises and values learner voice, and that students have been vital in its co-creation. An excellent piece by early-career academic Mary Farrelly powerfully explains how the adoption of the *Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions* in her workplace has helped mitigate the potential 'reduction of inclusion work to a "minority tax"', by re-positioning inclusion as 'everyone's business' (p.88). An equivalent piece by an early-stage student could be an invaluable complement to understanding the Toolkit's impact.

These minor points aside, *Making Inclusive Higher Education a Reality* is a remarkable achievement with relevance far beyond the higher education sector. It offers inspiration, guidance and support to anyone involved in the evolving and crucial work of creating meaningful inclusion. After all, that apple is one we should all be taking a bite at.

CHARIS HUGHES
AONTAS

Book Review: Poor

KATRIONA O'SULLIVAN (2023)
IRELAND: PENGUIN SANDYCOVE
ISBN: 9781844886210

This powerful personal narrative of Katriona O'Sullivan's life so far is written in a matter of fact tone that is searingly honest and deceptively simple. The memories, trauma and successes that are described require you to read some sentences twice to take in the depth of hurt and the long-term implications of her experiences. She recounts the early years of her life and her siblings and parents without embellishment, in clear, unambiguous language that neither judges nor complains. The writing is not without emotion. Her confusion, her feelings and her actions are set out sequentially, chronologically and to devastating effect. The last few chapters tell us how she feels now, as an adult and an academic, about the impact of her life experiences and how, having reflected on their impact from an outsider and insider perspective, she views how our society is helping and failing the most vulnerable.

Her testimony reminds us of the insidious nature of poverty within a society divided by class in England and by socioeconomic status in Ireland. She speaks powerfully of poverty as not only a lack of money and material possessions but also poverty of worth, 'Being poor controls how you see yourself, how you trust and speak, how you see the world and how you dream' (p.274). The poverty of worth meant that the value of education as a 'gateway out of poverty' was hidden from her. She thought education consisted only of tests and exams, a world where she internalised the view that she could not succeed thanks to the judgement and prejudicial views of some educators. Yet she persevered in her education thanks to key choice points in her young life when some key people responded with care, encouragement and practical advice to help her to help herself. Her journey through community education revived her love of learning, and her awareness of a route to higher education spurred her into an access programme. She describes the challenge of staying in education - the additional costs despite state support, familial responsibilities, and the difficulties in belonging – that can cause a person to revert to a challenging

environment that is known and consequently safe. She powerfully illustrates how the concept and operation of an access programme to higher education acts as a 'band aid on the education system' (p.279). She points out that the programme is designed and delivered by the middle class and the elite and as such controls who gets in, stays in and is celebrated for completion. She emphasises that education is about equity, not equality, and from her personal perspective ignites a call to action. She reports that 'nothing has changed since I was a child' (p.270).

The book highlights the supports available in the '90s that have either ceased due to lack of funding or changed into services that are increasingly metrics-driven or outputs-based. The potential for ad hoc support or the serendipity of help and care where people live and engage with each other has been eroded over the last thirty years. The rising tide did not raise all boats during the Celtic Tiger and while opportunities are ostensibly available to all, the support to help all to access these opportunities has diminished. The CSO 2022 census findings show that the richest 20% of people in Ireland had four times the income of the poorest 20% and that 13.1% of people were at risk of poverty in 2022, up from 11.6% in 2021 (Central Statistics Office, 2023). Although there are many dedicated, passionate people working across community and adult education settings, programmes and initiatives, often in a volunteer capacity, it can feel that the society we live in today is shaped by a system that outsources the most basic of care to charities and philanthropic services. The stated commitment to equity can be blocked by silos of funding models, hidden costs, bureaucratic obstacles and the system itself. There is a complexity of need that appears to paralyse the State's efforts to address it. The author does not present shocking statistics or academic references but instead relies on her authentic voice, sharing her experience and the facts of her life. Katriona O'Sullivan acknowledges her luck and is grateful for the opportunity, money and support from caring educators but she looks for more to be done. As she so concisely puts it - 'the education system can and should do better. We all should do better' (p.281).

JANE O'KELLY
Dublin City University

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Book Review: *Generative Knowing: Principles, Methods, and Dispositions of an Emerging Adult Learning Theory*

ALIKI NICOLAIDES (2023)
MYERS EDUCATION PRESS
ISBN: 978-1975503994

'Being demands learning' (Jarvis, 2009, p.208). This proposition is indicative of the vitality of learning in life. Therefore, it is of no surprise that diachronically one of the concerns of scholars in the field of education is to research human learning. The book we are discussing in this review offers a new perspective in this continuing exploration.

The topics that Nicolaides investigates and the tools offers are not the result of an epiphany about the phenomenon of learning. Indeed, from her first steps in research, she started seeking answers about the form, nature, and processes of learning caused by a learner's interaction with an experience that is not effortlessly interpretable. That is to say, those situations that threaten to challenge the certainties we usually employ to make sense of our everyday actions and emotions. Although contact with the unknown is a recognised source of knowledge, in this book Nicolaides attempts something unique: the recognition of the processes that take place beneath experience, or the appreciation of the processes of becoming that are born from 'the entangled intra-active aspects of our identity' (p.2).

Nicolaides neither ignores nor criticises existing theories of learning. She acknowledges their value while appreciating that the contemporary context of our lives creates conditions that require a new form of human agency that is rooted in the intangible knowledge that supports our actions without always being perceived. In her quest, she does not rely on safe theoretical grounds but rather she performs, like an athlete of giant slalom, an investigation that explores a new territory with flexibility, avoiding conflicts with grand narratives and meaning-making schemes that claim a constant presence in our thought processes. In this sense of constant motion among theories, Nicolaides' approach is nomadic. Readers of this book should not expect the emergence of fixed interpretations for learning, but a genuine testimony that will assist them

to recognise the fluidity that occurs from the complexity of our everyday life or from the processes of generative *knowing*.

This exploration requires conceptual support and therefore the author offers us three new concepts: 'ruptures', 'in-scending' and 'awaring'. These concepts are introduced in the first chapter. They are the meaning tools that help us understand the author's approach. The first term refers to the rupture that occurs with given knowledge when one decides to examine the experience of experience. In-scending is a neologism created by the author to define the process of seeking the underlying essence of experience. Finally, awaring refers to the process that allows the dynamic of contact with the unknown to act as a source of knowledge.

In the second chapter, the author draws elegantly on the work of Deleuze (1994) to justify the necessity of a theoretical approach more open to complexity and an exploration of learning beyond its instrumental and communicative nature. In the third chapter, she emphasises the inter-subjective meaning-making process that lies in the heart of phenomenology. This process that highlights the value of lived experience is generative only through the public reflexive exposure of the researcher's own vulnerability. The dialogues presented here are helpful in preparing the reader for what is to follow.

The next four chapters are the essence of the book. The author utilises personal stories through which the tools mentioned above are highlighted. In the previous chapters, the author has pointed out that understanding generative knowing requires negotiating with the unknown. This process includes significant risk because it requires challenging assumptions that construct our identity. Here, the author takes this risk herself by presenting an inquiry in the lived experiences of her biography as well as in the biography of her parents. In these stories, the reader will more fully realise the meaning of the term in-scending, the heart of the central process of generative knowing. As a practice of embodied reflexivity, this has the potential to lead to one of the central goals of generative knowing, which is freedom:

> Freedom is one aim of generative knowing. Freedom signals creation and permission to make something different. To make something different frees us from the system's desire to keep reproducing the same thing, its dominance. Freedom is vitality, Vitality is potential that creates something new, different, joyful. (p.71)

Chapter seven is written by Dr. Ahreum Lim, with whom the author worked at the University of Georgia. In this chapter, Lim thoughtfully describes her

personal experiences from the world of labour, utilizing the cognitive tools of generative knowing. Through a reflexive construal of her parents' experiences in workplaces in South Korea, she provides us with the dynamics of generative knowing that do not reduce learning to mere preparation for the future but elevate it to a generative force.

Finally, the last chapter summarises the presentation of generative knowing as a theory of adult learning. This is a theory that has no predetermined elements but 'receives, returns and responds to all that is given' (p.130). It is a theory that begins with being and makes possible new ways of becoming based on the language of sensations. Accepting such a view of adult learning requires from educators, according to Nicolaides 'resonant intimacy', 'courageous vulnerability', and 'flexible emergence'. These dispositions constitute for the author the necessary conditions where the learning process becomes 'generative', offering the essential common time needed for creative potential to take shape.

This new perspective on the learning process in adulthood offered by Nicolaides will be of interest to all those adult educators who understand the potency of learning in adulthood for liberation and transformation.

GEORGE A. KOULAOUZIDES
Hellenic Open University

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2024 Edition of the Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner – *Call for Articles*

About the Journal

The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education: The Adult Learner was founded in 1985. This valuable resource documents the growth and development of adult learning policy and practice. It provides a forum for critical reflection on the practices of teaching and learning, giving priority to subject matter that addresses disadvantage, social exclusion, equality, workplace learning, and the study of the teacher and learner relationship.

2024 Edition

AONTAS are delighted to announce that we are now accepting submissions for the 2024 edition of the Journal.

This year's edition of *The Adult Learner* will explore the power of adult learning to drive change. What do we mean by change? What constitutes both individual and collective change in adult learning? What practical changes are being made by adult educators as a result of policy? Papers that explore the following topics are particularly welcome:

- Practices that support transformative adult learning
- The capacity of the adult learning sector to drive change
- Adult learning for social equality
- Case studies exploring the impact of adult learning on learners

We welcome submissions from learners and first-time writers, as well as more experienced authors. The deadline for submitting an article is **Friday, 16th February 2024**, and we are here to help you develop your ideas right up until then.

To Submit a Paper

Journal submissions can take two forms. All articles must identify the type of submission being made and clearly link the submission to adult education and community education. The following types of article submissions are welcome:

- Type 1: Papers which engage in critical debate and analysis of concepts, policies and theories and/or practices in the field. They may include findings from recent research and where this is so, should include a brief outline of any research methodologies used. Papers which initiate dialogue between individuals, groups or sectors in the field of lifelong learning are also welcome. (Maximum word count: 8,000)

- Type 2: Practice-based papers or other contributions including case studies which exchange ideas about what works in various programmes and contexts, which are innovative, and which share examples of good practice. These papers engage in analysis of practical aspects. (Maximum word count: 3,000)

How Do I Submit an Article?

To submit an article, email journal@aontas.com with:

- The article title
- The article type (Type 1 or Type 2 above)
- A short profile of yourself (maximum 100 words).

You must also submit an article abstract. The article abstract should not exceed 100 words. This should include:

- A short introductory overview
- The methodology you will use (where applicable)
- How your article relates to adult and community education.

The deadline for submissions is **5pm on Friday, 16th February 2024**.

Adult Learner Journal Style Guide

All papers submitted must strictly conform to The Adult Learner Journal Style Guide 2024. This is available on the AONTAS website, www.aontas.com. Please note the requirements for the submission of articles. You must adhere strictly to *The Adult Learner* Journal Style Guide 2024. If articles do not adhere to the style guide they will be sent back to the author for amendment, or the article may be rejected.

Please note only one submission will be accepted per author for the 2024 edition of *The Adult Learner* unless otherwise permitted by the Editorial Board and Editorial Office. All papers submitted undergo a reviewing process which involves at least two reviewers. Where contributions are accepted, this may be on condition that changes recommended by reviewers are taken into account. We recommend contributors consider the diversity of our readership and ask that articles be written with an international readership in mind. We are very grateful for all contributions submitted and will consider each on its merits and provide feedback.

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