

# Finding a voice: The Experience of mature students in a College of Further Education

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## **Abstract**

*This article summarises the background to the development of further education and goes on to describe research carried out with a group of older mature students in a further education college in Ireland. The first research element was a survey and focus group, followed by interviews, which explored with the students their reasons for returning to education, their experience while in further education and what they consider to be the benefits of participation. Three significant concepts emerged from the analysis. The first concept, the latent self, describes a range of social, structural and biographical influences and how they interact and impact on the decision to return to education. The second concept, the emerging self, describes the negotiation of challenges faced by the students in the process of change. The third concept, the revised self, describes the changed self emphatically described by the students as resulting from their participation and characterised by greatly enhanced confidence and agency, which benefits the students, their families and society. Finally, I offer some reflections on the implications of the research for the development of the revised further education and training sector under the new Education and Training Boards and its relationship with other sectors of education in Ireland.*

## **Background to FE**

Further Education (FE) is described as ‘education and training which occurs after second level schooling but which is not part of the third level system’ (DES, 2013). It encompasses a diverse range of full and part-time programmes including VTOS, Adult Literacy, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), apprenticeships, Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), work-based learning and Community Education. This article looks at mature students on full-time

courses in a further education college. Further education colleges offer what used to be called 'Post-Leaving Certificate courses' (PLCs). This section outlines the development of further education under the Vocational Education Committees, the range of courses offered and the competing discourses that characterise the sector.

The development of the further education sector was influenced by the pedagogical and curricular developments in adult and community education as well as the post leaving type programmes, which emerged in the 1980s. Post-Leaving Certificate courses were intended to prepare students for employment or progression to other courses. Many of the courses, practices, and assessment systems in this sector evolved as a result of pragmatism. As enrolments in traditional courses declined, schools looked for other ways of maintaining student numbers. O'Sullivan's point about the emergence of adult education is valid for FE also – that it 'depended very much on the level of interest and commitment on the part of a particular CEO, VEC committee member, school principal or individual member of a school's staff' (2005, p.518). The development of further education was haphazard, with no overall policy or plan. Much of the development was carried out without official sanction or support. Individual colleges were quick to recognise and provide for gaps in employment and training. The White Paper on Adult Education, 'Learning for Life' (DES, 2000, p.107) acknowledged the growth of the PLC sector 'for young people to bridge the gap between school and work' and recognised the inadequacy of its existing structures and services and promised a review. Structures and practices emerged within colleges which had no official recognition but met the needs of the institution. Many colleges re-named themselves Further Education Colleges to reflect the changing profile of the students, increasing the numbers of non-traditional students, who did not have a Leaving Certificate. For many years the sector used a variety of certifying bodies, including the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee's Curriculum Development Unit, and a number of national and foreign examination boards and professional institutes. FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) now certifies most courses at level five and most two-year courses in colleges of further education are certified by BTEC (Edexcel), a U.K. awarding body.

The doubling of student numbers in FE since 1991 is attributable, almost entirely, to mature students. The sector provides a range of courses not available elsewhere and accommodates students who could not access third level education directly. It also has an important role in providing second chance education and

facilitates a significant number of adults and non-traditional students both on designated return to learning programmes and in mainstream courses. FE colleges now offer a large variety of courses. The student body is diverse, coming generally from lower socio economic groups than those in Higher Education (HE) and with relatively high numbers from intermediate non-manual backgrounds (Watson, McCoy and Gorby, 2006). More than half are mature students. The numbers of non-Irish students and students requiring extra support have risen greatly in recent years. There is a considerable range of academic ability and many of the students have family, work or other commitments. This diversity has implications for structures and teaching and learning in FE.

Despite having significant numbers of students, 35,500 in 2013 (DES, 2013) (with 10,000 within City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB)<sup>1</sup>, the FE sector still operates within the confines of the second level system, which has increasingly proved unsuitable for adult learning and the range of activities encompassed by FE. For many years there have been calls for the recognition of FE as a distinct sector within Irish education with appropriate structures and resources and particularly for the implementation of the McIver report (2003)<sup>2</sup>

### **Competing discourses**

There are two discourses operating side by side in FE. One is characterised by the neo-liberal discourse of individualism, accountability and servicing the needs of the economy. The other provides the supportive environment and individual care that is fundamental to the changes described by the students. The neo-liberal influences at the official and policy level are being mediated by the staff of the college and the practice on the ground, in general, reflects a belief in inclusiveness, an ethos of care and a broader vision of education. This vision includes a concern for the development of the person and the encouragement of a questioning, critical approach that goes beyond the transmission of skills and competencies. These discourses are manifested at college level in discussions about the extent to which the demands and practices of the workplace should influence the educational agenda. The staff, generally, is accessible and understanding when dealing with the issues that affect mature students and recognise the importance of this approach for their students. The McIver report (2003) called for the establishment of non-teaching roles for advisors and counselors,

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1 The Education and Training Boards (ETBs), formerly VECs, are by far the largest providers of FE. They are not selective in their intake and have a long history of educational innovation and accommodating non-traditional students.

2 The review promised in the White Paper, 2000.

which have proved to be a key resource for mature students progressing to HE and while in college.

### **Mature students**

The term mature student is often used to differentiate older students from the traditional students of 18 or so who have just left secondary education having completed the Leaving Certificate. In FE mature students are those who are over 21 years of age. Young mature students share most of the characteristics of students a few years younger. This study concentrated on the experience of students who have come back to full time education in the FE sector after an absence of several years. This research was undertaken for a Doctorate in Education in NUIM (Hardiman, 2012) and took place in a large college of further education.

### **Methodology**

The first research element was a survey and focus group, followed by qualitative interviews, which explored with the students their reasons for returning to education, their experience while in further education and what they consider to be the benefits of participation. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) the data were generated and analysed through a systematic process of coding, categorisation and the development of core concepts grounded in the students' lived experience.

### **Findings**

Three significant concepts emerged from the analysis. The first concept of the latent self describes the range of social, personal and structural influences that interacted and impacted on the decision to return to education. The second concept, the emerging self, describes the negotiation of challenges faced by the students in the process of change. The third concept, the revised self, describes the changed self emphatically described by the students as resulting from their participation.

### **The latent self**

This section focuses on why the mature students in this study returned to education. I use the term latent self as a core concept to describe the student on entering further education and the circumstances that lead to the decision to come, the extrinsic and intrinsic factors that came together and impacted on the decision. The term latent self (Mercer, 2007; Baxter and Britton, 1999) describes the feeling that many of the students expressed that an aspect of their personality was neglected.

There are three subcategories of this concept:

*The right time*

Many of the participants said things that were brought together to make a theme indicating that returning to education happened at the right time. Many said that becoming unemployed was the immediate trigger that made them consider returning to education. This was usually combined with a number of other factors that together resulted in the decision to enroll on a course. In a number of cases it was a chance encounter or recommendation that planted the idea of becoming a mature student. Others had previous experience of the college, knew of it from living in the area, or knew someone who had attended. As Aoife suggests 'It was something that I always wanted to do. I'd been thinking about it and thinking about it. I decided yes, I will do it now [pause] and this seemed like the right time'.

*Missing out*

Most of the participants had liked school, or at least some aspects of it, and felt that they had 'missed out' by having to leave education early. The affinity with education and a belief in its value seem to have developed quite early. All spoke of their parents' encouragement to go to school and being encouraged to do well even though circumstances and culture often meant that employment was a priority and often a preference. There was a feeling of unfinished business – a vague sense that things might have been different if they had continued or that they would have seen themselves differently if they had continued in education. Clearly, it was an important issue for the individuals who felt that an aspect of their identity had been neglected. James pointed out that 'Circumstances at the time meant I didn't get the opportunity to finish. Maybe I could have gone on. Maybe I could have been working at something different.' Caroline on the other hand said 'Well, to be honest with you, I think I always kind of felt like I'd missed out by not going back to school; as I got older I realized.'

This feeling of missing out, often combined with the opportunity presented by becoming unemployed and a recommendation or discussion with a contact, made returning to education a real possibility rather than a vague aspiration. For others, children growing up provided the opportunity.

Important aspects of the self were being denied or not fully used and the opportunity for reassessment and change came through unemployment or the time being right. Baxter and Britton (1999, p.185) refer to the latent or submerged

self-wanting to be reclaimed and suggest that here education is not seen instrumentally, but as a means of 'realizing the self or becoming the self one always was.' Mercer (2007, p26) speaks of 'reclaiming a part of the self that had not been developed earlier in the lifespan.' Similarly, Dawson and Boulton (2000, p.168) speak of such motivations as 'imbalances' and a return to education a desire to restore balance.

### *Needing a qualification*

Wanting a qualification was often the first thing that the interviewees said to explain how they came to be in the college. For most, however, it was not so straightforward. The decision to return had been less direct. They had become unemployed but going back to education had not been uppermost in their minds and they were acting on a suggestion, a recommendation or an idea that had been smoldering within them for some time. They had a general and somewhat vague aim of getting a qualification and hoped that during the course of the year or two, their options would become clearer, which often turned out to be the case. Others had a stronger, more active desire to revisit education but with no specific course or career in mind.

In some cases the qualification was needed for more than vocational reasons. It represented something important to the person and gave a degree of recognition they felt they lacked. The vocational motivation came easily to mind when they were asked, but clearly there were many other motivations associated with it for the individual. Although many mature students hoped to be able to get a better or different job after college, they were adamant that if this were not to happen they would still consider their time well spent. Some said they would work in a voluntary capacity if they could not find paid work. The focus was not entirely on traditional notions of work and their motivations were more complex than 'I needed a qualification' as the questionnaire would indicate. Most saw their success in the college primarily as a personal achievement.

Adults generally have not one, but many reasons, often inter-related, for returning to education. The decision is influenced by a range of psychological, social, vocational and emotional aspects that may be masked in the constraints of replies to a survey.

Available cultures and discourses influence how learning choices are explained. Vocational motivations are often the most immediately accessible and acceptable reply to a direct question about motivation.

### **Emerging self**

By the concept of the emerging self I mean the processes that contribute the changes experienced by the individual during their time as a student to bring about a revised sense of self. I discuss here a number of issues, which arose from the data and can be seen as challenges, developmental tasks or crises which, with adequate support, are successfully negotiated leading to the changes described by the students.

For mature students coming to FE is a major change and is usually accompanied by some feelings of apprehension and anxiety as well as more positive emotions. For some, their previous experience of education was not happy and their knowledge of FE and the structure of the education system generally is limited. Many worry 'is it for me?' and that they will not be 'able for it' and fear showing themselves up. It is an area where some consider themselves somewhat alien as they see it as the preserve of young people they see as more competent and familiar with the demands of education. According to Vera 'At the beginning you do get a sense of overwhelming [pause] will I be able to achieve this?' Daniel on the other hand was concerned about young people being in the class when he claimed that 'When I saw the young people I said, "is this for me? Am I doing the right thing?" Even though I felt it was a good idea, I just felt I didn't belong there.'

Successfully negotiating this transition into further education and the student role is an identity shift and a major landmark on the road to a changed self-concept.

Another challenge commonly faced by older students is managing established roles, obligations and demands on their time and attention. Many have children, part-time work or elderly parents to consider. Lack of time is frequently mentioned, especially by those with young children, and study and assignments have to be organised at the times least disruptive to family life, often late at night. There is also the awareness that illness of a child or a breakdown in arrangements will result in having to take time off college. A number of periods of unavoidable absence and consequently falling behind are often cited by adults as the reason for dropping out or deferring (Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010, p.115). Some spoke of 'not being able to switch off completely' and having to have their phone on, 'just in case'. Feelings of guilt for not being available to children are common. Also common, however, is the recognition that the children benefit from their parent's participation and the role model it provided. Managing multiple roles is another stressful challenge that is part of

being a mature student. Adult relationships can be strained by such re-negotiation of roles and the change and development in the individual brought about by participating in education has implications for the student, partners and relationships.

While mature students with children complained of not having time for everything and their social life being curtailed, others without such responsibilities said they had no problems keeping up with friends. Some spoke of treating college 'like a nine-to-five job'. Many men spoke of college giving a structure to their day and providing valuable social contact which they greatly missed since becoming unemployed. The social aspect of college was important to all the interviewees.

The first assignment is a major landmark for most mature students. An assignment is graded and carries with it all the connotations of being judged in what for most is a strange or new area, demanding different skills that many feel they are lacking. It is generally a written piece produced on a computer, which in itself may be a big challenge, and many feel that they are exposing what they consider their weaknesses in this area. It takes time to become familiar with the language of assignments and academic work generally. Students sometimes feel dropped in the deep end, where aspects of language, presentation and formatting are taken for granted. The first assignment can be traumatic and important in determining whether a student, of any age, will continue. This is so even in a climate of encouragement and support. Maeve argues that 'When I did so well so well in that, it made me excel at the rest of them. I felt confident, more confident. When I was doing it I was so unsure, am I doing it right?' While Jason points out that 'The exam terrified me. To sit in a room with just a single desk in front of you I thought was unbelievable, Jesus, I was terrified. I'd never done an exam before'.

Success in assignment is a major turning point, contributes to students' self-esteem and validates their academic abilities. It is seen as an acceptance into the student role and student identity and bestows a feeling of entitlement to be in college. It is part of the reconstruction of the self, as Vera believes.

At the beginning, you do get a sense of overwhelming [pause] will I be able to achieve this? And that risk is there. Was it a wasted year? Before, up to now. I mean I know myself I can do this now.



Students speak of coming to grips with the language of assignments and of working out what is expected of them. This represents the acquisition of new forms of cultural and educational capital, which carries with it a revised sense of themselves as capable learners.

A key factor in the students' experience mentioned by all the participants was the support they received in the college. They found the relationship very positive and based on mutual respect. They all commented on the accessibility, friendliness and encouragement of staff and the vital role this played in their success. The flexibility and understanding afforded them with deadlines and assignments when they were having difficulties in college or home was greatly valued and in many cases was vital in their decision to stay. Vera expresses it thus: 'Well, I feel there's great support here, to be honest with you [pause] you can talk to them, they understand your situation'.

### **Revised self – finding a voice**

The revised self is a core concept that emerged from how the participants described the significant change they felt they had experienced as a result of their time in the college.

When asked to summarise what they had got from coming back to education by far the most common response was 'confidence'. Confidence came up first when discussing academic work and assignments but it was soon clear that it extended beyond academic competence into other aspects of the students' lives and was largely responsible for the revised self they reported. Mercer (2007) also suggests that academic and personal growth are not mutually exclusive categories, but inter-related. As so many responses explained their confidence in terms of speaking, saying things and having things to say, I developed the core category, finding a voice, as a conceptual label (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p.121) to describe this revised self. Voice is used here to include not just the act of speaking but a sense of agency, respect and entitlement to participate. Finding a voice also has metaphorical connotations of not having had a voice, of speaking up after a long silence and finding that you have something to say. It also implies speaking up for yourself, asserting a claim for recognition and a right to question and participate. It is not only a personal development but it is also social as it is manifested in dealings with others. It describes and symbolises the transformation described in the students' narratives. Jason believes he now has 'Confidence, a hundred percent. Not afraid to speak up or ask questions.' Vera believes that she now can 'voice a viewpoint that I wouldn't have voiced before',

while for Daniel the benefit is that when he is ‘sitting in front of the TV ... you’d understand what’s going on, that’s important. You know what’s going on.’

All the participants recognised that they had changed since starting their course. They were surprised at the change in themselves having come to the college expecting to acquire more or different academic knowledge or skills to enhance their CV or prepare them for employment. These things came as well, but the personal changes were more significant and were manifested in the willingness shown by the students to progress to another course or to HE. These progression options, as well as other significant changes in their personal or professional lives, would not have been considered before.

Finding a voice, speaking up, questioning, knowing what is going on are crucial for the fulfillment of the individual and imply a greater ability for meaningful interaction with others and engagement in society. For Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, (1986, p.134) to be silenced is to be voiceless, selfless and mindless, subject to the authority of others. Tarule (1996, p.276) sees voice as an ‘indispensable aspect of knowing and thinking’ and dialogue as ‘making knowledge in conversation.’ Finding a voice means being able to participate in discussion and ‘making knowledge.’

The benefits of participation in FE are not just for the individuals and their families. The increase in confidence, sense of agency and ‘knowing what’s going on’ mean that these students have a greater ability and willingness to participate in the community and contribute to an enriched public sphere. Finding a voice implies a greater capacity for discussion and the development of a more critical aspect to their reasoning that enhances their functioning as active citizens.

Many adults return to education having experienced a change in their lives, their roles and their sense of identity. Unemployment and grown children leaving home were cited by many of the adults in this study. Time in the college offered them many of the characteristics of a moratorium. West (1996) suggests that education can offer space for adults to experiment with their identities. It is seen as an enjoyable, if sometimes fraught, opportunity for time apart, ‘me time’ which allows for questioning, learning, discussion with other adults and discovering or reclaiming aspects of the personality that had been neglected or submerged. This moratorium provides an ‘in-between’ space, a safe place for the latent self to develop and emerge. This is not a straightforward process but involves several stages or crises, the successful resolution of which mark progress to the revised self.

The mature students in the study acknowledged the key role of family and friends. They mentioned particularly the staff in the college who, as mentioned above, mediate the neo-liberal imperatives of the system and create an atmosphere in which the students felt comfortable, welcome and respected. A supportive environment is not just a fortuitous pleasant extra, but also an essential aspect of negotiating the transition to a revised self.

### **Conclusion**

The increase in numbers of mature students in FE occurred, much like the growth of the system overall, without any stated policies or target quotas. In a time of high demand for places and in a system whose main stated purpose is to prepare students for employment, mature students, especially older mature students, may be seen as less deserving of a place than younger applicants. In this context, it is important to ask how FE staff can formalize a commitment to improving access and success and enhancing the experience of non-traditional students. This could involve considering quotas and liaising with community education facilitators and adult education organizers. At present, these sectors operate separately with very little attention given to cooperation or student progression. The expanding remit of the ETBs should do much to facilitate more coordinated and streamlined provision in consultation with employers, Intreo, and others.

Although there have been policies in place for many years at government and college level which encourage access to HE by non-traditional groups, no such policies exist for FE. Access offices and designated supports for mature students have been successful in attracting mature students and supporting them in HE. FE has not been included in these developments. This reflects FE's second level status and the continuing unsuitability of these structures for what happens in the sector and the urgent need for change.

Recently there has been much focus on the role of FE supplying the skills needs of the economy, addressing unemployment and contributing to economic development (Kis, 2010; Sweeney, 2013). There have also been calls for a stronger role for employers and greater efficiency, flexibility and evaluation in FE. Teaching and learning knowledge and skills for employment are part of the work that is done well in FE. As well as measuring the success of courses by the number who attain employment, evaluation must also include other significant benefits that are more difficult to quantify. These students' stories show that learning for living and learning to make a living need not be incompatible. Their time in FE

has enhanced their lives and better equipped them to address the priority areas identified in the White Paper (Ireland: 2000, p27) which included consciousness raising, citizenship, community building and cultural development.

The realignment of FE offers an opportunity to address the issues facing FE and to affirm the value of publicly accountable, inclusive education and what it has to offer students of all ages. It is vital that the FE sector under SOLAS and all involved in further education in its various forms have a clear vision of their purpose and value and a strong voice in these significant developments in Irish education, in order to protect the values of inclusive further education from being subordinated to the demands of employers and servicing the narrow interests of the free market economy.

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