# *It's Now or Never:* The Experiences of Older Mature Learners in Further Education and Training in Ireland

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## Abstract

For mature learners, the challenges and successes in undertaking a formal learning programme can be particularly significant, as they bring with them a range of prior experiences of, and attitudes toward learning. Older mature learners (i.e., 40+ years), represent a notable proportion of learners in further education and training in Ireland. This study endeavoured to capture the learning journeys of this specific group so as to better understand their needs, aspirations, and motivations. Six learners took part in a phenomenological arts-based project, where they created identity boxes and participated in in-depth interviews, revealing the story of their re-engagement in further education. Three distinct themes emerged. Resilience, in the face of past and present challenges, was key here. A sense of belonging and the supports that underpinned their experience was also evident, as was a clear sense of renewal, as they developed a reconstructed learner-self, bolstered by feelings of success and a focus on future paths.

*Keywords*: mature learners, adult learning, further education, arts-based research

## Introduction

Undertaking a formal learning programme can be significant for any learner, irrespective of age. For mature learners, challenges and successes in the learning process can however be more acute (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). Acknowledging this inherent complexity, there are continued calls to ensure that the learning experience for such learners remains meaningful, authentic, and reflective of their life stage (Aontas, 2020), but admittedly most research with this group tends to focus on those in higher education, rather than further education and training (FET) settings. There exists a level of confusion as to what constitutes a mature, or indeed an 'adult' learner (Hillage et al., 2000). Nonetheless, this group is undoubtedly diverse, and includes older mature learners, defined by Jamieson (2007), and Woodley and Wilson (2002) as those over 40. These learners potentially represent around two fifths of all learners in FET in Ireland (Solas, 2021), but there is limited research on their specific experience. This study therefore endeavoured to capture the experience of this

particular group as they undertook their respective learning journeys through further education and training.

**Further Education and Training in the Irish Context**

The fundamental nature and status of FET in Ireland is complex and evolutionary. Impacted by ongoing systemic reforms, it caters for a vast diversity of learners and offers an array of learning pathways (O'Leary & Rami, 2017). McGuinness et al*.,* (2019) describe the sector as "much more fragmented and much less focused around vocational labour market demand" (p. 558), in comparison to other countries. Evidently FET in Ireland is not exclusively about employability as it also promotes social inclusion and offers Irish communities opportunities to improve their lives (O'Kelly et al*.,* 2017).

Of course, both in Ireland and elsewhere, further education has traditionally been characterised as "positioned lower in the educational strata" (Addo, 2018, p. 25). In Ireland, FET stakeholders refer to the "poor relation" and "Cinderella sector", and the "second-best option to higher education" (McGuinness et al., 2014, p. 39). Maloney (2021) however is more optimistic in her recent commentary, where she claims that the last decade has witnessed a transformation of the sector, from "an under-valued and under-funded sector, to a distinct and valuable part of the Irish education system underpinned by policy, strategy and legislation" (p. 14). Solas (2020) is the state agency responsible for funding, co-ordinating and monitoring FET provision in Ireland. It is clear in its vision that the sector will "provide pathways… empower learners to participate fully in society…prepare people for work and successful careers…with FET colleges serving as beacons of learning within communities" (p. 36). However, there are evidently a number of challenges therein, including a weak implementation plan, a pre-occupation with higher education, and a lack of attention to older learners, specifically those over 65. Nevertheless, these issues can be addressed, with strategic decision making and a persistent and continued focus on the learner (Murtagh, 2021).

## Literature Review

The literature review contextualises the study within existing research and explores the construction of the mature learner in wider literature on this topic. Only a small number of studies evidently focus on the experience of older mature learners in FET, therefore the review garners insights from related material examining their engagement in higher education, and from work employing wider conceptualisations of mature learners.

**The Adult Learner and Adult Learning**

In exploring the characteristics and experiences of adult learners, authors use a range of terminology, often interchangeably. Typical terms include mature, non-traditional, second-chance, and lifelong learners (McCall et al., 2018). To add further complexity, there are additional sub-categorisations within these broader labels. Evidently mature learners can be considered as those of 21+ years (Trueman & Harley, 1996) or 23 years+ (Fleming & McKee, 2005), with a further delineation between younger and older mature learners i.e., those under or over 25 years (Rothes et al., 2014). In exploring the experiences of older mature learners, a number of researchers have explicitly categorised them as over 40 years (Jamieson, 2007; Pearce, 2017; Woodley & Wilson, 2002), with indications that there is little known about this "hidden" yet "ever-growing group" among the wider adult learning population (Barclay, 2018, p. 40). In keeping with such work, this particular study focused on learners over 40 years of age.

Research outputs pertaining to adult learners have grown steadily over the last number of decades (Schiller et al., 2020). Accompanying this growth, the construction of the adult learner and considerations of the processes in which they engage have become equally expansive (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). Milana and Tarozzi (2021) refer here to a "constellation of practices with diverse embedded ideologies" where adult learning encompasses "all forms of education and learning that aim to ensure that all adults participate in their societies and the world of work", enabling them to "exercise and realise their rights and take control of their destinies" (p. 47). Allusions here to agency and self-determination immediately resonate with well-established models of adult learning e.g., Knowles' (1973) seminal principles of andragogy, which in tandem with self-direction on the part of adult learners, also depict them as intrinsically motivated, problem-centred rather than 'subject' centred, and armed with a range of life experiences that can enrich the learning process, and a heightened consciousness about 'why' they engage in learning (Finn, 2011). This ability to contextualise and conceptualise in a more reflexive way is also a feature of Treinienė's (2017) characterisation of the adult, where she asserts that in tandem with the aforementioned assumptions around independence, self-direction and life experience, adults bring with them a pre-established set of "learning models", and "combine goals with their…learning ability and competence development" (p. 45). This expansive consideration, which accounts for a learner's respective past, present, and future, as well as their sense of evolving agency and positioning in wider society, proved fundamental to this particular research project.

## (Older) Mature Learners in FET

The vast majority of studies exploring the (re)engagement of mature learners in formal learning do so in the context of higher education, with limited attention afforded to FET. Moreover, studies generally adopt a broad conceptualisation of the adult, or indeed, mature learner, with less nuanced consideration of the trajectory of older learners (van Rhijn et al., 2015). In the context of higher education, Donaldson and Townsend's (2007) work is often cited, where their review of journals from 1990 to 2003 found only 1.3% of published articles that focused on adult students. However, it is again worth noting that they defined adult learners as those of 25 years and older. We might therefore assume that a similar review focusing on an older cohort would generate even fewer results, and that any addition of further education as a parameter, would significantly limit the output. With regard to the Irish context, only a handful of studies explore the experiences of mature learners in FET but with participants from a broad age group e.g., Hardiman's (2012) work with participants of 21+ years, Grahams' (2015) with those of 26+ years, and Dunnes' (2019) with those of 32+ years.

## Mature Learners' Motives for Engagement in FET

Those studies that have focused on mature learners in FET offer a range of relevant insights. Such literature indicates an array of motives for their re-engagement in learning, including "extrinsic motives that include professional, economical and improvement of status motives, and intrinsic motives that comprise mainly their desire to learn the subject at hand and social motives like meeting new people" (Rothes et al., 2014, p. 940). Other sudden drivers include a reaction to the diagnosis of an illness or the unexpected cessation of work (Findsen & McCullough, 2008). In an Irish FET context specifically, albeit from a broader age group, both Dunne's (2019) and Hardiman's (2012) participants commented on significant life events that sparked their return to education, as well as persistent feelings of 'missing out'. They also referred to this being the 'right time', and a desire to be a role model for their own children, as well as financial and professional drivers.

## Challenges for Mature Learners in FET

Evidently, engagement in FET can also present a range of challenges for mature learners. These include the inevitable financial burden, a misalignment with previous teaching and learning styles, social integration, time management, and overall comfortability with the FET setting and processes (Graham, 2015). These students may also have the added burden of health difficulties and the inevitable pressures of managing family life (Huddleston & Unwin, 2007). From the Irish context, learners also add a lack of competence

with technology, the competing demands of an ongoing career, and specifically with regard to teaching and learning, the daunting nature of assessment practices. Further internalised barriers are also a feature here, such as anxiety around readiness for, and fit with a FET environment (Hardiman, 2012). This fear of the unknown, of the 'leap in the dark' is of course a feature of wider research (Waller, 2005). This trepidation represents a direct link here between underlying anxiety and fear of academic failure, which at least in some cases, can be attributed to a "fragile learner identity" constructed from negative experiences (Dunne, 2019, p. 13).

In recognising the nuanced disposition of mature learners in FET, educators are required to meet their specific needs, while acknowledging their potential vulnerability. This includes the obvious requirement for physical safety in the learning environment, but also emotional needs, where "supports for engagement are provided and learning is facilitated without fear of put-down or reprimand" (Maloney, 2021, p. 51). FET settings should therefore nurture learner-centric cultures, characterised by security, where learners have the freedom to take risks and make mistakes, and see mistake making as a natural part of the learning cycle (Clapper, 2010). Positive peer and learner-educator relationships are evidently key here. Fowle and Butcher (2019) propose the offering of personalised and flexible learning pathways, increasing the capacity for greater empathy amongst educators, and nurturing self-belief in learners. Regarding peer relationships, research suggests that mixed aged profiles in FET can have a range of positive effects. These include older learners' propensity to ask challenging questions and be more assertive regarding teaching and learning, as well as their capacity to share work and seek help, resulting in more transparent and productive learning environments for all learners (Brooks, 2005). FET personnel have also reported more varied and interesting discussions as older and younger students bring a greater range of life experiences to the learner experience, preparing them for the 'real world' where they will be required to face diverse populations in other settings and workplaces, thereby enhancing their respect and appreciation not only for lifelong learning, but for intergenerational understanding and respect (Brooks, 2005).

**Outcomes for Mature Learners in FET**

Studies have offered evidence of a range of wider positive outcomes, where mature learners in FET have reported a shift in identity, in their self-image, where they feel more confident, agentic, and entitled to participate, not only in academic settings, but in wider society (Dunne, 2019). Hardiman (2012) refers here to the learners finding their "voice, speaking up, questioning, knowing what is going on…being able to participate in discussion

and making knowledge…implying a greater capacity for the development of a more critical aspect to their reasoning that enhances their functioning as active citizens" (p. 38). Learners have also reported the transformative capacity of engagement in FET, in a social and professional capacity (Mercer, 2007), as well as the impact on their intention to engage in further formal learning opportunities (Graham, 2015). Illeris (2014), in considering identity as spanning an array of dimensions, defined as "the cognitive, the emotional, and the social as well as the environmental and societal situatedness of this totality" (p. 160), calls for a redefinition of transformative learning where it can be understood as a fundamental change in identity. This aligns with Wenger's (1998) seminal work where he asserts that "because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming" (p. 215). Echoing these notions of transformation, mature learners in FET highlight the liberatory effects of engaging in learning. They describe a sense of freedom, from family and intergenerational constraints, and even the emotional strains of chronic illness (Jacks-Cobbold, 2019). They also reference the discovery of unknown abilities and talents during the learning process, and the nurturing of a new sense of purpose (Preston & Hammond, 2002).

**Conclusion and Research Questions**

Many of the studies mentioned in this review have addressed key elements in the learning journeys of mature students in FET settings. They present a range of conceptualisations of the mature learner, as well as varying challenges and opportunities they encounter in their re-engagement journey. However, there is an evident lack of such literature, especially in the Irish context, with only a very small number of studies offering insights into the experiences of this group. Such studies include participants from an admittedly broad age group with little reference to a more nuanced consideration of older mature learners i.e., 40+ years. Recent figures from Ireland demonstrate a potentially significant number of such learners in the FET sector. While they do not offer a specific number on the 40+ age group, data compiled by Solas (2021) does indicate that of the c.150 thousand learners enrolled in FET in 2020, almost half were in the 35-64+ age bracket. So as to inform policy and provision moving forward it is therefore crucial to understand their specific experiences, their motives for participation, and the challenges they face. Therefore, while informed by the available literature, this study attempted to address the evident gap in same, by seeking to answer one overarching research question: What is the nature of the experience of older mature learners in Irish FET settings?

Three further sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What are their motivations for engagement and continued participation in FET?
2. What are their needs in respect of their learning journey in FET?
3. What are their aspirations for their future in FET and beyond?

### Theoretical Framework – Engagement as Entering, Fitting In, and Staying

In attempting to encapsulate and understand older mature learners' engagement in further education, this study was underpinned by Case's (2008) framework. This offers three domains that can account for the learner trajectory through the experience i.e., entering the education community, fitting in to the education community, and staying in the education community. The first here i.e., entering the community, deals with the learners' choices and motives, including how internal and external factors influence their engagement. The second, fitting in to the community, focuses on power relations, the pervasive nature of imposter syndrome experienced by learners, as well as their sense of social and academic belonging, all of which can greatly impact a newly emergent identity. The final domain, staying in the community, involves the learners' capacity for, and strategies they employ to sustain their trajectory, including meeting programme requirements, and specifically the complexities of assessment.

Case's (2008) framework aided data collection through interviews that explored experience on a number of levels, for example, a temporal aspect where learners and researchers could map their experience over time, and a deeper elemental level, where we could unpack key factors that impacted their experience, such as motivations, aspirations, relationships, and support structures. This framework was also key to the data analysis process, which while remaining open to emergent themes in the varying narratives, was underpinned by an awareness of the participants' experiences as a journey, potentially characterised by uncertainty, as they joined a previously unknown community with preformed norms around thinking and acting.

## Research Design and Methods

This study employed a multi-method hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with illuminating lived human experience and offered a process for "listening to the story of the mature learners, to deconstruct those stories and to then explore emerging themes" (Collins, 2018, p. 65). The data collection process drew on Brown's (2019) emergent work utilising creative methods. Her identity box process is derived from existing work on memory boxes and Cornell's shadowboxes. The latter use everyday objects in the context of artistic installations to represent deeper meanings, while

the former are used in healthcare settings to elicit memories and support recall of experience. When employed in social research, "the boxes are specifically created, meaningful assemblages to represent experiences and emotions, or to stand for some specific qualities and characteristics" (Brown, 2018, p. 489). Identity boxes have been used to support a range of participants in articulating aspects of identity and experience. Brown's (2018) own work has done so with those with fibromyalgia, while Awan and Gauntlett (2013) have used boxes to explore the impact of online social networks on adolescent identity. Perkins' (2019) work with early childhood student-practitioners used identity boxes to support participants to recall, retell, and make sense of transition experiences, prior to engaging in interviews. In using this approach participants therefore have some control of the research trajectory as they can choose what they wish to share.

In keeping with similar projects using identity boxes, participants were invited to create a box which acted as a visual metaphor for their experience as a learner in FET. Upon receipt of their consent form, they were sent a pre-purchased plain card box (30cmx50cm) with instructions and questions that essentially prompted them to use the box to tell their story. They could choose to change the form of the box if they wished and were also asked to place within some artefacts that aided them in telling their learning story. Participants were then invited to engage in dialogic interviews with one of the researchers, where they could talk 'through' their experiences and be guided toward a more profound interpretation and analysis of their story, all while using the physical box as impetus for deeper conversation. Due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, they were asked to take photos of their box that could be shared with the researcher during the interviews, which were completed via video conferencing. The interviews focused on their life and learning experiences before, during and beyond their engagement with FET. Topics for exploration included motives, challenges, and successes, as well as their relationships with family, peers, and tutors. They were also asked to share their possible future actions and aspirations and key learning from the overall experience of re-engagement. Questions and prompts included:

- What brought you to re-engage in education at this time?
- Describe your previous experience in education.
- What challenges have you faced in your learning journey and how have you dealt with these?
- How do you envisage moving forward in your journey as a learner? What will you do next?

The box in each case was used as a mediator, facilitating dialogue, recall and the narration of experience, and was intended to lead the researcher and participant toward a common understanding (Lachal et al*.,* 2012). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and shared with participants via email to ensure accuracy.

**Participant Selection**

Prior to commencing, ethical approval for the project was sought and granted by the researchers' institution. All mature students (40+ years) currently enrolled in an Irish institute of further education were invited to participate in the study. The invitation was issued via a notice on the online student notice board. Seventeen learners initially volunteered for the study. Four of the initial volunteers (in their 20s and early 30s) did not meet the 40+ years criterion. The remaining 13 potential participants received a detailed outline of the requirements of the project. Six of this group eventually consented to full participation in writing. The age range of the final participant group was unexpected, with most participants 55 or over, with a median age of 58 years. According to the most recent published figures, this group (i.e., 55+ years) accounts for just over 16% of all FET enrolments (Solas, 2021). Arguably however, this makes this particular study even more nuanced as it features primarily adults who may be "passing the peak of their career and approaching retirement", or indeed have already retired (OECD, 2022, para. 2). The group was predominantly female, with only one male participant. One significant factor here concerns the participants' fields of study. While the original expressions of interest came from a varied range of participants, for example, those studying social science, media studies etc., those who eventually agreed to participate fully in the project were all from arts-based disciplines i.e., they were studying fine art, ceramics, crafts etc. For researchers engaging in arts-based methods, there is always the possibility that participants may be anxious around engaging in an unfamiliar process, and perceive the activity as 'childish', or indeed, beyond their capabilities (Blodgett et al*.*, 2013). In the case of this study, we might assume that the creative aspect, which was detailed in the invitation to participate, appealed to some while deterring others.

***Data Analysis and Trustworthiness***

Data analysis in the case of hermeneutic phenomenology does not adhere to a fixed pattern or universally agreed methodology (Osuji & Hirs, 2013). The approach in this study drew on Braun and Clarke (2006), but also on Fleming et al.'s (2003) suggested steps, particularly the insistence that researchers should move between the fundamental meaning of the text as a whole and the identification of themes that lead to a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Both researchers

independently analysed three interviews and the related photographs. This process involved familiarisation with the data, reading and rereading transcripts and viewing images of the identity boxes. The transcripts were coded manually, line by line, with emergent themes identified based on an initial amalgamation of codes. The researchers then met to discuss their preliminary codes and emerging themes. During these discussions each researcher openly shared their coding and emergent themes, and accompanying thematic maps, after which they jointly sought out areas of convergence and divergence. Provisional agreement was reached on congruent codes and emergent themes that provided an accurate picture of the transcripts, and that might assist with the remaining analysis. while remaining open to the possibility of the emergence of new directions in participants' commentaries.

The researchers then independently coded the remaining three transcripts, following which, they again met to discuss their overall conclusions based on the entire dataset. Agreement was reached around the final themes and the essence of same. This process of dual coding on the part of researchers, accompanied by reflective dialogue, has been employed in other qualitative projects, and aids the trustworthiness of the study (Fukumura et al*.,* 2021). Further credibility checks included member checking, where the overall analysis was shared with the participants, and any further commentary sought (Birt et al*.,* 2016).

## Findings

The overall process identified three overarching themes and a number of related subthemes. The main themes were Resilience and Resistance, Support and Belonging, and Renewal and Transformation. The themes are presented with verbatim quotes and accompanied by photographs. Pseudonyms have been used when quoting participants.

### Theme 1 – Resilience and Resistance

Resilience was central to the participants' re-engagement in formal education and training. This involved overcoming challenges that any learner might face when undertaking a programme of study e.g., financial, academic, or social obstacles. However, in the case of these older mature learners, with a wealth of life experience, resilience became a self-identifying feature of their learner self. It allowed them to forge new directions in their learning journey, irrespective of prior educational or occupational experiences. In adopting this resilient stance they could resist personal adversity e.g., ill health and family pressures, as well as the pressures of learning during the pandemic. Reclaiming their learner-self, in the midst of such adversity was a key feature of the narratives.

***Navigating Past Learner Experience***

The participants described mixed past educational experiences which in some cases were decidedly negative, and in others more ambivalent. They acknowledged the ongoing impact of these experiences, while resisting any inclination to let the past define their present and future and dominate their reconfigured learner-self. Wendy highlighted how she "didn't do well" at school due to "bullying and mental health". She made a direct connection to her re-engagement in further education, where there was "always that gap to fill in that I wanted to go further and achieve more". Kate spoke of the ongoing impact this time had on her:

> Maybe it's just maturity and realising what you have and realising that I really messed up my Leaving Certificate. I still have nightmares about it … and just regrets that I didn't do well and that I didn't try harder. I could have done something very exciting with my life maybe.

Moving away from second level in her narrative, Liz detailed how a desire to pursue a career in a specific discipline as an undergraduate was blocked by the (then) legislation preventing women from taking up this occupation. This left her in a programme of study that was essentially "going nowhere". The recent drive to re-engage at this point in her life represented a distinctive break and conscious choice to decouple from an evidently fractured learner identity , declaring that this time "I am going to do what I want to do".

Aileen used her box to highlight how her entire re-engagement experience was underpinned by discovering untapped potential in herself, a newfound confidence and awareness of the value she brought to the learning experience, which she claimed would not have been possible in the past.

**Figure 1**

***Top and Internal of Aileen's Identity Box***

> You either went to secretarial college or university and there was no middle ground. Today kids can do a bad leaving certificate but still progress somewhere. There's potential in all of us, even if we don't realise it. From the beginning to the end of my journey I would never have realised I was capable of creating what I created.

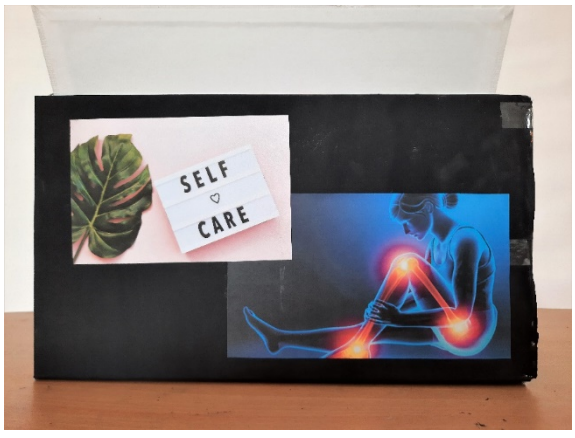
The participants not only highlighted the nature and impact of past educational experience but made direct references to their careers. Wendy spoke of feeling disillusioned with her work and how it was "something that I just wasn't meant to be doing", while Jim highlighted the need to move away from a career where people had "no ideas" and "did the same thing day in and day out". Kate described a range of different occupations with mixed success and satisfaction, while Julie, despite acknowledging the security of a regular income in a lifelong career, felt a pervasive desire to "do something different" and sought out retirement to facilitate this new learning path where she could fulfil long held aspirations.

***Managing Health and Wellbeing***

Health-related pressures and the participants' capacity to resist same during the learning journey featured in their narratives. Liz described her arthritis and how she managed this through support from the tutor. Julie spoke of a cataract operation where she "could finally see things clearly", while Wendy described her ongoing hearing loss as well as a further diagnosis that spurred her on to engage in the programme. This was a distinct feature of her identity box (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

***Side Panel of Wendy's Identity Box***




> I was told that I have got fibromyalgia and spinal stenosis. They will worsen over time and they are both conditions that cause me challenges on a daily basis. I had to learn all these techniques to manage the pain and figure out what my plan was if it got

> worse. So it was all a bit overwhelming and…I said I need to do something with my life now, for my head and for my mental health. There were days when I was in so much pain I didn't what to get out of bed. But I think the fact that I got so much from it, and I was so fond of my tutors and my classmates, that this pulled me in here every day.

While Kate also spoke of a prior condition, she also offered insights on her mental health. She described how the death of her father, and her previous role as his carer impacted her:

> I was also looking after my elderly father…I was basically his carer for the last few years of his life… Inside the lid I have a picture of my dad. I couldn't have done this unless he died, and that gives me a lot of guilt. I could talk for hours about the guilt I feel, having looked after him to the best of my ability; but you never feel you have done enough…I wouldn't be doing this except that he had gone.

As with other challenges, the overall sense here was an acknowledgement of the impact of mental and physical difficulties in tandem with a resolute determination to succeed in their learning journey.

***Surviving the Learning Trajectory***

All of the participants either continued or commenced their programme of study during the COVID-19 pandemic. The potential challenges of re-engagement in learning were therefore compounded by the move to online provision, where they were forced to develop new perspectives on what 'counted' as engagement in learning. Jim spoke of his struggles with technology, while Liz highlighted the college's lack of organisation and at the point where she was just about to "give up", support from her tutors helped her continue. While the circumstances of the pandemic clearly required resilience on the part of the learners, there were of course a range of other learning-related obstacles that necessitated ongoing determination. Julie talked about having to "think in a different way" about learning, where maybe she'd been "stuck in a rut before" and now had to "think more creatively". Wendy used her identity box to illustrate the unavoidable demands of the learning journey, as she and her peers negotiated these (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

***Internal of Wendy's Identity Box***

> I chose a sort of abstract design…just to represent all of the different facets of college life... It kind of felt as if we were being bombarded from all sides by things …but they all in the end came together and you made it work.

Both Kate and Aileen referred to trusting the learning 'process' where not everything could be controlled. The inclusion of the Raku pottery in her box acted as a metaphor (Figure 4)

**Figure 4**

***Aileen's Identity Box with Raku Pottery Artefact***

> So with that process you don't actually know what you are going to come out until it is finished. So you could come out with a piece that is full of cracks and that is very much like my whole process going through the course. I never knew what the end object was going to be like. But I was always delighted with it.

Wendy also spoke of her need to "let go" and her tendency toward perfectionism:

> When I first came in, I was a bit of a perfectionist.... But I became better over time. I am not afraid to mess something up because I understand that even if you do it's really important as part of your process.

This stance with regard to making errors was echoed by other participants, who were overt that their stage of life meant that they were more comfortable with asking questions and finding a way through the complexity. Liz made a direct connection here, saying that "maturity wise, shall we say, I am not afraid of asking questions anymore", while Julie made a similar link:

> The younger students naturally compete with each other and they are watching what people say and feel less free to ask questions. I would have been like that in school. I was always very self-conscious, whereas now I think I have nothing to prove to anybody.

Overall, this theme depicted a developing sense of learner identity amongst the participants, as they remained resilient in the face of unforeseen obstacles, determined to realise the potential they had believed was within but untapped until now.

**Theme 2: Support and Belonging**

All of the participants highlighted the vital role support from a range of sources served in their journey. The sense of belonging here was also evident, where it was clearly important to feel a sense of cohesion with other members in the education community.

***Part of the Group***

Overall the participants were very positive about their relationships with other learners. Julie referred to the "young ones" who she "got on great with" and were "different to what I was at that age". Wendy spoke of her group that "just gelled" and shared a deep common interest:

> We all get on. We all like each other. We just talk about art all the time and it goes on in college and it continues after we leave because we have a Whatsapp group. But the coffee cup that I included in the box there is kind of the symbol…You get to step out of the classroom and breathe and unwind or vent or talk I think that if there wasn't that the days would be harder.

Likewise, Aileen highlighted the mutually beneficial internal support systems in her group:

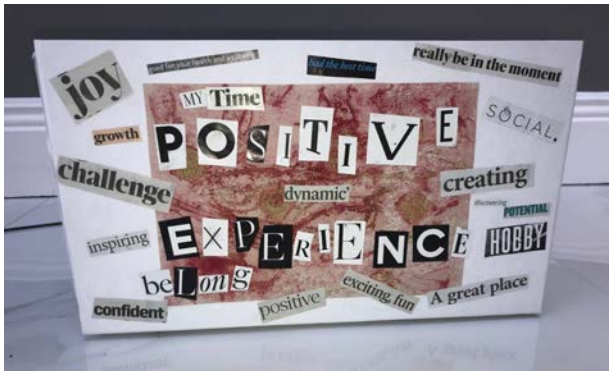
> I think the younger kids bring something for the older people and I think the older people can instil a confidence in the younger kids. All the ones that are older in the class have the ability to put some young kid under their wing and we are very encouraging to them, where they haven't got the self-belief.

Similarly, Kate highlighted the "great fun and camaraderie" between "all the ages" in her group. In her case however, the support of peers contrasted with a sense of isolation prior to re-engaging, where "getting out was quite difficult" so "it took a while to thaw out". Aileen

made a direct reference to the sense of belonging she felt, not only as part of the group, but as part of the overall college community, using "newspaper commentary" on her identity box (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

***Aileen's Identity Box with Newspaper Commentary***




She stated:

> I didn't feel like I was an outsider. I felt I was part of the class. I suppose belong means I didn't feel like a mature learner. I felt like I was one of the kids. Not in the sense that I am a kid but I didn't feel at all out of place. Even around the college I didn't feel out of place.

***Family Support***

All of the participants spoke about the ongoing support from their families. Wendy described her family as "cheering her on" while Julie described her family as "amazing" and how they were "really interested" in her work. Kate also spoke of how proud her family were, where they are "so excited for me to be able to do this and go back, and to do well". Aileen went further here, in highlighting how she was acting as a role model for her family in persisting with her programme even in times of difficulty, and how they praised her courage in returning to education:

> I felt one hundred percent supported. I had kids doing the dishwasher here in the morning, I had kids making dinners. I was keeling over at four o'clock because I was so tired after my day at school. So the family here were fantastic. My friends were very encouraging. A few of them wished they had the courage to do what I did, which I thought was a bit sad because I was saying you can do it. I think people of our age, when you are out of education a long time, don't have the belief in it.

***Support from Teachers***

All of the participants highlighted the crucial role of FET personnel. They were overt in their praise for specific teachers, not only during the challenging times presented by the pandemic, but throughout their experience. Aileen described how when she "hit a wall" the tutor would "turn the whole thing on its head" and get you to "think outside the box" so that you're "back on track again". Wendy went beyond the immediate teaching staff in her description:

> I am talking about the course co-ordinators and the tutors who are very open and they are great if you need something or if you need help with anything. Their door is always open if there is something that you are struggling with. I am always aware that they are there.

This learner-centred focus was also a feature of Julie's narrative, who made a direct comparison to her prior experience:

> All of the tutors were so encouraging and I mean they are so different to my last experience in education. Things have moved on very well and I think they are there to encourage you and not to trip you up.

**Theme 3: Renewal and Transformation**

All of the participants evidently experienced some form of transformation as a result of their experience. A sense of renewed confidence and esteem was evident here, brought on not only by their overall positive experience within their programme and respective learner groups, but specifically as a result of acknowledgement of their success. This stance left some with definitive plans to pursue further study.

***A New Sense of 'Successful' Self***

Jim spoke about his sense of success and how this was grounded in how his peers and tutors viewed his work. Aileen referenced the sense of 'growth' she felt and how this was grounded in a sense of challenge:

> At times I did find it very challenging. The fact that I overcame the challenge and was able to finish whatever project I was doing, gave me great satisfaction. It was exciting, it was fun, it was positive….I felt I grew a lot in those years with confidence and discovered that I had more potential than I ever thought I had. I thought it was a very dynamic thing.

Aileen went further here and described how this time has offered a sense of liberation from family responsibilities. She described how her wider family had relied on her to be "available all the time", and as this learning experience was now "my time", she was free

from those expectations. Wendy referred here to doing a lot better than she ever thought she would, especially in comparison to her past experience. She talked about an accompanying "sense of pride" and how she was now "competing against herself". She recognised that as a mature learner "you want to do better than you did the last time" and you can say to yourself "if I don't study that is the end of it". Kate acknowledged the explicit value of feedback and "basking in the praise". Her identity box specifically referenced the impact on her esteem and the journey she had clearly experienced. In fact, notably she reconstructed the box as a suitcase with specially crafted luggage labels, thereby encapsulating this same journey and the impact on her sense of esteem (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

***Kate's Identity Box with Constructed Labels***


Kate also included a mirror as an artefact in her box, and offered a profound explanation of how her return to education had left her fundamentally changed (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

***Kate's Artefacts, including a Mirror and Blank Canvas***

> I think one of the things that going back to education has made me do is really look at myself in a lot of ways; in personal ways as well and in how I can be a good friend to the others, how I can be a positive influence on the students and friends and anyone. That's on a personal level, but also from a work point of view and from the art point of view, I think for me it's going to be important… to paint or create work that I am proud of and that isn't just to impress other people.

The sense of the journey here was echoed by Wendy, who felt that her return to education involved stepping into the unknown. Her box reflected this in the use of a 'portal' image (Figure 8).

**Figure 8**

***Wendy's Identity Box with Portal Image and Welcome Sign***


> That one there is the portal to another dimension. All through the years when I was thinking about people who went to art college, it was like this secret world that I couldn't get a look inside of and I always wondered what they did in there and it just seemed like that was for other people and it wasn't for me. So it felt like stepping across a threshold for me into a sort of land that I had always dreamed of but I had never been able to visit and it seemed there was a huge sense of something magical about it because it was a dream from when I was very young. So to finally be doing it was just fantastic.

***Looking and Moving Forward***

The participants were clear that this was not the end of their learning journey. They spoke about future plans to engage in further study. In some cases this is carefully mapped out while in others it was more open to possibilities. Jim spoke of not having a "long term plan" as in the short term he wanted to "continue to build" his skills and to "continue to enjoy learning". Both Wendy and Kate spoke about moving on to higher education, with Kate

depicting this in her identity box as a "blank canvas", where she is excited about the next chapter of her learning journey. The constructed luggage label on her identity box featured her past and future colleges as she looked to the future (Figure 9).

**Figure 9**

***Kate's Identity Box with Luggage Labels***


Wendy was clear here that re-engaging at this time had a profound and lasting impact and had opened up a distinct path:

> I feel that reengaging with further education, this time particularly, has literally changed my life. It has given me a path that I didn't see before, which would be to progress onto university. I just didn't think that was possible before I went back. So it's brought about a huge positive change in my mental attitude and in my life.

In contrast, Liz had contemplated a move to higher education, but decided against it. She has opted to stay in her current setting and pursue another programme at the same level. Comfortability and familiarity appeared to be central here, as was the emotional aspect:

> I know the college now; I know the geography of it. All those stresses that we have had to go through in the last year I now know I have coped with them. So I kind of feel going back in September is going to be very comfortable and I haven't had that emotional connection for a very long time.

Aileen highlighted a similar desire to remain at the same level of study, highlighting again how this was her time:

> I would love to keep going. I think it's great for my mind. I think it's great for socialisation. I think it's great for a sense of purpose. And as I said it's kind of my time. I have reared my children. I am not going to spend the rest of my life cleaning the house. I am not going out to get a job. I am lucky and fortunate to be in that position.

## Discussion

The discussion directly addresses the research questions in illuminating the overall experience, the motivations for engagement, the evident supports required to sustain same, and the trajectory of the learners' journeys into the future. This section also connects the findings to the extant literature.

The participants' primary motivation for re-engaging in education was clearly grounded in a persistent and unresolved need to fulfil potential which they had realised for some time. In keeping with similar studies elsewhere, they had wanted to pursue their field of study much earlier in life, but for an array of reasons had delayed their journey (Dunne, 2019). For these learners, this untapped potential was finally actioned as a result of particular events or circumstances e.g., a health-related diagnoses, or a precipitous desire to escape negative or ambivalent educational or professional experiences. This echoes wider literature where older learners may face a 'now or never' juncture in their personal and professional lives, thereby leading them to realise long-held ambitions (Findsen & McCullough, 2008).

There were clearly a range of other motives that underpinned their journey, including the social aspect, which in some cases was unexpected, and in others offered a welcome relief from the sense of isolation they felt due to personal circumstances and/or the pandemic. This sense of social cohesion is of course in keeping with other projects but in the case of the learners in this study, goes beyond merely meeting new people (Rothes et al*.,* 2014). The sense of belonging is palpable in their narratives and is widely acknowledged as crucial to the success of such learners (Maloney, 2021). For those who do not feel a sense of cohesion with their group, or with the wider educational community, they risk occupying a form of "no-man's land", where in re-engaging in education they may experience alienation within the new culture of the institution (Case, 2007, p. 327). This sense of belonging is equally key to their reconstructed learner-self, as this is formed and reformed through meaningful interactions with peers and educators (Chapman, 2015).

In keeping with this significant social renewal, the learners here also experienced a sense of liberation, from past experience and current personal circumstances. This sense of freedom is a feature elsewhere in the research, as older learners in a programme of learning can cast off their "usual label" of "mother, father, husband, wife or even carer" (Jacks-Cobbold, 2019, p. 20). In referencing their past encounters with education, the learners here did demonstrate the initial sense of vulnerability and 'imposter syndrome' seen in other projects (Fowle & Butcher, 2019). However, there was an overriding sense of determination to succeed, and to resist the temptation to allow the past to define their present and future.

Nonetheless, the residual negative impact of post-primary education is arguably notable here, due to the significant gap between this time and their current engagement i.e., in most cases they had completed this stage 40 or more years ago.

While the learners here were determined to succeed, this shift in disposition i.e., from anxious and fearful, to focused and resilient, represents a potentially vulnerable transition period that requires support. The lack of such support may leave older mature learners reliant entirely on the 'self' as "facilitator, regulator and motivator for change and development" (Mercer, 2007, p. 30). In fact, in this study, we might argue that the learners appear to have drawn both on this newfound sense of learner self, and on other support systems, in order to sustain their journey. Externally, support was drawn from their respective families who championed their re-engagement, while internally their peers valued their inputs and aided them in feeling part of a like-minded community (Schlitz et al., 2011). Wider work has demonstrated how younger and older learners value their respective contributions to learning communities, as they bring varied experiences, expectations and learning goals, resulting in more transparent and efficacious environments (Brooks, 2005). In the case of the participants in this study, they were clear that their tutors demonstrated empathy with their life stage, valued the pre-existing resources these older learners brought to the learning experience, and challenged them to 'think' differently about their discipline and to cast off the need for perfectionism. These educators cultivated environments where dialogue and questioning were expected and where the making of errors was a key part of the learning process. This characterisation of educators and environments, as reflexive, responsive and constructively challenging is evidently key to the success of older learners (Hardiman, 2012).

The need for support went beyond the academic demands of the programme, as evidenced by the participants' commentaries around health and wellbeing. While illness may act as a trigger for older learners, marking their turning point toward education, they evidently have the capacity to defy the shift toward identifying as incapacitated or ill, thereby demonstrating a sense of resolute agency over their present and future selves (Findsen & McCullough, 2008). While the learners here were overt in how illness had continued to impact their experience, they refused to allow ongoing ill health to define their journey, as they adapted, sought support, and found ways to manage their difficulties. However, for educators and institutions more broadly, remaining cognisant of the potential impact of illness is again key to effective provision for these learners.

With regard to future plans, the participants offered a range of possibilities, with some moving on to another level of study, and others to a parallel programme within the institution.

These aspirational variations may be typical of such learners, who might re-engage with education without a definitive plan, or who may take "a more circuitous route as they respond to their individual needs" (van Rhijn et al., 2015, p. 20). It is therefore important to acknowledge the trajectory of older learners, whose needs for personal and social development may outweigh any notions of enhanced employability or professional status (Poulter, 2017). This echoes wider Irish research on the function of FET as moving beyond economic drivers, and into the realm of enhanced social participation and inclusion (O'Leary & Rami, 2017).

The overall experience of re-engaging in education for the learners in this project could arguably be summed up in a single term: transformative. Participants were clear that learning had altered their lives, forced them to reconsider who they were as learners, and offered new dispositions, perspectives, and directions. The social dynamic is also significant here, as they negotiated new and unexpected relationships, and developed a cohesive 'fit' with their community. This multi-faceted transformation is arguably evidence of a fundamental shift in identity. Identity transformation occurs when "default and long-standing beliefs are challenged" (Chen, 2014, p. 408), as we change our "ability to participate, to belong, to negotiate meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 226). This process involves acts of courage and resistance as learners position themselves within powerful discourses around, for example, failure, success, illness and life stage norms (Hughes, 2007). Throughout the narratives offered here, we can see recurrent repositioning and reconstructing of identity, as the learners cast off labels and experiences that might hinder their progress, demonstrating a significant determination to participate in all aspects of their learning journey, irrespective of the challenges. Of course, identity is never fixed as it is bound to social contexts and staged interactive experiences with the environment and is continually negotiated through experience (Sachs, 2005, p. 178). The learners in this study clearly identified with this ongoing reformation, as they saw the entire experience as a process, with a number of uncertainties, possible outcomes, and potential future pathways.

**Limitations**

The sample size and specific context of the study represents a limitation, as the results cannot be generalised across settings. However, the project could offer transferability to similar contexts, as the clear description of participants and context may provide insights for similar work in other settings Moreover, given its grounding in phenomenology and arts-based techniques, the small number of participants is in keeping with similar studies (Burton et al., 2017). However, the use of the creative approach here did present a potential limitation

i.e., that it may have deterred a wider and more varied group of learners, particularly those from disciplines outside of the arts. A study that included these perspectives may have offered alternative insights.

## Conclusion

This small-scale study endeavoured to unpack the re-engagement experiences of a potentially unseen group in the further education sector in Ireland. The overall findings suggest a multifaceted journey, as older mature learners reconstructed their learner-selves amidst past and present challenges, and readily drew on personal, social, and institutional support structures that proved crucial to their thriving during this time. The overall project offers some important considerations for the wider FET sector. The sense of agency and fervency with which the learners have grasped this new path is something to be acknowledged and capitalised upon. However, this same sense of renewal is dependent on continuing efforts to cultivate environments that account for the emergent and sometimes fragile learner identities, with which this group may present. Remaining responsive to their particular life stage and educational trajectory is therefore key here. Finally, ensuring that institutions actively nurture the relationships and sense of belonging, on which this group, and indeed other learners depend, is clearly vital for their continued success.

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