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Student name:	**Miriam McGuirk**		
Student number:	2991712		
Faculty:	Training and Education		
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Lecturer/Supervisor Name:	Ms Orla Butler		
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LEARNING IN LATER LIFE

A study of the experience of older adults engaged in non-formal learning within the community

by

Miriam McGuirk

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for MA in Training and Education (QQI)

Faculty of Teaching and Learning

Griffith College Dublin

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in Training and Education, is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other learners.

Signed: Miriam McGuirk

Date: 22/04/20

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Abstract

As the world experiences a growing older population this research study explores the participation of older adults in lifelong learning within their community, their motivation for engaging with education, the challenges they face while learning as they age and the benefits derived from learning in a local environment, both at a personal and societal level.

Using a qualitative research methodology, a group of older learners was interviewed to establish their views on these issues and to ascertain what is important to them in the learning environment.

The study found older learners to be active and engaged citizens who do not regard age as a barrier to learning and view this life stage as one of growth and opportunity; learners want an informal, social learning environment - their relationship with both the tutor and their peers is of key importance; early school experience can have a profound effect on learners and must be considered by adult educators.

A key finding was the lack of visibility of this age group, who are no longer in the workforce, in educational policy and planning, with an absence of hard data both at national and European level.

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INTRODUCTION

The population of the EU is growing older due to consistently low birth rates and greater life expectancy. People are living longer and are healthier and better educated than ever before. With advances in medical care, improved nutrition and declines in infant mortality longevity is expected to continue. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2002), population ageing is both one of humanity's greatest triumphs and one of its greatest challenges.

In Ireland, the most recent census data (2016) shows a sharp increase of 19.1% in the population aged 65+ from the previous census of 2011. Of the total population of this age group 26.7% lived alone. The number of males aged 65+ who lived alone increased by 21.1% from 2011 and the number of females increased by 11.6% (CSO, 2016).

This fast ageing population means that the needs of older people within our society will become more apparent in the coming years. Educational levels are increasing across the age groups and therefore we can expect to see more older adults participating in educational activities in the future, as prior participation is a predictor of engagement in education in senior adulthood (Ventura-Merkel and Doucette, 1993). Therefore, demand for education to meet the needs of older learners will intensify in future generations - 'the more education people have, the more education they want, and the more they participate in further learning activities' (Arsenault & Anderson, 1998, p. 30). Empirical evidence indicates that as citizens move on into residential accommodation those who have engaged in educational and social activities while in the community are more likely to engage in residential care activities and hence maintain their dignity and quality of life in later years (Fratiglioni *et al.*, 2000). With people living longer, healthier lives this area of learning is worthy of more research to establish the needs and wants of these adults and the benefits and challenges in this area.

Adult Education in Ireland is a rapidly expanding sector with organisations such as Educational and Training Boards (ETBs), SOLAS and AONTAS involved in funding, service delivery and advocacy. Much of the work of this sector is involved with upskilling adults in employment and training, and second-chance education for returning learners such as early school leavers, with emphasis on gaining accreditation and the development of pathways to Higher Education.

However, there is a substantial cohort of older adults who engage in non-formal, voluntary education. These learners are usually catered for within a community environment and have different needs, wants and challenges than typical adult learners. 'Lifelong Learning, as a key part of adult and community education, plays a vital role in enabling older people to participate in the human, social, economic and cultural development of Irish society' (O'Brien-Olinger, 2016).

Rationale

The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of older adults engaged in non-formal learning in a community setting, to examine the value of such education both on a personal and a societal level and to establish if older learners are visible in the field of educational policy and planning.

While much research has been conducted into adult education there remains a need to hear from the older learner about their experience of learning and what they want and need from it. This study will engage with learners in an in-depth manner in order to reflect their own voice and to answer the following research question:

- What motivates senior adults to engage in education?
- What are the perceived barriers to participation?
- What are the benefits to the individual and to society?

This research will be conducted by means of a small-scale local study of older learners in a community education setting using a qualitative research methodology.

Note: *for the purposes of this study older adults are deemed to be in the 65+ age group*

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines current trends in policy on adult education and lifelong learning, followed by a review of the literature concerning older adults engaged in non-formal education within the community, why and how they learn along with the challenges they face. It explores the benefits of education for older learners, both at a personal and a community level, and examines if the voice of these older learners is heard in educational discourse and planning for the future.

Lifelong Learning – The European Perspective

The concept of lifelong learning suggests that learning is a whole of life activity, not limited to childhood or the classroom. UNESCO states that 'lifelong learning is a process, one that begins at birth and carries through all stages of life' (UNESCO, 2016, p. 9), incorporating flexible learning pathways and re-entry points to education at all ages.

The EU states that 'learning is not limited to a single, specific phase in life, that of the years at school, but also happens in different contexts, over the course of a lifetime' and supports the concept of lifelong learning among member states (EPRS, 2018). It categorises 4 stages of lifelong learning – early childhood education, primary and secondary education, tertiary education and adult education, defining the latter as 'the participation of adults aged 25 - 64 in education and training, also referred to as lifelong learning' (EUROSTAT, 2019). This is a much narrower definition which excludes learners aged 65 and over and is reflected in the type of statistics collected at EU level.

Current Policy

In recent years EU policy on adult learning has focused on education for economic reasons, upskilling and market activation – 'the EU focuses on programmes that impart initial education and update skills, so that low-skilled adults gain and maintain employment' (EPRS, 2018). The ET2020 Strategy for sustainable and inclusive growth acknowledges the importance of lifelong learning and skills development to enable low-skilled and older adults to improve their ability to adapt to changes in the labour market and society (Bonjean, 2018). A further EU educational policy document, *Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways (2016),* reinforces this agenda stating that 'such skills, knowledge and competences are also crucial for accessing, and progressing in, the labour market and for engaging in further education and training' (EUR-Lex). Within the ET2020 framework seven working groups comprising of government officials appointed by member states, exchange best

practices on key educational and training matters for the development of policy objectives in the area of adult education and lifelong learning at both EU and national level (Bonjean, 2018). The indicators used to measure learning in adulthood throughout Europe are based on data collected through the 5-yearly adult education survey (AES), which measures the participation rate in formal and non-formal education among the population aged 25 – 64. This survey is conducted in Ireland by the Central Statistics Office (CSO).

Further Education and Training Strategy 2020 – 2024

In Ireland, the SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy (FET) 2020-2024 emphasises active inclusion of all citizens at different stages of the learning pathway and the community-based ethos of Further Education. However it goes on to state that ongoing evaluation of current FET provision will focus on increased formalisation and accreditation of learning and targeted workforce upskilling (SOLAS, 2019). Policy is focused on supporting job creation through upskilling and reskilling the workforce, creating opportunities for marginalised individuals to compete in the labour market and enhancing learning pathways to enable seamless transition within Further Education and into Higher Education. The strategy does not address education for well-being or for leisure, an area which especially attracts older learners. The FET Facts and Figures booklet (2018) does not include figures for lifelong learners over the age of 65.

AONTAS (2019, p. 109) points out that the FET strategy's application of 'active inclusion' takes a predominately labour activation approach. In its submission to the public consultation on the strategy document, AONTAS called for an assurance that all adults would have the right to participate in learning and that lifelong learning should benefit the 'social, personal, and skills development of individual adults, their family and community' (AONTAS, 2019, p. 1.). It also called for sustainable funding for community education and learner voice engagement as part of policy development in adult education, arguing that social inclusion is not just about providing learning opportunities for employment but supporting social engagement and inclusion, and social mobility within an educational context.

Community Education

Community education is 'adult learning which takes place in local community settings across Ireland ... and responds to the needs of the local community' (AONTAS). It is learner-centred, local and accessible, low-cost and offers a variety of classes, usually non-accredited, in a social environment. Community education evolved in Ireland in the 1960s under the concept that community

development should be an educative process, that it should enable a local population to act on a self-help basis in its own interests and that learning should be based on the needs, value systems and life skills of the local community (Commins, 1989). O'Sullivan's three models of how adult education within the community contributes to social change are cited by Commins (1989, p. 75) -

1. Providing for personal improvement so that individuals can contribute to society by better performance in their social allocated roles
2. Fostering individual adjustment to social and technological change which is seen a benign or inevitable
3. 'consciousness-raising' to facilitate critical analysis of the status quo and of the ideologies or taken-for-granted assumptions that support it

It is a vehicle for engaging people who wish to learn in a non-formal setting, offering a variety of short, part time courses which are suited to the learners in a local community, and facilitates personalised flexible learning, skills development, confidence building and social networking in the traditional sense, involving the learners where possible as equal partners in identifying learning needs and designing and adapting programmes on an on-going basis (Citizensinformation.ie). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) state that older learners tend to engage in non-formal learning such as non-accredited, short-term education courses which vary in scope and level. The community education model is a 'good fit' for these learners who are more likely to attend institutions that are accessible and familiar and who want to engage in non-formal learning in a social environment.

Why Older Adults Engage in Education

Adults engage in learning in later life for reasons which are many and varied. Gould (1978) states that adulthood is a time of change rather than a 'plateau' and there is great opportunity for growth in this life stage. Transitional events such as retirement, children leaving home, bereavement and altered financial circumstances can act as catalysts, causing a person to pause, re-evaluate their situation and take control of their future. Mezirow (1981) recognises these events, where adults reassess their roles and responsibilities and take steps to change them, as 'emancipatory' leading to a transformative learning process. Jarvis (2001) describes them as 'disjunctures' or 'gaps in our biography' caused by personal (internal) or social (external) disharmony, which are often the starting point of a learning process, whether informal, non-formal or formal.

As adults age and have less commitments they may doubt their perceived worth both in their personal lives and in society. The World Health Organisation states that 'older people are a precious, often

ignored resource that makes an important contribution to the fabric of our societies' (WHO, 2002, p. 6.), while Jarvis stresses the importance of experienced elders and their function in a society where some others find it difficult to oppose authority for fear of job loss etc. 'Society needs experienced learners who have a disinterested intelligent and critical voice – a voice of democracy – to speak to the wider world' (Jarvis, 2001, p. 26). Older adults are free to engage in critical debate and provide that voice - one way to enable older adults to engage in critical debate is through education within the community.

Dominice (2000) states that older adults are motivated to engage with education to preserve their independence and for personal growth. Boulton-Lewis & Tam (2018) concur, stating that elders engage in learning for personal reasons and in order to better cope with ageing. Boulton-Lewis *et al*. (2006, p. 279) found that older adults wanted to continue learning 'to keep the mind active, use the brain, exercise the mind, stay mentally stimulated, grow, attain goals, constantly learn, never stop'. Learning at this later stage of life is usually self-initiated and driven by personal interest and an intrinsic desire to learn (Illeris, 2002). The learners are there voluntarily and enjoy being inspired by both their instructors and co-learners. At a deeper level they are there to discover and understand their own needs and learn more about themselves (Dominice, 2000). This need to complete self-development is noted by Knowles (1980) who states that learners are motivated to actualise their full potential when their basic needs have been met. This concurs with Maslow's belief that people change and develop throughout their lives, and as they move through the higher order of needs come to find meaning and understanding. Transitional periods encountered by older adults, either internal such as life stages, or external such as altered financial or living circumstances, can trigger the motivation to return to learning to fill an educational gap and to develop personally (Maslow, 1968). 'As adults gain a life history perspective on their learning they typically clarify their concept of adulthood, recognize the centrality of interdependent social behaviour to their lives, and appreciate that maturity continues to develop throughout adulthood' (Dominice, 2000, p. 4).

Barriers to Learning

Barriers to learning fall broadly into two categories – external or 'situational' and internal or 'dispositional'. External barriers are 'influences more or less external to the individual or at least beyond the individual's control' while internal barriers 'reflect personal attitudes, such as thinking one is too old to learn' (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, pp. 56 - 57). In a study of the learning needs of older adults (Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003), barriers to learning which were attributed to ageing were categorised as -

- physical problems such as reduced mobility, hearing loss, failing eyesight, vulnerability and dependency on others for transport
- cognitive factors such as reduced attention span, memory loss, difficulty comprehending new material
- self-matters such as loss of confidence, feelings of being 'too old to learn', negative attitude towards learning new material (more prevalent in those with unhappy school history)
- social factors such as not having a companion to go with, anxiety about mixing with new people

Fleming (2005, p. 3) lists the following barriers – 'being seen as too old, having poor health, lack of time, cost, out at night, transportation, absence of a companion, lack of information about what is available, fear of competition with younger adults, fear of exposure of their background, fear of the unknown and location'. Withnall (2010) suggests psychosocial barriers to participation such as fear of failure, reluctance to engage with unfamiliar tasks, and perception of procedures being too complex. Chronic conditions such as pain and fatigue can lead to low energy and concentration levels while traumatic life events can also affect the ability to learn (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The normal decline in sensory function and in physical dexterity and endurance which occur with advancing age may affect learning ability (Wagner, 2001).

The Senior Classroom – Teaching Strategies

Older learners are a heterogeneous group with a broad range of experience – 12 people in a group will have 12 different biographies which they bring to the room. They are a group 'characterized by diverse interests, needs, motivations, approaches and preferences for learning' who have a wealth of past learning between them, whether informal, non-formal or formal (Boulton-Lewis & Tam, 2018, p. 642). Other variables include age, gender, education, health and cognitive ability and computer literacy (Chen & Chan, 2014). This wide variety of experience and interests will influence what and how they want to learn and where they want to learn it (Truluck & Courtenay, 1999).

According to Knowles concept of andragogy (1984) the extensive experience of the adult learner is a valuable resource in the learning classroom. The four principles of Knowles andragogy are:

1. Self-directedness - adults know what they want to learn and how they want to learn it and they believe themselves to be responsible for their own learning

2. Learners experience - adults have an accumulated wealth of life experience which they bring to the classroom and can share with their peers, creating a richer learning experience for all
3. Readiness to learn - adults are ready to learn when they identify a desire or need to know something in order to cope with a life-task. They are in the learning environment because they choose to be there.
4. Task orientated - Learners want to develop their competence and apply their new-found knowledge immediately in order to achieve their full potential. They are performance-centred in their learning.

The role of the teacher in the adult class is 'as facilitator and resource to self-directed inquiry and to regard education as a lifelong process. For knowledge gained at any point of time will become increasingly obsolete in the course of time'. (Knowles, 1990, p. 161). This is particularly true of the senior classroom where learners are trying to keep up with a world which is changing rapidly, such as in the areas of information technology and communication. Jarvis (2001) advises that in an elder classroom teachers need to be aware of the diverse backgrounds and attributes of the learners and accommodate learner differences, stressing that educators must adapt a teaching and learning approach that is sensitive to the characteristics of older learners and the transitional nature of this phase of life in order to ensure a positive learning outcome. Issues to be considered include learning environment, competence and capabilities of learners, social and political attitudes, learners' prior knowledge and experience and the fostering of good relations both between teacher and learners, and amongst learners (Boulton-Lewis, 2010).

Jarvis (2001) describes three teaching techniques for older learners: didactic, Socratic and facilitative, and advocates using a combined approach. Didactic is the traditional teaching style which these learners would be familiar with and is helpful in giving an overview of what will be covered. Socrative is where the learners are prompted to think and find answers to stimulating questions, and facilitative is where the teacher generates discussion where the learners can share their life experiences and learn from each other. Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism focuses on how the learning community supports the learning, a key factor being the Zone of Proximal Development where a learner acquires new knowledge when they are ready and when they can link it to existing knowledge (Kozulin, 2015). Conversations among learners and between learners and teachers, articulating what is already known, create a social, collaborative learning space where peer learning can occur in an unthreatening environment and is particularly suited to the older learner.

Older adults learn more slowly and need a supportive environment with lots repetition and practice (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). McClusky states that a combination of both auditory and visual imagery should be used to accommodate different learning preferences and abilities and that self-pacing is important. The older learner should be allowed to 'learn in his own way and in his own time, without too much pressure' (McClusky, 1976, p. 121). Similar techniques to those regarded as best practice in senior healthcare teaching should be applied, such as allowing time for assimilation of material, reducing environmental distractions, taking regular breaks and teaching in small groups (Wagner, 2001). Attention should also be given to the physical environment such as using appropriate seating, regulating the temperature, ensuring adequate lighting and avoiding noise interference (Conrad Glass Jr., 1996).

Benefits of Engagement with Learning for Older Adults

The World Health Organisation policy framework on active ageing reports that education is an important factor in the quality of life of older adults and in facilitating them to remain active in society (WHO, 2002, p. 16). Educational Gerontologist, Howard McClusky (1971) categorised five functional needs of older people as a guide for educational practice -

- Coping needs—literacy, which in modern times includes media and digital literacy, and self-sufficiency levels to preserve independence - if these are not met meet higher needs are less attainable
- Expressive needs—activity carried out for personal pleasure and interest
- Contributive needs—altruistic desire to move beyond "self" and serve others in the community
- Influence needs—to feel that one's experience and wisdom is valued and to be involved in political discourse
- Transcendence need—rising above age-related limitations.

A study by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) supports McClusky's theory, finding that engaging in learning meets these needs and 'provides a means for remaining actively involved in the community, for developing new interests and for keeping up with younger generations. In short, people feel healthier, happier, more respected and more independent when they pursue active learning in their senior years' (CCL, 2006, p. 3). In a UK study on the impact of learning in later life by Dench and Regan (2000) the following findings were reported -

- 80% reported a positive impact in one or more of the following areas:

enjoyment of life

self-confidence

self-esteem

satisfaction with other areas of life

ability to cope

- 42% reported an improvement in their ability to self-advocate and to take responsibility
- 28% reported an increased involvement in social, community and voluntary activities

According to Boulton-Lewis (2010), engagement in meaningful activities contributes to improved health, well-being and longevity and to decreases in physical and emotional illness, while continued education enhances self-sufficiency and coping strategies and helps to develop wisdom through a reflective approach to learning. Jarvis (2001) concurs, stating that although wisdom is not an educational concept, it develops as a result of learning and reflection. Increased wisdom, knowledge and experience which result in better problem-solving skills and ability to cope with change, are strong predictors of active ageing and longevity and can compensate for losses in some cognitive capacities which decline naturally with age (Smits et al, 1999).

Wolf (2009), cited in Boulton-Lewis (2010, p. 216) states that 'there is increasing evidence that older adults who are stimulated mentally experience less decline in memory and continued growth in verbal knowledge' well into later life. This view is supported in a study by Fratiglioni *et al*. (2000), published in The Lancet, which found that having an extensive social network seems to protect against dementia in older adults and there were lower levels of depression in those who participated in more social, leisure and learning activities. These findings suggest that the mental stimulation involved in these activities may delay the onset of dementia and that social contact has important implications for how long we live and provides consistent protection against depression. Older adults who engaged in education and activities had a more positive outlook and expected to live longer and healthier lives in contrast with older people who stayed at home and became isolated. 'In a society where there is considerable prejudice against older people we find among adult learners very positive images of themselves. They are confident, assertive, full of ideas, loving life' (Fleming, 2005, p. 7.). He describes adults who continue learning and developing as being open, inquisitive, caring and free from repression. Jarvis (2001) notes that older adults prefer the personal contact and sense of belonging that arises from attending a local class rather than engaging in distance or online learning. Goleman's study on emotional intelligence found that those who are emotionally involved with others are healthier and recover more quickly from illness, confirming the importance of social involvement in older life (Goleman, 1996).

Lifelong learning activities among older adults increases both human and social capital. As they become more knowledgeable and more socially engaged, personal as well as community wellbeing are enhanced (Merriam & Key, 2014). In the Adult Learning Journal, Mallows (2018, p. 12) points out that 'adult learning can have a positive impact on social capital (interpersonal and social trust, social connections, community engagement); social cohesion and integration (tolerance of diversity, higher degree of trust in people of different religions and nationalities); community involvement (civic participation, volunteering); … and democratic participation (political understanding, feelings of empowerment and levels of political participation)'.

The Learner Voice

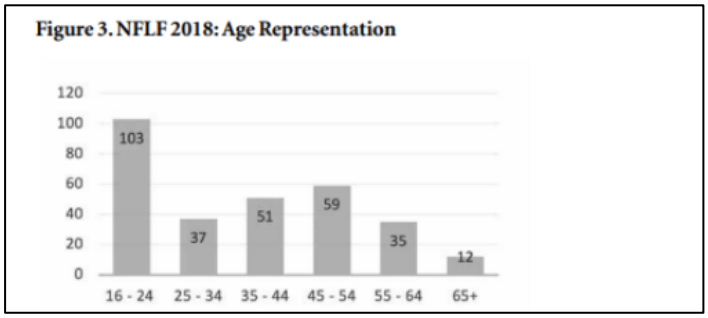
Boulton-Lewis (2010) states that there is little research on the views of the elderly themselves about learning and education. Statistics gathered by Golding and Harvey (2019) on contributors to the Adult Learning Journal over the last three decades substantiate this claim in an Irish context, showing that both the voices of senior learners and their teachers – their main advocates, are under-represented -

- the proportion of authors with an adult and community education worker affiliation decreased from 55% to 10%.
- Authors who were also adult learners (in the adult and community education sector) decreased from 27% to zero

In addition, between 1985 and 2017 the main identified data source as -

- 'Personal experience' (as an adult learner) decreased from 36% to zero
- Professional experience' decreased from 53% to 4%

The National FET Learner Forum (NFLF) which started in 2016 as a one-day national event to hear the learners' voice and to explore ways to improve the Further Education and Training (FET) sector has expanded to sixteen regional events which are held in partnership with Education and Training Boards (ETBs) across Ireland. However, of the 297 adult learners who participated in 2018 only 12% were in the 55 – 64 age group and only 4% were over 65.



(Dowdall, Sheerin & O'Reilly, 2019, p.158)

The WHO (2002, p. 43.) states 'It is time for a new paradigm, one that views older people as active participants in an age-integrated society and as active contributors as well as beneficiaries of development'. Boulton-Lewis (2010) also argues that a new research paradigm is needed where older people are involved in the research process and ageing is placed at the centre of the debate. This would generate data about why, how and what older people want from learning and would offer measurability of benefits and challenges. Ageaction, an advocacy organisation for older Irish citizens, states on its website that 'the socio-economic benefits of empowering older people through Lifelong Learning remains underexplored and its positive potential for individuals, local communities, and for society as a whole have been entirely undervalued' (0'Brien-Olinger, 2016). 'The positive outcomes of lifelong learning for older people in Ireland includes improvements to quality of life, reduced risk of social exclusion and isolation, an overall increase in self-confidence and general well-being, keeping mentally and socially active and learning new skills' (Ageaction, 2016).

This review has examined the literature regarding the development of education within the community and the reasons for participation of older adults in this sector. It has examined the challenges facing older adults as they return to learning and explored the outcomes both on a personal and societal level. The learning needs of this cohort have been examined along with suitable teaching strategies. Jarvis (2001) states that learning in later life is not just about acquiring information, but it is the effect that the learning has on the learner that is important. McClusky (1976, p. 11) states that 'the task of society is to produce a generation of Persons in the Later Years who are "models of lifelong fulfilment for the emulation and guidance of oncoming generations" and that life at its best in the Later Years should be a guide for education at all earlier years of life leading thereto'. The next part of this study will explore suitable methodologies for qualitative research and describe how the data for this study was collected and analysed.

METHODOLOGY

This section describes and validates the research methodology used in the study. It documents the selection sample, data collection and analysis methods, and addresses the ethics and limitations of the research.

Research Frameworks

A research design is a framework for collection and analysis of data (Bryman 2012). The three main frameworks are quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Quantitative research is suitable for data that can be counted, ranked and categorized. It is limited to factual detail but suitable for identifying patterns and making generalizations. Qualitative research is suitable for in-depth interpretive analysis of data where outcomes are not quantifiable and is a suitable model for small-scale projects. Mixed methods research is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods and allows for a combination of numerical measurement and in-depth exploration (Myles & Huberman, 1994).

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a holistic inquiry process based on the exploration of social and human problems and the meanings ascribed to them (Creswell, 2014). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state that qualitative researchers study their subjects in their natural setting using methods such as case studies, interviews, focus groups and observation, and interpret phenomena based on the meanings people bring to them. They refer to the beliefs or principals which indicate the researcher's position and how they will construct meaning from the data collected as the 'research paradigm'. Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe this paradigm as the set of beliefs that underlies and guides the actions and investigations of the researcher, who relies on their own insights and impressions while analysing the data.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology (a philosophical movement founded in the early 20th century by Edmund Husserl) is the study of conscious experience from the subjective viewpoint. In other words it is the study of life through the description of personal experiences – the ways in which we experience things and the meanings we draw from them;

- We describe a personal (often past) experience. This is described by Husserl as pure description of lived experience.
- We interpret an experience by relating it to its context, especially social and linguistic.
- We analyse the type of experience, factoring out notable features for further elaboration.

(Smith, 2018)

This research project is a qualitative study based on a phenomenological approach with interpretative analysis of the data.

Data Sample Selection

The study is based on a small data sample drawn from two community education groups in Dublin during a period between 2019 and 2020. Two sites were used to enhance the research credibility through triangulation of data. 'Data source triangulation involves the collection of data from different types of people, including individuals, groups, families, and communities, to gain multiple perspectives and validation of data' (Carter et al, 2014, p. 545). Participants self-selected in the first site and were all female – there were no males attending this centre. Participants were selected by the researcher in the second site in order to ensure a balanced representation of males and females. There was a total of 15 participants, nine in the first site and six (three male, three female) in the second. As this was not a comparative study, data from both sites was collated for findings and analysis.

Data Collection Method

Suitable methods of data collection for field research include interviews, surveys, questionnaires, tests and case studies. Unlike surveys or tests which are highly structured and designed to examine a respondent's knowledge, attitude or ability, the open-ended or semi-structured interview allows the respondent to express themselves in their own language and to introduce new themes (Brenner, 2006). Having initially considered individual in-depth interviews it was decided instead to use focus group interviews as the data collection tool for this research because a) more participants could be reached, and b) discussion in a relaxed atmosphere among fellow learners would stimulate disclosure and sharing of experience, thus producing richer data than would be achieved without the group interaction (Basch, 1987, Morgan 1988). The interview would include a short questionnaire to capture demographic data on the characteristics and circumstances of participants.

Ethics

'Ethics is not an option – it is a fundamental feature of all good research' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 329). Ethical standards in research define the moral principles which govern the behaviour of the researcher and the manner in which data will be used, while promoting standards such as trust, accountability, respect and fairness. Denscombe (2010) describes the ethical principles of research as protecting the interests of participants, avoiding deception or misrepresentation, voluntary participation and informed consent - 'the procedure in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of the facts that would likely influence their decisions' (Diener and Crandall, 1978, p. 57).

The BERA (British Educational Research Association) Ethical Guidelines of 2011 (updated 2018) outline the responsibilities of researchers –

- Educational researchers should respect all persons involved in their research by treating them fairly, sensitively, with dignity and with freedom from prejudice.
- Participation must be voluntary with the right to withdraw at any time. Voluntary Informed Consent should be obtained **before** commencement of the project.
- Researchers must ensure participants understand the process they will be engaged in, why their participation is necessary, how the data will be used and who it will be reported to.
- All necessary steps should be taken to put participants at ease and to minimise intrusion and inconvenience. If any part of the research process causes emotional or other distress, it must be stopped immediately.
- Researchers must be aware that the use of incentives could create a bias in participant responses.
- No individual or group should be disadvantaged by their participation - any detrimental impact identified during the research must immediately be bought to their attention.
- Participants must be assured of confidentiality and all data must be anonymised in findings.
- It is good practice to debrief participants at the end of the research and provide them with copies of the completed report.
- Researchers must comply with legal requirements in relation to the storage and use of personal data.

(BERA, 2018)

The BERA Ethical Guidelines were observed while conducting this research project. Firstly, ethical approval was sought and granted from both Griffith College and DDLETB (appendix 1). Participants were then issued with an information sheet which clearly documented the purpose of the study, how

it would be carried out and what participation would involve (appendix 2). They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. They were also assured that all data would be stored securely on a password protected laptop and backed up on an encrypted USB stick, used appropriately and destroyed within 24 months as per BERA guidelines. This information sheet was circulated by email in advance of the focus group interviews. A copy of the finished research document will be circulated to all participants upon completion of the study.

Limitations

This research is limited by its small scale and local nature. There is a gender imbalance in the data sample with a ratio of 20/80 percent male to female. It is a moment-in-time sample involving participants who are all either currently or were recently engaged in learning and therefore findings may be biased. This study does not claim to represent the views of all older learners in the community - rather it is the intention to hear a selection of older learner voices and to explore their experience in this sector.

The Qualitative Interview

Planning a qualitative interview involves deciding the range of topics to be discussed and devising a sequence of principle questions with pre-planned prompts for areas to be explored. Spradley (2016) describes this process as the grand tour question followed by mini-tour questions – with general questions leading to further probing questions incorporating the respondent's cultural framework and personal vocabulary, thereby eliciting more in-depth information.

The qualitative interview differs from conversational norms in that the respondent is encouraged to speak more than the interviewer. This can be achieved by avoiding short questions which may elicit yes/no answers, asking longer open questions which invite longer answers and allow the respondents time to think. This format allows for coverage of specific issues needed for data analysis while allowing the participants to respond in a narrative style and to introduce content that may not have been raised in the questions. The interviewer should convey interest in the informant's contribution, encouraging them to speak expansively on the topic, and should have the flexibility to recognise when a question has already been answered or when information has been given out of sequence (Brenner, 2006). Care should be taken to notice unwillingness or inability to talk about a subject and the conversation should be moved on.

Planning the Focus Group - designing the questions

A Table of Alignment (appendix 4) was designed to ensure consistency between the purpose and the elements of the study. The table was used to link each of the research questions with the individual sections of the literature review. A focus group guide (appendix 5) was then created with six principle questions, along with some potential probes for each one, based on topics identified in the literature and linking back to the research questions in the table of alignment. The interview style was designed to be semi-structured with open-ended questions, which were crafted in a clear conversational style, avoiding the use of jargon. A focus group check-list (appendix 6) was drawn up detailing equipment required and the sequencing of the event.

A pilot interview was conducted with a small group of learners, allowing the interviewer to become familiar with asking the questions, using probes and clarification, and to test the 'flow' to see if the order of questioning worked; to check whether questions were appropriate for participants, to assess their understanding of them and establish if the desired information was being elicited; and to check time-management, recording devices and supplies needed. This exercise revealed some misunderstanding of questions and a slight block in conversational flow - as a result the wording and sequencing of some questions were changed – for example the question about barriers to participation was moved further down in the order of questions as it elicited a change of tone in the interview. The pilot also revealed a gap in data regarding current/past roles of participants and level of educational attainment - this was addressed by making some changes to the demographic questionnaire to capture this information. Lastly it was decided that, as a precautionary measure, a second recording device would be used in the interview for backup.

Conducting the Focus Group Interview

Note: As data from both sites was collated for findings and analysis, both focus groups are presented in this section as one interview.

On commencement of the interview participants were given a brief overview of the research study and of the value of their input. They were reminded that the interview would last approximately 60 minutes and would be voice-recorded. The information sheet was reviewed to ensure sufficient understanding of its contents by participants and any questions/clarifications were invited – no questions or concerns were raised. Participants then signed an informed consent form (appendix 3) and completed the demographic questionnaire.

Participants were familiar with the community centre where the focus group was conducted and were known to each other through this environment. Refreshments were provided before the interview both to create a relaxed, informal atmosphere and as a gesture of appreciation to the group for their time and input. Spradley (2016) states that the research interview sets up an intimate relationship between people without any prior connection, while Patton (2002) notes the importance of establishing a rapport with respondents and of maintaining neutrality in questioning. In order to develop a relationship and gain co-operation the researcher shared some personal information about their own return to education and experience as an adult learner. This established a commonality, presenting the researcher as an insider and diminishing any perceived power imbalance, while demonstrating to the participants the expected language and style of their contributions.

In order to engage everyone from the outset the first question was addressed to each participant in turn. All further questions were addressed to the group and learners were free to answer if they wished, giving everyone the chance to contribute without feeling pressurised to do so. The group engaged willingly with the subject matter and enjoyed the opportunity to speak of their learning journey and hear about those of their peers. Recording the session allowed everyone to focus on the conversation without the distraction of note taking and created a complete record of the interview. On completion of the interview the participants were thanked and assured that a copy of the completed report would be make available to them in due course.

Data Coding and Analysis

In qualitative research some analysis happens during the interview itself. Activities such as modifying questions to respond to the needs of participants, following a descriptive question with a more searching one, probing an idea further and reacting to emergent themes involve the concurrent gathering and analysis of data, enhancing the quality of data analysis (Chamberlain et al., 2004).

Content analysis, “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1278) and thematic analysis, “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79), are approaches widely used in qualitative research studies. Because the boundaries between the two are unclear, and there is some confusion about their similarities and differences and how researchers should choose between them, they are often used interchangeably (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012, Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is not unusual for qualitative analysis to be described as “thematic content analysis” (Green & Thorogood, 2004). Both frameworks require the researcher to transcribe the data, become familiar with it by reading it several

times, look for patterns and code the data into themes and sub-themes, linking them to the research objectives. An inductive approach uses the data to determine the themes, usually where there are no previous studies in the research area (often used in medical studies). A deductive approach uses prior or expected themes, based on theory or existing knowledge (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that thematic analysis differs from content analysis in that it incorporates both a manifest (explicit content) and latent (subtext and underlying assumptions) approach to data while content analysis is only concerned with explicit content. The importance of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question. They identify the following stages of thematic analysis:

1. Familiarization – gain an overview through transcribing, reading, taking notes etc.
2. Coding - highlight phrases and sentences which describe different ideas or topics that recur throughout the data.
3. Generating themes - review codes and group into themes
4. Review themes - compare themes against the data, combine, discard or create new ones to ensure accurate representation.
5. Defining and naming themes - formulate exactly what is mean by each theme and how it helps us understand the data. Create an easily understandable name for each theme.
6. Writing up – address each theme in turn, describing how often it comes up and what it means, using examples from the data as evidence.

The framework used in this research project is best defined as a thematic analysis using a deductive approach. The interview was transcribed fully and read several times to gain an overview of the data. The text was colour coded into main themes, corresponding with the layout of the questions and answers. Each theme was then re-examined, sub-topics and patterns were coded and emergent themes were identified (appendix 7). Qualitative research 'uses words as data… collected and analysed in all sorts of ways' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, pp 3-4). Results were documented on a thematic basis, linking them back to the literature and the research purpose using the table of alignment.

The use of a reflective journal throughout the study, documenting decisions and interpretations, assisted with maintaining a sense of perspective at each stage. The following section will present the findings and analysis of the data.

ANALYSIS

The findings of this study are presented and analysed thematically. Noble and Smith (2015, p. 2) state that qualitative analysis should include 'rich and thick verbatim descriptions of participants' accounts to support findings'. This chapter is richly populated by direct quotes from participants in order to include the voices of the learners themselves and bring the data to life.

PROFILE OF LEARNERS

Age profile and occupational identity

80% of participants (n = 15) were female and 20% male. 40% were aged 65 – 69, 40% were aged 70 – 74, 13% were aged 75 – 79 and 7% were aged 80 +. The eldest participant was 83 years of age. 87% described themselves as retired while 13% were working part-time. Listed below are previous and current occupations/roles described by participants.

Carer (x2)	Lecturer
Family support worker	Machinist (x 2)
Factory worker	Physiotherapist
GP	Primary school teacher
Househusband (x 2)	Secretary
Housewife (x 5)	Service engineer
Jewellery maker	Stock control manager

53% identified with multiple roles such as (former) job title, carer, housewife or househusband. 73% described themselves as physically active, 7% as slightly active and 20% did not give details. 20% lived alone.

Education

47% left formal education aged 12 – 14 years with no accreditation, 13% aged 15 having completed the Junior Certificate, 13% aged 18 having completed the Leaving Certificate and 27% completed Higher Education to diploma or degree level, finishing in their mid-20s.

Social Activities

73% were actively involved in community groups, 40% were involved in volunteering such as GAA and other sports groups, 13% were involved in church groups and 40% were involved in other social activities such as walking groups, dancing and card playing.

Learners were from across the socio-economic spectrum and from all educational backgrounds, almost half had left school with no accreditation while others had second or third level accreditation. The variety of occupations/roles, civic and social activities indicates the diversity and range of experience among the population of older learners engaging with lifelong learning in the community.

MOTIVATION

Initial Motivation

Much of the literature suggests that older learners are in a reflective stage of life where their motivation for learning is largely intrinsically - to learn more about themselves, to find deeper meaning and understanding and to actualize their full potential (Illeris,2002; Dominice, 2000; Knowles, 1980). However, this study found that over half of the learners (53%) initially engaged with adult education for extrinsic reasons - to fulfil a learning need or to develop new skills such as computer basics, reading and spelling. Computers was the main entry subject with some learners needing to learn to use them for a specific purpose –

> *'To get familiar with my laptop, and Word, and how to do the (genealogy) charts.'*
>
> *'I came here to do a computer course because I'm the treasurer of a diving club …… there's quite a few sports grants available ... I don't have enough knowledge for what's involved in it.'*
>
> *'I came here cos I wanted to learn how to do reading writing and computers'*
>
> *'I needed it (computer) for work as I ended up doing things that I didn't think I would do'*
>
> *'to know a bit more about computers – I could make my own way around one, but was not very good at it, didn't understand what all the little icons meant … and that's the reason I decided to go to a class.'*

Many older learners were afraid of being left behind by new technology and the modern world. They did not want to have to rely on others to do things for them and were keen to address this coping need in order to preserve their independence and self-sufficiency -

> *'you need technology in today's world, for shopping, for absolutely everything – so it's important'*
>
> *'if you didn't keep up with computers I think there wouldn't be much that you could do'*

'I want to keep up with the IT world and especially with mobile phones and computers'

'if we don't make an effort to keep up we'll be totally left behind –for booking a flight, to go to the cinema… so you know, you've got to keep on top of it'

Other learners enrolled in classes for social reasons, out of interest in a subject, to remain mentally active or to '*do something for myself*'. These learners were intrinsically motivated, engaging with learning to fulfil a personal need, to combat isolation or to remain cognitively active. Some gave reasons which were a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic e.g. to learn how to use computers but also for social reasons -

'I just feel the need to keep my brain active'

'I wanted to learn to knit'

'I'm involved in the book club and that expands your knowledge of English because I hadn't read for a number of years'

'I love photography. I've always had a camera. When the children were small there was a camera always on the table and I just took photographs …. so after a while I got curious about what all the different knobs were and I've done a few photography courses'

'I always like reading and a good few years ago I went to an English class'

'I like being in with people – I was in a choir for several years – I just like being with people.'

'I come for the company, socialising, to be with my own age group.'

Learners described changes in their lives such as liberation from raising children, improved financial circumstances and increased confidence. Disjunctures experienced included retirement, bereavement, becoming a carer, personal trauma and loss of employment due to injury. These changed circumstances created new needs such as having to perform a task previously carried out by someone else or a need for social engagement and were a trigger for engaging in learning, supporting the assertions of Gould (1978), Mezirow (1981) and Jarvis (2001) that this time of life is one of transition where roles and responsibilities are reassessed, and is often a starting point of learning -

'When my grandson started school and started using computers I hadn't a clue. Things happened then over the years and I took on that (parental) role to help him as best I could. He was a child coming home from school, and I thought 'how am I going to help this child – such an age gap' so that's why I decided to go to learn the computers. I had to for him'

'I started in 2015 after a few years being trapped at home …. it just opened doors'

'most of my life I wasn't working with computers – because my husband was very good at all that, and he died 10 years ago, and that was the initial thing, I needed computer skills because we had the (business) .'

'I was waiting for an operation…. I couldn't work anymore but I couldn't stick to be at home all the time so I came here'

As well as dealing with change many learners had more free time than before and described the importance of having the routine and structure of attending a regular class -

'it gives me a bit of a timetable.'

'I always find it's great to get up in the morning and get out and do something. And if you've something to do it motivates you to get up … you had to be ready by 9 o'clock, get your stuff ready - it's great.'

Motivation to remain engaged

The study found that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation were not mutually exclusive and that there was a fluidity between the two. Many who attended initially to fulfil a particular learning need went on to enrol in other classes because they enjoyed the learning activities and the social interaction, while participants who came initially for social reasons became motivated to '*learn more or try something else'* -

'I did the photography course here several times, I've done the computer course several times. I've done cookery courses'

'I'm coming here about 2 years now and I'm still learning and still enjoying it. It fulfils a social need as well as the little bit of challenge to the brain, because I do feel I need to keep challenging the brain – otherwise I could get stale, seize up.'

'every now and then I'd say 'I think I'll try that course and I think I'll try this course'

'then we progressed to the creative writing and I enjoyed it'

'it's very interesting listening to people and their views'

'as well as learning there is a social interaction and there's a huge value to that… So there's a lot going on as well as your class.'

'I find the social aspect is great and I keep coming back, to both computers and gardening'

'I find the group concept very helpful and motivating and it makes you sort of do things that you mightn't do'

'I'm part of the foundations of this place, I can't remember how long I've been coming here…they have great things on'

'you've got to keep learning all the time – and there's something to be learnt all the time'

It is clear that these learners, far from entering a plateau stage, are at a time of great change in their lives, as stated by Gould (1978). This change, both internal in their personal circumstances and external in the world around them, has created needs which they are addressing by engaging with

education in a local, supportive environment. While initial engagement was either to close a knowledge gap or to increase social contact, once that gap was closed, social contact was established and the learner felt secure they became motivated to remain engaged in learning for the pleasure of learning and the drive for intellectual stimulation.

BENEFITS

Personal

Along with motivational benefits such as staying well through socialising, challenging the brain and having a sense of purpose and structure to the day, the findings support the claims of Goleman (1996) and Dench and Regan (2000) that engaging with learning in a social environment improves self-esteem and confidence, thus contributing to better mental health. While it is outside the scope of this research to assess if lifelong learning and social contact offers protection against dementia and promotes longer life, learners expressed their belief that it contributed to their overall well-being and happiness, describing a range of personal benefits such as a sense of feeling good and interest in new activities -

> *You feel good within yourself – you feel you've accomplished something'*
>
> *'I've met people here that I haven't seen in years'*
>
> *'this term I'm looking forward to doing a bit of beekeeping … and I'm really looking forward to that'*
>
> *'It encourages you to keep working to an older age as well – to have done a course like this'*
>
> *'Mentally, every way – it's just fabulous, it does you a power of good and that's why I come'*
>
> *'this is ME time'*
>
> *'It keeps me happy - it keeps my mind active'*

Socialization is an important element of the education system from early childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood (Roger & Borges, 2014), and should continue throughout learning in later life. Learners described the benefits of a classroom where they felt secure - participants who lived alone highly valued the social nature of the learning environment while others spoke of how it had played a vital role in helping them to deal with trauma and to address issues such as depression, social isolation and lack of confidence -

> *'it just opened doors and meant I had a life outside the house … cos you get depressed and you get fed up …. and I now have a great bunch of friends, we love what we do here so that for me – this is my patch.'*
>
> *'I'd be lost without this group'*

'I found it great therapy (after bereavement)'

'I found that I was going from work to bed and not doing anything else at all, and then I came here'

'if I had any problems whatsoever at my age (83) I know I could call on any of them. And like you make friends with everybody, you know – if I wasn't here now I wouldn't know all these people'

'This gets me up out of my bed in the morning, this gets me out of the house, this gets me to meet my friends. For years people on the road were saying 'we never see (name) anymore – she doesn't leave the house anymore' .... I turned up here at the door …. the rest is history.'

'A lot of things happened in my life, but eventually when I did get time … that was a big, big thing for me to get me out of the house …. gradually I kept coming up every week which absolutely made me breathe – because I didn't have time to breathe, so for me it was just an amazing thing'

For early school-leavers the opportunity to re-connect with education alongside others of a similar age group who were similarly motivated and supportive of each other led to improved literacy and greater personal ambition, with some going on to gain accreditation in QQI, ECDL, Junior and Leaving Certs -

'I would never have asked anyone to spell something for me - it doesn't bother me now though. If I can't spell it - I would say 'spell that for me', before I would not let anyone know that I couldn't spell something'

'From here you see came a chance to go to college, I left school when I was 12 … I did my Junior Cert last year, never thought I'd do anything like that, and joined a writing club … and I now write for (local) magazine once a month – all of that came from here.'

'6 of us from here went and sat our Leaving in English about 4 years ago. Then we went the following year and we sat history for the Leaving.'

'I did the Leaving Cert history with some of the other women here'

Benefits within the Family

Participants expressed belief in the wider benefit of their learning among those close to them, describing the reaction of family and friends as positive - their children were proud of them, friends were interested and wondered if maybe they should do something too. They spoke of how it was a great example to grandchildren to see that learning continues and that older people go to school and enjoy it -

'my children are delighted'

'I think generally it would be a good reaction and they're all very encouraging'

'it's great – they go out there and they brag about you'

'(your friends) - the first thing they look at you and say 'you're doing that?' and the next thing is you can see them thinking 'well maybe I should be doing something like that'

'any time you've accomplished something sure It's bound to rub off on those close to you'

' Your friends are quite interested in the fact that you've gone off and done a computer course, and you're doing a gardening course and things like that, yes they're interested'

' it helps the grandchildren to see that you're doing something.'

'it helps very much that you're able to do things that are more normal to them (younger people) I suppose. - that you're not brain-dead!! (laughs).'

'when your son turns around and says – thank God you're out there doing something – instead of being stuck at home - That's great, that's enough to keep you going isn't it'

'my family can't believe that I'm so outgoing now, I wouldn't have done it years ago.'

A study by Leeds University in 2002 found that 'by demonstrating to their children the advantages and the enjoyment that can be obtained from education, parents can in fact change their children's attitudes and raise their aspirations' (Coles, 2003). Early school-leavers in this study displayed a great awareness and appreciation of how intergenerational sharing of knowledge within the family enhanced relationships and how introducing cultural capital such as language, skills and cultural knowledge to younger family members fostered an interest in learning in the next generation -

'It's an example to them too that you're keeping up with things - encouraging the children is very important'

'my grandson – the one I helped with the computers will be a doctor next year.'

'And then you're bringing the learning home, and maybe they can show you something as well'

'It's great the fact that you can teach them something'

'and you're passing on your knowledge to other people as well – that's important'

'I would do it with them at home, and then they'd go into school and the teacher would say "where did you learn that? ... and then the teacher had the other children doing it – so it was all teaching being passed on around'

Benefits within the Community

At a societal level, participants felt their learning had allowed them to engage more fully in their communities with a very high proportion of learners (73%) volunteering with clubs and organisations. While some were involved in such activities before engaging in lifelong learning, most attributed their

civic involvement to the confidence, increased knowledge and social connectedness which resulted from this engagement -

> *'as a volunteer I'm kind of in touch with everything here now at the moment, the estate management, the resource centre itself'*
>
> *'I'm in the creative writing class and well I've been a volunteer here.'*
>
> *'I've been approached to go on to the committee - having a computer skill I would now consider it, because there's a lot of paperwork and stuff involved in it'*
>
> *'I came here for the computers, and from that to the ladies club and then went on the committee for estate management, and then the resource centre'*

Jarvis (2001) states that learning in later life contributes to improvement of self-esteem of older learners and to the enhancement of their contribution both at home and within the wider community. The benefits mentioned by participants in this study whether personal such as mental health, social engagement and active ageing, familial such as extending a culture of education to younger family members and to friends, or becoming active in the wider community through volunteering, clearly lead to wider societal benefits demonstrating that the well-being of individuals and the health of their communities are interconnected - these older adults are practising active citizenship, making informed decisions and contributing to society.

BARRIERS

In reviewing the literature the main barrier attributed to participation in learning at an older age was declining physical and cognitive ability. Surprisingly however, only 13% of participants mentioned health when discussing potential barriers to learning. Cognitive issues such as failing hearing or eyesight, and physical issues such as mobility did not feature. However, external barriers mentioned such as distance, night classes and wintertime would suggest an awareness of increased physical vulnerability. Likewise, at a later point in the interview, the mention of retention issues and the need to practise when discussing learning preferences in the older classroom indicate an awareness of increasing cognitive challenges.

External Barriers

Situational barriers are external conditions which limit participation in an activity. The main external barriers identified by learners were distance and lack of transport -

> *'distance for how far you have to travel, some people don't drive and don't want to be going home on their own'*

'walking distance or on a bus route is important'

'lack of transport'

'ease of access is very important.... much better than going into town – I wouldn't go into town'

Older learners want to attend local, daytime classes. They intensely disliked the concept of evening classes, stating that they do not feel it is a good time of day for them to learn -

'coming out at night…would prevent a lot people from doing a lot of things'

' I hated going into town .... getting there was a problem. It was winter, dark evenings'

'wintertime sounds to be a good idea to have classes, but I don't think it is really – coming out at 9.30 at night in the dark'

'now I find I wouldn't go to do a course at night – night is for enjoyment – I play cards at night, but as regards learning, sitting down to work – I'm gone past that'

'I think it's the wrong end of the day for us - daytime is better'

Cost, difficulty in accessing information about courses, and class size and structure were also mentioned. Learners favoured informal group learning among those of a similar age -

'years ago I wanted to go back, but I couldn't because you had to pay for courses, and because I didn't have that kind of money I couldn't do that so money could be a major issue'

'I come up from Wicklow - where is Wicklow's version of this.... I don't know where to find out'

'I like a group class … the day I went in I was the only student and I didn't want that so I didn't stay in that course'

'I wouldn't go into a lecture room. That would be a barrier to me – it wouldn't be informal enough'

Learners agreed that many of these barriers are being addressed successfully in community education, where classes are inexpensive, delivered in small groups in an informal environment and take place mainly during the daytime, usually starting after 9.30am when commuting is easier.

Another external barrier mentioned was lack of time due to family caring commitments, particularly care of grandchildren –

'some people are very taken up with minding their grandchildren … they're very stressed because of overdemands on their time. They certainly wouldn't be able to participate or seek out education'

Many women mentioned their past role as a primary caregiver within the home, putting the needs and wants of others before their own, as a reason why they did not engage with education earlier. They did not label this as a negative issue or barrier, rather as a reflection of the life stage they were at then compared to their present stage -

'life gets in your way'

'and then my daughter got sick so that was the end of the computers'

Internal Barriers

Dispositional or 'internal' barriers relate to personal attributes and abilities, such as a negative attitude, fear, pride, or lack of self-confidence, that prevent participation. Internal barriers mentioned by learners in this study included lack of self-belief or confidence and literacy difficulties. Many learners were intimidated by situations where they were mixed with younger learners. Purdie & Boulton-Lewis (2003) refer to the prevelence of dispositional barriers among those with an unhappy school history - the extent to which these barriers were cited by early school-leavers was notable compared to other participants -

'the hardest thing in the world is to walk into a room when you're in your 50s and 60s and you're looking at all the kids going in and you're thinking am I crazy – what's the point in me being here'

'I'm 70 now and I thought 'how am I going to go back to school with all them young ones''

'The night I walked in there was a whole load of young people and I was the oldest one sitting there thinking ' how am I going to do this''

'before I was afraid to touch a button in case I'd destroy whatever was on it'

'it was nothing to do with the teacher, I just can't do maths. It didn't suit me'

'I did the computers – I just can't get my head around it though I made loads of attempts, and I can type and all but I can't do them'

'Would you be fit for it'

'will I fit in – will I understand what's being said to me, and if I don't understand will I be able to put up my hand and say so – cos for a lot of people that would be a major fear'

Past Educational Experience

There was a direct correlation between early school experience and progression in education. Those who had left education without accreditation described their schooldays as unhappy. Those who had completed their Leaving Certificate did not describe any negative issues during their time in school. Those who said they 'loved' school had gone on to Higher Education.

An emerging theme among early school-leavers was fear - a word used repeatedly when discussing their experience of childhood education and how it differs from today's environment, vividly recalling incidents that affected them deeply –

'Years ago the teacher said 'if you can't learn I'll make you learn'. I remember in my first communion class standing in a circle and reciting who made the world and (she) thumped the back off us. OK I never forgot it 'God made the world'. But I don't think it was the right way whereas now I think it's much more laid back'

'Fear was a big thing in school years ago - you had the canes whereas now you cannot touch children'

'If you were a slow learner or had learning problems you were shoved to the back of the room, whereas now we're given these opportunities and everybody our age should be taking them'

'The teachers years ago, you got in you did it and if you didn't do it you were in trouble'

'They didn't care, now it's so different and there's respect between the students and the teachers'

'I was left-handed …. and they would come along and just whip you on the hand just for being left-handed and they would say put the pen in your other hand. I couldn't write with my other hand no matter what I tried'

'I hated it and was afraid'

'we were going to do a test, I was only about 12 and I was going out the gate and I met the teacher – I can still see her face – and she said 'where are you going?' I said 'I'm going down to do the exam'. 'you needn't bother' she said cos you're not going to get it. I have intelligence but she could have really ruined me altogether'

'I remember going home and my hands raw red from being hit and my mam asking what was wrong and I told her and she actually went to the school and said 'she's left-handed – don't be hitting her for it, she can't help it and that's the way it is', and I got it worse after that'

This negative experience of school had a huge impact on learners' confidence, staying with them into adulthood and resulting in anxiety in the adult classroom -

'you still have the hardwired fear of the classroom '

'the fear of making yourself look stupid'

'to this day I have terrible writing because I just had a terrible fear of writing'

'that fear actually does stay with you anyway because when you go into the adult class and you start off you tend to sit there and not say anything for the first couple of sessions … and you think 'if I open my mouth and say something I might sound stupid so I won't say it'

'It's fear – I don't know all those people and they all know each other'

However, these learners proved themselves to be resilient and determined and despite being initially nervous, given the right learning environment, they persevered and engaged –

'I turned to walk out the door and I saw a group of people walk in towards the desk and they were all the same age group as me and I thought ' you know what – I'll give it a go … 3 years later I was still there'

'I think that once you get into it you would (participate) – if everyone is at the same level'

'I just kept quiet - I was like that for the first few weeks and then I thought 'to hell with this - if you want to ask a question ask a question'. So I put my hand up and I asked the question and I remember the teacher saying to me "You don't have to put your hand up you're not in school".

Learners are faced with new challenges and demands as they age, such as physical limitations, decrease in cognitive ability and changes in how they are identified by society. Dispositional issues such as lack of confidence may have been carried with them from childhood. Awareness of these challenges while creating an inclusive, supportive environment within the classroom can help older learners to overcome these difficulties and pursue personal well-being through learning.

Where are the men?

The low rate of male participants in this study is reflective of the wider adult education sector where male participation is traditionally low – in 2018 male participation in lifelong learning was only 37.3% (SOLAS, 2018). Williamson (2010) states that older adults tend to behave according to their gender socialization with men inclined to stay at home in retirement while women are motivated to do things they have wanted to do outside the home, being free of family duties. Learners had differing views on why men were not engaging –

'men don't have the same interest'

'but some men do though, and they'd enjoy it if they gave it a go'

'when he discovered he was the only man among 10 women he wouldn't come back'

'I wonder is it that age thing like – 'what would I be doing that for' you know'

'(he's) extremely quiet … it wouldn't be his thing'

The men who took part in this study all had a history of active involvement in sports clubs or other organisations. Learners agreed that men were far more likely to become involved in physical activities and that what is available might not reflect their interests -

'if two men came in that door now and sat down with all of us on a Friday what would they do? When we're knitting and sewing?'

'we can't even get them to do a men's shed or anything'

'the only time that we get men to do anything in this estate is – we do a skip day twice a year… they come along for that and it's a great social event, and the men are there and they do all the heavy lifting and they pack the skips'

The low participation rates by men in educational programs for older adults may be a reflection of their retirement interests, the subject choices offered or the social groups to which they belong. Clearly there is an issue of gender difference in participation which needs further investigation.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The Senior Learner

It is important to understand the experiences of older learners in order to create an adequate environment for learning. They are a diverse group who each bring their own life experience and educational history to the classroom. In this study for example, none of the early school-leavers had enjoyed school, one was diagnosed as dyslexic later in life and some had literacy issues which they had gone on to address through adult education. In contrast to those who had a negative experience of formal education those who had completed secondary or higher education presented as confident and at ease with themselves -

> *'you're not so worried about making a fool of yourself – you've the confidence to ask a question and not worry if it seems silly to the person you've asked. And as long as they answer and say yes and get the problem solved'*
>
> *'It's only at this age that you have the patience and are comfortable'*
>
> *'I'm at the stage in my life now where I only do what I want to do, and I don't care, if I want to ask a question and everybody thinks it's stupid I don't care – I want to know'*
>
> *'you're not trying to impress'*
>
> *'it's a confidence you get in yourself, I think, when you come to a certain age'*

Learners presented with different abilities and varying expectations of what they would achieve from their learning, particularly in subjects such as computer skills, with some wanting to address a specific training need while others wanted more general learning. The different needs, cognitive abilities and learning preferences of these older learners can be addressed by applying the principles of UDL (Universal Design for Learning) - using flexible methods of delivery to ensure a good outcome for everyone, such as using training material and examples that are relevant to the age group, lots of visual material such as graphics, and providing clear, printed notes and exercises to try at home.

The Role of the Tutor and Classroom Environment

All participants felt that the role of the tutor in creating an inclusive, mutually respectful classroom environment was extremely important -

'I think when you go as an older person if the teacher respects you and you respect them you have a better working relationship'

'ability to bring all levels on and keep an eye on them, and not make us feel stupid'

'It's lovely when you are taught by someone nice who has insight'

'now it's so different and there's respect between the students and the teachers'

Learning from Each Other

An interactive environment where learners were encouraged to support and help their peers was important to the group who felt that they learnt well from each other and also that showing others enhanced their own learning -

'(the tutor) could be doing something over there but the person beside you might not know something and you know what they're trying to find out – that interaction is great'

'happy to accept help from the person beside you if they know what they're doing'

'very important, the group, for support. Everyone supports one another'

'any course I've ever done – the class was very important'

'you're benefiting from the experience of other people in the class'

'we all learn from each other. So if the teacher is up the other end and I've copped on how to do something I'd say to the person ' you can do it this way' and show them, or vice versa, you know we'd always just help each other along'

This highlights the importance of establishing a good group dynamic where learners are happy to share their own knowledge and skills and to learn from each other. A notable aspect of the study was the awareness among participants of different types of learning, from both structured and peer learning within the classroom, to intergenerational learning within the family, to informal learning occurring both inside and outside the classroom. Participants were eager to take control of their learning where they identified a gap in their knowledge and were generous in passing on their own expertise -

'I can't knit and as soon as I've off-loaded this one (grandchild asleep on knee) someone's going to teach me'

'I recently joined the gardening class and I'm enjoying it and I found that there is a great deal of interaction and advice from other students about how to do different things and where to get various things - very informal and most enjoyable'

' it's the first time I've been involved in running a club like this –when we started first we didn't have any money and didn't really keep any proper books, but when we went official we had to so I had to learn how to do it'

'and when I started with estate management … we asked could we do some more training'

'with college and with learning the computers and all that, I was learning all about money and stuff like that – (name) started me on book–keeping, how to keep the books for the club so that was great'

'I showed some of the others … to do it this way, a simpler way'

'last year we set up a webpage with DLR, where all our community centres are connected … that was all great learning'

Teaching Strategies

Learners were in agreement that they learn best in a relaxed, informal situation where there is no pressure and where they are encouraged to contribute and ask questions. The tutor was seen as vital in creating this space and facilitating the learning. There was a preference for learning through trial and error, being shown how to do something and then given the opportunity to try it themselves and learn by making mistakes -

'It needs to be a relaxed environment where you're not afraid or shouldn't feel intimidated to ask a question or be made to feel foolish if you do ask a question that everybody else knows but you don't'

'I think it's important not to feel under pressure in the class, and not to feel that you're rushed, because each person's ability is different. My retention wouldn't be great at times so I just feel a relaxed atmosphere is important'

'It's lovely to come in and there's an ease about the place. There isn't any big pressure, and we make mistakes and they're rectified'

' it's not a task for us to do it now. When you were in school you went in and sat down and everything was regimental, and you were there because you had to be there'

Where learner involvement was not facilitated, the pace was too fast, the level was wrong or there was too much content, the learning was compromised and learners felt rushed and frustrated –

'she would get in and take it and it would be done - and I would say 'hold on you didn't show me I want you to show me not do it for me so I know how to do it'

'he literally put his hand over my shoulder, picked up the keyboard and did something – I said…. 'I don't know what you've done, so I haven't learnt anything'

'I wanted to do beginners and I was put in the next level up and I was sitting there …so I went back and joined the beginners and that was fine'

'she told us we were all great - we all knew that she wanted us to feel good, but we knew we were doing it all wrong... you can see through it as an adult'

'she tended to lose people - it got more and more technical… I think she was trying to put too much into it for a term, instead of breaking what she was doing into 2 terms'

These findings illustrate that the use of a social constructivist teaching approach, where learning takes place in a social environment, learners take charge of their own learning and are actively involved in knowledge construction and 'hands-on' learning rather than passively receiving the information, would be a suitable strategy to use in the teaching of older adults and would create a very different experience from that of their early schooldays which would most likely have been a passive learning environment.

Learners found that what helped them to retain information was lots of repetition and practice and the ability to apply the learning outside the classroom -

> *'keep consolidating, keep making certain of the basics'*
>
> *'keep in touch with it. You see probably none of us are really using it all the time – I find that a bit of a problem'*
>
> *'I think it's only by doing it afterwards that you sort of benefit from it'*
>
> *' I practise what I did in the class at home by myself'*
>
> *'several times I've felt - we did that last week or the week before, but somehow or another… it went out of my head. It's as if the brain can only take a certain amount and then it just fades away'*
>
> ***'**You're likely to gain a lot more from something like this if you have another application for it elsewhere … that means that you're not losing what you gained in the class'*
>
> *'it's good when you know you can use it afterwards'*

Knowles principles of andragogy - self-directedness, recognition of experience, readiness to learn and ensuring the learning is relevant are clearly articulated by these older learners when describing their learning requirements.

THE LEARNER VOICE

Participants in the study reported that they enjoyed discussing what learning means to them as older adults and hearing about each other's educational history and learning journeys. It was interesting that one group, who were close-knit and had been meeting for several years, had never openly discussed their prior experiences of education with each other. They expressed the opinion that engaging in this research had given them the opportunity to find the voice to tell their story.

The National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013, p. 46) states 'given that many stereotypes about ageing are based on myths and misinformation about older people's competencies, beliefs and abilities, a better understanding of the process and experience of ageing is needed. One of the most effective

ways of ensuring that the reality of ageing is reflected in policy and service development is to ensure that people as they age are included in decision-making processes at all levels'.

When asked if they felt visible in education planning and policy making at local and national level most answered either '*no'* or *'don't know*'. Many learners felt that this was part of a wider issue of ageism in society where older people were overlooked and perceived as a nuisance by policy makers -

> *'there's a lot of TDs that don't even want the old people to have the free travel*'
>
> *'(name) said we are a drain on the country – that women in particular over the age of 40 were a drain on society'*
>
> *'we shouldn't be going out because we're stopping workers getting to work – I worked till I was 74'*
>
> *'women cannot afford to retire at 65 – lots have to stay working till 70 cos otherwise they don't have any money coming in'*
>
> *'some TDs wanted us to sell our houses and move out of Dublin'*

However, there were a few dissenting voices -

> *'when we have our AGM in the club we're asked what sort of activities we want and then (name) sees what she can provide us with to match what people are looking for … what's on offer doesn't always match what we want depending on what's available'*
>
> *'we would discuss at the start of the year what projects we're going to be working on'*
>
> *'I think so to a certain extent – look at the stuff we get from (head office) and that'*
>
> *'well not very visible, but there are people considering our needs too, because we get a lot of stuff provided here and for free, you know, like tutors'*

All participants agreed that they would welcome the opportunity to have a say in planning, recommending suggestion boxes or feedback forms in centres, and had plenty of ideas such as workshops or short courses in topics from home maintenance to psychology classes -

> *'there could be a questionnaire at the end of term asking you for suggestions*'
>
> *'offer say a five week taster course*'
>
> '*would love an Irish conversation class*'
>
> *'a DIY course would be great*'
>
> *'I think there's a huge gap there for people who end up doing something else – that they hadn't planned*'
>
> *'one off workshops or short courses would be good for that sort of thing'*

They felt that information about courses and services for older people should be readily available in libraries, citizens information offices, doctor's surgeries, chemists, churches, community centres, shop

or post office noticeboards – '*they should be in places where you're sitting waiting'*. None of the participants in this study were aware of the National Positive Ageing Strategy, none had heard of the National Learner Forum and none had seen the booklet 'Directory of Activities & Services for older people in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County' (dlr, 2017), a comprehensive guide to services for older people in the area. This would suggest that a lot of the information available for older adults is not reaching its target audience, perhaps due to an over-reliance on online rather than printed material which is favoured by this age-group.

A key finding of this study is that while researching European policy no statistics for participation in education in the over 65 age cohort could be found. As stated earlier, policy development is driven by data gathered in the 5 yearly Adult Education Survey which only measures the participation rate of adults aged 25 – 64. On further enquiry it was discovered that there is a limited amount of data pertaining to older learners collected in the quarterly labour force survey (LFS). This data, unpublished due to its small sample size, was made available by the CSO to the researcher upon request -

Persons aged 65 years and over classified by whether in informal education in the last four weeks				
	Year of survey: 2019			
	Q1	**Q2**	**Q3**	**Q4**
Yes - Is a student at taught learning activities (non-formal education) in the last 4 weeks	30.2 *(4.4%)*	28.9 *(4.1%)*	23.6 *(3.3%)*	36.2 *(5%)*
Total Respondents	691.4	696.3	703	709.4

Source: Labour Force Survey (LFS), Central Statistics Office, Ireland.

**Estimates for numbers of persons or averages where there are less than 30 persons in a cell are not produced as estimates are too small to be considered reliable*

This lack of hard data appears to validate the learners' perception of ageism and lack of visibility in educational policy making at European and national level. Older learners are a group of people 'who are not considered eligible for the workforce and therefore don't figure in the upskilling plans, but who have a formidable range of skills and life experience and a steely determination about making sure they use them' (Brady, 2009, p. 6).

Learners in this study described themselves as facing the future with energy and positivity -

> *'we are much freer. We're not inhibited now. There is a proverb – fiche bliain ag fás, fiche bliain faoi bhláth, fiche bliain ag meath agus fiche bliain gan bheith ann … 20 years a growing, 20 years in bloom, 20 years declining and 20 years where you might as well not be there (laughter) - but we don't look at it that way anymore'*
>
> *'No we've moved on - we're all determined to live to 100'*

'20 then would be the 80 now because I' approaching my mid 70's and I feel like I could go on - I can still do a good day's work, I'm still in good shape and still getting out. But what I'm saying is we lose the inhibitions – We're freer'

Having explored and analysed the role of education in the lives of these learners, and its contribution to the process of adaptation to this life stage, this research finds that social interaction, acquiring and sharing of knowledge and participating in learning activities in an inclusive environment contribute to health and well-being and foster a positive outlook – all indicators of successful ageing.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENATIONS

This research study set out to explore the experience of older adults engaged in non-formal learning within the community in an effort to establish their motivation for learning, what challenges they face in engaging with education and to establish the value of such learning both on a personal and societal level. It also endeavoured to establish if older learners are visible in the field of educational policy and planning.

The research found older learners to be forward-looking, vibrant, active and engaged citizens within their communities, interested in keeping up with technology and in learning new skills that they now find themselves needing or wanting. At the time of writing there is much focus on the well-being of older people due to the current global Covid-19 pandemic. The importance of information and communication literacy and community connectedness is prominent in public discourse as we seek to safeguard this group of citizens. With over 50% of people aged over 65 not online (Ageaction.ie), the socio-economic benefits of empowering older people to develop new skills to solve current problems and prevent future ones has never been more evident. Lifelong learning within the community offers the opportunity to acquire these new skills and knowledge, to engage in the sharing of education and to pursue the physical and emotional well-being and the positive attitude necessary for the retention of independence and autonomy in today's society.

A key finding is that while people are faced with changes in their physical and cognitive ability as they age they do not regard these changes as a barrier to learning, given the right environment, but simply as a different life-stage to which they must adapt.

An area that warrants further investigation is the correlation between experience of education in formative years and educational engagement and outcomes in later life. This study found that previous classroom experience had a profound effect on learners, leaving many vulnerable to anxiety about the learning environment.

Older learners are a diverse group, with different personal, socio-economic and educational histories. This must be considered and recognised by those in adult education - while we may not know everyone's background, we must be conscious how our attitudes and the atmosphere we promote within the classroom can influence their learning outcomes. Teachers should use a variety of teaching methods that can be adjusted for every student's strengths and needs, and attempt to remove any learning barriers, thus giving all students equal opportunities to succeed. Learning content should be managed so that it is meaningful and challenging, but not to the point where it frustrates the learner by information overload.

The lack of older men engaging in learning may be a result of their attitude to retirement, perhaps reflecting an internalized ageism, or may be that what is on offer does not reflect their interests. This is an area that warrants further investigation.

Participants in this study extol the mental health and social benefits they derive from the learning environment. For many it has literally been a lifeline which they treasure. These older learners do not discriminate between the value of accredited and unaccredited learning, they recognise and value all learning equally whether formal, non-formal or informal - this can be harnessed in the older classroom where everyone has something to share and the teacher can act as a facilitator. Participants were strongly of the belief that the benefits of their learning extended beyond themselves to their wider family, particularly younger family members, and on into their community and wider society.

Another key finding of the study is the lack of hard data on education for those aged 65 and over, both at national and EU level, suggesting that lifelong learning activities beyond working age are not valued by policy makers. The learners in this study would like to be more visible in educational policy and in public life.

The quality of life within a community is determined by how all of its citizens are catered for. Education for older adults contributes to their well-being both physically and mentally, and to social connectedness. They have much to offer from their experience and interests, with skills and competencies they can share. They want to be seen as active participants in an integrated society. It is hoped that this research study, by shining a light on the personal experiences, decision-making and motivations of older learners will increase awareness for educators and policy makers in planning for the future.

Miriam McGuirk

2020

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Griffith College Ethical Approval Form

This form should be completed by the researcher (with the advice of the research supervisor), for all research which involves human participants.

Research Title	**Learning in Later Life** **A study of the experience of older adults engaged in non-formal learning within the community**
Researcher(s)/Student	Miriam McGuirk
Supervisor (where relevant)	Orla Butler
Programme of Study (where relevant)	MATE

Checklist:

Please attach to all forms:	
Summary of Project Proposal (no more than 500 words)	✓
Participant Information Sheet	✓
If applicable, application should also include the following:	
Draft Consent Form *(page 2 of Participant Information Sheet)*	✓
Draft Research Instrument e.g. survey, interview schedule, focus group questions etc	✓

Part (a)

		Yes	No	N/A
1	Will you describe the main research procedures to participants?	✓		
2	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	✓		
3	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	✓		
4	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?			✓
5	Is the right to freely withdraw from the research at any time made explicit to participants?	✓		
6	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	✓		
7	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation?	✓		
8	Will your research involve discussion of topics which the participants might find sensitive?	✓		
9	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses or compensation for time) be offered to participants?		✓	
10	Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants in any way?		✓	
11	Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort?		✓	

12	Does your research involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or who may feel unable to give informed consent e.g. prisoners; children; people for whom English is not their first language; learners in a programme you teach on?		✓	
13	Will any non-anonymised and/personalised data be generated and/stored?		✓	

If you answered YES to any of questions 8 to 13 please complete Part (b) of this form. If there are any other ethical issues that you think the Committee should consider, please explain them in Part (b) of this form. It is the researcher's obligation to bring to the attention of the Committee any ethical issues not covered on this form.

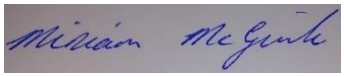
Part (b)

For each question 8 to 13 that you answered YES, please give a summary of the issue and action to be taken to address it (no more than 300 words in total):

Some participants may be sensitive about literacy levels. Some may have had negative experiences in childhood formal education. The use of focus groups rather than individual interviews means participants will not feel pressurised to contribute to the conversation on a topic which they do not wish to discuss. Participant will be assured that they do not need to answer any question which makes them uncomfortable.

Potential other ethical issues: *n/a*

Signed (by Researcher):



Date: 25/11/19

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT

INFORMATION SHEET

Dear _____,

I am an adult education tutor in DDLETB and studying for a Masters in Training and Education in Griffith College, Dublin.

I am conducting a research project on the involvement of learners (aged 65+) in non-formal education. The purpose of the research is to explore the experience of senior adults in education, and to identify the motivation for and barriers to participation among this age group.

I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group to discuss adult education within the community and to hear your views as a learner. The group will consist of approx. 5 – 9 participants and the interview will be held in *(location)* on *(date).* The duration will be approximately 1 hour. You will be asked to complete a short questionnaire about your personal circumstances, educational background and history of engagement in adult education prior to the interview. You do not need to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

The session will be voice recorded and later transcribed and analysed by myself. The findings will be documented in my dissertation. If you agree to participate I assure you of full confidentiality and you will not be identifiable in the finished research document, a copy of which will be made available to you.

All data will be stored securely on (my) the researcher's password protected laptop and a backup on an encrypted USB memory stick. I give my assurance that all information gathered as part of this research will be destroyed after graduation or in 24 months, whichever is sooner.

Participation in the study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time up to the analysis of findings, at which stage the data will be anonymous. Up to this point you are free to withdraw your data, without giving a reason for withdrawing, and without your withdrawal having any adverse effect for you.

Permission has been granted by Griffith College Ethics Committee to carry out this research. If you have any questions please contact myself or my dissertation supervisor, Orla Butler.

Thank you.

Miriam McGuirk

Contact Details:

Miriam McGuirk miriammcguirk@gmail.com
Orla Butler orla.butler@griffith.ie

CONSENT FORM

I have read the attached Information sheet and I **consent** to taking part in a focus group on adult education within the community and to offer my views as a learner.

> *'Participation in the study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time up to the analysis of findings, at which stage the data will be anonymous. Up to this point you are free to withdraw your data, without giving a reason for withdrawing, and without your withdrawal having any adverse effect for you'.*

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.

☐

> *'All data will be stored securely on the researcher's password protected laptop and a backup on an encrypted USB memory stick. I give my assurance that all information gathered as part of this research will be destroyed after graduation or in 24 months, whichever is sooner'.*

I understand that the session will be voice recorded and that all data will be destroyed within 24 months.

☐

I understand that I do not need to answer any question that makes me feel uncomfortable.

☐

I understand that the findings will be published in a Masters dissertation and that I will not be identified in the finished document

☐

I understand that I will not receive any recompense for my participation in this research.

☐

NAME: _____

SIGNATURE: _____

DATE: _____

TABLE OF ALIGNMENT

Learning in Later Life

A study of the experience of older adults engaged in non-formal learning within the community

This study will engage with learners in community in order to reflect the voice of the older learner and address the following research questions:

Research Question	*Lit Review*	*Focus Group Questions*
Context: Current discourse and policy ***What motivates senior adults to engage in non-formal learning?***	**Current Policy Trends** Interested parties: FET Strategy, Aontas, Ageaction **Why Older Adults Engage in Education** Developmental needs of older adults Motivation to learn: Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic (our assumptions) **The Senior Classroom – Teaching Strategies** Experience of older adult as valuable resource Diverse backgrounds and characteristics Role of teacher in providing supportive/safe environment	**Question 1** What makes you want to engage in learning activities? *Prompts:* *What caused you to return to education?* *What drives you to continue to engage with learning?* **Question 2** What does the ideal classroom look like for the older learner? *Prompts:* *What is different about learning as an older adult?* *What do you want to learn and why?* *How does adult learning compare to learning when you were in school?* *What is important to you in the classroom/learning environment?*

The Learning Environment	**Context** The views of the older learners about learning and education	**Question 3** What, in your view, is meant by Education? *Prompts:* *Why, where and how do we learn?* *Is learning important in different life stages?*
What are the benefits of lifelong learning to the individual and to society?	**Benefits of Engagement with Learning for Older Adults** Self: Self-sufficiency and coping strategies WHO report – active ageing combats social isolation, improved health and well-being Society: Ability to be a participant rather than onlooker civic involvement and self-advocacy	**Question 4** Has engaging with learning benefited you personally and do you feel it has benefited your wider family/community? *Prompts:* *Has it encouraged you to engage with any other activity group?* *Has it impacted on your family or community, positively or negatively?*
What are the barriers to participation that may arise?	**Barriers to Learning** External: Physical Internal: Cognitive/Physical/Social	**Question 5** What factors would prevent or make it difficult for you to engage in learning? *Prompts:* *Have you ever started a course that you did not finish? If Yes then why?* *Is there something you have always wanted to learn but haven't done so – what has stopped you?* *What do you think discourages or prevents others in your peer group from participating?*
The Learner Voice	Over 65s not featured in European study Irish picture Suggestions from learners for future planning	**Question 6** Do you have any suggestions for improvements in education for senior learners? *Prompts:* *As an older learner do you feel visible in education?* *Is there anything not happening for senior learners that you think should be happening?*

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Questionnaire

Personal Details:

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Which of the following best describes your current status?

Retired ☐

(previous occupation: _____)

Carer ☐

Housewife/husband ☐

Work part-time ☐

Word full-time ☐

Seeking employment ☐

Other ☐

Are you physically active? ☐

Do you live alone? ☐

Education:

At what age did you leave school/formal education? _____

What is your highest level of formal education? _____
(e.g. Junior Cert, Leaving Cert, Higher Education)

Higher Education details:

_____

Have you participated in any learning activity within the last 12 months? ☐

Details *(optional)*:_____

Social Activities:

Within the last 12 months have you been actively involved in any social activities such as:

Political party ☐

Church group ☐

Community group ☐

Choir ☐

Volunteer group ☐

Other ☐

*Any additional details*_____

_____

_____

_____

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. What makes you want to engage in learning activities?

   Prompts:
   Why are you here – what motivates you to want to learn?
   What caused you to return to education?
   What drives you to continue to engage with learning?

2. What does the ideal classroom look like for the older learner? (what does the older learner need/want in the classroom?)

   Prompts:
   What is different about learning as an older adult?
   How does the older learner learn well?
   What is important to you in the classroom/learning environment?
   How do you see the roll of the teacher in the adult learning environment?
   How do you see the roll of your peers in the adult learning environment?
   What do you want to learn and why?
   How does adult learning compare to learning when you were in school?

3. What, in your view, is meant by Education/Learning?

   Prompts:
   Where and how do we learn?
   Is learning important in different life stages?

4. Has engaging with learning benefited you personally/within your wider family/community?

   Prompts:
   Has it encouraged you to engage with any other activity group?
   Has it impacted on your family or community, positively or negatively?

5. What factors would prevent or make it difficult for you to engage in learning?

   Prompts:
   Have you ever started a course that you did not finish? If Yes the why?
   Is there something you have always wanted to learn but haven't done so – what has stopped you?`
   Would you know where to go to access information re education?
   What do you think discourages or prevents others in your peer group from participating?

6. Do you have any suggestions for improvements in education for senior learners?

   Prompts:
   As an older learner do you feel visible in education?
   Have you ever been asked your opinion on education for older learners?
   Is there anything not happening for senior learners that you think should be happening?

Appendix 6

Focus Group Checklist

Supplies:

Refreshments
Pen/paper (x 12)
Recording device / charger
Information/consent forms x 12
Questionnaires x 12

Day before:

Buy supplies
Check recording device
Print forms / get paper
Message contact person

Interview Guide

Introduction:

- Welcome participants and thank them for accommodating you. Introduce yourself - explain what you are studying and the topic of your dissertation, clarify that you are not there as an ETB employee.
- Distrubute information sheets and consent forms, allow a few minutes for reading of these and invite any questions re same.
- Collect completed consent forms.

Set the parameters:

- Length of meeting – request that everyone stays for full length of meeting
- Remind that it will be recorded / anonymity assured
- Request that everyone participates – remind them that they are they experts and have much to offer
- Request that there be no side-conversations – all comments directed to meeting (say this is for recording purposes)
- Explain that there will be another group in different site and that all information will be presented as one study (the two sites will not be compared and contrasted)
- If necessary start by telling about your own return to learning and what prompted it.
- Distribute questionnaire and make sure to collect papers
- **NB: Switch on recording devices before commencing Focus Group questions**

Finish:

Thank participants and remind them that you will make paper available when completed.
Next working day – Send email to contact person formally thanking the group for their participation.

CODING OF THEMES

1 Motivational Themes (how many times recurred)

No	Theme	Site A	Site B	notes
1	Computers/ict	12	17	(need to keep up with younger society
2	To learn new skill	2	6	Computers/English/knitting/photography
3	Fulfil social need	8	8	
4	Keep brain active	0	3	
5	Progress to other learning (non formal)	6	4	
5a	Progress to accredited	3		

2 Barriers to participation (how many times recurred)

No	Theme	Site A	Site B	notes
1	Health (physical)	1	2	
2	Transport/location	1	5	High
3	Classroom setup	1	1	
4	Fees	2	1	
5	Night/winter	1	5	high
6	Lack of time (family commitments)	3	1	
7	Lack of information	2	1	
8	Lack of self-belief Or confidence	6	0	Only early school leavers
9	Fear from school	6	0	Only early school leavers

Note: internal barriers only cited by early school-leavers

2.a Barriers to learning within class:

No	Theme	Site A	SITE B	notes
1	Too technical/advanced	0	2	Not as expected
2	Too much content	0	1	
3	Pace is wrong	0	1	
4	Lack of confidence (fear)	5	0	
5	Tutor attitude	2	4	
6	Cognitive function / memory		2	

Note: early school leavers barriers within class all internal vs external for others

3 Classroom Environment (what's important)

No	Theme	Site A	SITE B	Notes
1	Atmosphere	2	5	

2	Courses offered	1		
3	How youre taught Importance of basics/repetition/relevance/ Practice	2	3	How subject is presented
5	Life experience	1		
6	Tutor relationship	8	4	
7	School	9	1	
8	Peer relationship	5	4	
11	Learner attitude/confidence	1	7	

4 Benefits

self	Theme	Site A	Site B	notes
2	Social interaction Self esteem		2	Huge value/ gets you out of the house/ feel safe
3	Sense of achievement/feel good factor		1	
4	Keeping up with modern life		2	
5	Mental health Therapy	5	1	
6	Confidence Made my life easier	1		Dyslexia
family				
1	Friends interested		2	
2	Feel good factor extends to family Family relationships Good example to younger g Builds relationship with younger family en	8	2	
4	Cultural capital and intergenerational learning			/
5				
community				
1	Got grant		1	
2	Volunteering		2	Skills to offer and be useful
3	Passing on knowledge			Peer learning/teaching

5 Experience of school – Emergent theme

Theme	school	Ed level	notes
site B	3 loved 2 liked 1 didn't answer	3rd level 2nd level Early school leaver	

Site A	6 disliked 3 didn't say	-	Dyslexia/spelling Expelled Rote learning
Note: fear mentioned again and again			

6 Learner input

No	Theme	Site A	Site B	notes
1	Is your input sought Do you feel supported	Yes –1 No/don't know- 5	Yes – 2 No – 5 Don't know - 2	
2	What would you like to see /do	Mens shed	Irish conversation Diy Workshops Car maintenance	*workshops for basic life skills (for people cast into new roles)
3	Do you feel visible at local and national level in planning of ed	Discussion about tds vs old people Don't feel visible in lots of areas Not aware of learner forum	Don't know - 2 No - 2 Don't think so - 2	