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A study of students' experiences of work placement within the further education sector in the West of Ireland

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**A Study of Students' Experiences of Work Placement within the
Further Education Sector in the West of Ireland**

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Masters in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development

University of Limerick

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Title of Research Study

**A Study of Students' Experiences of Work Placement within the
Further Education Sector in the West of Ireland**

by

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the reward of Master of Arts in
Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development**

Submitted to the University of Limerick, 2nd October 2017

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work. No element of the work described in this dissertation has been previously submitted for any degree in University of Limerick, or in any other institution. I agree that the UL Library may lend or copy this dissertation on request.

Signed:

Julia Hawkins

“Commit yourself to lifelong learning. The most valuable asset you’ll ever have is your mind and what you put into it”

Brian Tracy

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Glossary of Terms

AONTAS	The Irish National Adult Learning Organisation
CEC	Cannes European Council
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DOTS	Decision Opportunity Transition Self Awareness
EDGE	Experience Degree Genetic Skills Emotional Intelligence
ELGPN	European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education and Training Board
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
EU	European Union
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
HE	Higher Education
IT	Information Technology
LTCC	Learning Theory of Career Counselling
NCGE	National Centre for Guidance in Education
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NGF	National Guidance Forum
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
QQI	Quality Qualifications Ireland
REAP	Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnership
SCCT	Social Cognition Career Theory
SLTCDM	Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making

SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SOLAS	Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanunaigh Agus Scileanna
UK	United Kingdom
UL	University of Limerick
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

Abstract

This study explores the experiences of students who have completed work placement as part of their further education studies. The research consider the influence of work placement on educational and vocational decision-making. The influence that work placement has on an individual's personal, social and vocational development is explored and specific skill sets acquired throughout the work placement period are identified. In addition, the research also considered factors that assist Guidance Counsellors prepare students for work placement and assisting them in their career decision making process.

According to Jarvis (2010) education and learning can occur in many situations including the practical setting whilst Kidd (2006) suggests the practical placement is a means of exploring occupational options that have been identified.

This study employs a qualitative approach to extrapolate narratives on students' experiences of their work placement through interpretive interviews with six QQI Level 5 students from various disciplines within a further education college in the West of Ireland.

The findings demonstrated that work placement is significant in contributing to students' independent decision making on educational direction and vocational path. Identification of key areas of growth and development included interpersonal skills, communication skills, teamwork and improvements needed in relation to confidence and assertiveness. In addition guidelines are developed to assist Guidance Counsellors in helping and supporting future students on work placement. A number of recommendations are suggested to inform policy, practice and research arising from the findings of this study.

Finally, a positive outcome of this study is the implementation of measures within the careers service of the further education college where I am currently part of the team in the provision of advance preparation of students for work placement and de-briefing and reflective practice process on completion of the placement stage of the programme.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This research study explores the experiences of students who have completed work placement as part of their further education studies. It also aims to investigate the skill sets acquired throughout work placement from the students' perspective and whether their experience of work placement has any influence on their career decision making. It further explores what factors are important for Guidance Counsellors to consider when preparing students for work placement.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview and justification for this research. The researcher's position in the context of this study is also addressed. The research methodology used is explained and an outline of the aims and objectives of the research project is provided. Lastly, a brief structural description of the thesis is outlined.

1.1 Context and Justification for the Research Study

There is a need to research the students' experience of work placement in the further education sector to gain understanding of the positive/negative aspects of the experience for students and to explore whether their placements influence their career decision making. As a practitioner working in this field, I am keen to carry out this research to increase my knowledge and understanding (Jarvis, 2010). The National Employer Survey (2015) reports that work placement is the most popular form of collaboration between employers and further education and training providers. A Strategic Review of Further Education and Training (FET) and the Unemployed (DES, 2013) raises concerns with regard to the amount and quality of work placements provided in Further Education (FE) courses.

SOLAS (2014) under the "Pathways to Work" initiative emphasises the goal of providing the unemployed with relevant education and training programmes and work placement which in turn will lead to labour market opportunities. In a recent survey, National Employers Survey (2015) it noted that on the job placement is the most popular form of collaboration between employers and further education and training providers with 75% of all employers involved in collaborations with further education providers. It stated further improvements in collaboration with FET could be achieved through a more practical component to courses by means of long-term placements and internships for students. The key challenge relates to

“employers’ capacity to provide sufficient and structured workplace learning opportunities” (National Employers Survey, 2015 p.124). The SOLAS (2015) report fails to provide any information on the significance of work placement as part of the training experience and no feedback from the learners perspective on their work placement experience.

The benefits of the study are to ascertain the influence work placement may or may not have on students’ decisions on educational progression routes and employment opportunities. Reflection on the work placement programme and on what were positive experiences and what were the negative experiences. An evaluation of the learning outcomes of the concept of theory and practice. The further education college can benefit by this direct feedback from the student to help and support future students completing on the job work placement. The Education and Training Board (ETB) organisation can relate to the insight provided by the students as an essential part of the links between the business enterprises, education and the learners.

1.2 Researcher’s Position in the Study

I have been working as a teacher in the further education sector for the past twelve years. As part of my work, I prepare students for work placement. The students are visited on placement by a supervisor and the supervisor prepares a written report. However, the experiences of the students are not recorded or reviewed and I believe their views and experiences are necessary to inform future practice. As a trainee Guidance Counsellor I am keen to gain knowledge of students’ experiences, learnings and potential influences on career decision making.

1.3 Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study on the basis that more in depth data can be obtained in the study and the ease of access ability of respondents. It involved semi-structured face to face audio recorded interviews which were then transcribed. The data analysis involved going through the material for key themes which were then mapped to show the links between them (Thomas, 2009).

The primary research questions involved:

- Review of the work placement from the perspective of the type of skills acquired throughout the work placement period and any concerns that arose while on work placement and coping mechanism.
- The students' perspective on their work placement experiences.
- The influence of the work placement on students' decision making with regard to further education progression routes and with regard to future employment.
- The role of the Course Co-ordinator and the Guidance Counsellor in helping and supporting the students on their return from work placement in exploring and evaluating the experience.
- Advice provided by students to future students completing work placement.

1.4 Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this study is to explore the experiences of students who have completed work placement as part of their further education studies. The objectives include the critical review of the literature on work placement in the context of the further education sector, to interview a number of students to collect data on the positive/negative aspects of their work placement and its influence on their career decision making and lastly to gain knowledge to assist Guidance Counsellors preparing students for work placement and assisting them in their career decision making process.

1.5 Outline of the Research Study

Chapter 1: Introduction to the research topic and focuses on the rationale for the study. It explains the methodology employed and outlines the aims and objectives of the research study. Lastly, it provides an outline of the chapters of the thesis.

Chapter 2: This chapter presents a review of literature from a range of sources including academic journals, textbooks, online articles, policy documents and research reports. This literature review is broken down into three sections. Section one outlines the Further Education and Training Sector in Ireland. Section two reviews work placement in the Further Education courses. Section three focuses on vocational theories of career development and career decision making and the policies, theories and practice of guidance.

Chapter 3: The purpose of this chapter is to describe and justify the methodology and research methods used for this research study. Initially, it focuses on identification of research questions. Then, the rationale behind choosing qualitative approach is explained and

supporting it as the most suitable design to generate responses to the research questions. The chapter describe the research methods employed including data collection and analysis. Finally, issues of validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethics are addressed.

Chapter 4: The primary findings of the research on the study of students' experience of work placement in the Further Education sector are discussed. The findings are discussed through a number of key themes which are then linked in the data analysis strategy. Quotations from respondents are included to help illustrate and explain specific issues.

Chapter 5: This chapter synthesizes and analyses the findings collected from the primary data, interpretive semi-structured interviews with reference to the research questions and the previous research in the literature review.

Chapter 6: The final chapter conclude the study by means of an overall synthesis of the findings and an appraisal of the strengths and limitations of the research study. It outlines implications at a practical and research level for guidance counselling and reflects on the personal learning of the researcher.

1.6 Conclusion

The main purpose of this chapter was to provide an outline of the key elements of this study. It proceeded to justify the reasoning behind this research and summarised the aims and objectives of the research study. Finally, it provided a structured description of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present a review of the relevant literature from a range of sources including academic journals, textbooks, policy documents, online articles and guidance related websites. This literature review is divided into three sections. Section one review the Further Education and Training (FET) sector from a policy and theoretical perspective. Section two examines the concept of work placement in further education under the headings of policy, theory and practice. The final section reviews theories of career development and career decision making relevant to further education and examines the role of guidance counselling in the Further Education (FE) sector.

2.1 The Further Education and Training (FET) Sector

2.1.1 History of FET Sector

The FET sector was formed because of a Department of Education (DE) concept to focus on meeting the requirements of a more academically aware population and a rapidly growing knowledge economy (DES, 2004). The sector focuses on offering re-skilling and up-skilling programmes to school-leavers and mature individuals, over the age of sixteen years; who may or may not have completed second level education (SOLAS, 2014). There are approximately 22,000 students currently participating on FET courses (www.solas.ie, 2016). FET provision is diverse and wide ranging and covers both full time (PLC, Youthreach, VTOS) and part time (Back to Education Initiatives, Adult Literacy) (McGuinness et al., 2014).

This review will focus on the Further Education Colleges within the FE sector. They offer a range of Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses which are designated as post second level education option but are not considered part of the third level education system (DES, 2000). PLC courses are typically full-time and taught in one academic year, offering general and vocational studies and include a work placement element. Qualifications achieved are at Level 5 and Level 6 on the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) framework and are accredited (SOLAS, 2014). FET learners are a diverse group in terms of backgrounds, needs, ambitions and maturity (DES, 2013).

Starting with the history on how the restructuring of the provision of the FET in Ireland came about in 2011, it resulted from the government's decision to abolish FÁS in 2011 introduced legislative reform to the FET sector with the creation of a new FET Authority, SOLAS (AONTAS 2013, DES 2013). SOLAS, with oversight from the DES, is responsible for the strategic development and funding of further education and training in Ireland, as outlined in its Further Education and Training Strategy for 2014-2019 (DES, 2013).

Under the Further Education Training Act 2013, the 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) which had previously been the main providers of FET in Ireland were dismantled, and replaced by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) (AONTAS, 2013, DES, 2013; McGuinness et al., 2014). In addition the legislation transferred the training functions of FÁS to the ETBs (AONTAS, 2013, DES, 2013; McGuinness et al., 2014). PLC (including work placement) are now administered by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) under the direction of SOLAS. The change in management structure has brought no change however to the work placement experience (DES, 2013).

2.1.2 Policy Perspective on Adult Education

The research supports the reason for policy makers interest in adult education as indicated by Jarvis (2010) is that those in power are motivated mostly by a capitalist agenda and therefore increasingly education policy is being dictated by employability.

Within the Irish context a key principle of adult education is that it enables re-engagement in learning; the PLCs are central to providing this second chance education in Ireland (DES, 2000). In 2000 in the white paper, Irish policy makers adopted the concept of Lifelong Learning on the basis that it promotes economic prosperity and social cohesion. Then in 2011, as part of its commitment to its agenda for Lifelong Learning, the Irish government began to introduce significant legislative reforms specifically to its FET sector, one of its primary adult education routes (AONTAS, 2013).

Jarvis (2009) explains that citizenship and social inclusion were key elements in forming European Union (EU) education policy. In the 1990's the focus on the EU education policy documents were on employment, technological developments and the labour market. As outlined by Jarvis (2009) there was a shift from lifelong education to lifelong learning which meant individuals were responsible for his/her learning. An outcome of this was the EU

White Paper (CEC, 1995) on the Learning Society which strived to link education and business closer together. Leading on from this the Qualifications Education and Training Act, (1999) as part of a European agreement outlined in the Bruges-Copenhagen Process (2002) to promote the European dimension in vocational education and training and the development of quality assurance mechanisms. This in turn leading to a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for Lifelong Learning with recognition of qualifications, mobility for working and learning, ensure quality and transparency.

2.1.3 Theoretical Perspective on Adult Education

From a theoretical perspective, since the introduction of the term lifespan learning by Houle (1964) there has been a significant emphasis on self directed learning within adult education; and a greater increase in the emphasis on it being a life-long process according to policy makers and academics alike (OECD, 2004; Jordan et al., 2008).

Knowles (1980) developed the theory of andragogy, the art and science of teaching adults. It takes into account the adult's: self-concept, self-direction, knowledge, skills and experience, internally motivated to learn and orientation to learning. The barriers that prevent adults from taking part in learning opportunities is one of the main talking points in adult learning. Barriers to participating varies – in some societies, cultural norms exclude women or certain ethnic or religious groups from education. In others, the main barriers are psychological and social, with some disadvantaged groups seeing education as not for the likes of us.

In addition, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle has provided a useful tool for comprehending learning through work placement. His theory outlines learning as

the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.

(p.41)

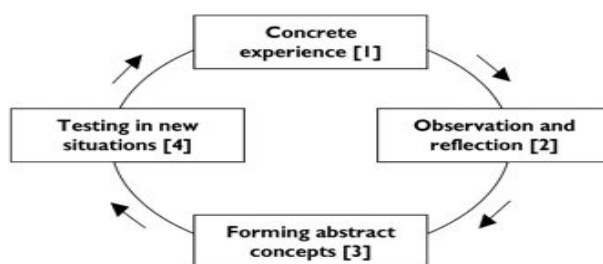


Fig. 2.1 Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984)

2. 2 Work Placement on PLC Courses

This section of the review concentrates on work placement as part of the practical based training in further education. The review is carried out under the headings of policy, theory and practice.

2.2.1 Policy Perspective of Work Placement

More recently, the quality of work placement within the PLC sector has been questioned and it is felt there is a need for PLC programmes to review employers' requirements to avail of significant benefits to all stakeholders (SOLAS, 2014). Additionally, under the "Pathways to Work" the initiative emphasises the goal of providing the unemployed with relevant education and training programmes and work placement which in turn will lead to labour market opportunities (SOLAS, 2014). McGuinness et al., (2014) in relation to work placement details the complete lack of data outcomes and information with regard to the effectiveness of this module as part of the FE programme.

In a recent survey, National Employers Survey (2015) it noted that on the job placement is the most popular form of collaboration between employers and further education and training providers with 75% of all employers involved in collaborations with further education providers. It stated further improvements in collaboration with FET could be achieved through a more practical component to courses by means of long-term placements and internships for students. The key challenge relates to "employers' capacity to provide sufficient and structured workplace learning opportunities" (National Employers Survey, 2015, p.124).

2.2.2 Theoretical Perspective of Work Placement

Research carried out by Jarvis (2010) on adult education refers to the importance of practical experiences in lifelong learning, "knowledge of the practice of education can be learned partly by doing it in the field of practice" (p.261). Coco (2000) suggested that work placements are a "planned transition from the classroom to the job, and are a natural bridge between college and the work world" (p.68).

When dealing with teaching adults it is necessary to include classroom instruction into the knowledge of practice, "where it needs to become embedded within their own understanding

of their own practice – their own practical knowledge” (Jarvis, 2010, p.262). From the same perspective Woolfe, et al., (1987) has written about the importance of work in individual’s lives as it influences their social and personal life leading to organising their personalities. Likewise Jordan et al., (2008) promotes the concept that experience and learning are inseparable and where people can learn from experience gained.

In addition to experience gained from work placement, a key element in the process is reflection. Some of the most notable theorists that carried out research in this area are Schon with regard to reflective experiential learning and Kolb who is known for cyclical experiential learning. It is where reflection is a vital way of improving future practice and it can be facilitated by reflective writing (Jordan et al., 2008). Schon (1987) believes that unless students reflect on their progress they will not learn to correct their mistakes and feedback will become merely a formulaic activity. Boud et al., (1990) also believe that reflective practice is an important feature in work placements as it features the individual and his other experiences, leading to a new conceptual perspective or understanding. They have defined reflective practice as:

a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations.

(Boud et al., 2001, p.19)

Boud et al., (2001) proposed a three-stage model of the reflection process focusing on: returning to the experience, attending to feelings connected with the experience, and re-evaluating the experience through recognising implications and outcomes.

In addition, Dewey (1938) explained the “organic connection between education and personal experience” (p.25). A notable element of experienced based learning is to do with meaning is drawn from a new experience in the light of prior experiences. It is where learning is facilitated by reflection, evaluation and reconstruction by the learner (Andresen et al., 2001).

Leading on from this it is important to express the necessity of suitable advanced preparation prior to participating in learning outside the college environment (McElhaney, 1999). Work placement according to Heyler (2011) is a form of experiential learning and combines learning with the activity and needs to be incorporated as a holistic approach in the higher education experience. In the same vein a more recent view from Bassot et al., (2014) work

placement as “useful to try out something you might be interested in doing later in life and also offer broader insights into the world of work” (p.125).

Worldwide experiential learning has been incorporated into the higher education system in the form of work placement within programmes, internship schemes and sandwich courses. Studies performed by Little and Harvey (2006) reveal that undergraduate work placement is a major element in higher academic achievement standards and employability of graduates. Significant contribution of work placement identified is the skills gained in teamwork, communication and learning skills. The specific and vast amount of knowledge and expertise demonstrated by work-based learners confirm the value of work placement (Little and Harvey, 2006). In the world of today work placement as a formal part of the programme is concerned with a more competence-based learning focus. It is perceived nowadays that the graduate needs to be equipped with the technical skills to do the job and also with higher level “soft” skills to apply to the task on hand. Harvey et al., (1998) outlines the benefits of work placements is where theory is put into practice; the gaining of personal attributes of time management, self confidence and adaptability; development of key interactive attributes namely team working, interpersonal and communication skills; helping with career choice and the building up of a network of contacts. According to Byrne and Smyth (2010) it is important for students on work placement to build a network of contacts in support of securing employment.

2.2.3 Practice of Work Placement

It is extremely difficult to find literature that supports students’ experience of work placement in the FE Sector (SOLAS, 2015). Adult students’ feedback on their participation in FE courses is provided by AONTAS (2016) “I am an Adult Learner” Report which provides minimal content in relation to work placement. Associated comments from FE students are relayed in relation to the provision of more solid links between the training sector and the employers and a few comments on the positive impact work placement has provided while on FE courses.

The rationale for having to draw on reports and studies from the Higher Education (HE) system in Ireland and the UK is due to the lack of literature available on work placement within the FE sector in Ireland.

One such report in the HE sector in Ireland is that of “Work Placement in Third Level Programmes” from the Roadmap for Employment-Academic Partnerships (REAP) Project (2011). This report compiles the perspectives on placement from all of the key stakeholders. The outcome of the report in relation to work placement experiences from the students perspective which is of relevance to my study included: generic skills acquired by students on placement enhanced their future employability; students felt that more in-depth placement preparation and more contact while on placement would be beneficial and finally students believed that placements provided opportunities for putting classroom learning into practice and also gained from informal learning in the workplace. In addition it established that work placements provide opportunities for students to develop soft skills, such as communication, teamwork and multi-tasking skills, which are essential in learning and work situations as well as part of general life skills for employees. Student benefits of placement expressed were it influenced choice of college course; good preparation for future career and build networking opportunities. Whereas areas for improvement suggested were in relation to preparation for placement and more contact with academic supervisor.

In the UK education system work placement takes the form of one-to-two week block period of work placement and it is perceived to be a time for exploring specific interests, adding valuable content to the Curriculum Vitae (CV) and in learning about the real experiences of the working world.

There are several research studies available on work placement and its impact on students in HE in the UK. One such study by Hall et al., (2007) focuses on the role of work placement in developing employment competences. The research is based on data from Aston Business School annual survey of work placement over a five-year period. Both employers and students are surveyed about the personal competences, namely “soft skills” obtained on work placement. The positive outcome of the study is that students gain excellent self-development and personal effectiveness skills which are highly rated skills for employability. It highlighted certain skills such as leadership, negotiating and to a lesser extent critical thinking and problem solving were of less importance as competences for both the placement year and for employment. Teamwork, relationship building and effective communication are the key skill sets for enhancing employability. Limitations of the study resulted from the structure of the methodology and in relation to the terminology used in the survey.

Another research study on work placement experience, Bullock et al., (2009) where the policy and practice relating to student work placements namely the sandwich placement model, in two departments in a university in the south west of England were researched. The aim of the study was to establish the placement experience in terms of student academic achievement and transferrable skills together with future employment aspirations. The research findings highlighted students who completed work placement gained substantially in terms of maturity, confidence levels, interpersonal skills and aptitude for learning. Students returning to college from work placement experience perform better academically but this outcome is tainted slightly as there is a tendency for the higher academic achievers that take up work placement in the first place. It is evident from the students' perspective that work placement plays a vital role in enhancing their employment prospects after graduating and in developing their general career progression routes.

More recent research includes Helyer et al., (2014) study based on a graduate internship programme in Teeside University in north east England. It set out to examine whether learning through experience in the workplace via internships contributes to enhancing graduate employability. On evaluation the employers were extremely positive with the graduates' performance where they proved to be enthusiastic, creative, emotionally intelligent and committed to undertaking all tasks requested of them. The few negative comments on the graduates' performance were based on immaturity rather than capability. To summarise the key findings, Helyer et al., (2014) states,

the combination of subject knowledge and real-life workplace experience, perhaps via an internship, provides a catalyst for future innovation, development and success.

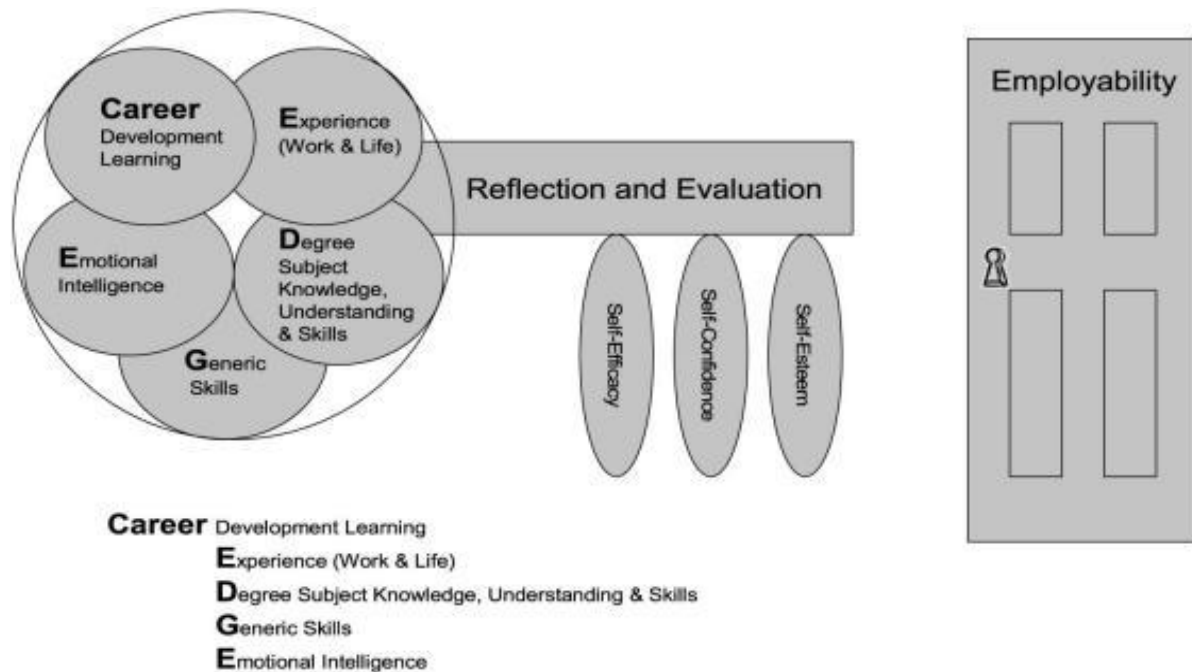
(p.368)

A further study, Wilson Review (2012), commissioned by the UK government reviewed work placement participation in a number of universities. The report highlighted that students who completed one-year work placement as part of their course were more employable than students who did not receive work placement. This study is relevant to FE in Ireland as it emphasises the benefits of incorporating a work placement element within the course structure. Wilson (2012) states

including work placement in higher education programmes, helps students to be better in the context of their own lives and employment.

(p.38)

Additional publications from Pegg et al., (2012) which offers information and guidance to higher education institutions members of staff in relation to the enhancement of student employability. This is in line with the Career EDGE model, developed by Darce, Pool and Sewell (2007) from the University of central Lancashire with regard to the key to employability emphasised in the diagram as follows:



CareerEDGE - The Key to Employability

Fig. 2.2 Dacre, Pool and Sewell (2007)

There are significant gains for the student, employer and the academic institution in work based learning. This fact is supported by research which identifies a period of formal work placement is crucial in confidence building and in turn forming employment prospects for graduates. It noted that it is necessary to incorporate a reflective element to the work placement. A number of concerns emerged as Moon (2006) states students lacked the skills of self-awareness and were unable to identify and describe the skill sets obtained on work placement. In order to overcome this issue and to get the most benefit from the experience it is necessary to build in a reflective component to work placement. Learning journals are a tool to support and develop reflective practice. Wilson (2012) states “being reflective requires a thinking process that understands strengths and weaknesses and seeks means for their enhancement” (p.39).

2.3 Vocational Theories of Career Development and Career Decision Making

According to Jeffers (2006) work placements offer students a way of truly engaging with their learning and appreciating its relevance; the work placement aspect of vocational training is one of its strengths and hence the relevance of vocational theories to the study of the effectiveness of work placements.

There are several vocational theories that provide a foundation in relation to adult guidance. Starting with Holland's Person Environment Fit Theory (1985) where he linked vocational choice with personality types. The concept taken was that people like to seek out environments that allow them to use their skills and abilities and at the same time working in the environment of likeminded people (Sharf, 2002). Then Parsons theory (1909) trait and factor theory where clients are picking a job that's a proper fit for them based on their skills, abilities and aptitudes and matching these interest areas with a specific occupation.

Another theorist which is of utmost interest with reference to work placement is Donald Super (1957) where his focus was on a developmental model where occupational choice was based on development across the life-span. The fundamental element of Super's theory is that the self-concept changes over a person's life as a result of experiences. This is very relevant to the work placement within FE where the student is provided with substantial experience which can have an instant effect on decisions they make regarding their future not long after participating in the work placement.

Yet another vocational career theory which is relevant to mention is Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory focuses on career self-efficacy. This is where the client takes control of the decision making and destiny. It is apt to use Social Cognition Career Theory (SCCT) to aid in exploring student's work placement due to its realistic approach and the acceptance that there may be barriers due to expectation levels to overcome on choice of work placement. When referring to vocational theories, in career counselling the career decisions in line with social learning theory implies the more experience you have the better the chances of you making sound career decisions. Krumboltz decision making techniques involves enacting and embracing genetic endowment, environmental conditions, learning experiences and task-approach skills in career decisions.

Similarly, Savickas (1999) proposes that ability, interest, values and belief system, family, culture and environment are basic factors for career choices. Savikas (2012) presents the

concept that the individual is the agent in their own career story and they have the ability to impose meaning on their career experiences. This Career Construction Theory implies career adaptability where the individual utilises their skills and abilities in fitting themselves into the right occupation.

Finally, the contribution of the DOTS model by Law and Watts (1977) is relevant where it outlines that a client is very self aware and is fully in tune with potential opportunities based on their level of capabilities and interests which is referred to as opportunity awareness. In this light it is evident the value of acquiring occupational information prior to the decision making process (Sharf, 2010).

2.3.1 Policy Perspective on Guidance

As a starting point based on research, according to Savickas et al., (2009) career guidance is being seen as a socio-political catalyst by policy-makers such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and European Commission. Consequently greater emphasis is being placed on career guidance in public policy, and it is being defined as an activity across the lifespan requiring self-agency (Patton and McMahon, 2014).

At an International Level career guidance is there to provide services to help individuals at any stage in their lives to manage their careers (OECD, 2004). Furthermore, the OECD (2004) outline the necessity for policy makers to work with career guidance practitioners “in support of the development of career management skills, better career information and diverse service delivery” (OECD, 2004, p.149).

Similarly, at a European level, guidance is a lifelong service to help individual’s with their educational, training and occupational decision making (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network, 2015). The EU Council Resolutions 2004 and 2008 emphasise the role of lifelong guidance for all EU citizens with key priorities for all citizens to have access to guidance services and to obtain lifelong career management skills.

In an Irish context, the National Guidance Framework (NGF) recommended an integrated lifelong guidance service for Ireland to create the necessary conditions for learning and a prosperous and better society. The guidance counselling service includes vocational guidance throughout the lifespan; labour market education and training; counselling; information and resource management; and professional practice (NGF, 2007). NGF (2007) promotes an

integrated lifelong guidance service which is person-centred rather than age-centred which facilitates people in managing their vocational choices in life (NGF, 2007).

In addition, SOLAS strategy for guidance in FET proposes a national referral system and greater collaboration between national agencies. According to SOLAS (2014) Section 10 guidance service includes one-to-one guidance and group guidance to adults and early school leavers to support them in career and life choices (SOLAS, 2014).

2.3.2 Theoretical Perspective on Guidance

An important factor to note in relation to lifelong guidance is that in parallel to the development of adult education into a concept of lifelong learning, is the repositioning of adult guidance as lifelong guidance (NGF, 2007; SOLAS, 2014). Theorists such as Watts (2005) and Kidd (2006), believe individuals in the 21st century must find security in their employability skills rather than employment itself and the role of the Guidance Counsellor is to enhance client's employability (Kidd, 2006).

2.3.3 Practice Perspective on Guidance

In respect of the guidance offered in the PLC Colleges of FE it is governed by the DES and therefore the post-primary school circulars on guidance are applicable. It is a holistic model (educational, personal, and social) the provision is based on the DES circular 009/2012 and its allocation is determined by the institution (SOLAS, 2014; NCGE, 2017).

The guidance services on offer in a PLC are the provision of preparation, help and support with students' entry into higher education and other educational progression routes (NCGE, 2017). In addition it includes the availability of labour market, learning and career-related information, planning and organising workplace learning and establishing links with the wider business community, agencies and voluntary sector (DES, 2016).

A significant strategic review of FET by the DES in 2013, found that in the post-primary and PLC Colleges: the reduction in the guidance provision is likely to have a negative impact on the quality of the guidance. The 'career clusters' concept should be used as a framework to educate students, parents and tutors about career decisions (Sweeney, 2013).

The guidance service as specified in the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) (2016) is divided into three areas personal/social, educational and vocational. Firstly, personal/social counselling provides a means for clients to address personal, social development and academic concerns through one to one and group counselling, workshops, seminars and referral procedures. The Guidance Counsellor in practice uses various models such as “the life skills counselling model of (Nelson-Jones, 2012), “Skilled Helper Model” (Egan, 2010) and the three significant counsellor attributes of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding (Rogers, 1951).

2.4 Conclusion

In summary this chapter has addressed relevant literature relating to Adult Education, focusing on the history of FE and outlined recent policy and legislation with regard to this sector. It has provided details on guidance in FE from a theoretical, policy and practical perspective. It has discussed vocational theories of career development and career decision making. Finally, it has examined theory and policy in relation to work placement and reviewed a number of reports and studies pertaining to the area of work placement. This study, in Chapter 3 will investigate the experiences and perspectives of students who have completed work placement in the FE Sector.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology and research methods employed in this research study. Initially, it focuses on identification of research questions, then the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach is outlined. It describes research methods employed including data collection and analysis techniques. Finally, issues of validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethics are addressed.

Research is a “disciplined, balanced inquiry, conducted in a critical spirit” (Thomas, 2009, p.21). It is about the relationship between the background meaning where the issue arises, the issue implying the problem or question and the solution which may be achieved through research. Research is not about proving what is right or wrong (Thomas, 2009).

I currently work as a teacher in the further education sector. As part of my work, I prepare students for work placement as part of their further education course. The students are visited on placement by a supervisor and the supervisor prepares a written report. However, the experiences of the students themselves are not recorded or reviewed and I believe their views and experiences are valuable and necessary to inform future practice.

3.1 Identification of Research Questions

Thomas (2009) also states that methodology means “to talk about or study something” (p.70). It incorporates both methods employed and reasoning for choice of research design. Blaxter et al., (1996) explains “your research questions determine your approach and techniques” (p.75) whereas Silverman (2000) states that it is necessary to be aware of what exactly one wants to accomplish from the research and the questions need to reflect this. I am keen to gain knowledge of students’ experiences, learning and potential influences on career decision making.

It is important to construct key research questions that underpin the research (Merriam, 2001) The overall aim of this study was to explore the experiences of students who had completed work placement as part of their further education studies.

Therefore, the specific primary research question was:

“What are the experiences of students’ who have completed work placement as part of their further education?”

In addition a number of secondary research questions were identified:

1. Does the students’ experience of work placement influence their career decision making?
2. What factors are important for Guidance Counsellors to consider when preparing students for work placement?
3. What skill sets are acquired throughout work placement from the students perspective?

3.2 The Research Paradigm

Attention was given to identifying the most suitable research paradigm to answer the identified research questions.

A paradigm “is a technical word used to describe the ways that we think about and research the world” (Thomas 2009, p.72). An interpretivist paradigm, which is the core focus of this research, is “rich, exciting and challenging in lots of ways” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.10). It allows us to make patterns of meanings and captures the complexity that characterise the real world. It has become “an increasingly popular approach to social research” and how it is “broadly inductivist, constructionist and interpretivist” (Bryman, 2004, p.380). The approach is interpretive in nature leading to the discovery of the meaning, experiences and knowledge of the people being researched (Ryan, 2006).

Research consists of positivism (quantitative) research and interpretivism (qualitative) research (Thomas, 2009). Positivism strives for “objectivity, measurability, predictability, controllability, patterning, the construction of laws and rules of behaviour and the ascription of causality” (Cohen et al., 2011, p.31). In contrast interpretivist research focuses on understanding of the person’s interpretation of the world (Cohen et al., 2011). It can be described as an interest in people and the way they relate with each other, how their worlds are constructed (Thomas, 2009). The positivist approach acquires knowledge in an objective manner which involves measuring and recording and in contrast interpretivist approach is

where the individuals' interpretation is independent of objective measurements (Cohen et al., 2007). Positivism is of the assumption that you can prove features of reality and on the other hand interpretivism is perceived as a human construction. Positivism is seen as a deductive process where generalisability is easier where as in contrast interpretivism is viewed as an inductive process where generalisability is more difficult (Thomas, 2009).

The strengths of positivism research according to Cohen et al., (2006) are that “quantitative data analysis is a powerful research form, emanating in part from the positivist tradition” (p.501). However, the weakness lies in the lack of opportunity to ask probing questions or to check back with the respondents. Additional limitations of positivism relate to:

linear, quantitative and hypothetico-deductive approaches fail to capture adequately the richness and complexity of the interaction of individual and contextual factors, human action, consciousness and agency.

(Herr et al., 2004, p.625)

The strengths of interpretative research, is where the individual's interpretation is independent of objective measurements. It is characterised by a concern for the individual; the central focus being in understanding the individual from within and understanding their subjective world (Cohen et al., 2007).

Limitations include context is an issue and there is an over reliance on the respondent's ability to provide thick descriptions in the process (Thomas, 2009). Additional limitations refer to the fact that the findings are not tested for statistical significance which means they cannot be extended to wider populations with a major degree of certainty (Cohen et al., 2007).

There is a need to pay attention to how the data is interpreted as it may be exposed to subjectivity and bias. Therefore it is important for the researcher to be conscious of reflexivity to examine preconceived ideas (Ping-Chun, 2008). Rigour and validity need to address claims of subjectivity and bias (Robson, 2007). According to Cohen et al., (2011) reactivity presents a challenge for this form of research as the presence of the researcher may change the situation for the participants.

Stead et al., (2012) state “qualitative research methodologies open avenues for new understandings of the world of work” (p.107). A qualitative approach was employed in this study as it is more appropriate for the purpose of this research where

information may be facts, or opinions or attitudes, or any combination of these, by doing face to face interviews you get the contextual and behavioural detail and the commitment of your respondents.

(Thomas, 2009, p.160)

This research study uses an interpretivist paradigm as it helps to gain understandings and perceptions of students in relation to work placement in FE from a qualitative perspective. It was chosen on the basis that more in depth data can be obtained from the study and it made possible the gathering of insight into the students' experiences of work placement (Kidd, 2006). An interpretive method "assumes there are many realities as there are people (Kidd, 2006, p.86).

3.3 Access and Sampling

This study sought to gain the perspectives of FE students participating in work placement as part of their college course. Prior to collecting the data, ethical approval was granted by the University of Limerick's School of Education, 8 April 2017.

I applied a specific sampling strategy to source the participants for the study. Sampling involves taking a small portion of a whole in order to show its quality, it looks for relationships that show variables (Thomas, 2009). I chose random sampling strategy which is a "sample that is taken by a random process" (Thomas, 2013, p.135). This strategy helps to avoid bias and has to be drawn from a large enough subset of the population to avoid finding a distorted picture (Thomas, 2009).

The sample size comprised of six FE QQI Level 5 students from three disciplines (Early Childhood in Education and Care; Sport, Exercise and Fitness; Motor Technology) who have completed the mandatory work placement module which entails a minimum of ten days work placement on their specific course.

In order to gain access and approval from the Principal (Gatekeeper) I requested permission from the Principal of the further education college to carry out the study. I obtained consent from my Principal by providing him with a subject information sheet informing him of my study [see appendix A]. I got the Principal to sign a consent form [see appendix B]. The Principal sent an email to all QQI Level 5 students in the three disciplines within the further education college inviting them to participate voluntarily in the study [see appendix C]. The

email stated the purpose of the research and procedures to be used for data collection. The first two students from each discipline to volunteer to participate in the study were chosen. I obtained consent of all the research students involved by providing them with a subject information sheet informing the students of my study. I had each student sign a consent form [see appendix D]. As part of the semi-structured interviews I provided the students with a copy of the interview questions so that they familiarise themselves with the content of the interview questions [see appendix E]. The audio-tape recorded interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and it was conducted at an appropriate location and time that suited the student. Confidentiality was guaranteed at all times and the right to withdraw consent after the interview began was clarified.

3.4 Methodology

3.4.1 Semi-structured Interview

An interview, where a discussion takes place to obtain information, is a very good method as by the researcher's physical presence, the participant is motivated to give their opinions, (Seidman, 2006). Throughout the discussion I used gestures of encouragement and identified with behaviour on how the student felt about the topic by watching and listening. It was important to establish a rapport with the student and be mindful of the primacy of the personal contact, appearance, tone of voice and demeanour. Care was taken to have the content pitched at the right level, with suitable wording and the context sequence and response categories to help the student without biasing answers (Oppenheim, 1992). As Drever (1995) illustrates semi-structured interviews are more suited to a study where you are interested in interpreting your participants' comments. A semi-structured interview

combines the structure of a list of issues to be covered together with the freedom to follow up points as necessary and is typical of small scale research.

(Thomas, 2009, p.164)

In addition, by using this process there were no restrictions and allowed expanding on the questioning process. An interview schedule with possible questions was prepared prior to semi-structured interviews, which aided in keeping focus. The intention was for the questions to be open ended allowing for any necessary reordering, expansion, pursuit of new avenues, or probing (Cohen et al., 2011). Qualitative methods, such as used in this study, are a very

interactive way of generating, or constructing knowledge by listening to, interpreting and understanding the multiple perspectives of the students' real life experience.

The research involved semi-structured face to face audio recorded interviews. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to adapt to themes that arose during the course of the interview (Thomas, 2009) and are a means of collection, which

rely on directly asking people questions to get information, need instructions to be clear, must be concerned with who will be asked the questions, when and how often, and with the processing, analysis and interpretation of data.

(Fink and Kosecoff, 1985, p.13)

All interviews were audio recorded with the interviewee's prior consent and transcribed verbatim by me. The interviews followed a structured format, with a list of questions serving to guide interviews.

3.4.2 Data Collection Method

Data collection refers to a range of strategies used to gather data (Cohen et al., 2007). The data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and therefore the main methods of analysis were the qualitative data. Qualitative data analysis involves interpreting data from the participants' narratives while identifying patterns and themes (Cohen et al., 2007).

The method for data collection was face to face audio recorded interviews with six students from three disciplines, namely Early Childhood in Education and Care, Sports, Exercise and Fitness, and Motor Technology, within a FE college in the West of Ireland.

Initially, I wrote to the Principal of the college requesting permission to complete the study in the FE college. The Principal filled out a Consent Form. The Principal emailed the students in the three disciplines within the FE college inviting them to participate voluntarily in the study.

The first two students from each discipline to volunteer to participate in the study were chosen. The students participating in the research signed a Consent Form. According to Diener and Crandall (1978)

informed consent is the procedure in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of the facts that would be likely to influence their decisions.

(Diener and Crandall, 1978, p.23)

An interview schedule with possible questions was prepared prior to semi-structured interviews as Thomas (2009) explains

that participants need to be made aware of the nature and purpose of the study, including its methods, expected benefits of the study and possible harm that may come from the study.

(Thomas, 2009, p.150)

In this way the participant can understand what they are agreeing to and provide informed consent. I provided information with regard to confidentiality, anonymity, how data was to be stored and for what duration and finally when and how it was disseminated. The information was presented and communicated in non-technical language. The students were provided with information on the research process and that taking part in this study is totally voluntary and they can withdraw at any time without giving reasons. Data was treated confidentially; students were assured that their identity was not disclosed at any stage of the study. The research was conducted in a way that was consistent with commitment to honesty and open inquiry.

The interview was approximately 40 minutes and was recorded on a dictaphone. Directly after the interviews I wrote brief notes outlining my impressions of the encounter and some possible themes emerging. As the interviews continued I felt that my technique improved where I was able to seek clarification or make interpretation suggestions to the student. I transcribed the interviews personally as it provided me with the opportunity to develop a close familiarity with the data and preserved nuances that would have been missed or forgotten using the transcripts or recordings alone and proved to be a valuable part of the process of analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis Method

Analytical Approach

On completion of the data collection, the data analysis involved

organising, accounting for and explaining the data; in short making sense of data in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes categories and regularities.

(Cohen et al., 2007, p.461)

The analytical method chosen by the researcher was the “constant comparative method” to analyse the data and identify themes (Thomas, 2009, p.198). This method involves repeatedly going through the data again and again while identifying and comparing phrases, sentences and paragraphs. By constantly comparing the data in this method, common themes are identified (Thomas, 2009).

The analysis involved firstly, identifying and grouping emerging themes followed by a more in-depth examination of patterns and relationships were compared and contrasted (Thomas, 2009). Systematic analysis of these data identified both common and diverging views across these main themes. This process of analysis was then completed by representing the accounts of interviewees to give an overall picture and ensure confidentiality. As with all qualitative research, quotations are selected to reflect both overarching perspectives and variations in opinions across the groups. To preserve anonymity, no individuals or organisations are identified in the analysis.

As Thomas (2009) explains

the aim in using an interpretative approach is to emerge with the meanings that are being constructed by the participants (including you) in the situation.

(Thomas, 2009, p.198)

It insured that the data was compared continuously until no more variation occurred (Cohen et al., 2007). This produced common themes which were the building blocks of the analysis.

The themes coming from the data were then mapped to show the links between them. Thomas (2009) refers to theme mapping as an uncomplicated method of putting themes in sequential order and identifying connections between the themes. Bryman (2012) states themes provide

the researcher with the basis for a theoretical understanding of data that can make a theoretical contribution to the literature relating to the research focus.

(Byrman, 2012, p.580)

3.6 Validity, Reliability and Generalisation

When deciding on a research method it is crucial to consider validity and reliability. Validity means that a study measures exactly what it is supposed to measure (Bell, 2005). Validity relates to whether the research data obtained refers to what it claims to be about. The potential threats relating to the validity of this research included: the researchers positionality within the sample organisation, preconceived ideas and assumptions about responses and outcomes; respondent bias and researcher bias; subjective interpretation of the data; respondents distorted answers to please the researcher. In an interpretivist research study it is important that the researcher is aware of certain design stage threats (Cohen et al., 2011). Punch (2005) refers to internal validity as having internal consistency meaning there is accuracy in the data analysis to reflect what has been researched.

On the other hand, “reliability is the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant condition on all occasions” (Bell, 2005, p.117). If someone took your study and used it would you get the same results? Reliability was achieved through the choice of semi-structured interviews which allowed the respondents to lead the narrative and in this way reducing researcher bias. The voluntary selection of interviewees resulted in the representation of research based on a wider population as the demographics were from a mixed gender, broad age category and varied levels of experience gained. In order to ensure accuracy of content the interviewees were provided with the opportunity to view their transcripts. No discrepancies were identified in the transcripts.

Mason (2002) underlines the importance of producing consistent data using accurate methods whilst Silverman (2000) recognises that in qualitative research like this it may prove difficult as reliability often depends on how the data is categorised:

unless you can show your audience the procedures you used to ensure that your methods were reliable and your conclusions valid, there is little point in aiming to conclude a research dissertation.

(Silverman, 2000, p.175)

In order to overcome some of the draw backs of interpretivist research in the area of validity and reliability, it is necessary to look at other forms of trustworthiness to ensure validity and reliability in this study. These can include credibility of the researcher, transferability incorporating detail and thick descriptions in interview process. In addition, dependability

involves critical self-reflexive activity where all data is collected, transcripts produced and data analysis pages which justifies that the research is dependable (Thomas, 2009).

When referring to generalisation the specific participants involved in the semi-structured interviews were representative of a specific populations thereby these results have the potential to be applied to similar populations (Creswell, 2009). Generalisability is defined by as “the researchers ability to generalise the results from the sample to the population from which it was drawn” (Mertens, 2005, p.4). The outcome of the responses from the students within this study can be utilised by outside users to explain trends and choices made by students around the country relating to their vocational and personal development. Cohen et al., (2011) explains that when using generalisability there is always the risk that regardless of the similarity between the context of the research and the wider context, the same kind of people “may act differently in different - or even the same - contexts” (p.242). It is not the aim of this research to claim generalisability but the findings may be transferable to other FE student groups.

3.7 Reflexivity

“Our subjectivity and wider cultural understanding shape our response and interpretation” (Merrill and West, 2009, p.115), I had to be aware of not being influenced by my own understanding of the values of the FE Work Placement Programme when it comes to students making vocational decisions. In a more general sense, all research decisions are filtered through our theoretical sensitivity, a ‘unique combination of personal and professional experience, and your reading of relevant literature’ (Ryan et al., 2006) so the researcher is obliged to be reflexive at all stages of the research and analysis.

Reflexivity can be described as “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher” (Merriam, 2009, p.219). Reflexivity “requires researchers to monitor closely and continually their own interactions with participants, their own reactions, roles, biases and any other matters that might affect the research” (Cohen et al., 2011, p.225). The researcher’s obligation to make clear where they are ‘coming from’ is a fundamental aspect of the transparency and integrity of the work. Overall, I consider that my position in the college worked to my advantage and greatly facilitated contact with the participants and constructing with them an understanding of their experience. It contributed also to the development of a

“valuable rapport, a reflexivity that would explicitly include lived experiences and a heightened awareness of ethical issues” (Brannick and Coughlan, 2007, p.69).

3.8 Ethical Considerations in the Study

In all types of social research, ethical considerations are paramount. When conducting qualitative interviewing the main focus of ethical issues are informed consent, confidentiality and the consequences of the interviews (Cohen et al., 2007; Seidman, 2006).

Firstly, it is necessary to obtain valid consent from the participants selected to participate in the research (IGC Code of Ethics, 2012). In this way the participant can understand what they are agreeing to and provide informed consent. In line with the IGC Code of Ethics (2012) and Thomas (2009) valid consent from the students to take part in the research was obtained. Prior to this the students were provided with information on the research process and that taking part in this study was totally voluntary and they had the option to withdraw at any time without giving reasons. Thomas (2009) uses the term opting-in to describe participants who make an active choice to consent.

Secondly, I adhered to the Institute of Guidance Counsellors Code of Ethics (2012) and the National Centre for Guidance in Education Code of Ethics (2008) in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Data was treated confidentially; students were assured that their identity was not disclosed at any stage of the study. Pseudonyms were applied to all students in the data analysis to protect their anonymity. I transcribed and analysed all interviews personally. In relation to confidentiality and the protection of contribution of the students, all information was kept safe and secure in a locked cabinet in the Principal Investigator’s Office in UL. All information on my computer was password protected and encrypted at all times. Students were not identified at any point in the research process, including dissemination. Transfer and encrypted audio recordings were password protected and then the original recordings were deleted from the recording device. Recordings and hard copies of participant data were stored in a locked cabinet in my college.

Thirdly, in relation to the consequences of the interview, consideration was given to potential risk associated with the possibility of a student becoming upset about experiencing some difficulties during their work placement. In the event of such a case a process was put in

place where the participant was asked if he/she wished to stop, check in with the person and see if he/she wished to continue. If the interview was cancelled, the data was destroyed. If there were emotional risks to the participant I needed to communicate to the participant that I have identified appropriate support services for referral.

Fourthly, in order to overcome any bias in the research, I requested permission from the Principal of the FE college to carry out the study. The Principal sent an email to the students in the three disciplines within the FE college inviting them to participate voluntarily in the study. The first two students from each discipline to volunteer to participate in the study were chosen. In order to overcome any bias excluded from the study were the Business Studies and Office Administration disciplines as I am a teacher on these courses. Students in both of these disciplines were not involved in the research where influence and abuse of power could detract from the results.

Finally, it was important to consider the cost/benefits ratio of the research by evaluating the social benefits against the personal costs to the participants (Cohen et al., 2007). Benefits of the study were to ascertain the influence work placement may or may not have on students' decisions on educational progression routes and employment opportunities. Reflection on the work placement programme and on what were positive experiences and what were the negative experiences. An evaluation of the learning outcomes of the concept of theory and practice. The FE college can benefit by this direct feedback from the student to help and support future students completing the work placement programme. The ETB organisation can relate to the insight provided by the students as an essential part of the links between the business enterprises, education and the learners. The risks to the participant are the time commitments to take part in the research. I believe the benefits outweigh them.

It is important that the research is conducted in a way that is consistent with commitment to honesty and open inquiry. As Hearne (2013) explains

the over-riding principle involved is the professional responsibility we have as practitioner-researchers to protect the dignity and wellbeing of our research participants at all times.

(Hearne, 2013)

3.9 Limitations of the study

One limitation of this study is that it was only carried out in one FE College and therefore this is a very selective piece of research, which may not fully reflect other FE colleges in Ireland. Hence, it provides an opportunity for one aspect namely work placement to be studied in some depth. Another issue of limitation is objectivity. Being the researcher and a teacher in the college it would be unrealistic to expect complete objectivity, it is possible that the issues of bias may have arisen. However, it is hoped that this was kept to a minimum by the careful design of the research instruments and by adopting a grounded theory approach to the data analysis. In addition, bias was kept to a minimum when designing the data collection instruments by carefully wording and phrasing each question.

3.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, the issues discussed consisted of the reasons why a qualitative methodology was chosen, research questions, paradigm, methodology, participants, data collection methods, ethical issues, validity, reliability, generalisability, reflexivity, limitations and data analysis.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Primary Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the method of data analysis employed in this study and present the research findings from the six individual semi-structured interviews. The participant profiles will be displayed in table no. 4.1 and the data will be presented under the heading of the three main themes identified (i) The Experience of Students' Participation on the Work Placement Programme in Further Education (ii) The Influence of Work Placement on Career Decision Making in the Further Education Sector and (iii) The Role of the Guidance Counsellor in Relation to the Work Placement Programme in the Further Education Sector.

4.1 Analytical Strategy

The analytical method chosen was the "constant comparative method" to analyse the data and identify themes (Thomas, 2009). The process of analysing the primary research involved three principal steps. Firstly, the analysis involved familiarisation with the data that emerged and the generation of initial codes. Secondly, time was allocated to searching for themes and reviewing potential themes. Thirdly, it involved defining and naming themes. Lastly, these themes were then linked together and the findings from the data are presented in the remainder of this chapter (Thomas, 2009).

Quotations from respondents are included to help illustrate and explain specific issues. To preserve anonymity, no individuals or organisations are identified in the analysis. The themes coming from the data were then mapped to show the links between them. Transcription of the interviews was undertaken by the researcher and, although time consuming, the process proved to be invaluable in terms of understanding the data and identifying the emerging themes. The transcription involved reflectively re-listening to the taped interviews a number of times which offered the opportunity to interpret the meaning behind the tone and emotion of the narratives.

4.2 Participants

The study consisted of six individual interviews with students from QQI Level 5 Courses in a FE College in the West of Ireland. All students had completed the mandatory work placement module which entailed a minimum of 10 days work placement on their specific course.

A total of six students from three disciplines participated in the study, namely:

- *Early Childhood in Education and Care QQI Level 5*
- *Sports, Exercise and Fitness QQI Level 5*
- *Motor Technology QQI Level 5*

Four female and two male students participated in the semi-structured interviews. Pseudonyms have been used to protect their identities.

Table 4.1 provides information related to background information on the interviewees which includes; pseudonym of each student, level of education, past experience of work placement, course of study, work placement and duration.

Table 4.1: Background Information on the Interviewees

<i>Pseudonym of Student</i>	<i>Level of Education</i>	<i>Past Work Placement Yes/No</i>	<i>Course of Study</i>	<i>Work Placement</i>	<i>Duration</i>
Emma	Leaving Certificate 2000, Haccp QQI Level 5	No	Early Childhood in Education and Care QQI Level 5	Crèche	Nov to Apr for 1 day per week Plus 2 week block
Mary	Leaving Certificate 2016	Yes	Early Childhood in Education and Care QQI Level 5	Crèche	Jan to Apr for 1 day per week Plus 2 week block
Emear	Leaving Certificate 2014, dropped out after 1 st year Business Level 7 in IT College	Yes	Sports, Exercise and Fitness QQI Level 5	Gym	10 weeks for 1 day per week for 5 hours per day
Maeve	Business Level 7 Course and access course into Arts at University but left after 1 st year	Yes	Sports, Exercise and Fitness QQI Level 5	Gym	10 weeks for 1 day per week for 6 hours per day
Tom	Leaving Certificate 2016	Yes	Motor Technology QQI Level 5	Garage	10 weeks for 1 day per week
Mark	Leaving Certificate 2014	No	Motor Technology QQI Level 5	Garage	10 weeks for 1 day per week

All students had completed their Leaving Certificate Examination. Two students progressed to third level but dropped out after 1st year. One mature student had worked for ten years in the retail trade.

In summary the reasoning behind the two female students choosing Early Childhood in Education and Care QQI Level 5 were in Emma's case as a result of being influenced by her work placement in a primary school while in transition year and also her experience of babysitting and Mary was influenced due to her love of children, having a family and the availability of work in this area.

The choice of category in relation to the two female students on the Sport, Exercise and Fitness QQI Level 5 Course was due to the fact that they both had a huge interest in sport throughout their life having played gaelic football and camogie in their local community at competition level and the family background where all were heavily involved in sport.

The final two male students interviewed were studying Motor Technology as they always had an interest in cars and an additional reason for Mark was due to the influence of his father owns a recovery service.

Overall it can be identified that the motivation for choosing their specific occupational category for work placement can be broken down into interest, convenience and employment opportunities.

4.3 Themes identified during the Research

Following data analysis, three main themes emerged in the research:

- 4.3.1. The Experience of Students' Participation on the Work Placement Programme in Further Education
- 4.3.2 The Influence of Work Placement on Career Decision Making in the Further Education Sector
- 4.3.3 The Role of the Guidance Counsellor in Relation to the Work Placement Programme in the Further Education Sector

4.3.1 The Experience of Students' Participation on the Work Placement Programme in Further Education

The research findings of the students' experience of work placement will be presented under the headings of development of skills, personal development, professional development and reflection on experience.

Development of Skills

Following data analysis it emerged that students saw skill development as comprising practical and soft skills.

Data Analysis showed that the mechanical courses delivered on providing a placement that taught technical skills. Where the caring/nurturing course delivered a placement which assumed this ability (ie. innate in the candidates) but taught them how to integrate the theory with the practical skills of caring and nurturing children.

As regards mechanical skills the students from the Motor Technology Course were given the opportunity to use the technical tools, equipment and software “got to use a lot of the diagnostic machines in the garage...doing the job cards” (Tom) and also “using ratchets and sockets...I have improved using them when working on cars” (Mark). Early Childhood in Education and Care and the Sport, Exercise and Fitness Courses were very definite that they did not obtain any additional technical skills while on work placement. “No, did not learn anything at all there” (Emma) and similarly “I was not trained on the software” (Emear). While the students on the Motor Technology Course learned how to master servicing a car and putting wheels on cars. Tom got “practice at putting on wheels on cars and taking them off” and Mark “mastered the very basic skills of servicing a car”.

In relation to practical skills developed throughout work placement these were specific to each occupational category. The two students from Early Childhood in Education and Care Course acquired listening skills and seeing the theory put into practice. Mary noted: “I was learning the theory and then seeing it in practice” while Emma expressed “good listener is one of the key things” that she picked up on. The Sports, Exercise and Fitness Course students developed practical skills of planning and running gym classes, cleaning the facilities and making smoothies. Emear learned about “setting up the classes...cleaning...learned how to make smoothies” while Maeve “mastered...the aqua class...will benefit my CV...if I apply for a job”.

Interestingly, the development of soft skills which were attained and common to all students was communication skills and teamwork. Students commented that: “communication was a very big one...and there was teamwork especially with the heavier parts of the cars such as the engine blocks” (Tom), “I learned my teamwork alongside the Manager, fitness tests and personal training” (Emear). Additional soft skills identified by participants were interpersonal skills, confidence, observation and speaking out. Students commented that: “I would feel confident around the children” (Emma), and “I definitely improved on my interpersonal skills working with people” (Emear). Mark also noted that “I definitely improved on my interpersonal skills working with other mechanics...taking their constructive criticism”. The development of confidence was evident in the strength of the relationship built with their employer...their confidence in having a job to return to in the future. Significantly, all of the students felt they had gained strong contacts from their work placement and were offered further work placement if needed, job offers if work became available and references. Students commented that: “Yes, I think there definitely will be opportunities” (Mary) and Emear was told she could have work “if it was available”.

Personal Development

When starting out on work placement some of the students expressed anxious feelings of being nervous, shy and were fearful of making mistakes but managed to overcome their concerns with the support of their mentors. Mary felt “I was unsure of what I was going to be doing...not aware of my boundaries...I was kind of shy...and observed first...it took time to get my ground” while Emear relayed “I am a shy person...coping mechanism...by throwing myself into the deep end...I have to do it and it worked out...my mentor encouraged me to do it and that helped a lot”. Similarly Tom felt “I was kind of nervous going into a garage with other mechanics...worried if I made a mistake...did something wrong that I might break something... coping mechanism...asked for help...making sure I was doing everything right” and also Mark “was a bit nervous starting the work placement...coping mechanism...once I got to know everyone the nerves went away”.

It’s worth noting that some of the students had experienced no concerns at all and felt very positive about the whole experience where the people they worked with were nice and welcoming. Emma commented that “I was happy...they were nice and welcoming” while Maeve felt “everything went very well, and they really helped me out... had a very positive experience”. The most significant personal growth areas expressed by all students were

confidence building and time management. Emeare specified “definitely confidence and independence”, while Maeve felt she “improved on all my techniques, taking down notes” and Mary reflected she was “more confident coming out of it”. Whereas both Tom and Mark improved their “timekeeping skills”.

On the other hand socially their ability to interact and work with new people was improved throughout the period and additionally valuable contacts were developed. Emeare commented “working with groups of people and working alongside a team”, similarly Mary commented “face to face and interacting with the children” while Maeve “really enjoyed getting to know them and interacting with new people”.

Finally in relation to vocational improvement it proved extremely significant to Mary and Emma from Early Childhood in Education and Care. It meant that what they experienced in practice was fitting in with the theory they had gained on the course. It also established what area in the childcare sector is of interest to them and realised there are other areas to explore. Mary felt she “got a big insight on how you can progress in your career...originally when I started the course I was thinking of play therapy...because it’s so wide and varied...explore it more”. Also, one notable comment from Maeve where she learned how to “operate an office in a gym environment” which may possibly motivate her to open her own gym in her local community.

Professional Development

The student’s learning was echoed in the supervisor’s comments which was completed at the end of the work placement period. The supervisor in the work place was required to submit a Supervisors Report Form detailing the student’s performance which was subsequently graded as part of their overall learning. All students expressed that they were very satisfied with the positive feedback obtained.

Reflection on Experience

As part of the overall work placement module it was mandatory to complete a ten day work placement reflection diary. All students reflected on their work placement in their diary detailing what was learned and what could be improved on, dealing with incidences, challenges and opportunities and different aspects of the work. Students were very positive about keeping a diary where Emeare felt “it is definitely a good idea to keep a diary” and

likewise Maeve felt “it really helped me to find out what I got out of the work placement...helps you to keep on top of things”.

Overall the general feeling from the students were that the work placement was a very positive experience where they improved interpersonal skills, teamwork, loads of practical skills, learning new techniques and specifically getting to know this occupational category. Students commented that “I found it very positive...even the children were very welcoming and the workers” (Emma). In the same manner, Mary “found the whole experience was very positive...love to stay longer...get to know how to do the work and form a bond with the staff...it’s an area I would like to go down this area...while on work placement you have the rest of the staff to support you”. Additionally, Emear “liked the people aspect” and expressed she wants to work in this environment and also it increased her confidence levels. Maeve felt “everyone worked well together whereas Tom “got loads of practical skills” which helped him in making up his mind on course of further study and Mark on the other hand was happy with “learning new techniques”.

On reflection the negative aspects expressed were sometimes the work was very repetitive and boring, job not what they expected, too short a period and delay in getting work placement due to processing of Garda Vetting. Mary was concerned about “not being able to go out before the Garda Vetting “personally I learn more by doing and a lot quicker...more effective to be learning it and out doing it”. Emear felt the work was “very repetitive...just the same classes...to teach every evening”, whereas Maeve felt it “was not as busy as other leisure centres and it could be boring”. Tom “realised that being a mechanic is a dirty job and it’s not cracked up to what you think it is”.

A significant realisation for both the Motor Technology students was they would like to pursue further studies in mechanics either an apprenticeship or study mechanical engineering in college. Tom knows “I want to do something in mechanics...unsure if I want to go straight to do an apprenticeship...want to go to college first and get some papers” and similarly Mark felt it “made me think about maybe I also want to work as a mechanic not just in recovery...made such an impact I feel there are more options now”.

It is worth noting that comments expressed by students on advice they would provide for students going on work placement can be used by the Course Co-ordinator and Guidance Counsellor when preparing future students embarking on work placement. Students commented that “definitely, do the work placement as it opens your eyes on what exactly the

job entails... could be given more tasks to do...have work placement to identify what area you want to work” (Emma). What was important for Emeare was to “record your diary...be grateful and throw yourself in and avail of the opportunity”. This diary is a key requirement for this work placement module as it needs to be submitted for evaluation as part of learning process. Maeve stressed the necessity to “pick the right place” which is critical in maximising the true value of the work placement period. Tom was adamant to “definitely go on work placement...not to be afraid to get stuck into work” emphasises the necessity to be diligent and hardworking throughout the duration of work placement. Lastly Mark felt it’s critical to “make sure you have a slight interest...if you don’t have the interest you won’t learn” this can be applied to all pursuits.

4.3.2 Theme 2: The Influence of Work Placement on Career Decision Making in the Further Education Sector

A significant factor was that all students felt the work placement influenced their decision making to continue to pursue education in the specific occupational category. The students from the Early Childhood in Education and Care have decided on completing further studies in Early Childhood in Education. Emma commented “yes, definitely, I am going to return and do a QQI Level 6 Early Childhood in Education Course” while Mary “would like to do Early Childhood in Education QQI Level 8 and progress to Play Therapy Course”.

The two students from Sport, Exercise and Fitness want to study Personal Training QQI Level 6. Both were very definite that work placement had helped them with making this decision. Emeare commented “Ya, the work placement has definitely helped me realise what I want to do and what area I want to get into” and similarly Maeve felt “Ya, the work placement has had an impact on me as I want to go further with my education and find out more about different aspects of sport”. Likewise both Motor Technology students were influenced in their decision making to pursue further education. Tom commented “the work placement definitely had an impact on my future decision making...I am thinking of doing an Automotive Engineering Course or an Agriculture Engineering Course” and Mark felt “I need to get the truck licence...and thinking about Apprenticeship Mechanic Course”.

The work placement has influenced all students to work in their chosen occupational category and it has helped them to decide their chosen career path. The Early Childhood in Education students commented “definitely, in the preschool and hopefully progress on to an SNA” (Emma) while Mary commented “ I would like to work in a place similar to where I am doing

my work placement, say in a child development centre or maybe joining some kind of organisation to do with children”. Similarly, both students from the Sports, Exercise and Fitness Course want to work in a gym and personal training with Maeve commenting “I would see the opportunity of setting up my own place as a long term goal”. The students from the Motor Technology Course both commented that they definitely wanted to work in the car business. Tom commented “I know that I want to be working with my hands all day... I definitely want to be working with cars” and in the same light Mark commented “employment wise I still want to work around the car business...I might also choose the mechanic side of the business”.

4.3.3 Theme 3: The Role of the Guidance Counsellor in Relation to the Work Placement Programme in the Further Education Sector

In securing work placement all students obtained it themselves by means of personal contacts within the specific business sector or by being assertive using a direct approach in contacting the business. The majority of the students were able to use their personal network to find their placement. Emma was “able to find work placement myself easily in the town where I live”, whereas, Emeare secured work placement where “I knew the manager on a personal basis so I rang him...I did it myself”. Tom “just rang the garage and asked would it be possible to get some experience” and in Mark’s case “it wasn’t necessary to get support...family connections I was able to get work placement”. The majority of the students expressed that if necessary their Course Co-ordinator was there to provide them with a listing of potential places to seek work placement and also to help and support them. Emma commented “a list if needed any assistance but I was able to secure my own” and Mary “knew if there was a few that could not get places there were recommendation lists of places available from the Course Co-ordinator”.

One vital statement that was unanimous from all six students, there was no involvement of the Guidance Counsellor in providing any assistance throughout the work placement process. Emma clearly commented “no Guidance Counsellor assistance with regard to work placement” and in the same vein Mary commented “no Guidance Counsellor involvement, not unless you made an appointment and looked for it”. In addition Emeare commented “no involvement with the Guidance Counsellor...not since my Guidance Counsellor in school” and lastly, Tom commented “I didn’t get any Career Guidance in securing the place”.

In relation to preparation for work placement four of the students expressed they were well prepared for work placement and had a good knowledge on the expectation levels from their Course Co-ordinator. Emma commented the Course Co-ordinator had given “a detailed job description of exactly what we should be doing and let us know as well that we should be under supervision while we were at work”. While Mary commented “Course Co-ordinator...in the classes we talked about it and given information that we needed for it, the Garda Vetting and references...organised a pack when you were going out. I was well prepared with regard to the insurance but I did not know exactly what to expect from it”. Suggestion to have someone who has already completed a QQI Level 5 to come in as a guest speaker prior to you going out on work placement...it happened after...to do with Autism units...when we came back from work placement”. In relation to the Course Co-ordinator’s involvement Emeear commented “I was told what to expect...showed me what to wear so I was fully prepared” and Maeve felt “I was prepared...told me what I should be doing and that I should be learning from the manager and the others working there...all the different jobs...really helped me out and I had good support going out”. On the negative side both students from the Motor Technology Course felt that they had no preparation for their work placement. Tom felt “I didn’t get any preparation for work placement” and Mark commented “there wasn’t any real preparation other than getting the safety equipment needed to work in the garage”.

On students return from work placement the Course Co-ordinator is responsible for student’s completion of the work placement module assignment which included a work placement diary. Students felt that the input from their Course Co-ordinator on their return from work placement was basically to do with fulfilling the requirements of completing a ten day work placement diary. There were mixed views on the Course Co-ordinator interest and support on their return, where Mary felt “they talk about the work placement more as conversation to see how you got on” and Mark commented “there was no discussion about my work placement other than I done that part of the module”. Whereas some positive comments were from Maeve “asked me how I got on and asked me did I enjoy it and would I do it again”. An additional significant outcome was that all the students expressed that on their return there was no one to one involvement from the Guidance Counsellor in relation to their experiences. If you wanted some career advice you had to be proactive and make an appointment with the Guidance Counsellor to meet on a one to one.

In relation to follow up on work placement learning outcomes it was felt by four of the students that there was adequate follow up provided on work placement learning outcomes by the Course Co-ordinator. Emma commented “visited us or phoned us and gave us feedback on how we got on”, Maeve commented “asked me how I was getting on, what was I learning” and Mary felt “if you looked for it, it will be provided, they don’t come to you...have to go and find them...give advice and help”. Negative experiences on follow up were expressed by both Motor Technology students where Tom felt “there was not adequate follow up on work placement by the college...I would like some more guidance counselling...for next year....idea of entry requirements to college”.

Lastly, the students provided a number of recommendations based on their personal experiences on their work placement journey. Emeare commented “maybe do a Career Day so I would be aware of other options other than the gym”. Maeve suggested “I suppose if you had a one to one with the Guidance Counsellor to ask you how you got on”.

On review of the data analysis and findings it is extremely evident the positive impact of work placement on the individual students in the study in relation to the experiences gained which included development skills, professional development, personal development and personal reflection. Additionally, the outcome of work place experience on decision making is hugely significant with regard to further educational progression and career path choices. Finally, the research provided insight into the guidance services limited resources available to the students, the lack of contact with students and students not using the service of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to work placement in the FE college.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the findings of the interviews. It highlighted the data analysis strategy. The next chapter will synthesise these findings with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This study aimed to explore the students' experiences of Work Placement within the Further Education Sector. The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the research findings in the context of the original research question, primary findings and literature review (Thomas, 2009). Firstly, an overview of the research findings is provided in this chapter followed by a discussion of the three overarching themes that emerged in the study.

5.1 Overview of Research Findings

The primary research question refers to understanding students' experiences of work placement. It sets out to collect data on the positive/negative aspects of their work placement. In addition, it establishes its influence on their career decision making. Finally, it seeks to gain knowledge to assist Guidance Counsellors preparing students for work placement and assisting them in their career decision making process. The secondary research questions relate to the influence had by their placement on their life-long learning and career choices, what are the experiences of students who have completed work placement as part of their further education ie., does their work placement influence career decision making? Consequently what factors are important for Guidance Counsellors to consider when preparing students for work placement?

The data gathered by this research from the responses of the students who participated in this research affirm the success of this approach to learning. The findings in this study reveal that work placement in further education is highly valued and most worthy activity for inclusion in further education exposing them to new ideas, new concepts, and new ways of learning (AONTAS, 2016).

It has offered considerable insights into student attitudes to work placement. Students' overall attitudes to work placement were significantly positive with students agreeing that it was a worthwhile endeavour. It was worthwhile as it helped them focus on particular careers, reinforced existing ideas, confirmed childhood career ideas, saved them from pursuing unsuitable careers, helped them learn about themselves through experience in the world of work, helped them to increase their focus on study for a better future, gave them insights into

how their professional identities might look. This is evident in the literature in the REAP Project (2011).

The National Employers Survey (2015) supports the work placement programme in FET for the strong cooperation between employers and further education and training providers and recommends more can be done to develop “workplace learning opportunities” (p.124).

The following Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) recommendations relating to Guidance in the FE system, were made to the newly established SOLAS included the creation of a system for labour market intelligence to evaluate current and future developments in vocational employment to enable the FET sector match and support these trends. The need for the elevation of the poor status of FET by creating awareness of its offering amongst students and post-primary Guidance Counsellors, and as an alternative to HE, rather than solely being a route to HE (McGuinness et al., 2014).

The quality of work placement within PLC programmes can be improved by engaging employers’ needs for the benefit of all stakeholders (SOLAS, 2014). Under the “Pathways to Work” the initiative emphasises the goal of providing the unemployed with relevant education and training programmes and work placement which in turn will lead to labour market opportunities (SOLAS, 2014).

According to SOLAS training programme with work placements provide real opportunities for the unemployed to find labour market opportunities. However, the quality of these placements requires employer cooperation and review to realise these career opportunities (SOLAS, 2014, National Employers Survey, 2015).

This approach of government/policymakers is corroborated by the experiential learning models of Kolb (1984) and Schon (1987) which show that the work placement element of FE reinforces engagement of participants and the relevance of the learning. This concept is reflected very clearly in the comments provided by the Early Childhood in Education and Care students “I learn more by doing, and a lot quicker...learning the theory and then seeing it in practice”.

According to McGuinness et al., (2014) as part of the study on the FET sector, where the report details the lack of information and data outcomes of work placement.

5.2 Themes Emerging from Review of the Literature and the Data Analysis

On review of the literature and data analysis emerging themes are as follows:

Theme 1: Positive and Negative aspects of Participation on the Work Placement Programme

Theme 2: Relevance and Influence of Work Placement in Students' Vocational Career Path

Theme 3: Insufficient Career Guidance in the FE Sector

5.2.1 Theme 1: Positive and Negative aspects of Participation on the Work Placement Programme

Learning through experience as presented in the literature provides young people with “engaging and relevant learning opportunities” (Jeffers, 2006, p.409). Experiential learning models in relation to learning from experience from such theorists as Kolb (1984), Dewey (1938) and McElhaney (1999) effectively underpins the further education work placement. This theory is supported in the data findings where students were “learning the theory and then seeing it in practice” (Emma).

The data has offered considerable insights into student attitudes to work placement and the multitude of experience gained. It emphasised the skills, knowledge and expertise levels acquired pertaining to practical skills and soft skills. Practical skills in relation to technical training obtained by students in Early Childhood and Education and Care Course and the Sport, Exercise and Fitness Course were lacking whereas the Motor Technology students were satisfied with the level of exposure to technical skills as expressed “got to use a lot of the diagnostic machines in the garage”. The literature supports this where Little and Harvey (2006) relays the graduate needs to be equipped with the technical skills to do the job.

The students unanimously expressed the profound impact of the soft skills namely communication skills, interpersonal skills, confidence levels, independence and teamwork had on how they were personally affected by their work placement. This is substantiated in the various comments supplied by the students “definitely improved on my interpersonal skills working with people”, “learned my teamwork alongside the Manager” and “communication was a very big one”. It was evident that they were fully aware of the development within themselves and how it changed the identity that defines them. There is a direct link with the literature here where research on the students' comments on work placement benefits and values fully backs up the students' perception of work placement.

Little and Harvey (2006) research reveals the skills gained in teamwork, communication and learning skills are the key contributions of work placement and this competence based learning identifies the true value of work placement. This is revealed in the “Work Placement in Third Level Programmes” from the (REAP) Project (2011) which provides insights on students developing soft skills, such as communication, teamwork and multi-tasking skills while on work placement. Further literature in support of the soft skills gained while on work placement are expressed by adult learner feedback in “I am an Adult Learner” Report, AONTAS (2016). Additional studies include Hall et al., (2007) on data from Aston Business School where soft skills such as teamwork, relationship building and effective communication were highlighted as necessary for enhancing students’ employability. This concept is further supported in the literature by the Career EDGE model developed by Darce, Pool and Sewell (2007) and which has recently been incorporated into some of the IT Institutes of Education where research identifies a period of formal work placement is crucial in confidence building and developing employment prospects. This is further supported in the research study where a number of students related apprehensions about starting in the workplace and being “shy” and “a bit nervous” but as the placement progressed they grew in confidence.

Practical skills as put forward by Jordan et al., (2008) where experience and learning are inseparable, Heyler (2011) where learning needs to be combined with activity and Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, learning through work placement as put forward in the literature is well verified by the students in their comments. The two students from Early Childhood in Education and Care Course expressed the extreme benefits of the practical experience during the work placement helping with their understanding of the theory and the learning process. It is essential to have ongoing practical experiential learning experience in a childcare environment throughout the year in order to fully understand and learn the theoretical content and apply theory with practice. The practical skills acquired by the Sports, Exercise and Fitness and the Motor Technology students afforded them the opportunity to obtain a greater understanding of what the daily tasks entail and it greatly influenced their career decision making as commented “I realised that being a mechanic is a dirty job...it was good that I could see what it was like in making up my mind” (Tom). It is evident the many benefits from integrating this type of learning with the formal theoretical class-based learning which they brought to their work places from the FE courses. The real world experiences they gained while on placement could be used to apply theoretical aspects of their course.

This study revealed the personal, social and vocational improvements throughout the work placement. The personal growth achieved related to “time keeping skills”, “definitely confidence and independence”, awareness of their capabilities and sheer enjoyment working in the specific occupational category. Social development consisted of interpersonal skills, interacting and communicating with their employer, work colleagues, teamwork and creating social capital within the business sector. In support of this some students commented “really enjoyed interacting with new people”, “I got to work on my teamwork skills” and “great teamwork...we worked well together”. Vocational improvement present with regard to career decision making on further studies and future employment aspirations and the value of theoretical learning in conjunction with experiential learning.

As Moon (2006) expressed concerns with realising the true value of the work placement requires a reflective element and suggests the keeping of a journal, as in this case, all students in this study reflected on their work placement in their diary detailing “what was learned and what could be improved on, dealing with incidences, challenges and opportunities and different aspects of the work” (Mark). They included “challenges, opportunities and what was done on a daily basis” (Emea) in the diary. The students believed this to be very useful in keeping track of what they got out of the work placement even though it was a mandatory part of the work placement module. Students commented “definitely a good idea to keep a diary” (Emea), “it helps you to keep on top of things” (Maeve) and helped to identify “things I learned and what I could improve on” (Mark).

The students were very definite in how positive this whole experience was for them in their choice of words and their passionate delivery throughout the interviews. They expressed it improved their interpersonal skills, teamwork, practical skills, learning new techniques, self awareness, confidence and self esteem. It also provided them with an in-depth knowledge and hands on experience of the specific occupational category which they felt improved their sense of self-direction in decision making. The concerns expressed related to the work in some cases being very repetitive or boring and not what was anticipated which greatly helped the student with career path decisions. The research findings included the work placement “could be boring” and “the work was very repetitive”.

5.2.2 Theme 2: Relevance and Influence of Work Placement in Students' Vocational Career Path

The participation in the work placement programme within the work placement module which is mandatory in the further education sector provides students with real life situation of the world of work which can have an impact on their personal, social, educational and vocational decision making on their destiny (Jeffers, 2006). This is reflected in the findings of this study with all students expressing that the work placement had helped them with making their career decision, “definitely helped me realise what I want to do and what area I want to get into”. Most students agreed that the work experience process, at the very least, crystallised their career ideas in the future. Many students talked about being put off a particular career while the majority believed that they either had their career idea confirmed or that they were switched on to a new career goal.

Career choice according to Holland's theory of career choice (1985) is based on individual's personality and if there is a match of personality with career choice it can result in job satisfaction. This concept is true in the findings of this study where a number of the students sourced work placements in an environment of like-minded people. Parsons theory (1909) acknowledges where individuals choose a career based on their interests and desire which is also evident in this study. This resulted in students expressing that their work placement motivated them to undertake an investigation into further educational progression routes in this occupational category. The findings included comments in relation to this “I have an interest in cars and anything that has an engine”, “I was always into sport” and “I always wanted to work with kids”. Concerns with this approach relate to the neglect of consideration for changing needs across their lifespan and the necessity in today's world of work to be prepared for career adaptability (Savickas, 2008). This leads on to Career Construction Theory Savikas (2012) which relates to the way the individual utilises their skills and abilities in fitting themselves into the right occupation.

Super (1957) “Life Rainbow Model”, Life-Span, Life-Space theory which involves life roles and life space approach and that occupational choice was based on development across the life-span. A persons' self-concept is influenced by their experiences throughout their lives. In relation to the findings from this study some students when choosing their work placement their career ideas dated back to childhood and also influenced by family backgrounds. Children are always influenced by their own life experiences and those of their immediate families. This is indicative of Super (1957) a fantasy stage in their vocational choice theories.

This is substantiated in the findings as commented “Gaelic is mainly my sport which I got from my family...we all play football in my family” (Maeve).

Super’s (1994, as cited in Savickas, 2001) concept of “planfulness” which is the awareness that vocational choices must be made coupled with the inclination to make those choices, where students are seeking out self- direction in career decision making. This involves action and reflection and represents the exploratory stage of Super (1957). Through this students’ can begin the process of informing themselves regarding their own career values, interest and abilities (Savickas, 2001). Super also contributed to career development theory with his idea that self –concept changes over a person’s life as a result of their experiences. The outcome of the work placement gained result in students acquiring skills of self awareness and self-direction that could well determine who they become professionally. Work placement provided students with the knowledge, encouragement and experience to prepare themselves for their future career path while developing their self-concept and their overall core identity. One final note on Super (1990) those who possess high self-esteem are better able to act on their interest.

The SCCT deals with career self-efficacy which supports the decision making process by individuals using the Career Decision Making Self-Efficacy tool. It works on the principle that people are drawn to what they can do well and are influenced by the feedback from others in life. The research participants in the current study had similar views on how the work placement boosted their self confidence, built independence, self awareness, autonomy and self-concept. It provided students with the ability to make definite decisions on further education progression routes which they feel are necessary to provide a more fulfilling future for themselves in relation to job satisfaction and career prospects. It has established a solid commitment to work on what is required to obtain future employment in their chosen occupational category. Work placement comments from the data supporting this include “it has definitely made me want to work in a gym”, “I had a fairly good idea before that I wanted to work with cars...I know now that I want to do something with mechanics” and “it has an impact on me as I want to go further with my education and find out more about different aspects of sport”.

In line with this the literature describes the DOT Model (Law and Watts, 1977) where the individual is very self aware, know their capabilities in relation to potential opportunities, exploring alternatives and making their final decisions followed up by an action plan.

The students' career decision making in this study has been influenced by enacting and embracing genetic endowment, environmental conditions and through the level of experience gained on the work placement. These findings are substantiated in the literature by Krumboltz decision making techniques and can be further supported by "Career Beliefs Inventory" assessment tools (Sharf, 2010).

Overall, this study reveals students were overwhelmingly in support of the work placement which they expressed in their comments on how it helped them to decide their chosen career path and in some cases to ratify and reinforce existing career ideas. It helped them focus on particular careers, confirmed childhood career ideas, saved them from pursuing unsuitable careers, helped them learn about themselves through experience in the world of work, helped them increase their focus on study for a better future and gave them insights into how their professional identities might work.

Furthermore, it is clear that work placement was very advantageous for developing new skills, for networking within their chosen occupational category. As outlined in the literature, where Byrne and Smyth (2010) expressed the importance of establishing personal networking in order to enhance employment opportunities. In the study they disclosed some advice they would give to future students who are about to embark on a work placement programme which included to choose a specific occupation where there is a genuine interest in this vocation as commented "definitely, do the work placement as it opens your eyes on what exactly the job entails", "put your best foot forward" and "make sure you have an interest in it".

Additionally, to be mindful of when choosing work placement to choose wisely and to avoid convenience and careless placements. The majority of students made careful and valuable selections but some students made poor or careless choices of work placement and should have been more careful in their selection. Finally, to embrace the experience and give it your best shot as supported in the data "throw yourself in and avail of the opportunity".

5.2.3 Theme 3: Insufficient Career Guidance in the FE Sector

It is important to highlight the necessity for Guidance Counselling to be involved in advanced preparation of students for work placement, debriefing and reflective practice process on completion of work placement on students return to the college. The FET Strategy (SOLAS 2014) incorporates a FET Guidance Service which aims to offer a service to help people make informed educational, career and life choices. It strives to help and support individuals

with their career development issues to enhance their employability. The role of the Guidance Counsellor also includes provide labour market, learning and career-related information, planning and organising workplace learning and establishing links with the wider business community, agencies and voluntary sector (DES, 2016).

While no Guidance Counsellor input there was course Co-ordinator input. The findings from this research, is that this was inadequate. All students in the study expressed there was no involvement by the Guidance Counsellor in helping students source suitable placement, no advance preparation provided and no discussion on work placement experiences on their return from work placement as commented by students “no Guidance Counsellor assistance with regard to work placement”. All students were unanimous in being critical of the lack of support from the Guidance Counselling service with regard to work placement. In the study students made several suggestions on improvements necessary such as “run a Career Day” and “one to one with the Guidance Counsellor on your return from work placement”.

The time constraints on Guidance Counsellors and the quality of guidance is a concern due to the DES 2012 re-allocation of guidance provision (DES, 2012). In 2013, a strategic review of FET by the DES found that in the post-primary and PLC Colleges: the reduction in the guidance provision is likely to have a negative impact on the quality of the Guidance.

The recent circular regarding post primary school staffing allocations (DES, 2016) may improve the guidance provision to some level. The concern is its allocation is still being left largely at the discretion of individual principals and college management.

McElhaney (1999) states the provision of advance preparation prior to participating in learning outside the educational environment is of utmost importance to the student. The findings in the study in relation to advance preparation held mixed views where some students expressed they were well prepared for work placement and had a good knowledge on the expectation levels from their Course Co-ordinator. While others clearly stated they had no advance preparation for work placement. It is important to state there was no help or support provided by the Guidance Counsellor with preparation for work placement.

On return from work placement the students need to engage in reflection where Andresen et al., (2001) states the quality of the reflective thought on the part of the learner has a more

significant effect on the learning outcomes than the actual experience itself. It is further supported by theorists namely, Schon's reflective experiential learning and Kolb's cyclical experiential learning. Moon (2006) identifies the necessity to build in a reflective component to work placement due to the students' inability to evaluate the experience effectively.

The findings from the study were negative views expressed by the students in general where they felt on their return from work placement the Course Co-ordinator was only interested in feedback on work placement for the sole purpose of fulfilling the necessary work placement module assignment as commented in the data "they talk about the work placement more as conversation to see how you got on". There was no contact with the Guidance Counsellor in the provision of reflection and evaluation of their work placement on their return.

5.3 Conclusion

There is clear evidence of a connection between the findings in this study and the literature reviewed in chapter two. The issues were examined through a critical engagement with the primary findings and the literature. The next chapter will present the conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

This final chapter presents a summary of the main findings of the research within the context of the aim and objectives of this study. It addresses the strengths and limitations of this research study and presents a number of recommendations for policy and practice. In conclusion the researcher will reflect on personal learning involved in the process.

6.1 Overview of the findings in the context of Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this study was to explore the experiences of students who had completed work placement as part of their further education studies. The main objectives of this research study related to reviewing the literature on further education, guidance counselling within further education and the role of work placement in this sector, work placement influence on career decision making and to acquire knowledge in assisting Guidance Counsellors in the preparation of students participating in the work placement process.

Overall, the aims and objectives of this study were achieved. A number of key issues emerged in this expanded study. Firstly, in relation to the overall experience of student's participation on the work placement programme in further education, where the students were overwhelmingly in support of the work placement programme. The evidence in this study indicates the extensive experience gained and on how they were personally affected by their time there and developmental identity changes that transpired.

The students clearly outlined in the study the benefits gained from their work placement experience which included; working in a setting which puts theory into practice; developing an awareness of work based culture; opportunity to develop a range of personal attributes of time management, self-confidence and adaptability; development of key interactive attributes of team working, interpersonal and communication skills; enhanced employment prospects; assistance in developing career strategies, such as help with career choice, becoming aware of opportunities and building a network of contacts.

The key elements to enhance employability prospects are supported in the literature outlined in the Career EDGE model, developed by Darce, Pool and Sewell (2007). A number of reports and studies based on work placement in higher education in Ireland and the UK due to the lack of literature available applicable to work placement in further education and training sector in Ireland were reviewed (REAP Project, 2011) and (Hall et al., 2007). The literature

substantiated the concept that students acquire excellent self-development and personal effectiveness skills specifically teamwork, relationship building and effective communication which are necessary to enhance employability (Hall et al., 2007). It is further validated in the literature in the true value of work based learning for the student, employer and the academic institution (Dacre, Pool and Swell, 2007).

Furthermore the literature provides insight into the experiential learning process from various theorists' perspective and how it fits into the whole education process (Kolb's Learning Cycle, 1984; Jordan et al., 2008).

Secondly, findings in this study discusses the influence of work placement on career decision making with regard to further education progression routes and career decision making with regard to future employment. Students were unanimous in their disclosure of the profound influence of work placement on their decision making with regard to future education progression and future employment. They rated the knowledge of a potential career very highly. It involved students discovering that their tested career feels right for them, whether they had this career notion for a while or even since childhood, or whether it is an entirely new discovery for them.

Many students had chosen their placement out of a genuine interest in that particular career. For others it is the negative experience on placement that makes them realise that either they cannot see themselves spending the rest of their lives doing that job, they hate the work involved, or the job was simply not what they expected. It is worth highlighting the fact that many students were turned away from certain levels of an occupational category and had to face the reality that it was not what they thought it would be and that a good education can bring them beyond jobs like this. Equally this may be the outcome of careless selection of work placement out of convenience or just handy placement through personal connections. It is a powerful reveal for a student to discover that a particular career is not right for him/her. Students agreed that this outcome is as important as finding that your career interest has real potential. The reasons for discovering that a career was unsuitable were varied. For some, it was discovering the realities and complexities of a career and simply realising that it was not what they thought it would be. This lead to an increased interest in studying harder at college, to achieve or improve their career prospects. For others it may have been poor or careless selection of work placement. It also brought out comments in relation to the difficulty or monotony of certain jobs.

The findings are in line with the literature where a number of theorists' models on career development and career decision making are outlined. Theorists provide an understanding of how individuals make the decisions about their career choices (Parsons theory, 1909; Super, 1957; Savickas et al., 2009).

Finally, the role of the Guidance Counsellor in relation to the work placement programme in the further education sector was addressed. The findings are somewhat disappointing where all students revealed there was no involvement whatsoever on the part of the Guidance Counsellor for the duration of the work placement programme.

Evidence emerged in this study from the literature the significance of suitable advance preparation prior to participating on experiential learning (McElhaney, 1999); thorough debriefing, reflective practice and evaluation on return from work placement (Moon, 2006). The findings in the study further expresses the students concern with the lack of a guidance service by offering a number of suggestions namely Guidance Counsellor to set up a career day, group workshop specific to each occupational category, one to one with Guidance Counsellor on return from work placement.

Significant evidence emerged in the literature to indicate the concerns of the students where SOLAS (2014) suggests there is a necessity to review the quality of work placement in further education. The lack of resources for guidance counselling in the FE sector is an area of concern and the fact that the allocation of guidance provision is predominantly left to the principals and college management discretion (DES, 2016).

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of the study

6.2.1 Strengths of the study

The main strength of this study is that participation in the research provided students with the opportunity to voice their opinions due to the lack of research conducted in relation to the topic of students' experience of work placement in further education in Ireland.

An additional benefit is the personal learning for the researcher and the satisfaction in having contributed to gaining a greater understanding of students' experiences within the work placement programme and the role of the Guidance Counsellor in the whole process.

6.2.2 Limitations of the study

While this research may serve as a base for future research in the field of work placement, there are a number of limitations that need to be considered.

My subjectivity in this study could be seen as a limitation as I teach in the college where I completed the study. A reflexive approach was applied to address researcher bias in this study.

The qualitative approach taken in this study could be seen as limitations of this study in relation to subjectivity as findings rely too much on the researcher's opinion of what is important.

Finally, as in this situation where research is carried out with a small number of individuals in a particular organisation generalisation may be restricted.

6.3 Recommendations

The findings in this study highlighted the need to reappraise the current work placement programme within the further education sector to make sure that all of the best elements of the programme are present. In particular, for the role of the Guidance Counsellor with regard to work placement in further education need to be reviewed. It suggests that the guidance service needs to clarify their roles and responsibilities. It needs to address areas of help and support with sourcing of suitable placement, advance preparation of students for work placement coupled with an effective and thorough de-briefing and reflective practice process on completion of the placement stage of the programme. The data findings in this study indicate a strong desire on the student's behalf to have the Guidance Counsellor at the centre of this process as a wide range of expertise across the three interlinked strand of guidance, personal and social, educational and vocational counselling is required.

In relation to policy the Department of Education and Skills should have the ex-quota allocation of guidance counselling reinstated to ensure students are provided with appropriate guidance and to review the control of the allocation being left in the hands of the principal and college management. There is a necessity for further education to obtain its own set allocation of guidance resources.

Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) recommendations relating to guidance in the FE system, were made to the newly established SOLAS included the creation of a system for labour market intelligence to evaluate current and future developments in vocational employment to enable the FET sector match and support these trends. It is necessary to implement these recommendations as a way of ensuring that appropriate courses are available to afford students the opportunity to secure the knowledge required for their chosen course of study or career path. As indicated by the research findings, where it has shown a significant link between time spent on work placement and the subsequent vocational choices made by students, which can in turn have an impact on the college courses or career areas pursued by students.

It is important to highlight the responses of the students who participated in this research in affirming the success of this approach to learning and that work placement was a significant factor in shaping their vocational decisions. The level of technical skills, soft skills, and practical skills acquired; personal, social, and vocational improvement, and social capital gained and positive and negative experiences of the whole process cannot be underestimated. It is recommended the genuine, heartfelt views of the student be communicated to prospective employers as a means of encouraging them to come on board in the provision of future work placements and leading to employment. More needs to be done in developing links with key stakeholders in the surrounding community which also means an investment of time and resources. This is supported by the recent National Employers Survey (2015) where the work placement programme in FET is well received and recommends more can be done to develop “workplace learning opportunities”. SOLAS (2014) suggests there is a necessity to review the quality of work placement in further education.

The FE College can benefit by this direct feedback from the student to help and support future students completing on the job work placement. The ETB organisation can relate to the insight provided by the students as an essential part of the links between the business enterprises, education and the learners.

The Guidance Counsellor has an integral role to play in career development. The outcome from the findings of the study which demonstrates the significance and the value of work placement, it requires the Guidance Counsellor as a key player. Krumboltz Learning Theory of Careers Choice and Counselling (LTCC) were primarily developed to assist Guidance

Counsellors in their work (Mitchell and Krumboltz, 1996). Recommendations in the area of career development where the Guidance Counsellor can help students to expand their capabilities and interests empower them to take action and integrate career and personal counselling to help students deal with potential problems.

An additional recommendation is to resolve the issue with the delay in the processing of Garda Vetting which is preventing students from taking up work placement at the critical early stages in the course. It is clearly evident in the study that it is resulting in the quality of the delivery of the course modules being affected as it prevents theory and practice taking place simultaneously.

Finally, the direct feedback from the students' experience of work placement and their advice to future students participating on work placement can be utilised by the Guidance Counsellor in preparation of students for the work placement programme. In addition to this it would be beneficial to have past students who participated on work placement in the various courses to speak to the students about what to expect on placement and provide recommendations to the students in order to get the most out of the process.

6.4 Personal Learning

In this study a reflexive approach was applied where I kept a reflexive journal where I monitored interactions with participants, reactions, biases that could affect the research.

At the initial stage of the research I had a number of preconceptions about the topic formulated around my own experiences as a teacher and trainee Guidance Counsellor in the FE college in the study. Therefore, I had to withhold these assumptions of the students and take a more objective stance.

Additionally, I realised that my previous belief, that the work placement programme does in fact have significant value was confirmed.

I also had initial concerns that the data collected may be influenced by me being a practitioner researcher in the college. In contrast the data was honest and revealed a number of aspects in regards to the work placement programme and the guidance counselling service in the college.

Finally, the process of undertaking this research study has strengthened my belief that the successful delivery of the work placement programme very much depends on the guidance allocation in post primary schools being fully restored to ensure the full value of such a programme is derived by students.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes this qualitative research study. It summarised the main findings of the study, its strengths and limitations. Additionally, it has provided a number of recommendations for future guidance practice and provided insights on the personal learning of the researcher.

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Title of Research Study:

A Study of Students' Experiences of Work Placement within the Further Education Sector in the West of Ireland.

Date of Submission: 1st March 2017

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Appendix A: Subject Information Sheet (Principal)



UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Subject Information Letter (Principal)

EHS REC no.

Date:

Research title: “A Study of Students’ Experiences of Work Placement within the Further Education Sector in the West of Ireland”.

Dear Principal

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Ms Siobhan Keogh and Dr Lucy Hearne. As part of my studies I have to complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research I aim to explore the topic of work placement in the further education sector. In order to gather this information I would appreciate if you would give me consent to carry out the research study in the college. This would involve you writing to students from four disciplines within the college, namely Early Childhood in Education, Sports, Exercise and Fitness, Laboratory Studies, and Motor Technology, inviting them to participate in a face-to-face audio-taped interview for a period of approximately 45-60 minutes. The first two students from each discipline to volunteer to participate in the study will be chosen.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after analysis according to UL guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the college's name and the name of the individual participants will not be used in the research and the college will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved.

If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Julia Hawkins

Supervisor: Siobhan Keogh

Email address: 15041506@studentmail.ul.ie Email address: siobhanmkeogh@gmail.com

Principal Investigator: Dr Lucy Hearne

Email: lucy@hearne@ul.ie

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC no. _____). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

Appendix B: Consent Form (Principal)



UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Consent Form (Principal)

EHS REC no.

Date:

Research title: “A Study of Students’ Experiences of Work Placement within the Further Education Sector in the West of Ireland”.

I have read the Subject Information Sheet and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the college will not be revealed in the reporting of this research study. The conditions involved in the research which are designed to protect the privacy of participants and respect their contribution are:

1. Participation is entirely voluntary.
2. Participants are free to withdraw at any time prior to the data analysis stage and any contribution made will be subsequently destroyed.
3. The interviews will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the research and the supervisor. Excerpts from the interviews may be part of the final research dissertation but under no circumstances will names or any identifying characteristics be included in the report.

I hereby give my consent for Julia Hawkins to carry out this research in the college:

Signature: _____

Printed name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Subject Information Sheet (Student)



UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Subject Information Email (Volunteer Participant)

EHS REC no.:

Date:

Research title: “A Study of Students’ Experiences of Work Placement within the Further Education Sector in the West of Ireland”.

Dear Student,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development course with the School of Education, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Ms Siobhan Keogh. As part of my studies I have to complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research I aim to explore the topic of work placement in the further education sector. In order to gather this information I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in a face-to-face audio-taped interview. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and be held in a confidential location agreeable to you.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio tape recorded and the data will be destroyed after analysis process. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that your name will not be used in the research. If you have any queries or require any further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Julia Hawkins

Supervisor: Siobhan Keogh

Email address: 15041506@studentmail.ul.ie Email address: siobhanmkeogh@gmail.com

Principal Investigator: Dr Lucy Hearne

Email: lucy@hearne@ul.ie

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC no. _____). If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie

Appendix D: Consent Form (Student)



UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Consent Form (Volunteer Participant)

EHS REC no.

Date:

Research title: “A Study of Students’ Experiences of Work Placement within the Further Education Sector in the West of Ireland”.

I understand what this research project is about, and what the results will be used for.

- I am fully aware of the procedures and of the risks and the benefits of the study.
- I am fully aware that the recording of the interview and the data generated from it will be kept confidential.
- I am aware that my identity will remain anonymous.
- I know that my participation in the research study is voluntary and I can withdraw my involvement at any time prior to the data analysis stage.

I hereby agree to take part in this study:

Signature: _____

Printed name: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Interview Questions (Student)



UNIVERSITY *of* LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

Research title: “A Study of Students’ Experiences of Work Placement within the Further Education Sector in the West of Ireland”.

Date:

EHS REC no.:

INTERVIEW (Student)

Part One: Background Information

1. Can you tell me about your career up to this point? What level of education did you achieve prior to coming on the Further Education course?
2. Have you had any experience in the past of work placement? If so, for what duration? What occupational category?
3. What course are you studying? Why did you choose this course of study?

Part Two: Details of the Experience

4. Where did you complete your work placement and for what duration?
5. Why did you choose this occupational category?
6. What steps were involved in obtaining your work placement? Had you any assistance from your Course Co-ordinator and Career Guidance Counsellor in securing your placement? and if yes, what assistance did you receive?
7. Did you receive prior preparation for work placement and if so what did this entail and by who?
8. Did you keep a diary and reflect on what was achieved on a daily basis?

Part Three: Review of the Experience

9. Had you any initial concerns in your work placement? and if so how did you cope or resolve these concerns?
10. What technical skills did you gain or improve on during your work placement?
11. What soft skills did you acquire or improve on during your work placement?
12. What practical skills did you master?

Part Four: Reflection on the Experience

13. Overall what were the positive/negative experiences of your work placement?
14. What were the areas for personal, social and vocational improvement identified throughout your work placement?
15. What level of contacts/networking did you attain while within the organisation?

Part Five: Outcome of the Experience

16. On completion of work placement was there any opportunity to obtain future employment within the organisation after completion of your course or in the near future?
17. Did you obtain feedback from your Supervisor/Manager? Did you obtain a reference from the organisation on completion of work placement? What was the outcome of this feedback be it positive or negative and on reflection did you agree with it?
18. On reflection of your work placement has it had any direct influence or not on your future decision making with regard to further educational progression routes and in what specific category?
19. On reflection of your work placement has it had any direct influence or not on your future decision making with regard to future employment/career path choice?
20. In light of the above what help, support and advice mechanisms were in place in the college on your return from work placement to explore the above further from your Course Co-ordinator and Guidance Counsellor? Have you any comments or suggestions to share in relation to this?
21. Did you feel there was adequate follow up provided by the college on your work placement learning outcomes? If so explain? If not explain?
22. Lastly, what advice, if any, would you give to future students participating in work placement?

Thank you for participating in this study

Appendix F: List of Support Services

List of Support Services in the Further Education College

Career Guidance Counsellor

Further Education Career Guidance Counsellor, Shane McClearn

Contact: 091 755464

Email:shanemclearn@gretb.ie

GCC Chaplaincy

Further Education Chaplain Adrian McGrath

Contact: 091 755464

Email:adrianmcgrath@gretb.ie