Declaration

The author hereby declares that this thesis is entirely her own work. No element of the work described in this dissertation has previously been submitted for any degree in the University of Limerick, or in any other institution.

Signature: ____________________________

Mary Tyrrell
“Knowledge is invariably a matter of degree: you cannot put your finger upon even the simplest datum and say ‘this we know’.”

T. S. Eliot
Acknowledgements

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### Glossary

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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AEGI</td>
<td>Adult Education Guidance Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEGS</td>
<td>Adult Education Guidance Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AONTAS</td>
<td>Aos Oideachais Náisiúnta Tri Aontú Saorálach (National Adult Learning Organisation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDEFOP</td>
<td>European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td>Continuous Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECB</td>
<td>European Central Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELT</td>
<td>Experiential Learning Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESRI</td>
<td>Economic and Social Research Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETB</td>
<td>Education and Training Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>FETAC</td>
<td>Further Education Training and Awards Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HLT</td>
<td>Happenstance Learning Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBEC</td>
<td>Irish Business and Employers’ Confederation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGC</td>
<td>Institute of Guidance Counsellors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NALC</td>
<td>National Adult Learning Council</td>
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<td>NCC</td>
<td>National Contact Centre</td>
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<td>NCCE</td>
<td>National Centre for Guidance in Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NESF</td>
<td>National Economic and Social Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>Post Leaving Certificate</td>
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<tr>
<td>QQI</td>
<td>Quality and Qualifications Ireland</td>
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<td>SCCT</td>
<td>Social Cognitive Career Theory</td>
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<td>SST</td>
<td>Specific Skills Training</td>
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<td>UL</td>
<td>University of Limerick</td>
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<tr>
<td>VEC</td>
<td>Vocational Education Committee</td>
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<td>VTOS</td>
<td>Vocational and Training Opportunities Scheme</td>
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An Investigation into the Relevance of the Work Practice Placement Module on the Career Development of Former ETB Trainees

Abstract

Although there has been much research into the Further Education and Training (FET) Sector in Ireland, its focus has been motivated by economics (McGuinness, 2014) and in its progression through its relationship with its many stakeholders (SOLAS, 2015). An area of neglect in this research has been the role played by work placement as part of the training experience, and in particular the voice of the learner her/himself in this process.

This study is an empirical evaluation of participants’ direct experience of the work placement element of PLC programmes. Within this study there is a focus on a number of areas: the link between participation in work placement and securing employment, the impact of the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, and the level of career guidance available in the pre-entry process for participants of these PLC programmes.

The research methodology adopted a quantitative approach using an on-line survey (e-SurveysPro) in the form of a questionnaire which was disseminated to a random sample of past trainees from one Education and Training Board centre.

The findings indicated that the inclusion of a work placement component on FET programmes plays an important role in preparing trainees for employment. The study concludes with policy recommendations to improve both the design and delivery of the work placement component of current PLC programmes and makes a number of recommendations for future research.
Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.0 Introduction

The following sections will outline the context of this research study, present a justification for the research and position the researcher within the study. The research methodology, aims and objectives of the study and a plan of the dissertation are also presented.

1.1 Context and Justification for the Research Study

This research study explores the relevance and impact of work placements undertaken as part of Further Education and Training (FET) programmes, particularly in relation to employment outcomes for participants on completion of their training.

The Irish FET sector is unique in that it is not dedicated to one specific group of learners, either in age or stage. It is available to learners from 16 to 65 and so facilitates lifelong learning, (SOLAS, 2016). Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes come under the FET umbrella and are funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), and through SOLAS are managed by the national network of Education and Training Boards (ETBs), (SOLAS, 2016). Because FETs are largely Government funded they facilitate social inclusion and allow access to training opportunities which can result in the learner gaining qualifications up to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), (SOLAS, 2014). In addition FET can facilitate progression to higher education, up-skilling, re-skilling and gaining employment.

Within the context of Irish Government reform of the Public Services, the past three years have seen momentous changes in the FET sector which have included the introduction of the FET Act (2013), the amalgamation of the VECs to establish 16 ETBs, the dissolution of FÁS and the establishment of SOLAS. The FET Strategy 2014-2019 (2014) is providing direction for the sector and supporting the change process of developing an integrated FET system that “will meet the needs of the learner, enterprise and the community” (SOLAS, 2016). While FET programmes are undergoing ongoing policy and structural reforms training is being provided to more than 300,000 learners annually (FET Services and Training Plan, 2016). This is the backdrop against which this current research takes place.
Although much research has been conducted on the FET sector, work placement is an area which has been relatively unexplored. In the wake of Ireland’s recent economic recession, and with youth unemployment running at just under 19% (SOLAS, 2016), there are increasing numbers of adults qualifying for and engaging in FET programmes. Through adult education, adults hope to obtain the necessary qualifications and skills to improve their employment potential (OECD, 2014). Adult education programmes have a responsibility to prepare adult learners for the work environment and this research investigates the impact of work placement on employment outcomes. The study also investigates the relevance of work placement on the career development of trainees (Mezirow, 1991), (Knowles, 2012). Work placement is an assessed module on some, but not all, FET programmes. This study investigates the experiences of trainees who participated in assessed work placement modules (SOLAS, 2015).

1.2 Researcher’s Position in the Study

During this study the researcher was employed as a trainer on Post Leaving Certificate Level 5 Programmes within the FET sector. The researcher is also a trainee guidance counsellor, and has taught ICT and languages in secondary schools. The idea for this research proposal came about from having observed the outcomes achieved, and learning attained, through work placements on numerous PLC programmes. Having taught PLC programmes for over 15 years the outcomes of work placements, in their diversity, in their level of organisation, in their quality and duration has struck me at times as ‘wasted opportunity’ at worst, and ‘unbelievable luck’ at best. The researcher sought to identify the outcomes for FET participants who engage in Work Placement Modules and utilise this knowledge to contribute to best policy and practice in the organisation of PLC programmes.

The researcher is aware of the possibility of survey participants having been taught by her. In addition she is aware that the origin of the research was influenced by her own background as a PLC trainer, therefore as it was imperative to ensure validity in the research (Cohen et al., 2011), the issue of reflexivity will be addressed throughout the thesis. The researcher’s overall interest in this topic is motivated by a desire to improve the quality of Work Placement practices on PLC programmes and to develop new insights for theory, policy and practice.
1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The overarching aim of this exploratory study was to investigate whether the Work Practice Placement Module on LCETB programmes has had an impact on the employment outcomes of participants.

The research objectives were to:

1. Explore the impact of work placement undertaken as part of Further Education and Training (FET) programmes for participants on their immediate, or subsequent, employment outcomes
2. Determine the relevance of the Work Practice Placement Module on the future career development of former FET trainees
3. Investigate the frequency and level of training received by participants on work placement
4. Gather data on guidance counselling available to participants before placement on the PLC programme
5. Report on the research findings and make recommendations for future policy, practice and research relating to work placements in the PLC sector

1.4 Methodology

In order to obtain the relevant data for this research a quantitative approach was adopted. The data was collected by means of an on-line questionnaire (eSurveysPro), targeted at the two most popular training sectors, Administration and Healthcare. This approach was chosen for the following reasons:

1. Economy of time
2. Easy of analysis
3. Cost effectiveness

The researcher was cognisant of the goodwill of the participants in the study in giving of their time freely to complete questionnaires. At all times, ethical principles, including institutional requirements for carrying out research at the University of Limerick, professional ethics outlined by both the IGC (2012) and the NCGE (2008), as well as the personal ethical beliefs of the researcher, were adhered to.
1.5 Structure of the Study

A brief overview of the structure of the thesis and the chapters to follow is summarised below:

Chapter 1 – Introduction
The introductory chapter outlines the topic being investigated by the researcher along with an examination of the relevance, significance and background to the study. This chapter also describes the researcher’s position within the study.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review
The Literature Review scrutinises relevant literature on the topic to provide a policy, theory and practice context. It is divided into three sections: the policy that has shaped the development of PLC programmes in the FET sector to date; the role and integration of work placement into PLC programmes, and the theory relevant to the career development and decision making of adult learners in the context of further education.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology
The Methodology Chapter provides justification and rationale for the research methodology chosen. It outlines the process involved in the organisation of the investigation, including data collection and analysis. In addition, research issues of validity, reliability, and reflexivity are addressed. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the ethical issues raised and how they were addressed during the research process.

Chapter 4 – Primary Findings
This chapter presents the primary findings from the instrument used to collect the data from participants. A discussion on the data analysis strategy is followed by the findings, and concludes with a summary of the emergent issues.

Chapter 5 – Discussion
Chapter 5 provides a critical discussion of the overall findings of the study in the context of the original research question, primary findings and literature review.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion
This closing chapter presents conclusions derived from the study. It outlines the study’s implications for policy and practice within the PLC sector. Suggestions for future research are also addressed, as are the strengths and limitations of the study. The chapter finishes with a personal reflection on the learning over the duration of the project.
1.6 Conclusion
This chapter has introduced the research topic, positioned the researcher’s interest, outlined the aims and objectives of the study and described its structure. The next chapter will review relevant literature in the context of the overall aims of the research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the literature relevant to the exploration of the implications of the existence of a work placement module on Further Education and Training (FET) programmes, the impact for participants on their immediate and subsequent employment outcomes, and on their overall progression and career development. The review engaged with a range of resources, including Irish and international policy documents; journal articles; primary texts, research reports, conference reports, documents from education and guidance counselling representative bodies, and relevant web based sources. The chapter is divided into three sections. It firstly examines the policy that has shaped the development of Post Leaving Certificate programmes in the FET sector to date. Secondly, it explores the role and integration of work placement into PLC programmes. Thirdly, the research will investigate the theory underlying the relevance of work placement modules within the PLC sector.

2.1 Policy on Development of PLC Programmes in the FET Sector

2.1.1 Background

PLC programmes were introduced in 1985 (Watson et al., 2006) through the European Social Fund, to provide education and training for young people to bridge the gap between school and work; therefore they have been in existence in Ireland for over 30 years. The further education and training sectors in Ireland were developed separately over many years, mainly through FÁS and the Vocational Education Committees (VEC’s), which often resulted in duplication and waste of resources (Quinn, 2012).

The VEC sector led the development of Adult Education provision in Ireland at its outset (Farrell, 2012). During the 1970’s night classes in vocational schools formed the backbone of the service, and adults had few other educational options available to them (Farrell, 2012). Following the appointment of Adult Education Organisers by the Department of Education at the end of the 1970’s adult education began to slowly grow and develop in Ireland (Fleming, 2004). The Murphy Report (Murphy, 1973), the Kenny Report (Kenny, 1983) and more recently the Green Paper (DES, 1998) and White Paper (DES, 2000) all set a systematic developmental path for adult education.

The Department of Education and Science commissioned the Green Paper (1998) to make recommendations on how the Adult Education sector might evolve, and this marked the
first State recognition of the adult education sector in Ireland (Grummell, 2010). It recommended:

“a balanced approach to adult education, incorporating economic considerations within a broad spectrum of issues, including personal, social, cultural and environmental concerns.”

(DES, 1998, p.7)

The Green Paper (1998) was followed by a consultation process with stakeholders that led to a perceived need for the development of a Lifelong Learning Policy.

In 2000 the White Paper was commissioned by DES to set out a blueprint for the establishment of Lifelong Learning Policy. The White Paper placed a greater weight on citizenship, participation and community life. The focus of attention had moved from an emphasis on economic factors and the labour market “to encompass a broader range of political, community and social aims, with a specific focus on equality and interculturalism” (DES, 2000, p.13). The White Paper (2000) proposed the re-establishment of the National Adult Learning Council (NALC), which was set up in 2003 but, due to budgetary constraints, was disbanded again in 2008. The adult national learning organisation (AONTAS), a non-Government organisation established in 1969, has an ethos of influencing policy in the area of adult and community education and was a lead player in the development of the White Paper. AONTAS is informed by policy at European level and, with a focus firmly on the learner, produces submissions on learner needs, funding, and governance, to name but a few. AONTAS and NALA, as national organisations, have contributed significantly to the way adult education has advanced. (Fleming, 2004). The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) was established in 1995 to develop and support quality guidance provision in the education sector as part of lifelong learning in accordance with national and international best practice (NCGE, 2015). The Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) was set up in 2012 by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to provide quality educational guidance services for adults (AEGI Operational Guidelines, 2012). The work of the AEGI is informed by the White Paper (2000). There are now 40 Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS) nationally.

2.1.2 PLC Programmes
The PLC sector has its origins in community education (AONTAS, 2003). Community education provided a means for disparate groups, including the marginalised, travellers, the disabled, and many others “to engage with empowering processes and become active agents in their communities” (Connolly, 2003, p.9). Many PLC students are early school leavers as evidenced by DES (2013) research which tracked early leavers who left DES-supported post-primary schools between the 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 academic years. This research found that 55 per cent of these early leavers went on to further education or training or continued in second-level education in Ireland and 20 per cent of these enrolled in PLC courses.

The PLC sector, from a participant’s perspective, had been relatively neglected in research literature up to 2006 upon the publication of an Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report (Watson et al., 2006). One of the aims of the Watson et al. (2006) report was to find out how PLC leavers fared in the labour market, however, the report concentrated on discrepancies between gender, age and region, made little reference to course content and none to work placement. The report did highlight the fact that the bulk of participants were over the age of 21, which appeared to point to the emerging role of the PLC sector in providing a route to ‘second chance’ education. Interestingly, on further analysis, this proved not to be the case and that in fact “PLC’s were

Published in 2003, this extensive document outlined a blueprint for the future of the PLC sector and made 90 recommendations. The key recommendations of the McIver Report (2003) related to restructuring the sector, placing emphasis on the rights of FE functioning more as an alternative, rather than a route, to further education” (Watson et al., 2006, p.33).

A major review of the PLC sector (McIver Report, 2003) was commissioned by DES in 2001. students to a similar quality of service as students of third level institutions and in line with international further education services, outlining the broad steps required to achieve such goals. These recommendations shaped the sector in its development into governance by one body (FÁS) which was subsequently dissolved on 27 October 2013, (DES, 2016). SOLAS is now the State organisation responsible for funding, planning and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET – no longer PLC) programmes in Ireland. On 1st July 2013, the 33 Vocational Education Committees (VEC’s) were dissolved and replaced by 16 Education and Training Boards (ETB’s),
(www.education.ie) and these ETB’s were given responsibility for the FET sector. The SOLAS home page (www.solas.ie, 2017) shows current State investment of €634m in the sector. The numbers of students participating on FET courses has increased steadily and now stands at approximately 22,000 (www.solas.ie, 2016).

As part of Ireland’s Memorandum of Understanding with the European Union (EU), European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), a strategic review of the training and education provision offered by ETB’s was commissioned by the DES (Sweeney, 2013). This report looked at policy and procedure, making strategic recommendations for the establishment of SOLAS. Worryingly this report stated that “in no case are specific data on outcomes for adult unemployed available” (Sweeney, 2013, p.83). In addressing adjustments to current programmes, it stated specifically that “there are significant concerns with the amount and quality of the work experience involved on many PLC courses” (Sweeney, 2013, p.83). Recommendations included engaging employers with PLC programmes:

“if SOLAS and the ETB’s were to make it a priority to develop more systematic and effective engagement with local employers and engineer a higher quality and longer length to work experience on the programme.”

(Sweeney, 2013, p.83)

The main emphasis of PLC programmes has been to bridge the gap between leaving school and work for those who could not, or did not want to, proceed to further education, (Farrell, 2012). However, since 1996 PLC courses have also become a route into further education through the Institutes of Technology, via the Higher Education Links Scheme. The advantage is that those who have sat the Leaving Certificate Applied (an alternative Leaving Certificate which adopts a cross-curricular approach, and does not allow direct entry into higher education), or indeed those who have the normal Leaving Certificate but have not gained enough points, can add to their overall points and successfully gain entry to a third level programme (AONTAS, 2016). In addition, according to Mooney (2016), some universities now reserve a few places on specific programmes for entrants through the Further Education Training and Awards Council (FETAC) route.

According to the FET Strategy 2014-2019 (SOLAS, 2015), the range and variety of PLC programmes are developed largely with the aim of supporting industry and community needs. The sector has filled educational gaps in such areas as childcare, community care,
sport and leisure management as well as in more traditional areas such as administration and information technology applications courses.

“The vast majority of PLC provision is certified as Further Education by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) under the framework of qualifications established by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.”

(McCoy, Kelly, Watson, 2006, p.2)

Courses are offered, as listed on www.plccourses.ie, in both second level schools, administered by the schools, and by specialist training providers, both private and public sector. Those provided by the public sector are administered through the ETB’s, many of these being sub-contracted to specialist training providers who manage them on their behalf (www.fás.ie/en/Training/). Unlike entry to higher education, applications are through the training provider, i.e. the school or relevant ETB.

In a study that looked at the change in further education for school leavers who did not immediately go on to third level education, (Hannan et al., 2003) considered the experiences of participants in a range of educational and training settings, looked at the need for expansion of the PLC sector and also compared the Irish PLC model to those of England and Scotland, concluding that the Irish model was less satisfactory, arguing that it was too disparate and in need of further, more unified expansion. Following the Further Education and Training Act (2013) and the subsequent establishment of SOLAS, the FET Training Strategy was developed. The FET Strategy (2014-2019) is intended to provide a framework for the establishment and development of a strong FET sector (SOLAS, 2014).

2.2 The Role and Integration of Work Placement into PLC Programmes

Most PLC programmes fall between Level 2 and Level 5 of the FETAC framework. Assessments are undertaken on-site and FETAC are responsible for quality assurance, which they ensure through the appointment of external verifiers who monitor standards. Work placement is an assessed module on a number of training programmes (www.careersportal.ie). The module is assessed through project work and also by practical task based assignments. The work placement module is awarded points in the same way as other modules and these are included in the final award.

In the integration of work placement into PLC programmes this section looks at the existing research on outcomes from educational, employment and progression standpoints.
2.2.1 Outcomes of PLC Programmes

McCoy and Smyth (2006) carried out an analysis of educational and employment outcomes of PLC programmes. However, the emphasis in this study was very much on educational outcomes and the results of the examination of employment outcomes looked only at the situation of the PLC leaver one year after the course had ended. The study found that about one third of PLC leavers do go on to third level education and that this tended to be an alternative rather than a direct route into education.

More recently, Sweeney (2013) in a review of the FET sector, examined the early labour market experiences of PLC leavers and compared them to standard Leaving Certificate students. The Sweeney (2013) study included older PLC students, those over age 21 on leaving the PLC course, and analysed their situation separately from younger school leavers. In relation to the issue of work experience Sweeney found that:

“there are significant concerns with the amount and quality of the work experience involved on many PLC courses, which can rest primarily on the participants’ own initiatives. The ‘labour market justification’ test applied to proposals for new courses is cursory and the continuing labour market justification for existing courses is poorly monitored.”

(Sweeney, 2013, p.83)

In addition, the Sweeney (2013) study looked at how the FET sector needs to evolve to supply the skills needs of the economy while meeting the challenge of unemployment, and it carried out a survey of Irish Business and Employers’ Confederation (IBEC) members (June 2013) where employers were asked their opinions on the most important ways in which employers can act to improve the quality of publicly-funded FET. Results revealed that over 60% considered it important to provide work experience or internships and were currently doing so, and a further 37% considered it important that this should be done, although they were not in a position to provide it themselves. This would suggest that employers are willing to facilitate work placements for PLC students. Sweeney (2013) also identified the need to “involve employers and unions” (p.79) in the provision of programmes to FET groups and suggested the establishment of a workforce development committee “through which bodies with specific insight into the skills needs of the region’s economy and its workforce can systematically advise their ETB.” (p.78).

Other findings in the Sweeney (2013) study included inadequacies in how data is gathered and analysed, in particular data for assessing and monitoring the performance of programmes and providers. While it is outside the remit of this research to look at how data is currently gathered, the shortfall in its existence is crucial to addressing change.
Stakeholders in the FET sector offer ambitious goals towards the provision of broad ranging programmes which include opportunities for work experience (SOLAS, 2014). DES (2016) in its strategy for the next ten years, states as one of its objectives: “employers will participate in skills development through active collaboration with education and training providers” (National Skills Strategy 2025, p.10). (Sweeney, 2013, p.18) identified that there were 16,300 participants on “specific skills training” (SST) programmes, the category to be targeted in this study, who were “unemployed primarily” upon commencement of their programmes. The researcher’s interest lies in how work placements impact upon the employability of trainees.

A survey is commissioned by SOLAS every two years to investigate the destinations of former FÁS (now ETB) trainees once they have completed their programmes. The most recent survey available was carried out in 2015 (SOLAS, June 2015) among the trainees who had exited these programmes twelve months previously (2014) and it provides detailed information on the contribution which the training made to subsequently gaining their current/most recent job. The employment figures varied considerably between the programme types, however, the Full Time Training (FTT) sector was second highest, with 45% claiming that their course had “helped a lot” and 21% said it had “helped slightly” (see Table 2.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>FÁS Programme</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full-time Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unweighted</td>
<td>661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighted</td>
<td>697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did not help at all</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped slightly</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helped a lot</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 Contribution of FÁS course to gaining employment by programme (SOLAS, 2015)

The previous survey (2013), commissioned by FÁS/LCEBT (McGrath, & Milicevic, 2013), of trainees who exited training in 2012 aimed to identify which programmes were effective in enhancing employment prospects. The survey relates to trainees in a wide range of programmes, including traineeships and on-line training, a throughput of some 55,000 trainees in 2012 at a cost to the State of over €250 million. The study is broad
ranging and looks at positive outcomes such as progression to other training and up-skilling. It summarises labour market status post-programme and finds 40% of trainees (all programmes) to be employed, although it is not specific about the nature of this employment, i.e. full-time, part-time, or contract. The FÁS/LCEBT (2013) survey suggests that the training courses made a strong contribution to finding a job, bearing in mind that most of these former trainees had been out of work for more than 6 months and in some cases for more than two years. However, the survey does not show which programmes were most effective in achieving employment and work placement is not taken into account, so in effect the survey tells us very little about the effectiveness of programmes in enhancing the employment prospects of participants. Indeed much of the employment is transient and this is confirmed by the figures in Table 2.2 which shows that 57% of the jobs were temporary, while 43% were permanent. The findings of this FÁS/LCEBT (2013) survey also point toward a positive association between the level of education and the job type, with those holding higher educational qualifications being more likely to hold full-time posts. The temporary nature of many of the jobs is also reflected in the difference between the number of former trainees who found employment over the twelve months and the number who were employed at the time of the survey. Interestingly, a considerable number of the trainees, (21%) of those that accessed employment since exiting their courses, had worked for the same employer at some stage prior to commencing the course, while a similar share (18%) of trainees found employment with the employer they had done a work placement with during the course (see Table 2.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Is/was the job temporary</th>
<th>Worked for the same employer prior to their course</th>
<th>Worked for the same employer on a work placement during their course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2 FTIT Participants who got a job since exiting training
FÁS/LCEBT (McGrath, & Milicevic, 2013)

Ireland participated in an OECD Review (2013) of Local Job Creation Policies, which examined the contribution of local labour market policy to boosting quality employment and productivity, focusing on how policies are actually implemented. The findings from this review suggest that, when compared to other OECD countries, Ireland’s employment and skills system could be better aligned with employer demand.
One of the findings from a research report commissioned by the ESRI (Byrne & Smyth, 2010) on The Dynamics of Early School Leaving was that early school leavers rely heavily on personal networks to obtain apprenticeships and jobs. This study aims to show that personal networks are indeed essential, however they may be narrowly available to many early leavers whose employment outcomes could be greatly improved through introductions to employers outside of their own circles.

In 2013 The Department of Social Protection established the National Contact Centre (NCC), which operates a free job advertising and matching service, provides employers and jobseekers with information and profiles about prospective jobs and staff. The OECD Report (2014) identified that 60% of employers used neither the National Contact Centre (NCC) nor their local employment office when recruiting, opting instead for expensive recruitment agencies. A follow-up survey indicated that, among employers who had used the NCC, 64% stated that they had filled their vacancy with a DSP referred candidate.

2.2.2 Progression Outcomes of PLC Programmes
The term ‘progression’ is used a great deal in adult education. ETB programmes are sometimes referred to as ‘progression programmes’. FET outcomes may include employment, progression to another course in FET or HET and personal progression (SOLAS, 2016). The interpretation of the terms ‘progression’, ‘achievement’ and ‘outcomes’ are somewhat interchangeable, therefore by definition progression is a matter of perception. Progression may be seen as what is valued most by an individual and that ‘what’ according to McGivney (2002, p.11) may be seen as either the ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ outcomes of adult learning. For an adult learner the outcome of achieving employment may be far more important than achieving a qualification, although these two may be closely linked. McGivney (2002) also notes the gap between policy makers and the learners themselves.

“When questioned about the benefits of taking part in formal learning activities, adult learners repeatedly talk about the intangible benefits such as increased self-confidence and enjoyment, whereas policy makers and funders of adult education are more concerned with qualifications”

(McGivney, 2002, p.11)

This view is corroborated by Hearne’s (2009) research on the measurement of outcomes by the DES in the Irish Adult Education Guidance Service. Hearne (2009) found that, due to policy requirements, hard quantitative outcomes such as the attainment of qualifications and securing employment were favoured over soft qualitative outcomes,
such as analytical and interpersonal skills gained from training, in the determination of progression and concludes that there is a requirement for the qualitative measurement of career progression in the field of adult learning.

One of the key findings by Sweeney (2013) was that “non-accredited on-the-job training and industry-accreditation continue to be as, or more, highly valued by employers than FETAC awards” (p.78). This appears to suggest a growing lack of faith in many awards both from employers and learners perspectives, while also demonstrating the growing need for on-the-job training. Sweeney (2013) also found that “a wide diversity of employers have skills needs that the FET sector can supply” (p.76) and recommended greater liaison with the labour market so as to gain intelligence to improve the design of appropriate FET programmes and monitor their impact on progression. This emphasis on skills for employability is not without its critics. Grummell (2010) suggests that this view supports a neo-liberalist/capitalist agenda with employers and managers increasingly looking to develop a flexible and educated workforce to fulfil their own needs. Inglis (1997, p.5) also argues that adult educational concepts such as lifelong learning have been adopted as part of management strategy, thereby getting workers to share the same values and practices as employers and managers, with the ultimate goal of improving competitiveness, productivity and profit.

Sweeney (2013) raised further concerns regarding the lack of liaison and inflexibility around demand for programmes, the quality and lack of continuity of data gathered, that in fact “in no case are specific data on outcomes for adult unemployed available” (p.83). The review recommended more engagement with employers to achieve an increase in the quality of work experience available on PLC programmes and went so far as to say

“the importance of the occupations being targeted to local economies and domestic sectors suggest potentially major returns if SOLAS and the ETB’s were to make it a priority to develop more systematic and effective engagement with local employers and engineer a higher quality and longer length to work experience on the programme”

(Sweeney, 2014, p.83)

In a survey of IBEC members (Sweeney, June 2013) participants were asked their opinions on the most important ways in which employers can act to improve the quality of publicly-funded FET. Over 60% considered it important to provide work experience or internships and were currently doing so, and a further 37% considered it important but were not in a position to do so. Possibly the most interesting finding, however, was that
76% regarded the ability to influence the curriculum content of what is being taught as important, and stated that they were not in a position to do so.

Usher & Edwards, (2007) define learning as a “social cultural embedded set of practices”, so for them learning may be seen as “free floating” and any learning may be defined as ‘learning’, arguing that “oftentimes signifying a particular practice as a case of learning is an exertion of power”.

“Policy makers at national and supra-national levels are incorporating lifelong learning into the discourse and practices of an economic rationalism where the needs of the economy and labour market are to the fore”

(Usher & Edwards, 2007, p.11)

In its extreme Bagnall (2001) takes the neo-liberal argument one step further, by suggesting that the rise in popularity of informal learning over formal learning will prove to be a model which is economically more viable, leading to governments surrendering responsibility for education and lack of investment in formal learning institutions.

Learning outcomes from PLC programmes are evaluated on an on-going basis through assessment and accreditation, although some programmes are not accredited, making evaluation more complex. Evaluation of employment outcomes is even more difficult to determine; long-term versus short-term outcomes, quality versus quantity, and the perspectives of the adult learners themselves (Sweeney 2013). Schuller et al. (2007) highlights the fact that research on learning outcomes is weighted towards the input end rather than output, i.e. it is much easier to measure numbers and results at the participation end rather than try to discover the benefits of that training afterwards. Schuller et al. (2007, p.7) brings together a multi-dimensional picture of the benefits of learning by looking at the “wider benefits” of education, i.e. non-economic, and benefits ‘beyond’ the individual, through the integration of both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

2.3 Theory underlying the Relevance of Work Placement within the PLC Sector

Theory underpinning work placement lies in experiential learning. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) was defined by Kolb (1984) who, building on the theories of Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, Vygotsky, Jung, Rogers and others, pointed out the link between theory and practice and was the first to highlight that learning is a process based on experience. This link is important from the point of view that it shifted the ecology of learning away from the classroom and into the workplace.
In the early 1970’s Malcolm Knowles first introduced the concept of andragogy, the idea that adults and children learn differently. This concept has endured and Knowles theories of learning are still taught at teacher training level. Building on his theories of learning and development Knowles et al. (2012) looked at new employee programmes and argued a need for increased focus on new employee development. The term ‘new employee’ encompasses every type of new employee and is applicable in any type of organisation. Knowles et al. (2012) endeavoured to quantify the effects of social learning and self-directed learning by creating a ‘New Employee Learning Taxonomy’ when he argued that it is only through interaction between the individual and the work environment that relationships are established, knowledge is gained, roles are learned and acceptance follows. Knowles et al. (2012) challenges educational institutions to assume responsibility for the development of their students beyond just the task related learning which is the norm and he suggests this should include building work relationships and networking, building awareness of organisational culture and developing organisational learning skills, and dealing with complex problems, to name but a few. Work placement programmes could provide the perfect environment for such experiential learning.

2.3.1. Career Development and Decision Making in Adult Learners

The research questions specifically look towards gathering data on the level of guidance counselling available to participants before placement on their PLC programmes, and so career development theory is discussed in this section. To gain a broad knowledge of how individuals develop in adulthood, and how this impacts on their working lives, it is important to look at the theories underlying adult career development.

Kidd (2006) describes how psychologists including Piaget, Freud and Erikson define development as a series of stages. A stage may be seen as a period in development in which people exhibit typical behaviour patterns and establish particular capacities. Stage theory assumes that the stages of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline (Super, 1957), follow similar patterns across the lifespan. Super (1957) created a developmental model of career theory to illustrate how one’s personal experiences interrelate with occupational preferences in the creation of one’s self-concept. Theorists prior to Super, e.g. Parsons (1909) simply looked at personality and occupation (Trait and Factor Theory) which focused on the match between personality traits and the requirements of the occupation. Super’s model broke the lifespan into very specific stages, which may be seen as rather inflexible. However, in the context of continuing
education Super’s exercise could prove invaluable to individuals in the identification of career related abilities and in gaining perspective on career progression. However, Kidd (2006) argues that stage and developmental theories are limited by their disregard for difference, both cultural and individual. She also argues that a growing multicultural society needs to integrate multicultural perspectives into career development. This point has relevance in the context of the study as programmes increasingly accommodate foreign nationals, and must be modified accordingly.

According to Kidd (2006), the predictable stages of career development, as defined by Super (1957) have been superseded by theories such as that of ‘chaos’, (Pryor & Bright, 2011) and ‘happenstance’ (Krumboltz, 2009). Many researchers have written on the concept of chance. Also known as the Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC), Bright & Pryor (2005) contend that individuals are so complex that chance events have to have a huge influence on career outcomes. Chance/chaos theories have also been referred to as happenstance learning theory (HLT) and Krumboltz (1998) attempted to explain how individuals find themselves on a particular path in life. He (Krumboltz, 1998) explains that the situations in which people find themselves are largely due to learned responses to circumstances and are therefore reactions to situations that they have created for themselves. Chance plays an important role in life and so it follows that it also plays a role in career. Krumboltz explored the idea that unplanned events can become opportunities for learning, and by extension how this might influence career guidance. Savickas (2011) contends that the 21st century must give way to a new general model for career counselling designed for fluidity, flexibility and multi-culturalism. The research outlined above fits into the structure of this new model where employees must continuously reinvent themselves and reconstruct their careers.

Job and career changes due to the uncertainties of the economic environment, technological changes, and new attitudes towards work have led to “a dramatic increase in the amount of change with which most people must cope during their lives” (Sugarman, 2001, p.137).

Savickas (2011) identifies the need for vocational psychology to focus attention on employability rather than employment. Savickas (2011) states that employability requires basic skills such as communication, honesty, decision-making and problem-solving which can be applied quickly to diverse situations. This shift from employment to
employability has implications for training design and for how careers are conceptualised by all stakeholders.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is aimed at understanding educational and occupational interest development, choice-making, performance and resilience, satisfaction and well-being (Lent et al. 2000). According to Bandura (1989), within social cognitive theory people are neither driven by inner forces nor automatically shaped by their environment, but are subject to a combination of interacting influences. SCCT emphasises the way in which behaviour may be a predictor for career, e.g. the idea that people’s interests are a basis for career choice. SCCT may also lend itself to the study of many process aspects of career behaviour (Lent et al., 2000) including such issues as how people cope with the challenges involved in career preparation, entry, adjustment, and change, regardless of their specific educational and occupational fields. Lent et al. (2000) contend that the SCCT model can be used as a base theory of career self-management and offers examples of the adaptive, process behaviours to which it can be applied (e.g. career decision making/exploration, job searching, career advancement, negotiation of work transitions, re-training etc.). Lent et al., (2000) emphasise the idea that people form lasting interests in activities when they experience personal competency and positive outcomes.

More recently, constructivist approaches argue that people produce knowledge and create meaning based upon their experiences (Savickas, 2011). Through her research into career interventions, Bimrose et al., (2005) concludes

“\[the experience of work in some form strongly influences early career learning/development, progress towards entry into the labour market and acquisition and development of a vocational identity.\]”

(Bimrose et al., p.55)

Bimrose contends that one of the key components of the construction of an individual's new knowledge is assimilation. Assimilating causes an individual to incorporate new experiences into old experiences (Bruner, 1990, and Piaget, 1972), allowing them to develop new outlooks, rethink misunderstandings, and evaluate what is important, and ultimately altering perceptions. Built on constructivist theory, narrative theory emphasises the process of re-interpreting the past in order to develop a coherent career story (Savickas, 2011) and is more in tune with career patterns and the idea of empowering one’s own destiny. Narrative theory looks at storytelling as a method of understanding. Storytelling has a universal appeal and can be generally easily
understood. It moves from theory to practice through telling the story, identifying themes and encouraging ideas. It can be a very powerful way to get people to think in creative and unexpected ways, leading to more positive outcomes (Savickas 2011).

Kidd (2006) points out the distinction between career theories and career guidance theories; career theories are concerned with an individual’s career experience and how that relates to the environment of that career, whereas career guidance theories focus on interventions in relation to career development (Kidd, 2006, p.7).

2.4 Conclusion

Largely, the evaluative work done to date on the effectiveness of PLC programmes has been neglected and is therefore unknown. Clearly there is a research gap pertaining to the progression outcomes for those emergent from the PLC sector, specifically, little is known on the impact of work placement undertaken by participants. In addition, there is very little known about the design effectiveness of placements within the PLC structure. Taking into consideration the background of PLC programmes, and the theory underlying the relevance of work placement within the sector, the study considers whether the progression and employment objectives of such programmes are being met.

Chapter 3 will outline the research methodology used to gain insight from research participants.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

Chapter 2 identified a gap in existing evaluative research on work placements in FET programmes. Specifically, little study has been done on the impact of work placements undertaken by PLC learners and the intrinsic value of work practice, very little is known about the design effectiveness of existing work placement programmes and there is a deficit of knowledge pertaining to the progression outcomes for those emergent from the PLC sector. The questions in this research were set up having identified these gaps in knowledge.

The focus of this research is on ETB participants on FET programmes who had engaged in a Work Practice Placement Module as part of their studies and therefore the questions addressed the experiences of trainees. The questions concentrated on the relevance of the work placement to the training programme undertaken, and the immediate and subsequent outcomes of the placement. Secondary research sought to investigate the level of workplace training during placement, and in addition, looked at the level of engagement with guidance counselling before placement on a training programme.

3.1 Identification of Research Questions

As stated in Chapter 1, the research objectives of this exploratory study were to:

1. *Explore the impact of work placement undertaken as part of Further Education and Training (FET) programmes for participants on their immediate, or subsequent, employment outcomes*
2. *Determine the relevance of the Work Practice Placement Module on the future career development of former FET trainees*
3. *Investigate the frequency and level of training received by participants on work placement*
4. *Gather data on guidance counselling available to participants before placement on the PLC programme*
5. *Report on the research findings and make recommendations for future policy, practice and research relating to work placements in the PLC sector*
3.2 Research Paradigm

Cohen et al. (2011) holds that there are two predominant research approaches in education research; positivist and interpretative paradigms. The positivist paradigm is associated with a quantitative approach, where there is a large amount of data to be sampled. In contrast, the interpretative paradigm is associated with a qualitative approach, and is often connected with interviews as a research method. These paradigms offer different ways in which to carry out research, to facilitate analysis and so make a constructive contribution to existing knowledge. Cohen et al. (2011) explains the difference between each approach:

Positivism strives for objectivity, measurability, predictability, controllability, patterning, the construction of laws and rules of behaviour, and the ascription of causality; the interpretive paradigms strive to understand and interpret the world in terms of its actors

(Cohen et al. 2011, p.31)

From a philosophical perspective, positivism represents a shift in viewpoint from the largely humanistic approach which dominated up to the 18th century, to a more rational, deterministic, logical way of thinking, based on cause and effect. This research study is underpinned by the positivist paradigm, the origin of which has been credited to the French philosopher, Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Thomas (2009) contends Comte’s philosophy was in turn influenced by Hume’s (1711-1776) ‘principle of verification’. Hume’s basic premise is that worthwhile information must contain abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number and experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence. Thomas (2009) further develops his clarification of positivism by claiming that it may be called ‘realism’, or seen as a ‘straightforward’ view of the world.

Alternatively, interpretivist methodology has its origins in a more holistic and subjective approach. According to Thomas (2009) it can be traced to the American sociologist George Herbert Meade (1863-1931), although in the convention of all philosophical thought, there are probably many strands of influence. It is based on the view that each one of us sees and interprets the world in our own way and therefore differently; thus human experiences cannot be quantified in numerical terms. The whole idea of interpretivism is that it is about people, how they think and form ideas about the world and how their worlds are constructed. Thomas (2009) refers to interpretivism as ‘naturalistic’, and talks about immersing oneself in the research and using one’s own knowledge of the world to help make sense of the findings.
Silverman (2010) contends that the method used should be appropriate to what one is trying to find out and states that “methods should be our servants, not our rulers” (p.10). The importance of understanding each approach in order to select the most appropriate methodology is also emphasised by Bell (2005). Table 3.1 illustrates the differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The process of quantitative research</th>
<th>The process of qualitative research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Theory</td>
<td>1. General research questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hypothesis</td>
<td>2. Selecting relevant site(s) and subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Research design</td>
<td>3. Collection of relevant data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Devise measures of concepts</td>
<td>4. Interpretation of data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Select research site(s)</td>
<td>5. Conceptual and theoretical work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Select research subjects/respondents</td>
<td>6. Tighter specification of the research question(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Administer research instruments/collect data</td>
<td>7. Collection of further data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Process data</td>
<td>8. Write up findings / conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Analyse data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Findings/conclusions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Write up findings/conclusions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research Methods

3.2.1 Research Questions

The researcher wanted to investigate whether the Work Practice Placement Module on ETB programmes has had an impact on the employment outcomes of participants. In exploring the research problem and the literature at hand the researcher identified the primary research question as follows:

The primary research questions asked:

“What has been the impact of the work placement component of Further Education and Training (FET) programmes for participants on their employment outcomes?” and,

“What is the relevance of the Work Practice Placement Module on the future career development of former FET trainees?”

These questions sought to investigate the relevance of the work placement module in the career development of trainees on specified programmes run by ETB’s, and to evaluate whether the work placement undertaken on the training programme had had an impact on immediate, or subsequent, employment outcomes.
All sampling focuses on a small sample of a bigger population according to Brett Davies (2007) who makes the point that as long as the sample is truly representative then that is all that is required “in order to arrive at conclusions that are generally applicable” (p.55). The challenge is in ensuring that the sample is representative. The author looked at the different methods of sampling: random, cluster, convenience, quota and purposeful. Babbie (2008) suggests that “sometimes it is appropriate to select a sample on the basis of knowledge of a population” (p.204); this is purposeful (sometimes known as judgemental) sampling. Purposeful sampling, according to Davies (2007), is where the researcher targets individuals thought to be typical representatives of the whole. Davies (2007) also describes the population of study as being “determined primarily by the objectives implicit in your research question” (p.55).

In this study a purposeful sample was deliberately selected to represent a wider population, i.e. past trainees from two of the largest training sectors. The study sought to represent a particular group for a specific purpose, which was to access people who had participated in a training programme in the post leaving certificate sector and who had had access to a subsequent work placement programme. According to Babbie (2008) it is usual for the researcher to want to be able to apply the research to the total population from which the sample was drawn. In this case the sampled population is limited by type and broader conclusions can only be extrapolated to include similar types or groups. For this reason purposeful sampling supports this research where more conventional methods could not (Bryman 2012). The target sampling size for the survey was 80 past participants of Administration and Healthcare Post Leaving Certificate programmes, from one geographic region, which falls under the auspices of the ETB. The target population was comprised of both male and female past participants. The overall data collection period for this study extended from the 3rd July 2016 to 15th August 2016. The means of access and sampling are discussed in more depth in 3.3.1.

3.3 Research Design Frame: Online Survey

A survey may be seen as both a ‘research method’ and as a ‘design frame’. Issues of context and meaning arising from ambiguity and imprecision (Bell, p. 138), the potential for bias through the use of leading questions (Bell, p. 143), and the potential for sensitivity to questions, are just some of the hazards of writing a survey. A specific set of rules is provided by (Bryman, p. 255) for designing questions.
Bell (2005) states that a good questionnaire is “fiendishly difficult to design” and emphasises that thought must go into how questions will be answered at the design stage, and not after the questionnaire has been returned, as such an approach could make the answers impossible to quantify. This point is further emphasised by Punch (2005) who contends that the answer to a well-developed research question should be evident from the question itself. Thomas (2009) stresses that a questionnaire is “out of control once it is sent out” and emphasises the importance of piloting a draft to a small number for feedback. Thomas (2009) also highlights the flexibility of questionnaires and provides useful rules for creating different types of question, the kinds of response expected and how questions can be organised.

In the design of the questionnaire the researcher considered specifically:

a) What would the questionnaire measure?
b) How could questions be generated for the questionnaire?
c) How could results be measured?
d) How could reliability be generated?

The type of question, language used and order of items may all bias response. Consideration was given to the order in which items were presented, e.g. which questions would engage participants at an early point in the questionnaire and prevent boredom; should more demographic items be presented at the end? The issue of leading questions was considered, as was the possibility for respondents agreeing with a statement.

To allow respondents to expand upon answers and provide more in-depth responses, free text responses were included where more information was sought. However, whilst this approach can provide the interviewer with rich data, such material can be difficult to analyse and interpret (Oppenheim, 1992).

Cohen et al. (2011) emphasise that there is no ‘blueprint’ for planning research and that any research design should be governed by the notion of ‘fitness for purpose’. The key issues in relation to data collection in this study included the identification of a sample, gaining access to the participants, collecting and recording the data, and validity and reliability.

**3.3.1 Access and Sampling**

In the context of this research one of the potential issues could be that of uneven sampling (more responses received from one particular type of programme over others). Therefore
it was be necessary to get an even number of samples from both types of programme so as to avoid results being skewed. These kinds of issues must be taken into consideration in the final data analysis. To gain the required information it was necessary to look at similar groups within a specific time-frame. The survey respondents were former trainees drawn from two of the largest training sectors currently served by the ETB.

- Administration & IT
- Childcare & Health Studies

Access to the above was provided by the Gatekeeper, Adult Education Officer, of the relevant ETB. (See Appendix A). These former trainees were sourced from the ETB region, and were emailed by the Gatekeeper to ask their permission to forward their contact details for the purpose of the survey. A full explanation of the survey’s content and purpose was supplied (see Appendix B).

The researcher selected the target groups on the basis of her judgement on which groups would be the most representative (Babbie, 2008), therefore the sampling was purposive. One of the difficulties was to ascertain how many surveys would need to be distributed to create a valid survey. According to Bell (2005, p.120) “there are no set rules” and she advises that “the aim should be to obtain as representative a range of responses as possible” in order to fulfil the objectives of the study. From the 80 targeted participants there was a response rate of 61% (n=49) and the findings of the study are based on this figure.

3.3.2 Online Survey
Cohen et al. (2011) sets out a clear framework (p.73-74) for planning this kind of research which allows for decisions on the overall feasibility of the research to be addressed. Cohen et al. (2011) contends that the decision on which instrument to use follows on from these important earlier decisions on feasibility.

The objective of the quantitative questions is to provide data on the relationship between work placement and the achievement of full-time employment, using a mix of open and closed questions. Bryman (2012) describes the basic techniques used for both qualitative and quantitative data analysis and emphasises that while analysis is a distinct stage in the process it is important that the method of analysis should be decided upon while building the survey. According to Bryman (2012) not every technique is appropriate for every
type of variable and the size and nature of the sample can pose limitations on the technique used.

The researcher’s aim was to collect data from a number of post-programme trainees, to ascertain the impact of their work placement on employment outcomes and on their subsequent career development. This sub-set was further divided into two groups, “the key thing is that the observations are all made at the same moment in time, with a group whose members share some characteristic”, (Thomas, 2009, p.133). An examination of the collected data provided information relating to trends or differences in one or more of the variables, which led to a more in-depth examination of the observed relationships between and among the variables (Thomas, 2009).

With the ever expanding use of the internet, online surveys have become a viable and popular means of data collection (Callegaro et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2011; deVaus, 2014), and they are increasingly being used as a tool for academic research (Callegaro et al., 2015). The three main methods of distribution for online surveys are: email, via web pages and a combination of these two (de Vaus, 2014). There is a temptation to think of online surveys as web based, however, (Bryman, 2012) makes the distinction between web based and communication based methods, the former being where the questionnaire forms a web page that the respondent completes, and the latter where an email forms the platform from which the questionnaire is launched. The communication method was the format employed by the researcher.

A survey in the form of an online questionnaire was used to collect the data. There are currently 221 (Capterra.com, 2016) on-line survey tools available. The researcher selected ‘eSurveysPro’, which can be accessed via the website http://www.eSurveysPro.com, to create and host the questionnaire, and to collect the participants’ responses (see Appendix C).

3.3.3 The Strengths and Limitations of using eSurveysPro

3.3.3.1 Strengths

eSurveysPro software was launched in 2006 and has undergone many updates. Reasons for the selection of eSurveysPro included its recommendation by Capterra (Capterra.com, 2016), a free on-line service to help businesses to find the right software, as “one of the best web survey tools”. In addition, it has 18 different question types available, making it suitable for varying types of research. The questions can be organised in different ways
as there are additional options within each type. The design itself is visually attractive without being flashy, and the results can be reviewed in real time using built-in customised reporting, including comparison charts. (http://www.esurveyspro.com/ReportSummary.aspx?surveyId=358169).

### 3.3.3.2 Limitations

eSurveysPro is available as Freeware, however the free account features are limited and it was necessary to purchase the software. In particular it became necessary to gain access to advanced analysis settings which unavailable in the free version.

In order to complete an on-line survey, it is a pre-requisite that users have more than a basic level of computer literacy. The survey was received via email, therefore knowledge of email use, internet navigation, the ability to use a keyboard and mouse were necessary for accurate completion. The researcher did not anticipate any issues with computer literacy as the PLC programmes on which the research was conducted also include computer application modules to FETAC Level 5.

The time-frame required for completion of the survey was between 15 and 20 minutes, and it was difficult to get people to commit their time to its completion.

### 3.4 Pilot Study

As a means of validating the required time-frame to complete the questionnaire, the effectiveness of the instrument, and the value of the questions to elicit the right information so as to answer the primary research questions, a pilot study was carried out on 22\textsuperscript{nd} March, 2016. Two candidates who were known to have recently completed an administrative programme were chosen. Both candidates reported having been able to fill in the questionnaire within the allotted time frame. Neither candidate had any difficulty in understanding the questions. Both candidates reported that they found instructions on how to use the questionnaire quite clear and in no way confusing. There were no specific changes made to the questionnaire as a result of the pilot study.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections:

**Section One**, see Appendix C, aimed to elicit the base-line evidence on which to build an argument towards the main objective of looking at the intrinsic value of work practice. These base-line questions elicited information from respondents on their sociological
profile, educational background, their reasons for choosing the programme (now completed) and whether their expectations had been met.

Section Two, see Appendix C, aimed to explore the outcomes in terms of self-knowledge, making choices and understanding the world of work, to produce information on the relevance of the work placement, work placement training, new skills and knowledge, and placement outcomes.

Table 3.2 outlines the steps taken to access and administer the survey to the sample group of research participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>18/4/16</th>
<th>5/4/16</th>
<th>15/4/16</th>
<th>20/4/16</th>
<th>30/6/16</th>
<th>3/7/16</th>
<th>3/8/16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Details</td>
<td>Ethical approval was granted by the EHS ethics Committee University of Limerick (UL)</td>
<td>Permission sought from the (Gate-keeper), i.e. the Regional Manager of the Education &amp; Training Board to access email addresses of targeted sample</td>
<td>Approval granted by the Gate-Keeper.</td>
<td>The ETB sent a subject informatio n email to target sample group requesting permission to give email details to the researcher</td>
<td>Researcher received list of email addresses from those who had responded to ETB request.</td>
<td>Researcher emailed ETB list of respondents with Project Information Sheet containing link to survey, initial survey completion date specified 14 July</td>
<td>A further reminder email sent by researcher which extended the survey completion date to 12th August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ref. Doc.</td>
<td>(Appendix A)</td>
<td>(Appendix B)</td>
<td>(Appendix C)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Access details to participants

The survey was disseminated to a population of 126 email addresses. Participation in the survey was slow with a response rate of 36% (n=29) of the initial target of 80 participants from the first email link distributed on 3rd July 2016. When it became apparent that the response rate was poor from the initial request, a further reminder was sent on 3rd August 2016, subsequent to which the rate increased to 62.5% (n=50).

3.5 Validity and Reliability

The validity of a research study gives relevance to the results and overall value of the research (de Vaus, 2014). Validity refers to the accuracy and appropriateness of the survey data and its ability to address the topic of investigation (Bell, 2010). “Measuring
validity relates to the question of whether a measure is measuring what it is supposed to measure” (Bryman et al., p. 280).

According to Cohen et al. (2011) validity can be further defined as either internal or external. Internal validity refers to the extent to which the research can be accurately measured. The degree of accuracy with which the primary question is answered validates the survey. The researcher works in the area that the research study was aimed at and so it was not difficult to confirm that the content would elicit the kind of information necessary to support the study’s needs. The questionnaire was cross-checked and revised several times with the study supervisor who has also worked in the PLC sector. The researcher ensured that the questions were asked in such a way as to leave little room for inaccuracies and care was taken to develop clear, unambiguous phrasing.

Cohen et al. (2011) explains external validity in terms of whether inferences can be drawn from the data revealed through the study. External validity refers to the degree to which the results of the research can be addressed to a wider population. If the survey shows that work placement has had specific outcomes for participants how feasible would it be to extrapolate that data onto other PLC programmes? In looking at construct validity the researcher must check and compare the outcomes of other similar research studies. However, it is impossible for quantitative research to be 100% valid (Punch, 2005) and (Cohen et al., 2011) states that it “possesses a measure of standard error which is inbuilt” (p.105).

Babbie (2008) states that “survey research is generally weak on validity and strong on reliability” (p. 304) and contends that by presenting a set of standardised questions this, by its very inflexibility, goes a long way towards eliminating unreliable answers, while on the other hand the artificiality of a survey can put a strain on its validity. Cohen et al. (2011) makes the point that questionnaires, being anonymous, are more reliable than, for example, interviews, as they encourage greater honesty. However, there is also the possibility that questions have not been answered correctly and this is a hazard that is difficult to check. This researcher checked the reliability of the instrument by examining the consistency of responses. Two different types of programme were targeted for this survey so as to gain a cross-sectional sample. In the consideration of validity and reliability a central issue is that of the possibility of a skewed sample, which is to say that the sample must come from an even number of participants of both groups.
3.6 Data Analysis

The Microsoft Excel application was used to export the collected data from e-SurveysPro to enable analysis of the data. The quantitative data from each question was separated out so that statistical analysis could be performed on the nominal; ordinal and interval data. This involved transforming the mass of raw data into tables and charts, to extract and refine that data. Thomas (2009) describes the analyses of variables, frequencies and percentages to translate the quantitative data to a more meaningful form, or bivariate analysis, Bryman (2012).

3.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is concerned with the idea of the researcher being an inextricable part of the research (Cohen et al. 2011), so therefore their background and experience, their beliefs, understanding and behaviour impact on the research process. The researcher’s background holds potential for shaping their interpretations of the research (Cresswell 2014). According to Cohen et al. (2011) one must first determine whether there is a problem with reflexivity and then having identified it, determine how to address it. To achieve this end Cohen et al. (2011) goes one step further in stating that rather than trying to remove researcher effect the researcher should “hold themselves up to the light” (p.171) and to combat this reactivity researchers must “monitor closely and continually their own interactions with participants, their own reactions, roles, biases” (p.171). Therefore it is necessary to clarify one’s background and professional position in respect of the research.

The researcher is a trainee guidance counsellor with a training background, strongly linked to ICT, in the Post Leaving Certificate sector. Her background implies that she could bring preconceptions, assumptions, values and bias to the research. To address this the researcher carried out self-reflective exercises, guided by Blaxter et al. (2010). She looked closely at the reasons for the research and found for example, the study was undoubtedly motivated from personal experience. However, Blaxter et al. (2010) contends that it is useful to understand why one is involved in research as clarity can be found only through understanding motivation. Motivation can influence one’s openness to certain approaches or even influence one’s findings. A small percentage of respondents were past students of the researcher. Reflecting on this issue she became conscious of the potential propensity to look for positive outcomes; in balance the questionnaire was
structured in such a way that outcomes were returned on a scale and were collated as returned.

Research is not a wholly objective activity and only through awareness of bias can bias be corrected (Cohen et al., 2011). To address potential bias and awareness of preconceptions the researcher has adopted an attitude of critical reflection throughout the project, maintaining a reflective diary to record noted preconceptions, personal feelings, reactions and assumptions or biases that she became aware of. At the outset of the study the researcher was aware of perceptions she held around work placements and possible consequent bias in objectivity. For this reason the writer engaged with research wherever possible and has made every effort not to reflect personal observations or assumptions. In addition, the possibility existed of a number of respondents being past pupils of the researcher, giving rise to difficulties in maintaining anonymity on both sides. To counteract this possible issue email addresses were not displayed in the returned questionnaire, so specific connections would have been almost impossible to make. The researcher carried out self-reflective exercises, guided by Blaxter et al (2010), and sought to achieve clarity through the original questions asked in the questionnaire which was designed with a view to ensuring integrity and quality of results. These reflections have provided a self-monitoring process and helped to prevent bias and increase objectivity (Thomas 2009).

3.8 Ethical Issues

Ethics in social research refers to the rules of conduct required when carrying out research; they “bring us into a realm in which the role of values in the research process becomes a topic of concern” (Bryman et al. p.130). Ethical issues arise at all stages of research and revolve around the way in which research subjects are treated (ethical principles), privacy, anonymity, confidentiality and how data is stored, and the quality of the research itself. While ethical issues tend to focus on practical matters, Thomas, (2009) goes further and emphasises that it is about how one thinks about the work, and the inquiry as a whole. McNiff and Whitehead (2010) suggest the development of a set of ethical principles that includes the drawing up of appropriate documentation to ensure professional conduct throughout the research. Prior to commencing this study, ethical approval was granted by University of Limerick. Permission was then sought and obtained from the relevant ‘gatekeeper’ in order to carry out the research and administer the on-line questionnaire to
participants of the identified programmes (see Appendix A and B). Research was conducted in accordance with guidelines set out in the Code of Ethics (2012) of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors with regard to Best Practice Guidelines, with Informed Consent, and clear differentiation of facts from opinion and giving credit to contributors.

Respondents were made aware of their individual rights under the Freedom of Information and Data Protection Acts. Respondents were also informed that by completing the research questionnaire they consented to having that information disseminated for research purposes.

Notably, guidance researchers have a ‘duty of care’ to all parties involved (Hearne 2013) and “and especially so to the participants who volunteer to contribute their time, energy and intellectual capacity to the process” (p.6). The subject of ethics in social research is very wide ranging and challenging (Cohen et al., 2011) and is seen as an ethical dilemma. This dilemma is explored through cost/benefits ratio analysis, for example, do the possible benefits of the research outweigh the personal costs to the individuals taking part? Are there any possible benefits for these individuals? In assessing cost/benefits for this study the researcher looked critically at impact on the individual, for example the contribution of the individual in terms of time, patience and honesty, ease of use of the survey and certainty of confidentiality.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodological approach used in the research design. It has also outlined the method used for data collection and analysis. Research issues of validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethical considerations were addressed. The next chapter will present the findings from the online research survey.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the primary findings from the research study. A discussion on the data analysis strategy is followed by the actual data findings and concludes with a summary of the main issues to emerge in the primary findings.

4.1 Data Analysis Strategy

The data was collected by means of a questionnaire using the online survey software eSurveysPro to investigate the relevance of the work practice placement module on the career development of former ETB trainees (see Appendix C). The online survey was distributed via email to 80 past participants of Administration and Healthcare FET programmes, from one geographic region, which falls under the auspices of a specific ETB.

The Excel software application was employed to transfer the data from eSurveysPro to enable analysis of the quantitative data. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of views from the open ended questions, the qualitative data was examined using content analysis (Burton et al., 2009) The overall goal of the process of content analysis was to look at the informative comments and identify any commonality of themes. Where relationships between variables have been identified, correlational analysis has been utilised to quantify their association. The data is presented using statistics, graphs and tables. In addition, the respondents’ ‘direct quotations’ from the qualitative data will be used in this chapter, where appropriate, to support the statistical data findings. Of the 80 participants who were sent the questionnaire there was a response rate of 61% (n=49) and the findings of the study are based on this figure.

These findings are presented under three headings:

1. Demographic Information
2. Programme Choice and Guidance Process
3. Work Placement Module and Progression
4.2 Demographic Information

The first section (Section 1) of the survey obtained socio-demographic information from three questions (Q.1-3): gender, age range, and nationality. In relation to gender (Q.1) there were 49 respondents (61%), female (88%, n=43) and (12%, n=6) male.

The age range was broad (Q.2) with the greater number (31%, n=15) of respondents aged between 36 and 45, followed in descending order by 46-55 (24%, n=12), ages 26-35 (20%, n=10), ages 16-25 (16%, n=8), with the least (8%, n=4) aged 56-65, (see Figure 4.1).

Overall, there were seven nationalities represented (Q.3), the greatest number being Irish (80%, n=39), with the UK next (8%, n=4), followed by Polish (4%, n=2), Dutch, Bangladeshi, Ghanaian and Scottish (2%, n=1). Further analysis of the nationalities who completed the survey is referred to in Section 4.3 (see Figure 4.3).
4.3 Programme Choice and Guidance Process

Within Section 1 of the questionnaire there were 12 questions in total. (Q.4 - 6) sought information about the category of programme undertaken, whether it had been completed, and dates of completion. (Q.7 - 15) aimed to elicit information about the decision making process with regard to programme choice.

Responses to Q.4 revealed that the greater number of respondents had undertaken the Administration programme (75.5%, n=37) in contrast to the Healthcare programme (26.5%, n=13). The possibility of an uneven sample was referred to in the methodology sector (see Section 3.3.1).

Question 5 pertained to respondents completion of their programme and revealed that 88%, (n=43) had completed it, while 12% (n=6) had not (see Figure 4.3). These figures have significance as the work placement analysis will be based on a total figure of 43 respondents. Further analysis of the nationalities of the total number who had completed their programmes revealed that 80% (n=34) were Irish, followed by respondents from the UK (9%, n=4), Polish (5%, n=2), and Ghanaian, Dutch and Bangladeshi (2%, n=1) each.

![Fig. 4.2 Qu.3: Breakdown of Survey Participants’ Nationality](image-url)
Question 6 referred to the date of programme completion and it revealed that all programmes had been completed between 2012 and 2016, with equal numbers from 2015 and 2016 (35%, n=15), 2014 was next (21%, n=9), 2013 (7%, n=3), 2012 (2%, n=1), (see Figure 4.4). In total (70%, n=30) of respondents had completed their programmes between 2015 and 2016.

Question 7 gathered information about the decision making process of participants in relation to programme choice. It was open-ended so as to elicit qualitative information.
on participants’ reasons for selecting their programme. Content analysis of responses revealed that choice was largely influenced by the need to gain employment (53%, n=26) and qualitative comments from respondents included: “to retrain and return to the workforce”; “I saw it as an opportunity to increase my employment prospects”, and “to find work”. This was followed by wanting to learn a new skill/up-skill (33%, n=16) with such reasons given as, for example: “to further my skills in order to obtain employment”; “I had returned from travelling and found it difficult to find work in Ireland so decided to do some further training to brush up my skills and help towards me finding a new role”, and “I wanted to up-skill myself so I would be in a position to earn more money in a stable job that I enjoyed”. Autonomous choice (6%, n=3) was the next most frequent reason of programme choice with such comments as “out of own interest”, and “this was something I was always interested in and really wanted to try”. This was followed by those who had had recommendations from other agencies such as the Department of Social Protection (DSP) and ETB (2%, n=1) each. Finally 4% (n=2) did not comment (see Figure 4.5).

**Fig. 4.5 Q.7: Reasons for Programme Choice**
Question 8, which was a closed question, revealed that (92%, n=45) of participants chose the programme themselves and only 8% (n=4) had been influenced by another individual, (see Figure 4.6).

![Figure 4.6 Q.8: Participants’ Own Decision on Programme Choice](image)

Of the 8% of respondents who were influenced by others to do the programme, Question 9 extrapolated the following information: 50% (n=2) were influenced by the (DSP), 25% (n=1) by ETB, and 25% (n=1) by a Third Level Institution, (see Figure 4.7).

![Figure 4.7 Q.9: Influencers of decision to participate in programme](image)

Question 10 was aimed at finding out about the level of career guidance received by the participants prior to enrolment on their specific programmes. Interestingly, the findings revealed that 73% (n=36) had not received any form of career guidance from any source.
before enrolment on the programme, while 27% (n=13) had received guidance. Of the 27% (n=13) who had received guidance, it came from a number of sources (Q.11) including the Local Employment Service (LES) (12%, n=6), the Adult Education Guidance Service (AEGS) (6%, n=3), DSP/Intreo (4%, n=2), a Third Level Institution (2%, n=1) and a secondary school (2%, n=1), (see Figure 4.8).

![Figure 4.8: Sources of Career Guidance Prior to Enrolment on Programmes](image)

**Fig. 4.8 Qu.11: Sources of Career Guidance Prior to Enrolment on Programmes**

Question 12, a closed question, asked whether the choice of programme was connected to something the participants liked doing, e.g. interests/hobbies. It elicited a ‘Yes’ from only 33% (n=16) out of the total of 49 (100%) of respondents who had completed their programmes. This meant that only the same number (33%, n=16) answered Question 13 which aimed to gather information on the influence of participants’ own interests/hobbies on their choice of programme. Despite a low response rate all 33% (n=16) the data included qualitative information such as: “I like organising things”; “I worked in this field before”; “It is not connected to a hobby as such, but it is something I enjoy”; and “did volunteer work in caring for the elderly”, demonstrating a relationship between fields of interest and the decision to take up the programme.

The purpose of Question 14 was to discover the highest level of education of participants prior to entry on their programme of study. Responses revealed that the greatest number had obtained the Irish Leaving Certificate (33%, n=16), and 29% (n=14) had completed a PLC programme. Given that these programmes are at Level 5, a surprising number of participants already had a third level qualification (20%, n=10), and just 14% (n=7) had
completed Junior Certificate. The remaining 4% (n=2) had obtained qualifications outside of Ireland (GCSE’s), (see Figure 4.9).

Fig. 4.9 Q.14: Highest Level of Education of Participants Prior to Programme Entry

Question 15 aimed to ascertain, based on the participants’ knowledge of the programme prior to its commencement, whether it had met their expectations. This was a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ question with the option to ‘please explain further’. The findings indicate that 90% (n=44) of participant’s expectations were met and 10% (n=5) were not. Qualitative feedback was returned from 18% (n=9) of these respondents. Four respondents included positive comments: “Surpassed my expectations”, “This is the best training programme I ever did ….”, “I found the course excellent and very beneficial. I got work immediately after the course in the same field”, and “Yes, but probably more detailed/intense than I had expected”. There were three negative observations: “Would like to have covered more”, “More difficult than expected”, and “It was boring as I had expected”. Two respondents were undecided, offering comments such as “Yes and No, … longer time could have been given to a medical based software & Excel”, and “The course was excellent but it did not prepare me for the specifics of my work placement”.

4.4 Work Placement Module and Progression

Section 2 of the questionnaire (Q. 16-28) pertained specifically to the Work Placement Module of the programme undertaken. As mentioned in Section 4.2, the overall response rate for those completing the programme was 88% (n=43), therefore, as the work placement module, with the exception of those on day release (13%, n=5), takes place at
the end of the programme the remaining questions which pertain to this Module are based on this figure (88%, n=43).

Q. 16, a selection based question, demonstrated that the period of the Work Placement varied greatly in duration and format. The total response rate to this question was 98% (n=42) (see Figure 4.10). The most commonly experienced placement was 10 weeks full time (38%, n=16), the next most frequent was the much shorter period of 2 weeks (17%, n=7), followed by 2 days per week over 20 weeks (12%, n=5), 12 weeks (10%, n=4), and 2 days per week (day release) accounted for (5%, n=2). Of the remaining 19% ‘Other’, (n=8) 1 year full time (2%, n=1), 50 weeks (2%, n=1), 6 months (2%, n=1), 1 day per week over 40 weeks (2%, n=1), 1 day per week over 20 weeks (2%, n=1), 34 weeks (2%, n=1), 8 weeks (2%, n=1), and 6 weeks (2%, n=1). These statistics have been further analysed to extrapolate the number of full-time and part-time employments achieved in relation to the length of the work placement (see Q. 25).

Fig. 4.10 Qu.16: Duration of Work Placements

In response to Question 17 on the relevance of the work placement to the programme of study undertaken, 98% (n=41) stated it was relevant and a further 2% (n=1) stated it was not. It is worth noting here that the only respondent who was not satisfied with the relevance of the work placement programme offered the comment “unable to complete work placement in a relevant location due to Garda Vetting not being in place (before its commencement)”.
Question 18 sought to establish whether respondents had had a workplace supervisor during work placement whereby 86% (n=36) answered ‘Yes’, and 14% (n=6) answered ‘No’. This figure was later corroborated by qualitative data offered by respondents in the comments section (see Q.28).

Questions 19 - 21 sought information about work based training and the quality of the training received. Q.19 asked whether specific work based training had been received during the placement and elicited a 98% (n=42) response rate, with 83% (n=35) stating ‘Yes’, and 17% (n=7) stating ‘No’.

Information on the frequency of work based training was sought in Q.20 in the form of a selection based question. Responses revealed that while the duration of the training varied greatly ranging from 1 day per week over 15 weeks up to 1 year, they were in line with the variance in the duration of work placements (see Q.16 above). The breakdown of frequency was as follows: daily training (36%, n=15), continuous training (24%, n=10), weekly training (19%, n=8), monthly training (2%, n=1), and 19% (n=8) chose ‘not applicable’, (see Figure 4.11).

![Figure 4.11: Frequency of Work Based Training](chart)

When asked (Q.21) whether the training was adequate to confidently perform the required tasks during the work placement, there was a 93% (n=40) response. Analysis of these responses showed that 85% (n=35) agreed that training was adequate, while 15% (n=6) did not agree, (see Figure 4.12).
Question 22 sought to ascertain whether new skills and knowledge had been acquired by this participant on the work placement programme. There was a 98% (n=41) response to this question, with 83% (n=34); stating ‘Yes’ and 17% (n=7) stating ‘No’, (see Figure 4.13).

Question 23 sought to draw out qualitative information with regard to types of skills/knowledge acquired by the respondents (100%, n=43) on their work placement programme. The range of skills have been categorised into Administration (35%, n=15), Operating Equipment (23%, n=10), Caring for Elderly (21%, n=9), Personal Skills (19%, n=8), and Business Development (2%, n=1). These skills are further broken down by skill type (see Table 4.1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Type</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administration</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>making appointments, billing/issuing receipts,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scanning, strong telephone skills, correspondence, typing, payroll,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invoicing, a range of Patient Records Management Systems incl. Socrates, Health One, IPims, and PAS, petty cash, database, audio typing, generating prescriptions, franking letters, tracking files, cards indexing, preparing files for clinics and admissions, post, reception duties, stock control, processing SW forms, handling queries, dealing with the public</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Operating Equipment/Lifting/manual handling/health &amp; safety</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring for Elderly/nutrition/occupational activities</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Skills:</strong> confidentiality, confidence, customer care, communication, patience, how to multi-task</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Business development:</strong> direct mail shots, marketing, promotions, following sales strategy and achieving targets</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of respondents</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 Qu.23: Range of New Skills & Knowledge Attained on Work Placement

In response to Question 24 (see Figure 4.14), which sought to establish the number of trainees who had sourced employment in the line of work in which they had done their work placement, 48% (n=20) stated ‘Yes’, whilst 38% (n=16) stated ‘No’. In addition 14% (n=6) provided qualitative feedback which provided reasons for their current status such as: employed with the same company but in a work area other than where they had completed work placement (7%, n=3), employed with a different company (2%, n=1), and unable to take up employment due to illness and personal circumstance respectively (5%, n=2).
Fig. 4.14 Qu.24: Employment sourced in same line of work as work placement

Fig. 4.15 Qu.24: Breakdown of employment type subsequent to programme completion
Question 25 extrapolated the overall current status of those who had completed their programme of study. The findings revealed that after programme completion 37% (n=16) were employed full time, 28% (n=12) were employed part time, 16% (n=7) were unemployed, 7% (n=3) were pursuing FET programmes, 5% (n=2) were doing voluntary work, 5% (n=2) were unable to work due to illness, and 2% (n=1) on a Community Employment (CE) Scheme (see Figure 4.15).

These figures have been further analysed to investigate the relationship between length of work placement and achievement of employment (see Figure 4.16).
The information in Figure 4.16 demonstrates that the number of participants who completed a 10 week work placement were more likely to achieve employment (51%, n=16). Next most likely to achieve employment were those who completed 12 weeks, 2 weeks and day release at (7%, n=2) respectively, followed by 2 days per week and 1 day per week at (3%, n=1) each, and 1 year, 50 weeks, 6 months, 34 weeks and 8 weeks (3%, n=1) respectively. However, it must be noted that this figure is also correlated to the fact that the majority of work placements were over 10 weeks (see Figure 4.10) and the remaining placement figures correlate pro rata to the number of respondents who completed their placement during the specific time-frame.

Questions 26 and 27 explored the relevance of the Work Placement module to the respondents’ current overall situation, and sought suggestions for improvement in the quality of the programme. Of a total of (98%, n=43) of respondents to Question 26 (62%, n=26) found the module ‘very beneficial’, while (19%, n=8) found it ‘somewhat beneficial’, (10%, n=4) found it ‘not beneficial’, and the remaining (10%, n=4) offered feedback as follows: “it’s too soon to answer”, “I did not get any job in this”, “doing another training course”, and “didn’t complete work placement”, (see Figure 4.17).
Question 27 invited qualitative feedback on improvements related to their work placement programmes which generated an 84% (n=36) response rate. Only 11% (n=4) of respondents reported that they were totally satisfied with their work placement and did not suggest any improvements, 31% (n=11) felt they would have benefited from more training during work placement, 25% (n=9) would have preferred a longer period of work placement, while 19% (n=7) expressed the opinion that their work placement could have been more relevant. Of the remainder (14%, n=5) two offered useful qualitative comments which described the deficits: “more responsibility”, and “could be more interesting”, one respondent was “not sure”, one was unhappy with the hours of the placement, and one left the position before programme completion, having achieved full-time employment elsewhere.

Whilst the final question (Q.28) invited additional comments on the Work Placement module, only 29% (n=12) provided feedback. Analysis of this qualitative information evidenced that positive comments (21%, n=9) far outweighed negative ones (7%, n=3). Positive contributions were related largely to having achieved employment as a result of the work placement: “I am so lucky to have a full time employment with ….. and without the work practice there I would not have been”; “without my work placement I am fairly sure I would not have the job I have now and I am hoping for it to be made permanent.
this year”; and “without placement I would not have the confidence I got to apply for a position in this sector”, and this last also remarked that “the work placement officer was often too busy to spend time with me but I learned to be patient”.

The small amount of adverse contributions referred specifically to the training support in the work placement location, corroborating the data accumulated from Q.27 which observed how the work placement might have been improved (31%, n=11). Specifically, the insufficient, or lack of, training in the work placement location for participants undertaking the work placement module appears to be an issue. They included such comments as:

Do feel that in my work placement rather than received work experience I was depended upon to complete a role for people that were on holidays with no real training provided and

I committed 100% to my placement which was to shadow and assist the three rotational secretaries in place. I would have preferred a full week of training rather than being thrown in at the deep end. I was left on my own from very early on in the placement due to holiday time and sick leave. I loved my job and learned to pick up and get going through trial and error.

4.5 Summary

The focus of this study was to examine the relevance of the work placement module in the career development of trainees on specified programmes run by ETB’s, and to evaluate whether the work placement undertaken on the training programme had had an impact on immediate, or subsequent, employment outcomes.

A number of key themes emerged in the analysis.

4.5.1. Employment Outcomes

A clear impact on employment outcomes was demonstrated by the study. Despite the fact that in some 15% (n=6) of cases little, or no, on the job training was offered on work placement, direct employment outcomes were a surprising 48% (n=20) of respondents achieving full-time employment in the line of work in which they had completed their work placement. In addition 9% (n=4) achieved full-time employment in work areas other than where they had done their work placement and 7% (n=3) of these, while in a different line of work, were with the same company, clearly demonstrating the significance of making the connection with potential employers.
4.5.2 Workplace Learning and Development
The importance of workplace learning and development is illustrated by the variety and range of skills and knowledge attained through Work Placement. Skills developed (see Q.23) were both practical and academic. 85% (n=35) stated that they were satisfied with the type of training received on their Work Placement which ranged from administration to equipment operation, and personal skills to business development. This information was supported in the qualitative responses offered in the comments question (see Q.28) where confidence gained as a result of new knowledge not only developed in the immediate working environment but enabled the exploration of further opportunities.

4.5.3 Deficit of Career Guidance Prior to Placement on PLC Programmes
A deficiency in guidance counselling prior to enrolment on FET programmes was a secondary theme which emerged from the study. Guidance counselling was received by only 12% (n=13) of respondents, which is an extremely high number given the availability of guidance through the adult guidance service.

4.5.4 Paucity of Workplace Training During Work Placement
While 86% (n=36) of respondents had had a workplace supervisor, only 9% (n=4) were totally satisfied with the level of training they had received on their work placements. Workplace training appeared to be unstructured, varying in duration and frequency and 26% (n=11) of participants said they would have liked more training.

4.6 Conclusion
This chapter has presented the primary findings of this study. These key findings and themes which emerged from the data analysis are discussed in Chapter 5, with reference to existing literature.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

Chapter 4 presented the findings of this evaluative study. The aim of this discussion chapter is to explore these findings in the context of the original research question, primary findings and literature review (Thomas, 2009).

This chapter provides an overview of the research findings followed by a discussion of the two overarching main themes which emerged in the study. Additional findings are also discussed in this chapter and the research is summarised.

5.1 Overview of Research Findings

This research study was motivated by the researcher’s belief in the developmental value of work placement for trainees on FET programmes. Primarily, the findings identify the views of participants who engaged with programmes during the period between 2012 and 2016. The participants were sourced from the two most common training sectors, Administration and Healthcare, in one ETB. The two primary research questions of this investigation sought to establish the following:

1. What has been the impact of work placement undertaken as part of Further Education and Training (FET) programmes for participants on their immediate, or subsequent, employment outcomes?”, and
2. What is the relevance of the Work Practice Placement Module on the future career development of former FET trainees?

The findings indicate a very strong link between employment outcomes and the completion of a work placement on a PLC programme. The study identified also that the work placement module on PLC programmes is instrumental in the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. However, the findings also point to paucity in the level of training for the duration of work placements and the implications of this from both trainees’ and employers’ perspectives are discussed. In addition, a deficiency in career guidance in the FET sector was identified and will be discussed.

Two predominant themes emerged from the research:

1. The positive link between employment outcomes and completion of work placement
2. The importance of work placement in the acquisition of new skills and knowledge
5.2 Positive Link Between Employment Outcomes and Completion of Placement

One of the key aims of this study was to examine the impact of work placement as part of FET programmes on the employment outcomes of participants. The perceptions of a sample of participants on PLC programmes between 2012 and 2016 were examined, 91% of whom completed their programmes between 2014 and 2016. The stakeholders in the delivery of PLC programmes are the trainees, training provider, accreditation agency and, not least, potential employer. The main theme here is the positive relationship between employment and work placement, and within this theme the importance of developing contacts and networking during work placement is discussed. The range of time-scales for work placements and the quality and diversity of work place training are also evaluated.

The PLC programmes investigated in this study were from two sectors, namely Administration and Healthcare. The diversity of work experience in terms of its structure and duration is illustrated in the findings. Work placements varied from 1 day per week day-release over a full year to blocks of 10 and 12 weeks full-time. The results showed that the number of participants who completed a 10 week work placement were more likely to achieve employment (51%). There are no research statistics with which to compare this figure specifically, however to put it in context, the progression pathway of full-time PLC learners into employment in 2010 (McGuinness et al, 2014) was 26% and in 2012 stood at 25.2%. In this study, while 51% of those completing 10 week work placements achieved employment, the overall findings revealed that 37% (who had completed work placement) were employed full-time. It might be concluded from the research that a placement of 10 full weeks duration is an adequate time-frame in which to gain in-depth exposure to the job in question, to become proficient at the work, make connections and generally adapt to the work environment.

In order to place this research in perspective, the SOLAS (2015) follow-up survey of the contribution of FÁS (2014) (now ETB) courses to gaining employment demonstrated that 45% of participants of full-time training (FTT) programmes said their course “helped a lot” in gaining employment and a further 21% said it had “helped slightly”. However the SOLAS (2015) survey was based on all FTT programmes which took place in 2014 and did not establish how many of these participated in a work placement. This current study however, which was based only on programmes which contained a work placement
module, found the number employed after programme completion to be much higher than
the 2015 SOLAS study. In the current study, despite the fact that in 15% of cases no on-
the-job training took place, 48% found direct full-time employment in the line of work in
which they had done their work placement. In total 62% of respondents were employed
by the same company in which they had completed their work placements. Remarkably
14% of these were employed by the same company but in a line of work other than that
in which they had done their work placement, indicating the importance of making the
connection with the employer. This study showed that performing well on work
placement led to firm job offers at the end of the placement.

Another finding in this research is the relevance of developing contacts and networking
for trainees during a work placement which allows them to interact with individuals who
may be able to help them enter and progress into their chosen career. Byrne and Smyth
(2010) have also identified the importance of personal networks in obtaining jobs. This
is borne out particularly by those seeking apprenticeships where the apprentice must
secure an employer who will accommodate that apprenticeship. Similarly, Knowles
(2012) proposed that work relationships are established through interaction between the
individual and the work environment and he suggested that educational institutions look
towards building work relationships and networks for their students.

The economic recession in Ireland (2007-2013) and the pattern of migration into Ireland
have had the cumulative effect of increasing the proportion of the population which is
socially excluded, many of whom are on the live register (Fitzgerald, 2014). Economic
pressure has prompted a major reappraisal of the social welfare system and the adoption
of an active approach focussed on ensuring recipients use welfare receipt as an
opportunity to take steps to become self-reliant (Sweeney, 2013). This has put pressure
on the political system to identify innovative ways of offering such groups opportunities
to participate in education and training. In many instances, the response from
policymakers at national and regional level has been to develop training programmes and
these fall mainly within the remit of SOLAS and the ETBs. However, not all of these
programmes contain a work placement module and the exact numbers of trainees
emerging from FET programmes who have not participated in work placement are not
available. In the recent past stronger collaboration between the Department of Social
Protection (DSP)/Intreo and the FET system was recommended (Sweeney, 2013). In
addition, concerns about the amount and quality of work experience on many PLC
programmes and the lack of specific data on outcomes for adult unemployed adults was a concern (Sweeney, 2013). It was strongly proposed that employers be more actively engaged in the quality of work experience undertaken in PLC programmes through collaboration with local employers (Sweeney, 2013). The importance of such engagement is borne out in this study which explored the relevance of the Work Placement module to the respondents’ employment situation. 62% of respondents found their placement “very beneficial” while only 11% were not totally satisfied with the placement. Pathways to Work (2015) addresses the issue of employer engagement through Strand 4 of its 2016-2020 strategy (incentivising employers to offer jobs and opportunities to unemployed people). These incentives include educating employers to an awareness of the calibre of employee available through this route and provision of a comprehensive range of supports, making it easier for employers to expand their workforces.

After the recent recession, Ireland’s employment levels have recovered from an unemployment high of 15% at the end of 2011 to 6.6% (CSO, January 2017). As the economy recovers, core skills and abilities will underpin Ireland’s use of its talent. The primary aim of the FET Strategy (2014) is to provide these skills through FET to build and drive economic and employment growth, and it emphasises that these skills should be part of continuous development and lifelong learning so as to reduce the risk of unemployment. The strategy puts a clear emphasis on the development of skills credentials that are approved by industry and can be seen as transferrable across different sectors. The FET Strategy (2014) recognises the challenge in balancing FET reform with industry requirements, with Government policy and the needs of the unemployed and that its success will be dependent on a broad range of FET stakeholders. The McGuinness et al (2014) study on the FET sector, commissioned by SOLAS to assist in the development of its five-year strategic plan, highlighted the importance of the role of FET in lifelong learning and the weak data infrastructure around FET, as is evidenced in the deficit of information available on outcomes of programmes containing work placement modules.

In 2013 State spending on PLC’s was €170 million (Sweeney, 2013). Budget 2017 announced an increase of €36.5 million in funding for the higher and further education sector in 2017, though the FET portion of this has not yet been published. There can be no doubt that this is major investment. The need to improve the standing of FET in Ireland is recognised by the FET Strategy (2014), stating as a major priority that a new integrated
FET planning model be formulated which would be informed by employers in response to emerging labour market challenges. They further suggest that this strategy should be supported by a data structure reflective of this labour market intelligence. This has been addressed in Strand 5 of PTW’s 2016-2020 strategy (build organisation capability to deliver enhanced services to people who are unemployed) where the development and implementation of IT systems are detailed. Ultimately the goal is for better channels of communication, making recruitment easier for employers, creating opportunities for jobseekers. This study emphasises the importance of establishing links between jobseekers and employers, to create an awareness on both sides, to build up trust through communication.

The McGuinness et al. (2015) study found that 8 in 10 (77%) of participants on FÁS programmes, who completed training in the period January 2014 to March 2014, were unemployed prior to the commencement of their course and also found that over one quarter (27%) of FÁS trainees who were unemployed prior to beginning their course are now in employment. However, this research found that a total of 62% (more than double the number identified in the ESRI study) of those who completed PLC programmes and which contained a work placement, are employed. While the importance of the impact of the work placement module is evident, an economy which is rapidly gaining momentum must also be taken into consideration in the interpretation of this figure.

One of the core objectives of the establishment of SOLAS was to lead the modernisation of FET programmes ensuring they are focussed on the lifelong needs of learners, especially jobseekers, so that they are flexible and relevant to the needs of the labour market (SOLAS, 2014). The successful collaboration of all stakeholders in the FET sector will influence future programmes on offer, the future careers of trainees and the availability of a quality workforce. The SOLAS (2015) Follow-up Survey of FÁS Participants reported that the greatest impact of course completion was on confidence and job skills (80%).

5.3 Importance of Work Placement in Acquisition of New Skills & Knowledge

A key theme in the findings of this study was the importance of the acquisition of new skills and knowledge from the work placement experience for the participants. Overall, 83% of survey participants who had completed work placement stated they had acquired new skills and knowledge. In addition, the skills developed were shown to be both
practical and academic. Abilities acquired varied from routine administrative skills, e.g. “prepared files for patients”; “learnt a new computer programme”; “taking payments and issuing receipts”, to personal skills, e.g. “confidence when dealing with the public”; “strong telephone skills”; “how to multitask”, to business development, e.g. “managing promotions and mailshots”; “recommend products”; “liaise with suppliers”, to operation of equipment in all of these areas. This information was documented in the qualitative responses offered through comments and demonstrated that confidence gained as a result of new knowledge not only developed in the immediate working environment but enabled the exploration of other opportunities. Other opportunities were evidenced in the 14% who were employed by the same company in which they had done their work placement but were employed in a different line of work in that same company. Whether these opportunities were presented by management, or were identified by the participant, the fact remains that these trainees became employees through their assimilation of knowledge and their ability to perform the requisite work. Training programmes provide the theory and background for knowledge and skills, they can demonstrate method but cannot substitute hands-on experience.

The FET Strategy (2014-2019) is underpinned by European policy. Cedefop’s (European centre for the development of vocational training), whose core philosophy is that “people learn by doing; they learn in workplaces; while working”, work involves the study and comparison of vocational education and training (VET) systems and policies throughout the EU. One of Cedefop’s primary aims is to influence European policy in order to promote workplace learning. Reflecting this, the overall aim of the FET Strategy 2014-2019 is to increase the supply of ‘job-ready’ individuals through the roll-out of effective FET work-based learning models and they emphasise this should take place in the early phase of the Strategy, which is currently in its fourth year of implementation (April 2017). Many policy implications arising from the ESRI report in areas like planning and governance at national level, employer engagement, labour market intelligence and data collection could radically improve FET services. These policies are still being rolled out and their consequences are still not know. Similarly, in the UK, FET policies are undergoing a sea change. Traditionally the vocational training system in the UK offered low-level programmes, with consequent poor employment outcomes, however a Government policy paper (2015) (pre-Brexit) outlined a series of reform measures for FET in line with Cedefop recommendations, marking a move towards making
qualifications rigorous and responsive to the needs of employers and learners alike. However, CLD has been taken seriously in the UK by the Institute for Education Business Excellence (IEBE) which was established in 2009 to promote high standards in education/business links. The work of the IEBE is chiefly in bringing together all the stakeholders who build partnerships between education and business and is the first professional body of its type in the world. Its progression remains to be seen post-Brexit.

The Scottish FET system (Education Scotland, 2015), with its Curriculum for Excellence, was an underlying theme in the McIvor Report (2003) and has been a major influence on the proposals contained in the FET Strategy (2014). What stands out in the Scottish model is its “Curriculum for Excellence” which has been developed in conjunction with Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy. Overall, the Scottish system exhibits many characteristics of success and, in international comparison, Scotland has a high proportion of school leavers go on to productive activity in advanced education or the labour market and this provides the framework for all curriculum areas.

In researching the development of the relationship between employers and work placement opportunities it became apparent that, for many employers, work experience took precedence over qualifications. In its proposals on matching FET provision to employer needs the FET Strategy (2014) cites the Accenture Report (2013) “While many thousands of individuals have become unemployed, many employers report that they cannot find people with the skills they need”. The NESC review (2011) also pointed out a lack of confidence by employers in certification, finding that award holders still could not do the jobs for which they had been recruited. Sweeney (2013, p.78) found that “on-the-job training” was at least, if not more, highly valued by employers than qualifications. Sweeney (2013) found that 60% of employers considered it important to provide work experience, and did provide it, while a further 37% considered it important but were not in a position to do so. Sweeney (2013) also found that 76% of employers regarded the ability to influence curriculum content as important.

The FET Strategy (2014) categorically states that high quality workplace learning opportunities are effective in increasing labour market entry rates, and that programmes incorporating a module of work experience “represent an important mechanism for the FET sector to respond in a flexible way to meet the specific skill needs of companies”. This research study supports this viewpoint.
5.3.1 Paucity of Workplace Training During Work Placement

Adequate training is directly linked to confidence and ability to carry out tasks (O’Leary, 2016). A sub-theme to emerge in the consideration of the work placement link with employment outcomes is the paucity of work place training during placements. While 86% of respondents had had a workplace supervisor, only 9% were totally satisfied with the level of training received during the placement and 26% stated that they would have liked more training. Additionally, qualitative feedback revealed that participants were often left without any training at the beginning of the placement and that training was only done when it became necessary. There was a feeling amongst other participants that they were being used to fill in for full-time staff who were on holiday or sick leave, leaving no-one available to do the training. Other participants in this study revealed that their work placement supervisor was too busy to spend time with them.

In summary, 98% stated that their work placement was relevant to their field of study and 86% had had a workplace supervisor. However, the diversity in structure, duration and quality of training on placements begs the question as to whether there has been any joined-up thinking in stakeholders’ approach to the establishment of work placements during this period. On a practical level it is essential that employers know and understand the needs of trainees on work placement, e.g. that all criteria are met to ensure specified learning outcomes have been achieved, and that there is adequate mechanism in place for this to happen. On an industry level a cultural/attitudinal change is required as proposed in Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025 (DES, 2015) so as to “continue and enhance the reform of our system of education and training with a real partnership between the education sector and enterprise” (p.7).

The ESRI (2015) study identified the specific needs of employers in recruiting unemployed people for entry level positions, i.e. non-graduates with FET training. While 75% cited ‘work attitude’ as the most important attribute after soft skills, specific work experience (relevant to position) was next at 35% and, in addition, general work experience at 19%. Bearing out Sweeney’s (2013) argument and the NESC (2011) study, the ESRI (2015) results suggest that, once such attributes as work attitude, soft skills and related work experience are established, actual qualifications are not seen as priority (14%). PTW (2015) recognised that effective Public Employment Services need to be employer-centric.
5.3.2 Deficit of Career Guidance Prior to Placement on PLC Programmes

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) supports and develops guidance practice in all areas of education and informs the policy of the Department of Education and Skills in the field of guidance. Historically in the labour market sector FÁS has had a statutory responsibility for providing guidance services to the unemployed, prior to the establishment of the Pathways to Work (PTW) scheme which was first launched in 2012 by the DSP. PTW was tasked with implementing JobPath, a contracted employment services model for the long-term unemployed which is designed to complement the Action Plan for Jobs (OECD 2014) as part of a two-pronged approach to tackling the jobs crisis that emerged in the final years of the last decade. The Action Plan for Jobs is focused on stimulating employment growth; Pathways to Work on making sure that as many as possible of these new jobs, and other vacancies that arise in the economy are filled by people from the Live Register. The FET Strategy (2014) proposed the establishment of building blocks for an integrated guidance strategy for the FET sector.

A sub-theme which emerged from the research indicated a deficit of career guidance prior to placement on PLC programmes. The current research study sought to determine the level of career guidance (if any) received by the participants prior to enrolment on their specific PLC programmes. The findings indicate that career guidance was availed of by only 12% of respondents. The findings also revealed that 74% had not received career guidance from any source before enrolment which would seem a particularly high figure given the availability of guidance through the national Adult Educational Guidance Services (AEGS). In the event only 3% of the participants were referred through the AEGS.

The OECD review (2010) of vocational education and training in Ireland recommended that effective career guidance and information support should consist of a combination of career counselling and guidance where the individual learns to base career choices on their own strengths and aptitudes while aligning these with labour market opportunities. It also recommended the creation of an instrument to track progression through the education and training system which would chart the progress of trainees on their programmes. Hearne (2009) sought to clarify the measurement of individual progression in the FET sector and strongly recommended the development of a longitudinal tracking system in the AEGI. The Adult Guidance Management System (AGMS) has been put in place and it allows for easy reporting and statistical analysis, however it is not longitudinal...
and is limited to the individuals using the AEGI service (3% of study participants). A national joint initiative between SOLAS and ETBI has seen the creation of a live database of ETB courses, known as PLSS, which are visible on web systems and can be accessed by DSP staff that can then refer individuals to ETB courses. The availability of such information is crucial to stakeholders; however there would still appear to be quite a way to go in bridging the gap between all sectors.

While there is now a requirement for all those on the live register to register with JobsIreland, the level of engagement with qualified career guidance professionals is at the discretion of their Case Officers. This research shows that weaknesses remain in career guidance in this sector. However, the study also discovered that 92% of participants chose the programme for themselves and only 8% had been influenced by another individual. It has been the experience of the researcher that course participants frequently accept places on courses in which they have little interest, possibly due to their first choice being oversubscribed, combined with the fear they may lose their unemployment benefit if they do not participate. This gap in guidance services has far reaching consequences for the trainee, training provider and taxpayer alike. It may be extrapolated from this research that those who chose training programmes for themselves never had the opportunity of career guidance. In PTW’s latest review of its role in labour market activation it acknowledges that the “quality of engagement between individual Case Officers, clients and employers is not as effective, or as consistent, as it could be” (PTW, 2016-2020, p.17). In addressing this PTW (2016-2020) recommends earlier engagement with Case Officers, an increase in the level of engagement between those on the live register and their Case Officers and the implementation of an accredited professional development programme for Intreo Case Officers.

5.4 Conclusion

This research found that Work Placement, as an element of PLC programmes, can bring about positive employment outcomes through the attainment of full-time work, through the acquisition of skills and knowledge and through developing long term, lasting relationships with employers. Work experience helps to link theory with practice and can help the trainee in deciding whether they are on the right career path. In the light of existing research, this chapter has provided a critical interpretation of the findings of this study on the subject of the impact of work placement undertaken as part of Further
Education and Training (FET) programmes for participants, and on its relevance and implications for trainees, their future employers, and providers of PLC programmes. In Chapter 6 the implications of these findings will be discussed. In addition, the strengths and limitations of the study will be discussed and there will also be a personal reflection.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews the research study’s implications for practices within the PLC education sector, and attempts to identify what areas might be investigated in future research. Additionally it presents the strengths and limitations of the study, including its implications at a practical and research level. A number of recommendations are proposed and, finally, there is a reflexive examination of the study from the researcher’s perspective.

6.1 Overview of the Findings

The overall aims of this exploratory study were to survey the immediate, or subsequent, employment outcomes of ETB participants of FET programmes and to explore the relevance of the Work Practice Placement Module on their career development. In order to collect this information a questionnaire was hosted by eSurveysPro and was deployed to former ETB trainees who participated in programmes which took place between 2012-2016. On analysing the collected data the researcher believes that the aims and objectives of this study were achieved.

The study identified the following key findings:

- It is indicated that there is a very strong link between securing employment and having completed a work placement.
- The work placement module on PLC programmes is instrumental in the acquisition of new skills and knowledge.
- The level of on-the-job training, during placement, is often inadequate.
- There is a general deficiency of career guidance prior to placement on PLC programmes.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of Study

6.2.1 Strengths of Study

- This study has provided a valuable insight into the outcomes of work placement on PLC programmes.
- The research may provide a basis for further research, policy and practice initiatives in the PLC sector.
The use of a quantitative approach allowed the participants to submit information without pressure or bias. In addition, the option to ‘add comment’ yielded significant qualitative information, specifically it provided facts in relation to workplace training, and the types of skills acquired in the workplace.

6.2.2 Limitations of Study

- This researcher acknowledges, as a former and current trainer on ETB programmes, her own potential bias and was aware of this throughout the process. While every effort has been made to be as objective as possible the researcher is aware that every individual makes sense of reality though their own ideas and perceptions (Hopkins, 2008) and to maintain this objectivity her personal biases have been identified through the process, and strategies to minimise them have been employed.

- The participant sample was selected through consultation with management in one ETB. While subjects were unaware of the identity of the researcher, and were not coerced in any way, it is not possible to totally eliminate the chances of some participants feeling they were ‘obliged’ to participate and as such perhaps stating what they felt the collector wanted to hear.

- In a wider context it would have been interesting to include a larger sample from other programme types, e.g. Pathway to Employment/Tourism; their inclusion would have afforded a broader results base which would have made the study more valuable.

- In the analysis of the data it became apparent that the design of the questionnaire could have been modified to reveal more relevant data in some areas, namely in Section 2 it would have been beneficial to establish how the participant had sourced their work placement, but this question was not asked specifically.

6.3 Recommendations

These recommendations are based upon this research and emerge from the analysis, presentation and discussion of the findings.

6.3.1 Delivery

Having demonstrated the link between work placement and employment, the significance of the inclusion of a work placement module on all PLC programmes is imperative where the achievement of employment is seen as important. This research was conducted only
on programmes that contained work placement and the percentage of PLC’s which do not contain work placement was unavailable. Additional research is recommended in order to determine the overall ratio of programmes containing work placement to those who do not, and also to facilitate comparison of outcomes.

The many benefits of incorporating work placement into PLC training have been discussed. The main implication of the research for PLC courses suggests the development of Work Placement Modules for all PLC programmes, wherever feasible, together with improvements in quality and standardisation. A follow-on qualitative study is recommended so as to delve deeper into the subjective experiences of the participants.

6.3.2 Policy
A further parallel study of employers and policy makers is recommended, to facilitate more joined-up government thinking and improved policy making and delivery – all issues beyond the limited time-frame and resources of this existing study. In line with the Action Plan for Jobs (2017), National Skills Strategy (2025), the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Mary Mitchell O’Connor has undertaken to provide 2,600 traineeship places in 2017 through Skillnets and Springboard+ 2017. This model could be expanded to include PLC trainees and should incorporate a framework for delivery to ensure:

a) Liaison between PLC programme providers and employers
b) Structured framework for delivery of work experience modules
c) Measurable outcomes

This process might be streamlined with the appointment of dedicated Regional Work Experience Placement Officers, who would forge links with employers, and engage with them on individual student progress while on placement, ensuring all students gained maximum benefit from their placement.

For SOLAS and the ETBs the alignment of skills with employer needs are priority. To this end employers need to be represented on Education and Training Boards. Secondary research has shown that employers are willing to play a more active role in the design and delivery of training programmes; they are the ones who know exactly what is required. There are, in fact, some successful examples, such as Skillnets, whose expertise could be called upon, already in place.
A Workforce Development Committee, in line with FET Strategy (2014) representing all stakeholders, should be established. The work of the committee might include:

- Establishing a database of employers who are willing and able to accept trainees on work placement
- Establishing links between ETB’s and employers
- Establishing links with other stakeholders, e.g. accreditation bodies, local networks, unions etc.
- Create a best practice framework which could be applied to all work placements

6.3.3 Career Guidance
Delivery of career guidance and advice should be part of the provision before placement on PLC programmes. An area in which a specific deficit became apparent was the Intreo service, where there appeared to be very little provision. Currently career guidance is provided consistently only through the AEGI. The guidance service should be an integrated one, with all PLC programmes and trainee progression monitored similarly to the system already in place in the AGS. As previously addressed in the discussion chapter, a comprehensive guidance service is essential for potential PLC participants so that they have the knowledge to make informed decisions about participation on the programmes which are available to them. Guidance should also extend to provision of career advice. Many PLC participants have been long-term unemployed and their needs may include practical advice on learning to adapt, resilience and how to participate in the workforce again.

6.4 Reflection
It is an exciting time within Ireland’s new training and labour activation structures with their ambition to improve co-ordination and integration. The establishment of Intreo and SOLAS should advance how employment services and vocational education providers collaborate and communicate with each other. The merging of FÁS Training and Vocational Education Committees into 16 Education and Training Boards can also be expected to improve collaboration within the PLC system. At a national level, the legislation establishing SOLAS (2013) requires it to develop a strong relationship with Intreo.

The researcher was aware of perceptions she held around work placements and possible consequent bias in objectivity. For this reason the writer engaged with research wherever
possible and has made every effort not to reflect personal observations or assumptions. In addition, the possibility existed of a number of respondents being past pupils of the researcher, giving rise to difficulties in maintaining anonymity on both sides; measures were taken to counteract this potential issue. Every effort was made to structure the questionnaire in such a way that questions were not subjective. However, research is not a wholly objective activity and only through awareness of bias can bias be corrected (Cohen et al., 2011). To address potential bias and awareness of preconceptions the researcher has adopted an attitude of critical reflection throughout the project, maintaining a reflective diary to record noted preconceptions, personal feelings, reactions and assumptions or biases that she became aware of. These reflections have provided a self-monitoring process and helped to prevent bias and increase objectivity (Thomas, 2009).

Research informs practice in the field of education (Burton et al., 2009). Hopkins (2008) argues that research is at the root of all key learning activities. The opportunity to study outcomes of these PLC programmes has been both interesting and enlightening. The research has allowed an in-depth understanding of the policies that have shaped this sector and which will shape its future. As outlined, there is growing demand for this component of PLC programmes and we need a better understanding of its possibilities so as to develop better policy and practice.

It is my hope that the research can in some way contribute to the improvement of the work placement offering on PLC programmes, that future trainees will have the opportunity of meaningful work placement and consequently secure the employment they desire. In addition, it is hoped that what has been presented will prove to be of help in shaping future practices and informing guidance policy in the PLC sector. As my research progressed I realised that I was just scratching the surface of an issue of enormous political and logistical complexity, which could only be explored minimally due to space constraints. I would have liked to explore ideas surrounding the neo-liberalist arguments touched upon in the literature section, e.g. employer’s needs are often short-term and the importance of balancing their involvement with the non-profit sector and trade unions. There is a requirement for further research in this area.
6.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter concludes the research by presenting the main findings of the study with its strengths and limitations. The research has provided an insight into the outcomes of work placement for former trainees on PLC programmes, a small but important step in bringing the voice and experience of the user into focus. The learning was significant and provides a platform on which to build further research. In addition, it has provided a number of recommendations which emerged from the overall findings of the study. Finally, this chapter discussed the personal learning of the researcher over the course of the study.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form (Adult Education Officer)

EHSREC no. 2016_04_02
Research title: “An investigation into the relevance of the work practice placement module on the career development of former ETB trainees.”

I have read the Project Information Sheet and understand in detail the particulars of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants and the actual training locations will not be revealed at any stage 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 in the research prior to the data analysis stage and any contribution made will be subsequently destroyed.

I hereby give my consent for Mary Tyrrell to carry out this research “An investigation into the relevance of the work practice placement module on the career development of former ETB trainees” in the ETB.

Signature:_____________________________________
Printed name:__________________________________
Signature of Researcher:_________________________
Date:_____________________________________

UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
O L L S C O I L L U I M N I G H

ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Appendix B: Project Information Sheet

Title of study: “An investigation into the relevance of the work practice placement module on the career development of former ETB trainees.”

Dear Participant

As part of my MA in Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development at University of Limerick, I am conducting research on the above. This information sheet will inform you about the study.

What is the study about?
The overall aim of the project is to establish the relevance of a work placement module in the overall career development of trainees on specific ETB programmes.

What will I have to do?
You will be invited to participate in an on-line questionnaire, which should take approximately 20-25 minutes to complete.

What are the benefits?
It is envisaged that the study will inform stakeholders (course providers, trainees, employers and Guidance Counsellors) about the perceptions and experiences of trainees of their work placement programme, which will help to appraise programme design, delivery and support to programme trainees.

What are the risks?
It is not envisaged that there is any risk to participants involved. However, it is a voluntary study and if you should become uncomfortable you may opt out of the study prior to the data analysis stage.
What if I do not want to take part?
Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to consent or to withdraw any time prior to the data analysis stage.

What happens to the information?
The information that is collected will be kept confidential and stored on a password protected computer in UL. The information will be anonymised and kept for a period of 7 years, after which it will be disposed of according to University of Limerick guidelines.

Who else is taking part?
Trainees on relevant ETB (formerly FÁS) programmes which were delivered during the period from 2012 to 2015 will take part in the research.

What happens at the end of the study?
At the end of the study the information will be used to present the results and findings of the research. All data gathered from the research will be held by the principal investigator for up to 7 years in a password protected computer at UL. The results of the project will be available to participants on written request from the researcher.

What if I have more questions or do not understand something?
If you have any questions related to any aspect of the study you may contact the researcher or supervisor. It is important that you feel that all your questions have been answered.

What happens if I change my mind during the survey?
At any stage prior to the data analysis, should you feel that you want to discontinue being a participant, you are free to stop and take no further part. There are no consequences for changing your mind about participating in the study.

Contact name and number of Principal Investigators:

Dr Lucy Hearne
Supervisor
Department of Education & Professional Studies, University of Limerick, Tel (061) 202931
Email: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

Mary Tyrrell
Student of MA in Guidance Counselling & Lifespan Development
Department of Education & Professional Studies
I would be grateful if you would consider participating in this study. If so, please click on the link http://www.eSurveysPro.com/Survey.aspx?id=59003ab7-cbde-489b-95a4-97e7e056acf4 to access the survey. By doing so you are agreeing to participate in the study. Completion date for survey is Friday 15th July

Yours sincerely

Mary Tyrrell

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics committee (EHSREC no. 2016_04_02). 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
ehsrearchethics@ul.ie
Appendix C: On-Line Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Section 1: Background Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructions to participants: Please complete each of the following questions as accurately as possible and to the best of your knowledge. The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender:</td>
<td>Male, Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What is your Nationality:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Which of the following categories best describes the LCETB programme you undertook</td>
<td>Administration, Care Skills, Childcare or Health Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Did you complete the programme?</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. If you completed the programme, on what date did you complete the programme?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Why did you choose the programme?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Was it your own decision to choose the programme?</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. If you did not choose the programme yourself, who influenced your decision to do so?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Did you have Career Guidance from any source before enrolling on the programme?</td>
<td>Yes, No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. If you answered 'Yes' to Question 10, from whom did you receive this Career Guidance?
- Secondary School Guidance Counselor
- Education & Training Board Adult Education Service
- Advisor in Local Employment Service
- Advisor in Local Info Office
- Private Guidance Counselor
- Not applicable
- Other (please specify)

12. Was the programme you completed connected in any way to the things you most like doing, e.g. one of your hobbies?
- Yes
- No

13. If you answered 'Yes' to Question 12, please explain in more detail

14. What was your highest level of education prior to entry on the programme?
- Primary Education
- Junior Certificate
- Leaving Certificate
- Post-Leaving Certificate Course
- Third Level
- Other (please specify)

15. Based on information received before your commencement on the programme, did the programme meet your expectations?
- Yes
- No
- Please explain further
2. Section 2:

Work Placement Module

16. What was the duration of your work placement?
   - Day release
   - Two Weeks
   - 10 Weeks
   - 12 Weeks
   - Other (Please Specify)

17. Did you feel the work placement you undertook was relevant to the specific programme you studied?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Please explain further

18. During your work placement period were you assigned a workplace supervisor in the placement location?
   - Yes
   - No

19. Did you receive specific work-based training on your work placement?
   - Yes
   - No

20. If you received workplace training during your placement, how frequent was the training?
   - Daily
   - Weekly
   - Monthly
   - Continuously
   - Not applicable

21. If you received training during your placement, did you feel this work-based training was adequate to enable you to confidently carry out the tasks required of you?
   - Yes
   - No

22. Did you acquire any new skills/knowledge on your placement programme?
   - Yes
   - No

23. If you answered “Yes” to Q22, describe the skills/knowledge you acquired

24. On completion of your work placement have you sourced employment in this line of work?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Please explain further
25. What is your current overall situation?
- Full-time
- Part-time
- Further education & Training
- Voluntary
- Other (Please Specify)

26. How beneficial was your work placement to your current situation?
- Not beneficial
- Somewhat beneficial
- Very beneficial
- Not applicable (please explain)

27. How do you think your work placement programme might have been improved?
- Longer period of work practice
- More relevant work practice
- More training on work placement
- Other (Please Specify)

28. Any additional comments

3. Thank you for participating.
Thank you for your time in completing this survey. If you need help, or further assistance with your career, please contact the Limerick Clare Education & Training Board, Adult Educational Information & Guidance Service at http://www.lctel.ie/Support-Services.aspx

Note: Sample interactive survey can be found at this link:
http://www.eSurveysPro.com/Survey.aspx?id=59003ab7-cbde-489b-95a4-97e7e056acf4