**Professional identities and identity narratives of Irish Further Education and Training practitioners**

**Background, aims and objectives**

The Irish Further Education and Training (FET) Sector, as a distinct and official sector of the Irish national education system, came into being in 2013. Equivalent sectors and activities exist in various other countries, but may be described by different terms including Adult, Vocational, Technical, and Continuing Education and Training.

The Irish FET sector is the result of an amalgamation of numerous and diverse learning and teaching environments and contexts, which had developed separately and somewhat organically over a long period, and which had largely operated autonomously prior to 2013.

This paper will report on and discuss the first three stages of a four stage PhD research project which aims to examine the professional identities formed by FET practitioners in the Irish FET sector and to consider the impact of recent significant sectoral changes upon those identities. To date, little research has been conducted in this area.

The paper will present a narrative relating to the research process as experienced in these three stages, as well as the key findings that have emerged from the study to date.

**Research design and approach**

The study applies an inductive, grounded theory informed approach to allow the research and the findings to be firmly rooted in the opinions, experiences, perspectives and narratives of Irish FET practitioners themselves, rather than in pre-established theoretical assumptions, reflecting the desire of the researcher to give voice to the practitioners themselves.

Stage one of this study involved a scoping exercise utilising Open Space Technology principles to address the question, ‘Who are Further Education and Training practitioners?’ with 15 experienced and diverse FET practitioners.

The data from this stage informed stage two, which involved a wider context building exercise utilising an online survey. 167 practitioners from the South East region of Ireland participated in this survey.

Stage three began in November 2016 and involves narrative interviews with 20 FET practitioners, which were initially based on data obtained from stages one and two, and later on initial analysis of earlier interviews, which is in line with an overall inductive, grounded theory informed approach.

**Initial results**

Initial findings highlight contrasts in the experiences and narratives of FET practitioners working within different FET contexts, yet also illustrate common issues impacting FET practitioners across various contexts. These experiences and issues relate to the biographical journeys of the FET practitioners, to the structure of the Irish FET sector, to professionalisation and registration, and to macro and micro level policies.

**Significance of study to conference theme**

There currently exists no published research relating to the identities of Irish FET practitioners and internationally there has long been a call for more research into the professional identities held by those working in further education and training.

Initial findings from this research highlight the personal and societal ideas and narratives which are shaping and impacting upon Irish FET practitioner identities. They draw attention to the tensions between these identities and the developing Irish FET sector.