Professional Identity and the Irish Further Education and Training Practitioner

Sarah Bates Evoy, Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland

Summary

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. Irish FET provides full and part-time, accredited and non-accredited, formal and informal education and training opportunities to groups and individuals over the age of 15. Accreditation is offered between Level 1 and 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (EFQ Level 1 – 5).

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. Just as Irish FET contexts are diverse, so too are FET practitioners in terms of their own education, training, professional qualifications, career goals and values and beliefs about learning and teaching. Research on the post-2013 sector as a whole remains limited and there is currently no published research in relation to the identities of Irish FET practitioners.

As a FET practitioner myself, I am extremely aware of the differences and the tensions between FET practitioners. I feel that I know who I am as a FET practitioner, but I am aware that other practitioners may have a very different perspective on who they are as professionals. In part as a result of this awareness of varying viewpoints and identities, a PhD research project was born, broadly asking the question, 'Who are FET practitioners?', and more specifically examining the professional identities formed by practitioners in the Irish FET sector and considering the impact of significant, post-2013, sectoral changes upon those identities.

To begin the research journey and to counteract a lack of research on the newly formed Irish FET sector, contextual data in relation to the sector and issues of importance to FET practitioners were gathered. This was achieved through an initial small scale consultation, followed by a larger scale on-line survey. Stage 3 of the project, which is in progress at

present, involves a more in-depth exploration of the professional identities held by FET practitioners through the use of narrative interviews.

Initial results from the research suggest that, while major sectoral changes have been made since 2012, these changes have had little or no direct impact on the working lives and identities of FET practitioners on the ground. Research participants at all stages were more concerned with immediate everyday issues (e.g. conditions of employment) which appear to have not been adequately addressed by the sectoral changes.

The over-riding message from the research is that there is no common understanding or definition of what constitutes a FET practitioner, among either FET practitioners or the relevant stakeholders. Initial analysis suggests that this diversity of perspectives on behalf of the practitioners may be linked to practitioner identities being more closely linked to their past career identities than to their current teaching roles and work contexts.

Introduction to the Irish Further Education and Training Sector

In 2013, the Irish Further Education and Training (FET) Sector, as a distinct and official sector of the national education system, came into being as a result of the amalgamation of a range of different education and training bodies providing programmes and learning opportunities to individuals over the age of 15. The Irish FET sector is distinct from the mainstream Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education Sectors and offers both accredited and non-accredited education and training which can take place in both formal and informal learning contexts. Accredited FET programmes lead to awards between Levels 1 and 6 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) which is the equivalent to Levels 1 to 5 on the European Qualifications Framework (EFQ) (McGuinness et. al., 2014; SOLAS, 2014).

A number of significant policy and structural changes were implemented in order to facilitate the amalgamation of numerous and diverse parts into one overall FET sector. These changes included: the creation of an overall Further Education & Training Authority called SOLAS, which was given a remit to create an identifiable, structured and professional Irish FET Sector; the re-structuring and re-naming of the key national providers of FET, which involved the merging of 33 Vocational Educational Committees to form 16 Education and Training Boards; the establishment of an updated Common Awards System; and the establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland, which was given the responsibility for the external quality assurance of further and higher education and training (McGuinness et. al., 2014; SOLAS, 2014).

The newly amalgamated Irish FET sector brought together numerous and diverse learning and teaching environments and contexts, all of which had developed separately and somewhat organically over a long period (McGuinness et. al., 2014; SOLAS, 2014). This diversity is evident in the use of diverse terms within and among different FET contexts when referring to those delivering further education and training. These terms include teacher, tutor, trainer, facilitator, instructor and lecturer. For the purposes of this paper and the research project, the term 'FET practitioner' is utilised to encompass all those delivering further education and training. FET practitioners are also diverse in terms of their own education, training, professional qualifications, career goals, values and beliefs about learning and teaching, and workplace contexts and ethoses. This has led to much confusion about what FET is supposed to be, what FET actually is, and what constitutes a professional FET practitioner. The scenarios currently playing out in the Irish context are not unique in the international context and the complexity of Irish FET mirrors that found in comparable sectors internationally.

Introduction to the Research Project

Research on practitioner identities within these complex contexts remains relatively limited (McGuinness et. al., 2014). To date (January 2017) there is no published research available on Irish FET practitioners' identities and much of the limited international research on FET practitioner identities is based on trainee practitioners rather than on more established professionals.

This paper reports on a PhD research project which aims to address the gap that has been identified in the research literature with respect to Irish FET. Entitled 'Further Education and Training Practitioners in Transition – practitioner identities and sectoral change in the Irish FET sector', this study aims to examine the professional identities of practitioners in the Irish FET sector and to consider the impact of post-2013 changes to the sector upon those identities.

The theoretical approach is informed by the work of Margaret Archer in relation to identity, agency and structure, and the methodological design is underpinned by a critical realist position. The study applies an inductive approach to the investigation of the research issues 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 my desire to give voice to the practitioners themselves.

Research Design

A 3 stage research process was designed to address the research aims. The first 2 stages of the research project have been completed to date, and the third stage is currently underway.

Stage 1 of the project 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. Stage 2 involved a wider context building exercise utilising an online survey which built upon specific key data obtained from stage 1.

Research completed to date

Stage 1: Consultation Event

While I myself am a FET practitioner, my experience is limited to three part-time FET programmes. In recognition of my own limited knowledge and experience, the apparent confusion within the sector, and the limited literature available, I deemed it necessary to first

consult with other FET practitioners from across the diverse range of FET contexts. This was done in order to establish a starting point for the research project and to identify issues relevant to a range of FET practitioners which might be impacting their work identities

Open Space Technology (OST), developed by Harrison Owen in the 1980s, was chosen as the method of consultation as it provides a structure which can be used to bring diverse, self-selected people together through dialogue and activity to engage with a key, complex, urgent theme or issue where there is no clear consensus or solution. OST guidelines and processes involve a series of stages, moving from the invitation stage of an event, through to the consultation stage of event, and on to the action planning stage of an event.

OST facilitators create spaces where all participants are viewed as equal and where the agenda is designed by those present and not pre-determined (McDonald et. al., 2009; Owen, 2008). OST guidelines, when followed, guarantee that all issues of concern to participants will be raised, discussed and recorded (Owen, 2008). This was the experience at the OST consultation event held for this project with a group of 15 self-selected FET practitioners with diverse personal and educational backgrounds, who had experience of diverse FET contexts. The aim of the event was to capture the views and opinions of those present, in relation to the specific theme 'Who are Further Education and Training practitioners?' The event involved the co-creation of an agenda which resulted in 8 recorded group discussions.

Throughout the event an overwhelming sense of confusion, doubt, insecurity and fear was evident, and this was experienced most extremely by those working with part-time FET programmes. The records highlight issues of importance to participants and their working identities. These relate to conditions of employment, characteristics of participants' current working climates, and how FET practitioners view themselves and are viewed by others within the sector.

The over-riding message was that there was no common understanding or definition of what constituted a FET practitioner. This is evidenced through participants' reflections upon the different terminology used in varying FET contexts and through their differing opinions on what constituted a professional FET practitioner. While some viewed the attainment of a specific level and type of qualification as necessary to be professional, others felt that professionalism is based on how one conducts oneself in the classroom and with one's colleagues. There were also

varying opinions on the overall aims of the FET sector, with some participants placing emphasis on the aims of social inclusion and learner and community empowerment, and others favouring an emphasis on certification and increasing the employability of learners. There were also varying opinions on whether FET practitioners should have to register with a relevant teaching body.

The consultation resulted in a large volume of data and provided a solid starting point for the research process. (For a more detailed paper on Stage 1 and using OST as a consultation method, please see Bates Evoy, 2015)

Stage 2 – On-line Survey

The records of the discussions which took place as part of the OST consultation event were typed, thematically coded and used to inform the following stage of the research. This took the form of an on-line survey which expanded upon the stage 1 data.

The survey was targeted at FET practitioners working with statutory, community and private providers of FET in the general South-East of Ireland. 167 FET practitioners engaged with the process. The respondents represented both male and female FET practitioners (1:3), across a large age range. They represented many of the diverse contexts within the Irish FET sector, from full-time, formal, accredited FET programmes to short, non-accredited, informal FET programmes. A diverse range and level of educational and work experiences were also represented among the FET practitioners' personal histories.

The survey gathered mainly quantitative data, with occasional open ended questions. This created a contextual backdrop for the data collected in the third stage and compensated for the then lack of detailed official data on the profile of Irish FET practitioners. The survey gathered data on several topic areas: FET practitioners' work and educational backgrounds; their role perceptions and favoured terminology; their views around professionalisation of the Irish FET sector (in particular around practitioner qualification and registration requirements); their awareness of a number of recent sectoral changes; and their views on the extent to which these changes had impacted or were impacting on their work and on their sense of what it means to be a practitioner in the sector.

Initial interpretation of the survey data shed light on some of the key messages coming out from the consultation event. The majority of respondents had between 6 and 15 years' experience working in FET and interestingly all 157 of the respondents who engaged with questions about current and past work contexts identified more than one context for both their current and past FET work. This suggests that FET practitioners often work in more than one type of FET context at any time and that they move between contexts. This in part explains why, even among practitioners working with the same FET programmes, there is little consensus about what constitutes a FET practitioner or what is the most appropriate term to use when referring to FET practitioners.

Another interesting statistic was that 88% of the 157 respondents had engaged in previous careers outside of further education and training before becoming FET practitioners. This means that a large majority of respondents had not actively decided when leaving school or early in their careers to teach or train in FET, but rather had chosen to work in FET at a later stage in their developing careers.

The survey allowed for issues that had been raised in the consultation event to be explored in greater detail and to be better understood. For example, while participants at the consultation event had spoken broadly about issues related to their employment conditions, the data from the survey showed that the majority of FET practitioners were satisfied with their day-to day working conditions, and that their concerns were more with the type of employment contracts and terms and conditions they have.

As with the consultation event, a large volume of data was produced through the on-line survey and so this paper is necessarily selective in relation to the findings it reports. (For more details on the findings of the on-line survey, see Bates Evoy, 2016)

Current Research: Stage 3 – Narrative Interviews
The third stage of the research project, which consists of narrative interviews, involves a more in-depth examination of 20 individual FET practitioners' identities. These further explore issues identified through the first 2 stages, as well as issues related to the core research concepts of identity, structure and agency. During stage 2 of the research project, survey respondents self-selected to be considered for involvement in the narrative interview stage. 20 FET practitioners have been invited to engage with the interviews. 10 are currently working with Back to

Education Initiatives (part-time, accredited programmes) and 10 are currently working with Post Leaving Cert courses (full-time, accredited programmes).

Choosing narrative as a methodology

Narrative was chosen as a methodology, and narrative interviews as a specific method, due to the emphasis narrative approaches place on individual experience, meaning making and recognition of the connectedness between individual stories and larger collective stories.

Narrative approaches also exploit our human trait to be storytellers, to 'discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell', which makes them effective in exploring personal identity (Lieblich et. al., 1998:7). By facilitating interviewees to tell their stories rather than having a more structured interview, I am engaging in a more natural way with my interviewees and hearing stories and information that might not have been revealed through a more structured approach.

Elliot (2005) explains that narratives are stories, and that the telling of narratives and stories typically has two functions. The first is descriptive, a coherent account of an experience for the listener. The second is meaning making, outlining the meaning placed on the experience (Elliott, 2005). Both of these functions are being employed through the use of narrative interviews in the third data collection stage of this research project.

While individuals' narratives may be unique to the individual, narratives also reflect a shared cultural context (LaPointe, 2010). Personal and societal aspects of life are usually, if not always, connected; and social structures and phenomena will be understood by individuals through the subjective stories they tell themselves and others (Antonesa, 2006; Dominice, 2000). Stories which are lived and told can serve to educate the self and others (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; LaPointe, 2010; Lieblich et. al., 1998). Therefore, through the use of narrative interviews, an understanding of individual FET practitioners' working identities and lives is being reached alongside a deeper understanding of the issues that affect identity in the sector and of the sector itself.

Data collection and data analysis for stage 3

The structure of the narrative interviews is based on the systemised format developed by Fritz Schütze (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). This approach involves 5 stages: the pre-interview

stage, the initiation stage, the main narration stage, the questioning stage and the conclusion stage (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The guidelines contained within each stage strategically restrict the interviewer's influence and place emphasis on story-telling (by the interviewee) and active listening (by the interviewer) (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

The data generated from the interviews, along with the data from the first 2 stages of the research project, are being analysed through a process of content analysis informed by processes detailed by several researchers and writers and through the use of an iterative framework (Birks & Mills, 2015; Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Schreier, 2014; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

Qualitative content analysis is a form of qualitative data analysis used in many research areas and involves a set of flexible, systematic techniques which guide researchers in analysing the qualitative, informational content of textual research data (Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Schreier, 2014). While approaches to qualitative content analysis may differ, the aim is to achieve a deep level of description and understanding of the phenomenon or group being researched within their unique context, rather than producing generalised findings which can be applied to larger areas or populations (Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Schreier, 2014). A key component of qualitative content analysis is the systematic categorising of research data in order to make sense of complex data such as interview transcripts (Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Schreier, 2014).

An intensive, structured coding process is being used to analyse the narrative interview transcripts. Categories are being established both inductively and deductively. Nvivo is being used as a tool during the transcription and analytic process.

Deductive categories are based on themes which emerged from stages 1 and 2 data and on concepts associated with Margaret Archer's theories on identity, structure and agency. Deductive categories were established before the interviews commenced and may be augmented at a later stage with further reading.

Inductive categories are based on themes which are generated from the narrative themselves. Concurrent processes of data collection and data analysis are being undertaken, individual interviews being transcribed and initially coded as the research progresses. This early engagement with analysis means that the research data themselves influence the direction of

further interviews, and facilitates the testing out of possible connections and initial results as the interviewing and analysis proceed. This is in line with the assertions of researchers who utilise qualitative content analysis (Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014) that it is an inherently iterative and circular process.

Based on a framework described by Forman & Damschroder (2008) three phases of a qualitative content analysis process are being engaged while analysing the transcripts of the narrative interviews - immersion, reduction and interpretation.

Immersion involves my immediate reflection on the interview experience, through the use of recorded reflections, written reflections and memoing. Within days of completing an interview, I begin the transcription process and record hand written notes on the themes emerging. The purpose of the immersion phase is to get a sense of the whole before breaking the transcript up into categorised segments for analysis (Forman & Damschroder, 2008).

The immersion phase is followed by the reduction phase where I upload transcripts onto Nvivo, sieve through them and identify data relating to the research aims which is then coded into thematic segments. At a later stage (only 6 interviews have been conducted to date) these codes will be re-organised under relevant categories, creating a codebook to aid interpretation. Throughout the concurrent data collection and data analysis processes, the codebook will be continually refined as codes are added, adapted or expanded (Forman & Damschroder, 2008).

At the latter stages of the reduction phase, when all interviews are completed and transcribed, the codes contained within the developed codebook will be applied to all transcripts, to all memos and reflections, and to the data from stages 1 and 2. Code reports will be produced where all incidences of a particular code from the various data sources will be organised together (Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014).

During the final phase of analysis, termed the interpretation phase, code reports will be further 'analyzed, interpreted, and synthesized' (Forman & Damschroder, 2008:56) to formulate final results. The focus in this final phase will be the overall and encompassing interpretation of the analysed data by putting the various data back together again to tell an overall story, thereby re-contextualising the data (Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014).

Initial results to date from stage 3

While it is still too early to report conclusively on the results from stage 3, the interviews to date have generated interesting and enlightening insights, some of which I now address.

Earlier in this paper, several major sectoral changes that have taken place over the last 4 years were identified. Examining the impact of these changes is one of the aims of the research. Before commencing my primary research, I had expected that my research participants, as FET practitioners, would be aware of these changes and able to reflect upon the impact of these changes, and I had expected to find that the changes were impacting both the professional identities of FET practitioners and their day-to-day working lives. Contrary to these expectations, while most of the research participants were aware that sectoral changes had taken place, many were confused as to what these changes meant and how the changes were intended to affect them.

Like the large majority of participants from stages 1 and 2 of the research, the interviewees (to date) seemed unsure of what SOLAS (the Further Education & Training Authority) is and what it does and appeared largely unaffected or negatively affected by the amalgamation of the 33 VECs into 16 ETBs. Interviewees also reported experiencing very little impact relating to the establishment of QQI, although both consultation participants and the majority of interviewees expressed disappointment that their concerns relating to subject module descriptors were not dealt with when QQI, once established, created new module descriptors for the sector. The introduction of a common awards system (CAS) was rarely, if ever mentioned by research participants in stage 1 and 2, and only 1 of the 6 interviewees spoke about CAS. Interestingly, this interviewee has experience of working as a practitioner and at middle-management within an ETB and so had a different perspective to other research participants, appearing to have a greater understanding of the larger sector. He spoke of his memories of the introduction of the common awards system and how the changes it brought about, initially resisted by some practitioners, have been normalised with time. He noted that while major sectoral changes have taken place and continue to take place, "it's possible that the change is so slow that's it's incremental and that they [FET practitioners on the ground] won't even realise the change" (Interviewee 4). He felt that the slow pace of implementation often results in practitioners being unaware that change is happening at higher levels and being unsure as to where the change they do experience originates.

As stated above, 88% of 157 survey respondents had previous careers before becoming FET practitioners. The significance of this is highlighted again in the interviews: all interviewees (to date) appeared to be less influenced by their current teaching roles and work contexts than by their past career identities. For example, 3 of the 6 interviewees spoke about how they aim to improve the sectors in which they previously worked by producing capable, effective and confident practitioners for those sectors. One interviewee who previously worked in Childcare stated:

> "My thinking is, if you can instil more confidence in the people working with the kids, that will actually bring the whole status up, which I think badly needs to happen, so that will impact on the children as well…I like the teaching and I feel I can kind of do more to change things as a teacher then I could have done [in the crèche]". (Interviewee 2)

Another interesting theme relates to the perception interviewees held of working within Higher Education in comparison to Further Education and Training. The interviewees, 4 of whom had experience working with Higher Education institutions, felt lecturing at that level often involved teaching bigger groups, mainly of students coming directly from school, and an emphasis on the delivery of the module content within a strict timespan. In comparison, the interviewees found that working in FET allowed more scope to support and care for individual learners, as class sizes are typically much smaller and more importance tends to be placed on the relationship between learners and their teacher or tutor.

> I think it is less personal in university, I love the personal part of my job with the students…you have time maybe to sit down…and kind of bring them on…if you had 100 students in your class, you can't sit down with 100 of them…you don't have that same interaction with the class, and I love that interaction. (Interviewee 3)

They also valued the opportunity to support learners who may have been let down by the mainstream primary and secondary systems, to help them lead more fulfilling lives, and to help them prepare for third level education if that was what they wanted to pursue.

Conclusion

In an area where there is little previous research, as is the case with Irish FET practitioner identities, it is important that research projects be influenced by FET practitioners themselves. This is being achieved here through the choice of research methods employed, in particular

through the use of Open Space Technology principles and narrative interviews, within an overall inductive research approach.

As stated previously, a core theme within the research to-date is the presence of multiple and diverse views among FET practitioners as to what constitutes, and what should constitute, a professional FET practitioner. The research suggests that this diversity is influenced by practitioners' work experiences with multiple FET contexts which all operate somewhat differently and by practitioners placing emphasis on different factors relating to professionalism such as qualifications, experience, conduct in the workplace and registration with a professional teaching body. The research also suggests that the individual identities of FET practitioners are heavily influenced by their previous career identities.

It is hoped that, through papers such as this, the research project will give voice to FET practitioners by communicating the research results to a wider audience, including policy makers and others who have the power to impact FET practitioners' lives and identities by shaping and changing their professional worlds. It may also help current FET practitioners to better understand their sectoral colleagues who are working in other diverse FET contexts.

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