

Access/Preparatory Studies Programmes at LYIT – Students’ Perspectives

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August 2016

Dissertation in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of MA in  
Learning and Teaching

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## **Abstract**

There is little available research about the opinions and experiences of students who undertake Access/Preparatory Studies programmes in Ireland. This is an exploratory project which attempts to address this lack of information. The research includes students currently (2015-2016) undertaking one of the two Access/Preparatory Studies programmes on offer at LYIT, also, students who have previously (since 2011) undertaken either programme and subsequently progressed to undergraduate programmes at LYIT. It is hoped that this research will provide important information for educators and policymakers in planning, implementing and reviewing adult Access/Preparatory Studies programmes at third level in Ireland and beyond. Possible benefits of this research include enhancement of the programmes at LYIT in terms of teaching and learning, content and other factors impacting student experience.

The literature review primarily focused on mature students. A self-reporting questionnaire was completed, it comprised of two sections, the first to be completed by all participants, and the second by those participants who had progressed to undergraduate programmes. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics to summarise the data recorded from 100 participants.

The research found that, overall, participants were of the opinion that both programmes were beneficial in terms of, for example, confidence-building and preparedness for progression. Additionally, all reported that they would recommend the programmes to someone considering a return to education. Recommendations include the need for: improved formative assessment and feedback; enhanced peer learning; reconsideration of module content; an exploration of the reasons underlying (some) students' perception that progression is not viewed as a possibility.

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the immeasurable contribution made to this research by all the current and progressed Access and Preparatory Studies programme students who participated in this project.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my research supervisor, Dr Sharon Mc Laughlin, for her invaluable advice, encouragement and insight throughout the research.

Additionally, I wish to recognise the valuable assistance and support shown to me by all my colleagues in The Curve, and in the Department of Science, who either helped frame the survey questions, piloted the survey, and those who acted as peer reviewers or as proof-readers throughout this research.

Finally, I wish to most gratefully thank my husband, Conal, for his patience, understanding and much appreciated support throughout the MALT programme.

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## **1.0 Introduction and Rationale**

### **1.1 Introduction**

There are currently two part-time programmes available at Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT) which, upon successful completion, enable students to progress onto undergraduate programmes, both within LYIT and at other third level institutions. Students who successfully complete either of these programmes are eligible for admission to a wide range of programmes in LYIT such as, all undergraduate School of Business, Engineering and Tourism programmes and some undergraduate Science programmes. Successful completion, however, does not enable progression to the three Nursing programmes at LYIT, as these have a separate entry route. The first programme – the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education - commences each September and finishes the following April. Students complete four mandatory modules and select two electives (Introduction to Arts, Business Studies, Computing, Design, Engineering and Science). Students who graduate from this programme can also gain entry to the high demand quota courses such as veterinary nursing or pharmacy technician. The second programme – the Certificate in Access Studies – commences each February and finishes the following May. Students complete three mandatory modules only, so students who graduate from this course cannot gain entry to any of the quota courses but are eligible for entry to all other undergraduate programmes at LYIT. Both courses are intended for adult learners who wish to return to study after a break in their educational experience and who may not have benefited from, or had access to, previous educational opportunities (LYIT 2010b). Historically, many of the students who undertake these programmes are mature students of 23 years or more and are from a diverse range of backgrounds. As a result, this research will focus primarily on this age group.

### **1.2 Rationale**

There is little available research about the opinions and experiences of the adult students who undertake Access/Preparatory Studies courses in Ireland and, more specifically, at LYIT. This is an exploratory project which attempts to address the lack of information in this area. The research includes students currently (2015-2016) undertaking one of the two Access/Preparatory Studies programmes on offer at LYIT, as well as students who have previously

(since 2011) undertaken either programme and subsequently progressed to undergraduate programmes at LYIT. This information gleaned as a result of this research will be analysed and, where feasible, will be used to inform the review of the courses in the upcoming (2017) Periodic Programmatic Evaluation (PPE). It is hoped that this research will provide important information for educators and policymakers when it comes to planning, implementing and reviewing adult Access/Preparatory Studies programmes in third level institutions in Ireland and beyond. Possible benefits of the research findings include enhancement of the two courses currently available at LYIT in terms of content, teaching methods, delivery, timetabling, and other factors impacting student experience.

LYIT's guidelines for PPE (LYIT 2010a) state that each programme at the Institute will be evaluated at least once every five years. The PPE process contains two distinct elements: (1) an internal element comprising of programme(s) evaluation, a plan for the next five year period and a revised programme document; and (2) an external element wherein a group of external experts conduct their own evaluation of the revised programme documents. In monitoring a programme, the focus is on the effectiveness of the programme in meeting its stated aims and also on the success of the learner in reaching the intended learning outcomes (LYIT 2010a).

### **1.3 Objectives and Aims**

The objectives of this research are:

- (a) to determine student opinions regarding teaching and learning on the Access/Preparatory Studies programmes at LYIT.
- (b) to ascertain whether students who undertake either course believe that it has benefitted them in terms of, for example, confidence-building, preparedness for further academic study and such like.
- (c) to establish the various considerations that are relevant to students in deciding to undertake such a course and why they chose LYIT;
- (d) to discover students' opinions regarding continuous assessment and other aspects of the courses;
- (e) to determine whether students found course modules interesting and, more importantly, beneficial to their progression to undergraduate level.

## 2.0 Literature Review and Critique

### 2.1 Critique of Research Studies

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland defines a mature student as being at least 23 years of age on 1 January of the year of entry or re-entry to an approved course (Hunt 2011). However, in the United Kingdom (UK), mature students are defined by the University and College Admissions Service (UCAS) as any student aged 21 or over on their year of entry to third level (UCAS 2016). There is a lack of research relating to the opinions and experiences of mature students who have completed Access/Preparatory Studies programmes in higher education (HE) in Ireland. A number of Access officers in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) who deliver these courses were contacted by the researcher in order to obtain current information. It was found that, while all the HEIs collected feedback data from their students, unfortunately, the data could not be released to the researcher. There are, however, a number of studies on adult students, including mature students, in Ireland and the UK which are discussed and referenced throughout this research. The researcher took direction from these studies when framing the research instrument questions.

A significant report for the purposes of this research was the education doctoral thesis by Hardiman (2012) entitled 'Finding a Voice: The Experience of Mature Students in a College Of Further Education'. Further Education (FE) includes education and training which occurs after second level schooling, but, is not part of the third level system (Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2016). In FE, a student aged 21 or over is considered a mature student, however, Hardimans' research focuses on mature students who have been out of full-time education for some years. This thesis did not involve students in HE or Access programme students but was very pertinent to this research. The report employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, using a survey questionnaire and student interviews. In this thesis, the voices of the participants are central. A very interesting finding was that all students responded that the most important benefit they gained from returning to education was 'confidence.' Hardiman was surprised by how strongly students expressed this sentiment and that it extended beyond academic confidence into other personal and social aspects of their lives.

Another beneficial research report was 'Where Next? A Study of Work and Life Experiences of Mature Students (incl. disadvantaged) in Three Higher Education Institutions', by Fleming *et al.* (2010). The report examines how mature students value HE after graduating, maps their

destination after undergraduate course completion, investigates their move into the workplace or otherwise and examines their motivations for entering higher education, their expectations and experiences. The report differs from this research, in that the mature students did not progress from Access programmes and were not currently studying. Fleming *et al.* uses a mixed methods approach, with questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews to gather quantitative and qualitative data from the graduates of NUI Maynooth (NUIM), Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The vital role of Access offices in HEIs in the participation and success of mature students is highlighted. The report also confirms that there is little relevant research on mature students and an absence of qualitative research about their experience in Ireland.

An earlier study titled ‘College Knowledge’ by Fleming and Murphy (1997) also looked at the experiences of mature students, in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM). This study did not include Access programme students, but it is nonetheless relevant to the subject matter of this research. It highlighted many of the issues affecting mature students (including financial, academic and personal) and how these issues interacted with their motivation, learning and achievement. It emphasised that, while access is an important issue for equality and conquering disadvantage, what happens after the student gets into college is equally important. A key finding is the importance of how the students manage the difference between their experiential knowledge and the knowledge of the university, ‘College Knowledge’. The study used mainly qualitative methods but included some quantitative information, and also incorporated the opinions of the students themselves from semi-structured interviews and focus groups (uncommon at this time).

An additional, important report entitled ‘Higher Education Access/Foundation Courses’ by Murphy (2009) examined reports on 37 Access/Foundation courses currently being delivered across five Universities, two Colleges of Education and ten IoTs (including LYIT). Although most of the review concentrated on quantitative data, there was a qualitative perspective included. The evidence points to positive impacts for individual students, their communities and for the providing institution. Based on the evidence found, it can be proposed that these courses are making a substantial contribution to the National Access Plan in relation to widening access for underrepresented groups in higher education.

## **2.2 Irish Statistics**

The Hunt Report (2011) found that just 21 per cent of Irish adults have qualifications at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Level 8 (Honours Degree) and above, and a further 12 per cent have qualifications at Levels 6 (Higher Certificate) and 7 (Ordinary Degree). Hunts' current projections for new entrants in the next twenty years show that demand will rise steadily to approximately 68,000 in 2027, followed by a slight fall-off to 64,000 in 2030. However, Hunt also reported that the demand from students entering higher education directly from second level will increase only marginally, while the bulk of the increased demand will come from late entrants, mature students, international students and greater demand for postgraduate study. The term 'late' refers to students who enter a year or two after completing their Leaving Certificate and the largest proportionate increase will be among mature students. This projected increase in demand by both late and mature students encompasses the majority of students who complete the Access/Preparatory Studies programmes at LYIT.

## **2.3 Entry Routes for Mature Students at LYIT**

There are three college entry routes for mature students in LYIT. Firstly, they may complete the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education or the Certificate in Access Studies. Secondly, an alternative entry route for mature students is by direct application through the Central Applications Office (CAO). The CAO reserves a limited number of places on all programmes specifically for mature students – they are exempted from the standard academic requirements and are admitted by computer random selection. A third alternative for mature students is to compete separately for non-quota places based on their previous academic qualifications (LYIT 2015).

## **2.4 Improving Access to Third Level Education for Adults**

Promoting fairness of opportunity in higher education is and has been a national priority since the foundation of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in the early 1970s (HEA 2015b). Since then, there has been substantial progress across the Irish education sector, but there are still groups in our society who are very under-represented in higher education. These groups are often referred to as non-traditional students and they include entrants from socio-economic

groups that have low participation in higher education, first time mature student entrants, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, further education award holders and Irish Travellers (HEA 2015b).

Substantial progress has been made by policymakers, access workers and educationalists to develop wide-ranging strategies that enable and promote 'equitable access routes' for non-traditional students in order to broaden participation in higher education. Over the past two decades, a wide range of programmes, procedures and targets to promote access have been devised (DES 2001; HEA 2008, HEA 2015b), Department of Social Protection and the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) 2016).

While there has been considerable progress in relation to access, a number of practical barriers remain that prevent adults from accessing third level education. A report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in 2014, published findings on the reasons given by adult students for not engaging in more/any learning activities across the OECD countries. In Ireland, the most popular reasons cited included the expense associated with learning and lack of time due to childcare and family responsibilities. Additionally, research has shown that there are greater levels of non-progression in higher education in students from lower socio-economic groups and they often have a tougher transition to third level (Hussey and Smith 2010). Therefore, it is not only important to facilitate entry for these students but, equally, to support them appropriately throughout their time in college.

The NFQ has provided opportunities for improving the boundary between FE and HE (Hunt 2011). In the past decade, there have been significant improvements in transfer and progression arrangements for students into and within higher education. The introduction of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) provides opportunities for greater flexibility and progression for students (Hunt 2011). ECTS is a credit system designed to make it easier for students to move between different countries. The credits are based on the learning achievements and workload of a course, so a student can transfer their ECTS credits from one Institution to another so they are added up to contribute to an individual's degree programme. ECTS helps to make learning more student-centred and it is a central tool in the Bologna Process (European Commission 2016). However, the Irish HE system does not currently fully support the kinds of flexible learning that the ECTS facilitates due to constraints in the system, namely the limited availability of public funding for part-time or online students (Hunt 2011).

## **2.5 Financial Policies Affecting Adult Third Level Participation**

There are a number of financial policies which directly impact the participation rates of adult students at third level, particularly those from under-represented groups. These include the Maintenance Grant, which was introduced under the Local Authorities (Higher Education Grants) Act in 1968. Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) provides grants to both undergraduate and postgraduate students attending higher education institutions. Figures compiled by the HEA (2015c), based on data supplied by SUSI (for 2013/14) show that, overall, 46 per cent of first years received a maintenance grant to help cover their living costs. However, the breakdown by sector reveals 56 per cent of new entrants to Institutes of Technology (IoTs) receive a grant, well above the 36 per cent in the university sector. In the most extreme example, 71 per cent of students at LYIT were in receipt of a grant, compared with 24 per cent in TCD (HEA 2015c).

The BTEA is a mechanism which supports eligible adults who are unemployed, parenting alone or have a disability and are in receipt of certain payments from the Department of Social Protection to retain their social welfare payment while they return to education either at second or third level (Department of Social Protection, 2016). The Student Assistance Fund provides financial assistance for full-time higher education students who are experiencing financial difficulties whilst attending college on either a temporary or ongoing basis. The Fund provides a further source of funding in addition to the Student Grant (HEA 2015c).

A Free Fees Initiative was introduced in 1995, which abolished tuition fees for first-time full time undergraduate students who met certain eligibility criteria. A standard registration charge continued to apply to cover additional costs over and above tuition. At present, over 50 per cent of undergraduates students (who qualify for free fees) have all or part of this charge paid for them by the State (Cassells 2015). However, costs of part-time fees is a particular financial barrier to inclusion which has not been addressed by the government to date (Hunt 2011).

## **2.6 Benefits to Adults of Third Level Education**

Education and training encourages more equitable outcomes for all learners, and there are many benefits for adults with tertiary education. In their 'Education at a Glance 2015' report, the OECD (2015) found a strong correlation between levels of tertiary education and earnings,

with tertiary-educated adults earning about 60 per cent more, on average, than adults with upper secondary as their highest level of education. In general, employment rates and earnings increase as an adult's level of education and skills increases, but the labour market still regards a diploma or degree as the primary indication of a worker's skills (OECD 2015).

However, the benefits of education are not only financial. Adults with higher educational completion are more likely to report that they are in good health, that they participate in volunteer activities, that they trust others, and that they feel they have a say in government. In other words, more highly educated adults tend to be more engaged in the world around them (OECD 2015). In Ireland, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) found that the unemployment rate for people with education levels at lower secondary or less was 15.7 per cent, and 10.8 per cent for those with higher secondary, but for those with higher education honours degrees and higher it was only 5.1 per cent (CSO 2015). These findings strongly support the need for all adults to have equality of access to third level education in Ireland.

## **2.7 Reasons why Adults Return to Higher Education**

There are a wide variety of reasons why adult students enrol in higher education including a desire for learning, reskilling, to make good use of time, the desire to be a better role model for their children (Marks 2010, Kearns 2013), to obtain a qualification and to prove that they can do it (Fleming and Murphy 1997). Davies *et al.* (2002) noted five motivating influences for becoming a mature student: an interest in the subject area; the chance to improve career prospects; a wish to advance existing qualifications; a need to alter the direction of their life; and the fact that they had always desired to study but never had the chance. In other words, personal development was a crucial motivator. Osborne *et al.* (2001, 2004) also reported that adult students may struggle to balance the demands related to the cost of studying, their employment responsibilities, their family responsibilities (children and elderly parents), lack of childcare, etc. They also found that a lack of confidence and limited opportunities for socialisation with peers were very important issues for mature learners. Indeed, age can become a divisive factor in many ways as Lynch (1997) and Uí Casaide (1997) suggest that mature students can experience a sense of alienation, as they often perceive higher education is the preserve of younger students. Also, as the student progresses in education, they may experience a separation from significant others who do not share the same study experience. Additionally, Wlodkowski (1999) found that mature students may suffer deeply from exam pressure.



## **2.8 Benefits of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education**

There are many positive benefits associated with having mature students in the third level classroom. Brookfield (1986), Woodbyrne and Young (1998) and Brady (2001) found that mature students are often extremely motivated, have high completion rates, normally have a positive influence on a course and have a higher tutorial contribution than younger students entering third level directly after their Leaving Certificate. These findings were also confirmed in a study by Kelly (2005) involving interviews with 10 lecturing staff from various IoTs. There was unanimous agreement by all the lecturers that mature students delivered benefits in their classrooms both professionally and personally. They stated that conventional students often approach third-level as the next educational step in their lives, whereas mature students have made a considered decision to alter their lives personally, socially and financially. A wide variety of studies from Ramsden (1992), Jarvis (1996), Rogers (1996), Brookfield (1995) and Wlodkowski (1999) all support the claim that adults can be experientially rich learners with effective powers of reasoning, have preferred paths of distinguishing, mediating, remembering and problem solving and will regularly adopt a deeper approach to learning than their younger colleagues.

Studies have shown that ‘non-completion in adult students is normally due to personal or financial factors rather than academic failure’ (Lucas & Ward, 1995 cited in Richardson & King, 1998, p. 16). In 1984, Woodley commenced a study of all universities in the UK and found that mature students were just as successful as younger students. Also, research on the progression of former Access/Foundation students in the University of Ulster (UU) (1993) discovered that ‘adult students with previous restricted or curtailed educational histories can become proficient and successful higher education students’ (O’Fathaigh, 1995, p. 58).

## **2.9 National Targets for Improved Access for Mature Students**

The government’s National Plan for Equity of Access 2015-2019 is targeted at addressing social inequality by bringing about tangible and sustainable change over the five year period of the plan (HEA 2015b). The plan is committed to widening participation in higher education from groups and communities who have been under-represented up to now. Having clear targets helps the HEA and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to assess progress in individual institutions and nationally, and it assists the institutions to put in place practical

arrangements to promote access among the target groups. The targets set out for increased participation in the Plan have been established with reference to the 2008–2013 National Access Plan and draw upon the investigation of HE demand up to 2019 contained in the Hunt Report.

The Plan (HEA 2015b) contains a target for mature students, who represent the majority of students who complete the Access/ Preparatory Studies programmes at LYIT. A key feature of national access policy, since 2005, has been to support mature students who have not previously benefited from higher education and who enter college to complete a full-time course. However, reflecting the increasing importance of part-time and flexible learning opportunities for mature students and the decrease in the numbers of those seeking full-time options, the Plan has set a national target for combined full-time and part-time participation. Part-time is defined as participation that leads to less than 60 credits per academic year. The targeted five per cent increase, from 19 per cent to 24 per cent, represents an increase of 3,500 mature entrants. A mid-term review of the targets will take place in 2017 (HEA 2015b).

The Institutes of Technology Act, 2006, created a similar relationship between the IoTs and the HEA as that between the HEA and the universities. It provides for greater institutional autonomy, improved governance and a statutory guarantee of academic freedom for the IoTs. Since then, there has been rapid growth in the numbers enrolled in the IoTs (HEA 2015a). This increase is significant as greater numbers of non-traditional students and those with poorer levels of achievement in the Leaving Certificate are now accessing higher education (McCoy and Smyth 2011). For example, mature students in 2014/15 represented 16 per cent of new entrants in IoTs compared to only eight per cent in the university sector (HEA 2015a).

## **2.10 LYIT Statistics and Targets for Improved Mature Student Access**

There are a number of objectives regarding inclusion of non-traditional learners detailed in LYIT's Strategic Plan 2014-2017 (LYIT 2014). These include the development of initiatives to: ease the transition into higher education; ensure greater parity in terms of access for part-time students; further develop Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms; build on LYIT's success as a national leader in widening participation by growing student numbers assisted via The Curve; enhance supports for these student groups; coordinate these activities with the academic schools and further integrate Access processes within the Institute's quality assurance

framework; and develop collaborative initiatives with national and international partners (LYIT 2014). The LYIT registration office provided current student profile data for 2015/16 for 993 new entrants. Mature students (full-time) represent 21 per cent of the new entrants, which is currently slightly below the national Access target (for 2019) of 24 per cent. However, this figure for mature students participation is well above the 16 per cent figure for new entrants in IoTs for 2014/15 as found by the HEA (2015a).

In October 2013, LYIT submitted its first draft Mission-based Performance Compact to the HEA for the period 2014-16 (HEA 2014). Compacts underpin the move to performance funding and will provide incentives for higher education institutions to improve overall performance. Funding will be allocated based on performance against agreed targets and indicators of success proposed by the institution across a range of outcome domains. The targets and indicators of success must be agreed with the HEA. Element two of LYIT's Performance Compact relates specifically to participation, equal access and lifelong learning. Conscious of the National Access Plan 2015-2019 draft target, LYIT set a target of 30 per cent in relation to participation in HE by first time mature students, which is well above the national Access target of 24 per cent (HEA 2014).

### **2.11 LYIT Access/Preparatory Studies Programmes**

In LYIT, the Access Office (now known as The Curve) was established in 2001 to encourage under-represented groups to enter third level and provide supports throughout their time in LYIT (LYIT 2014). The specific groups of students that avail of the services include students with sensory, physical, and multiple learning difficulties, mature students, adults returning to education and students from low income families. The Curve provides Learning Support, two Access/Preparatory Studies programmes and Lifelong Learning (LYIT 2014). The two programmes are positioned at NFQ minor award Level 6 (LYIT 2010b) and, since 2011, have attracted approximately 140 applicants annually. Applicants may apply to either course who are early school leavers between the ages of 17-22 years, and who have been out of school at least two years, mature students and applicants who meet the institution's lower socio-economic criteria (LYIT 2010b). There are no specific entry requirements but applicants must sit an aptitude test prior to acceptance to ensure an adequate level of Mathematics and English. It is assumed that the skills, knowledge and competencies developed by the students through

successful completion of either of the two programmes should ensure a realistic prospect of success in subsequent studies (LYIT 2010b).

The number of students who initially embark on either of the two Access/Preparatory programmes usually declines by the end of the courses for a variety of reasons, such as for financial or childcare reasons, physical or mental health issues, lack of home support, etc. Programme data since 2011 was provided by The Curve administration from student course choice selection, this data is presented in Table 2.1 together with the percentage of students who progressed and a breakdown of participants' gender on the two programmes.

**Table 2.1** Access/Preparatory Studies programme student data 2011-2016.

Year	Number Completed	Number Progressed	Progressed (%)	Males (%)	Females (%)
2011-12	93	51	55	66	34
2012-13	115	72	62	63	37
2013-14	113	72	64	56	44
2014-15	109	53	49	61	39
2015-16	101	75	74	47	53

It can be observed from Table 2.1 that between 49 and 74 per cent of students who successfully completed the Access/Preparatory Studies programmes chose to progress over the five years since 2011. At this juncture, it must be emphasised that student progression has not been accurately recorded over this time period and, as a result, these figures are approximate. It can also be observed that final completion numbers are well below the initial start numbers of 130-140 and that, for all five years, there has been a majority of male students attending both programmes.

In summary, the literature review highlights the many benefits of third level education for mature students. The two programmes at LYIT offer further opportunities enabling access to third level education for this cohort of students. The next chapter provides detail regarding the methodology of the study, results of the qualitative analysis a discussion of the findings.

### **3.0 Implementation and Evaluation**

#### **3.1 Implementation Survey- Questionnaire**

Most surveys combine nominal data on participants' backgrounds and relevant personal details with other scales (e.g. attitude scales, data from ordinal or interval measures). Surveys are useful for gathering factual information, data on attitudes and preferences, beliefs and experiences - both past and present (Weisberg *et al.* 1996). This is a qualitative study which employs a self-reporting questionnaire for participants in order to investigate their opinion regarding the Access/Preparatory courses they were in the process of completing or had previously completed (since 2011). The questionnaire is a widely used and useful instrument for collecting survey information, providing structured, often numerical data. It can be administered without the researcher needing to be present, and is often relatively straightforward to analyse (Wilson and McLean 1994).

A number of study questions were designed to collect ordinal data using Likert scales (Likert 1932), these provide a range of responses to a given question or statement from, in this case, 'Strongly Agree' through to 'Strongly Disagree'. One of the attractions of using rating scales is that they provide more opportunity than dichotomous questions for making data more sensitive to respondents while still generating numbers. This makes rating scales particularly useful for tapping attitudes, perceptions and opinions. However, the need for a pilot study to devise and refine categories is a necessary part of this type of data collection and this process can be time-consuming (Cohen *et al.* 2007).

#### **3.2 Implementation- Trustworthiness (Reliability and Validity)**

The principal researcher, Julia Wilson, has an MSc. by research from LYIT and has been employed as a part-time assistant lecturer and learning support tutor for five years in The Curve. The researcher teaches 'Introduction to Science' – an elective module on the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education. As the researcher is performing research in the Institution in which she works and with some students whom she teaches, she is aware that she is an 'insider researcher' so there may be issues relating to bias in the research. Rooney (2005 p.6) defined insider research as 'where the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting'. Objectivity, in the traditional sense, is almost impossible as the researcher invariably draws from their cultural and personal context. Thus, an awareness of the

role of personal beliefs and values on the research process is of central importance and declarations of positionality are now generally included by researchers (Sikes and Potts 2008).

In a study by Anney (2014), the Masters dissertations of 323 students, all of whom employed a qualitative research methodology, were examined to ascertain the extent to which students applied the qualitative trustworthiness criteria to ensure the rigour of their findings. Typically, for quantitative research, the reliability and validity of the study design and instrument is statistically analysed (e.g. Coefficient alpha calculated) to confirm trustworthiness. Anney concluded that most of the students incorrectly employed the quantitative criteria to ensure the rigour of their findings, only 21 out of 323 employed the correct qualitative trustworthiness criteria, such as credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability. As this research study employs a qualitative approach, the issue of trustworthiness rather than reliability and validity will be addressed.

In his first publication, Guba (1981) highlighted four trustworthiness concerns that any researcher needs to address, irrespective of their research model: (1) Truth Value Concern: How can a researcher establish confidence in their findings?; (2) Applicability Concern: How can a researcher determine the applicability of the findings of the inquiry in other settings or with other respondents?; (3) Consistency Concern: How can one know if the findings would be repeated consistently with similar participants in the same context?; and (4) Neutrality Concern: How do we know if the findings come solely from participants and the investigation was not influenced by the bias, motivations or interests of the researchers? Wallendorf and Belk (1989), building on Guba's ideas, expanded his 'Neutrality Concern' to include an 'Integrity Concern' – how does the researcher know that the findings are not false information given by the study participants? For qualitative researchers, strategies such as safeguarding participants' identity, ensuring participant anonymity and researcher's awareness of bias serve to alleviate this integrity issue (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). All these strategies were employed by the researcher during the course of this research.

In order to further improve the trustworthiness and rigour of this research, two further measures were taken – firstly, consultation with senior staff of The Curve in the framing and editing of the survey questions, and, secondly, the distribution of a pilot of the final questionnaire. Up until two years ago, Access/Preparatory Studies programme students completed a feedback questionnaire about their course however, this process had been discontinued. There is now a desire among staff in The Curve to re-instate this process. This research, in addition to

collecting similar information to that which was collected previously, set out to collect information about aspects of teaching and learning on the two programmes generally, as well as on the specific modules that make up these courses. Additionally, for the first time, feedback from students who had progressed to undergraduate programmes at LYIT would be collected. Secondly, a pilot of the final questionnaire was distributed to ten members of staff from both within The Curve (not those who helped determine the questions) and from the Department of Science. The purpose of the pilot was to test for word difficulty and/or ambiguity and to check whether replies actually answered the research questions. The pilot participants were asked to complete this survey as if they were a real participant, making up the answers. Any issues highlighted were subsequently addressed. The pilot was a quick, efficient way of obtaining immediate and valuable feedback, which was then used to improve the questionnaire.

Qualitative data analysis involves organising and explaining the data or making sense of data in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation. In qualitative data, the analysis is unavoidably interpretive, hence the data analysis is less a completely accurate representation and more of a reflexive, responsive interaction between the researcher and the collected data (Cohen *at al.* 2007). Therefore, in order to address the trustworthiness concerns of qualitative data analysis, a peer examination/de-briefing was completed where the researcher discussed their research process and findings with neutral colleagues. According to Bitsch (2005) and Krefting (1991), peer examination helps the researcher to be honest about their study, and peers contribute to their deeper reflexive analysis. This method is also favoured by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a technique for enhancing credibility of interpretation. Lincoln and Guba assert that researchers should regularly meet with peers who are not researchers on the project who will critique and question the emerging interpretation before the researcher becomes fully committed to it.

### **3.3 Implementation- Ethical Considerations**

The research participants included some students who were in a dependent relationship with the principal researcher in that they were undertaking the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education, a programme on which the principal researcher delivers content. Research participants also included students who were not in a dependent relationship with the principal

researcher, namely students undertaking the Certificate in Access Studies and those who had since progressed to undergraduate programmes at LYIT.

There were no ethical issues around consent or confidentiality. Personally Identifying Information (PII) was not sought from research participants and completed questionnaires were not returned directly to the researcher (but rather were deposited by the participants in the secure post-box of the researcher's supervisor, or completed anonymously online via Survey Monkey). All research participants were provided with an Information Sheet and a Consent Form thus ensuring that consent obtained was voluntary and informed and all subjects were over the age of 18 years. There were no risks posed to subjects by participating in this research.

### **3.4 Rights**

Permission for students to be involved in this research was sought from the relevant Heads of School (HoS) or Department (HoD), and from the student participants themselves. It was made clear by the researcher that no adverse consequences would arise from failure to provide such permission, or from subsequent withdrawal from the study. Students who chose to withdraw were able to do so up to the point of return of their completed questionnaire. The HoS/HoD were informed that they could withdraw their consent up to the point of data analysis (May 2016). All HoS/HoD, and all participants, were informed that the data generated by the study would be used in the researcher's dissertation for a Masters of Art in Learning and Teaching, and may also be used in academic papers, journal articles and in future research studies.

The principal researcher, the project supervisor and a number of the researchers' peers had access to all collected data. Personally Identifiable Information (PII) was not sought from research participants for the purpose of this project and all data was collected, processed, stored and retained in compliance with relevant data protection legislation and in compliance with LYIT's Guidelines for Electronic Data Storage.

### **3.5 Implementation- Sample Population**

A questionnaire (Appendix 1) was compiled and distributed to students who are currently undertaking the Access/Preparatory Studies programmes and to those who previously



completed either of these from 2011 onwards and are, at the time of the research, undergraduate students at LYIT. The questionnaire contained two sections, the first to be completed by all study participants and the second to be completed solely by participants who had progressed to undergraduate study. The initial questions in section one gathered background information about the participants including age, gender, whether they had children, reasons why they chose to complete the course, etc. The remaining questions were Likert Scale ordinal type questions that were ranked on a scale of “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. The last question in section one asked the participants whether they would recommend the programme to someone considering a return to education and, at the close of this section, there was a comment box provided for those who wished to provide additional information.

The second section, to be completed by progressed participants, contained three Likert scale questions to gather information about the benefits or drawbacks of the two programmes in relation to progression, and information relating directly to the modules taught on the programmes. It was expected that a minimum of 90 responses (35 per cent) would be received, based on the number of registered students who were completing or had completed both courses and subsequently progressed in LYIT since 2011. The list of progressed students was provided by the administrative assistant in The Curve.

### **3.6 Implementation- Sampling and Data Collection**

The researcher met with the proposed research subjects who were currently completing either programme in order to explain the purpose of the research, provide information relevant to consent and distribute an Information Sheet (Appendix 2). Once this information had been provided, the researcher departed from the room and another member of LYIT staff (who was not a lecturer/tutor in The Curve) distributed a Consent Form (Appendix 3) and Questionnaire to those students who indicated that they were willing to participate in the research. The Information Sheet was retained by the participants, the Consent Form was signed and returned to the staff member, and the questionnaire was then disseminated to the student participants for completion. Participants were not required to complete the questionnaire immediately upon receipt unless they elected to do so (a labelled dropbox was provided for this purpose), but rather were instructed to complete and submit the questionnaire at any time before the stipulated deadline (27th April).

In relation to those students who previously completed an Access/Preparatory Studies programme and subsequently progressed, the researcher enlisted the assistance of the various HoS or HoD in making contact with this cohort of students. An Information Sheet (Appendix 4) and Consent Form (Appendix 5) were emailed to the HoS/HoD explaining the purpose and scope of the research and requesting permission to survey the relevant students within their School/Department. After obtaining the consent of the relevant HoS/HoD, the researcher forwarded to them the Participants' Information Sheet, Consent Form, and Questionnaire for distribution by them to the relevant students within their School/Department. In order to assist the HoS/HoD with this task, the researcher forwarded to them the email addresses of those students within their School/Department who were eligible to participate in the survey. Student participants were instructed, via the Information Sheet, to place their completed questionnaire in the secure postbox of the researcher's supervisor. In order to maintain their anonymity, students were also instructed to ensure that the signed Consent Form was not appended to their questionnaire when submitted, but rather was submitted separately.

Unfortunately, when the deadline date arrived, only eleven completed questionnaires had been returned, representing an extremely low response rate of just over four per cent. The researcher then converted the questionnaire into an online survey using the free application Survey Monkey. The link to this was then e-mailed to the HoS/HoD, who then forwarded it to all the progressed students together with an explanatory email. This online questionnaire was fully completed by another 21 participants, which increased the response rate to 12.8 per cent. In total, 250 progressed students were contacted by e-mail by the various HoS/HoD. Since students from 2011 onwards were included, it was assumed that quite a proportion of these would have either finished their studies and graduated, or deregistered from college by April 2016. As stated in section 2.10, there is no monitoring at present of progressed students at LYIT after completion of the Access/Preparatory Studies programmes.

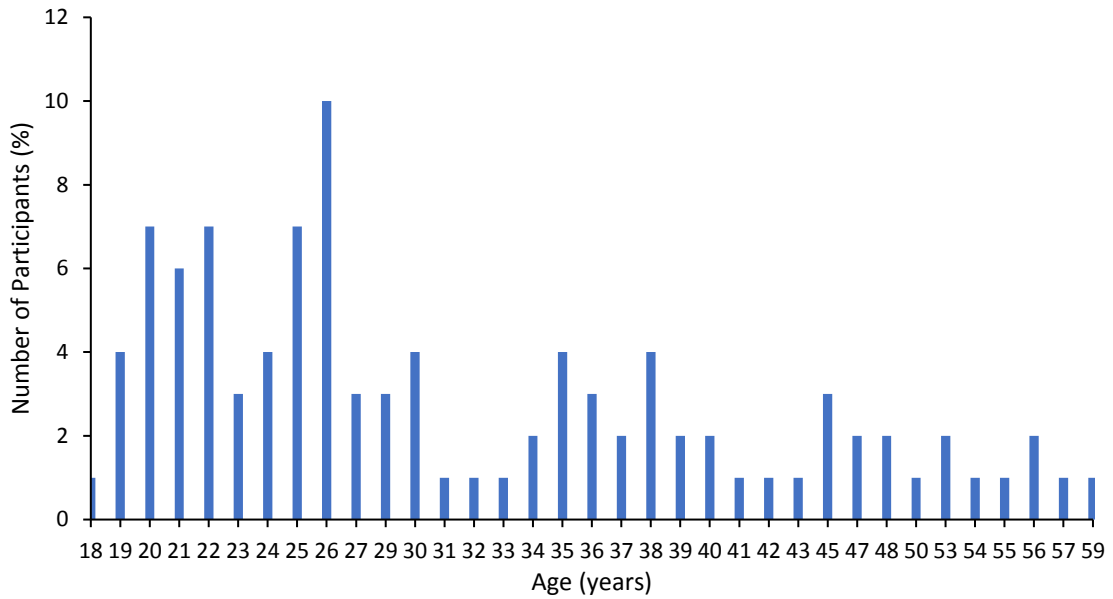
### **3.7 Implementation- Data Collection**

All data was collected during April and May 2016. A total of 105 questionnaires were completed and returned: 73 by current programme participants and 32 by progressed participants. Unfortunately, five questionnaires were only partially completed and were subsequently excluded from the study, leaving a total of 100 questionnaires. The response rate for current programme participants was 67 per cent.

### 3.8 Implementation - Method of data analysis

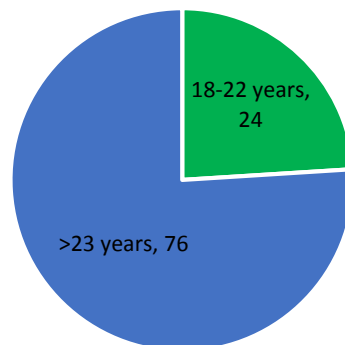
Data analysis involved descriptive statistics to summarise the study data using Microsoft Excel 2013. All data was presented graphically using either pie or bar charts.

### 3.9 Evaluation: Questionnaire Section One.



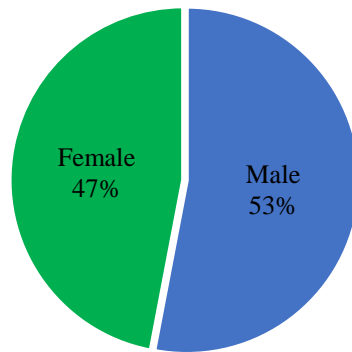
**Figure 3.1** Age distribution of research participants.

The age range of participants was very broad, ranging from 18 to 59 years old. There was only one participant at either age extreme, with 26 years old being the age featuring most heavily.



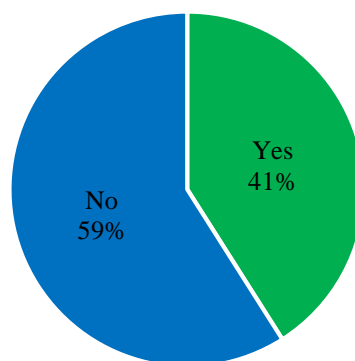
**Figure 3.2** Age profile of research participants, younger and mature students.

The age profile of the participants illustrated that the minority (24) were under 23 years old, and the majority (76) were aged 23 years and older and thus deemed to be mature students. These results confirm that the majority of students who undertake both Access/Preparatory Studies programmes at LYIT are mature students.



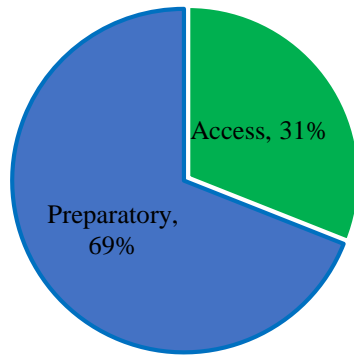
**Figure 3.3** Gender profile of research participants.

The gender profile of participants correlates well with the gender profile of Access/Preparatory Studies programme students over the past five years, with the majority (53 per cent) being male. Since 2011 (Table 2.1), the majority of students attending either programme have been male.



**Figure 3.4** Number of research participants who are parents.

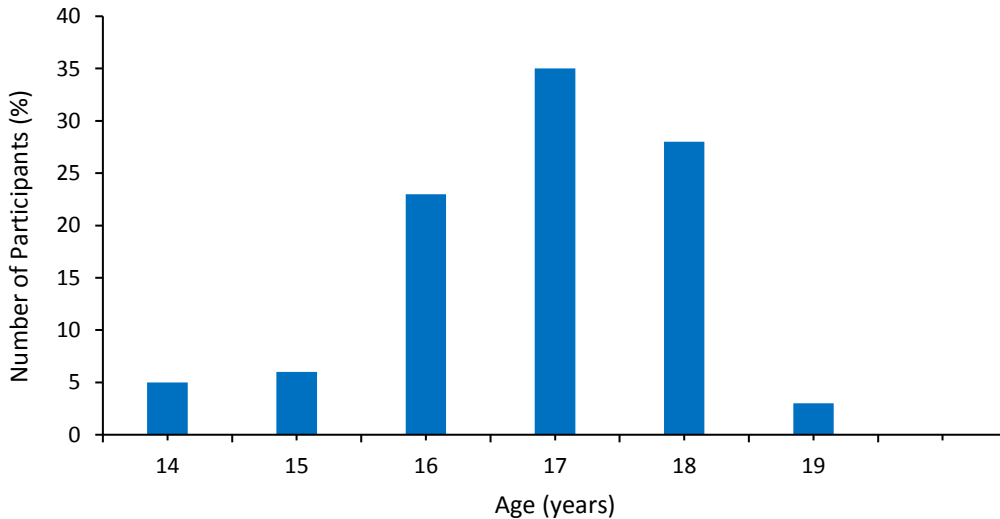
Forty one per cent of participants indicated that they are parents. These students, therefore, have additional responsibilities compared to students without children.



**Figure 3.5** Type of programme undertaken by research participants.

The majority of participants were completing or had completed the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education programme. There are approximately four times as many students who successfully complete this course compared to the shorter Certificate in Access Studies programme.

**Q 1. At what age did you leave school?**

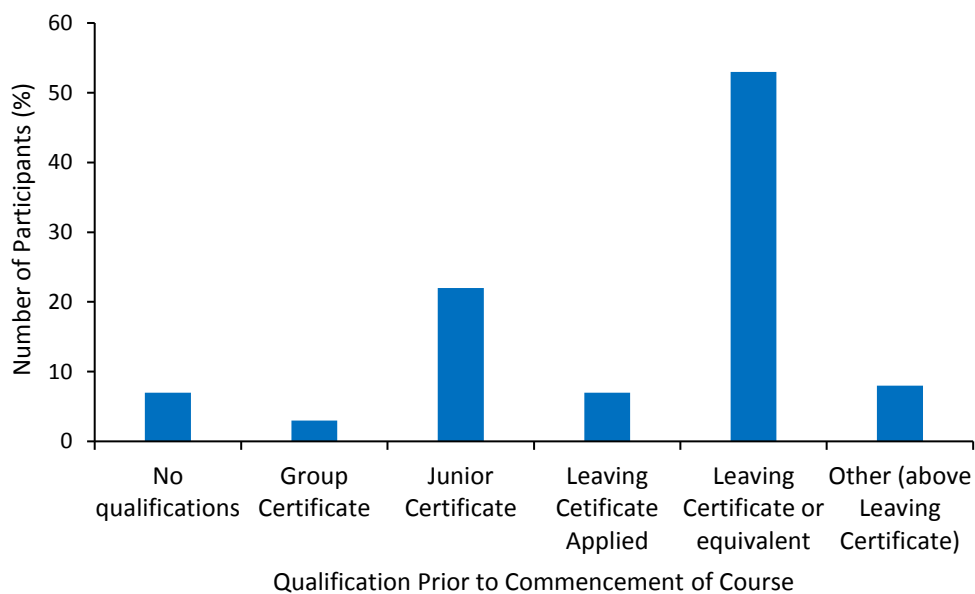


**Figure 3.6** Age research participants finished secondary school.

The data recorded for this question indicated that a number of participants finished secondary school early, with 34 per cent responding that they finished their secondary education at 16 years of age or younger, and 11 per cent at 15 years of age or younger. The legislation

governing school attendance in Ireland is the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. Under the Act, the minimum school leaving age is 16 years or the completion of three years of post-primary education, whichever is the later. In Ireland, most students who successfully complete secondary school to Leaving Certificate level (two-year programme) are at least 17 years old, and those who successfully complete a three year Leaving Certificate programme (i.e., complete an optional transition year) will be 18 years of age or more.

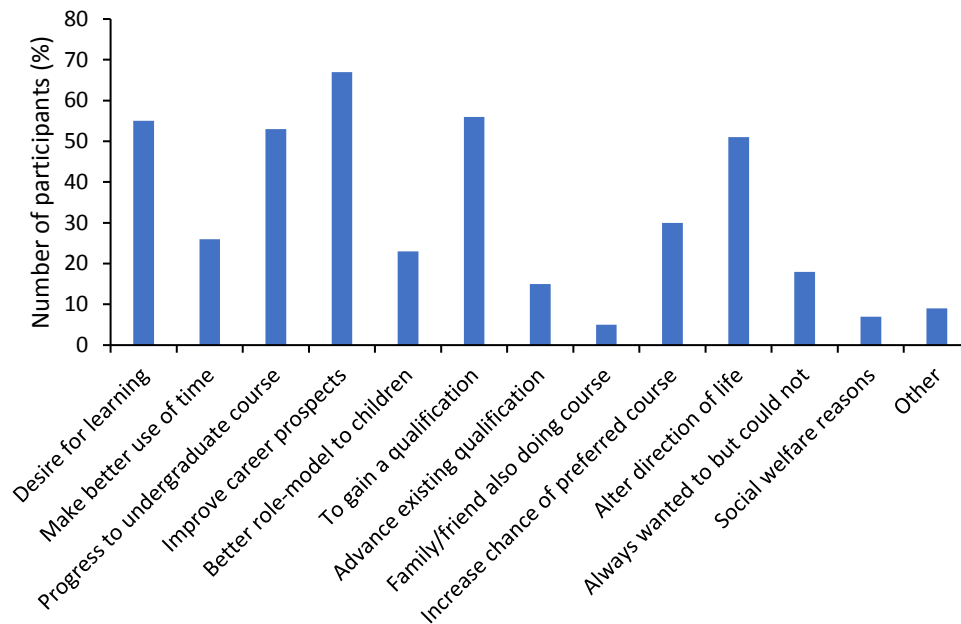
**Q 2. Please select the highest educational level you had completed prior to commencing the Access/Preparatory Studies course.**



**Figure 3.7** Research participants’ qualification level prior to course commencement.

The data recorded for this question indicated that 32 per cent of participants had attained a Junior Certificate qualification level or less, with seven per cent having no formal educational attainment prior to commencement of the either the Access/Preparatory Studies programme. Sixty one per cent of participants had attained a qualification level equal to or higher than Leaving Certificate level. Of these, eight per cent had attained a qualification above Leaving Certificate level. These results correlate quite well with the data obtained previously in response to question one, where 34 per cent of participants responded that they finished their secondary education at 16 years of age or younger (the age that the Junior Certificate is typically undertaken).

### Q 3. Why did you choose to complete the Access/Preparatory Studies course?



**Figure 3.8** Reasons selected for choosing to complete an Access/Preparatory Studies programme.

It was found that the majority of participants, 67 per cent, chose to complete an Access/Preparatory Studies programme in order to ‘Improve their career prospects’. This finding was expected, as it is one of the main motivating influences stated by adult students who chose to complete higher education in studies by Davies *et al.* (2002) and Fleming (2010). Over half the participants, 56 per cent, reported that they wanted ‘To gain a qualification’ and 55 per cent reported that they had a ‘Desire for learning’. Both these results support the findings of studies on adult students returning to education by Fleming (2010), Fleming and Murphy (1997), Hardiman (2012), Marks (2010) and Kearns (2013).

It was interesting to find that only 53 per cent of participants responded that they intended to ‘Progress to undergraduate course’ upon completion of their programme. Of these, 32 per cent had already progressed onto undergraduate courses. Of this 32 per cent, only 20 per cent selected this response, meaning that the remaining 12 per cent had not initially intended to progress. This appears to suggest that progression is not always seen as a possibility for a substantial number of students when they initially embark on either programme. It would

therefore be beneficial for senior staff at The Curve to investigate the reasons why a substantial number of students undertaking the programmes do not envisage progression as an option and explore the steps that could be taken to address this. This finding was repeated with the current students from both the programmes, as only 21 per cent selected the response ‘Progress to undergraduate course’. However, according to data supplied by The Curve, 74 per cent of those who successfully completed the two programmes in 2016 have chosen to progress (Table 2.1). Additionally, in a study by Fleming and Murphy (1997, p.65), it was discovered that many mature students in FE who progress to HE also had not intended to progress.

This progression response also may help to explain the variable progression figures from the two programmes over the past five years, which range from 49 to 74 per cent (though it must be stated that these percentages are approximate). The two programmes are primarily aimed at, and intended for, adults who wish to return to education at higher level yet it appears, from the results of the research, that just over half the participants did not initially intend progressing onto undergraduate programmes. It would seem that these adults are completing the programmes in order to gain knowledge or experience college life and possibly, as one participant responded, “To prove to myself that I could do it”. Therefore, for these students, their motivation for completing the programme is personal development without the end goal of progression.

Fifty one per cent of participants reported that they chose to complete the programme in order ‘To alter the direction of their life’, 18 per cent of participants chose to complete the programme because they ‘Had always wanted to study but never had the chance’, and 15 per cent because they wanted to ‘Advance existing qualifications’. These three results correlate well with the motivating influences findings in the studies by Davies *et al.* (2002) and Fleming (2010).

Thirty per cent of participants reported that they chose to complete the Access/Preparatory Studies programme in order to ‘Improve their chances of getting accepted onto their preferred undergraduate course’. Upon successful completion of the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education, students may apply to gain entry to a number of high demand quota courses in the School of Science at LYIT. These courses have one to two places reserved solely for these applicants. Historically, there have always been a number of students who complete the Preparatory Studies programme solely to gain access to these undergraduate programmes. Otherwise, these students do not have the necessary qualifications to gain admission, or their

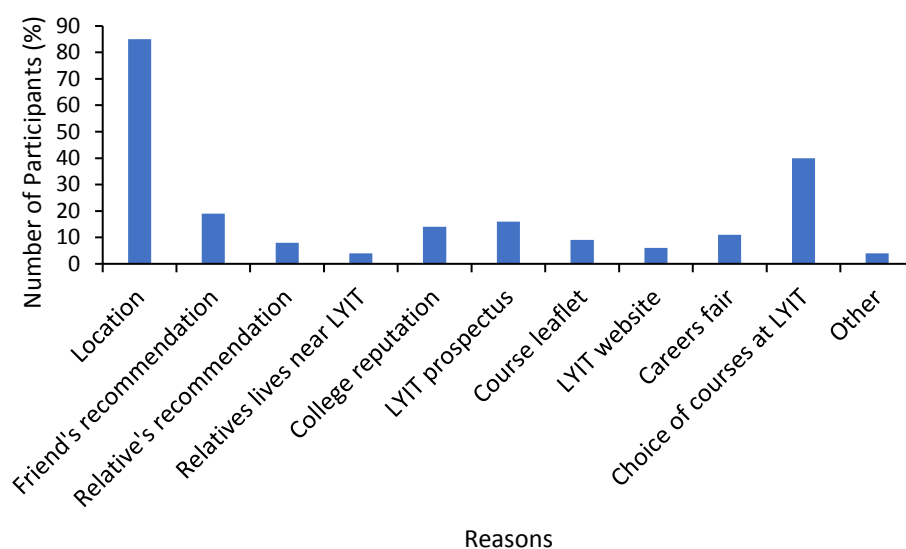


qualifications are not considered acceptable due to the high demand for these programmes. Only the students with the highest grade point averages on the Preparatory Studies programme will be accepted, therefore, there is strong competition between students to achieve the reserved places.

Two other reasons cited by adult students returning to education in the research by Marks (2010) and Kearns (2013) included: 'To make better use of time' and the desire to be 'A better role model to their children'. This research found that 26 per cent of participants did select the response 'To make better use of time', and 23 per cent of participants selected the response 'To be a better role model to children'. It was found previously in this research that 41 per cent of participants were parents, yet only 21 per cent of those selected this as a reason they chose to return to education. The remaining reasons supplied for choosing to return to education included: 'Family/friend was also doing the course' and 'Social welfare reasons'. Only five per cent of participants selected the 'Family/friend also doing the course' reason despite there often being a number of related family members attending both programmes since 2011; and the 'Social welfare' reason was selected by just seven per cent of participants. This reason was included as the Department of Social Protection allows participants to retain their payments while they complete the two programmes as there is an expectation that the students will progress into college full-time after successful programme completion.

Finally, an 'other' option and comment line was provided to allow participants to note any other reasons (not already listed) underlying their decision to complete an Access/Preparatory Studies programme. Nine participants selected this option and provided information, these included three participants who reported that their Leaving Certificate results were not enough to gain entry to their preferred course at LYIT. One participant reported that she 'felt pressure as getting a degree seems like a must-have these days'. Other reasons included: 'to ensure a better future' and, from a participant in their fifties, for the 'social life', this response supports a similar finding by Hardiman (2012). Therefore, there are many reasons why adult students choose to complete either of the two programmes, and most verify previous findings by other researchers.

#### Q 4. Why did you choose to return to LYIT specifically?

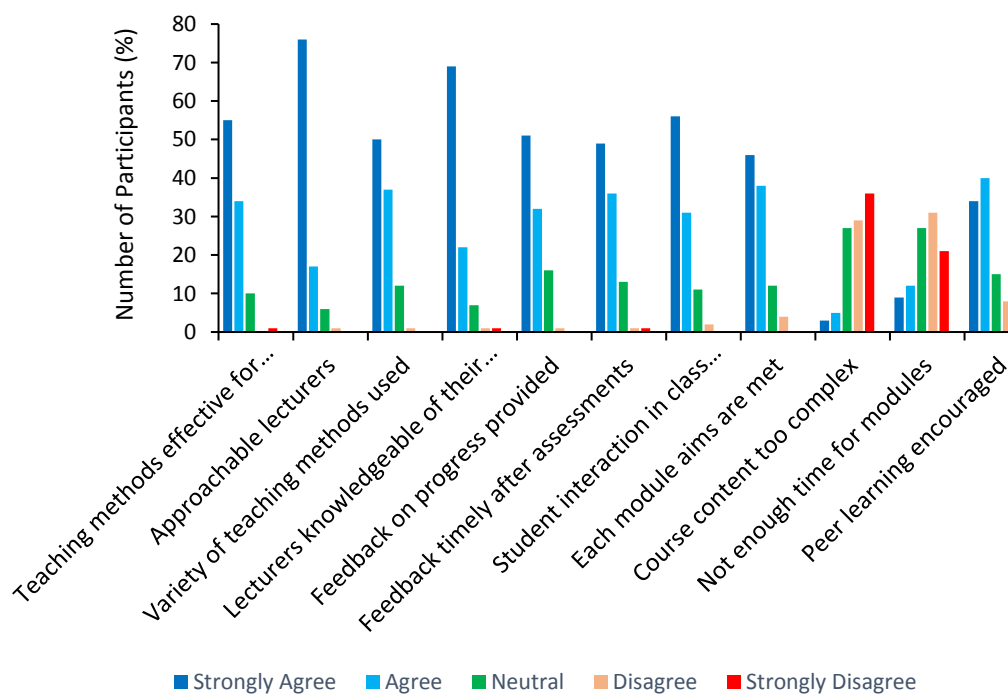


**Figure 3.9** Reasons why research participants chose to study at LYIT.

The data recorded for this question confirms that ‘Location’ was of utmost importance to the research participants, with 85 per cent selecting it as their reason for choosing to study at LYIT. This finding was not surprising as LYIT is the only third level institution in Donegal and a large proportion of the student population is from the county (HEA 2014). A Scottish study completed by the National Union of Students (NUS) (2013) found that college students were more likely to choose a college that was close to home, reinforcing the importance of local access to college. Additionally, this result was also found in the Hardiman study of FE students (2012). Living within commutable distance to LYIT was also found to be an extremely important factor, with only four per cent of participants indicating that they chose LYIT as a ‘Relative lived near LYIT’. Forty per cent of participants selected the reason ‘Choice of courses at LYIT’ for their decision to study at LYIT. The other four main reasons that were selected included: ‘Friend’s recommendation’ (19 per cent); ‘LYIT prospectus’ (16 per cent); ‘College reputation’ (14 per cent); and ‘Careers Fair’ (11 per cent). These four reasons are obviously important from a college and course marketing perspective to prospective students. The NUS study (2013) found that students predominantly chose their institution based on the range of courses available and on academic reputation. These findings also concur with those found by Hardiman (2012).

The NUS study also found that students were more likely to have read information published by colleges and universities to learn about courses, followed by advice from family and friends. The findings from this study strongly support those from this Scottish study. All other reasons were selected by less than 10 per cent of participants, indicating that these reasons were less important overall to their choice to study at LYIT. It was interesting to note, particularly considering the current technology-based climate, that only six per cent of participants responded that they obtained information from the ‘LYIT website’. This finding is not entirely surprising as, anecdotally speaking, many students who avail of the two programmes at LYIT are initially limited in terms of technological awareness. In the NUS study (2013), students were also less likely to have used ‘official’ resources, such as the university/college website. Four participants selected the ‘other’ option in answer to this question and provided additional reasons for their decision to study at LYIT, such as: ‘advised by the Education and Training Board (ETB) to do the course’; ‘age not relevant, most refreshing’ (from an older participant); and ‘an advert in the local paper’.

**Q 5. Regarding teaching and learning on the course, please indicate your opinion of the following.**



**Figure 3.10** Research participants’ opinions on programme teaching and learning.

This question, and the remainder of research questions, were designed as ordinal questions using Likert items to measure participants' attitudes to a series of statements. Most statements are positive but negative statements were also included to help reduce bias in the study design.

For the statement 'Teaching methods are effective for your learning', the vast majority of participants, 89 per cent selected either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree', which is an excellent result and confirms the high standards of teaching on the two programmes. The following statement 'Lecturers are approachable' is associated with the 'Teaching methods are effective for your learning' statement, as it is well established that interaction between teachers and students, both inside and outside of the classroom, is motivating and aids the learning process (Race 2005). Additionally, student-lecturer interaction has been shown to be a significant factor influencing student's satisfaction and performance (Long *et al.* 2010). Most participants, 93 per cent selected either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' to the statement, confirming that the students believe that the lecturing staff on both the programmes are highly approachable.

For the statement 'A variety of teaching methods are used', 87 per cent of participants selected either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree', while 12 per cent selected 'Neutral' and one participant selected 'Disagree'. Individuals learn in different ways and possess different strengths, weaknesses and preferences – accepting this is key to student-centred learning (Race 2005). Race asserts that, in the context of teaching and learning, it is best practice to use a variety of teaching methods involving a multi-sensory approach, i.e., visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. This style of teaching accommodates a wider variety of students, and their various learning styles, keeping students engaged and involved in learning and so providing equal opportunities to learn (Race 2005). This is especially crucial in teaching the Access/Preparatory Studies programmes owing to variations in terms of age, (academic) ability, confidence levels, etc.

For the statement 'Lecturers are knowledgeable of their subject', 91 per cent of participants selected either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree'. This is a positive finding that confirms that the students believe that the lecturers are knowledgeable. All staff are qualified experts in their own area and most have completed, or are in the process of completing, a postgraduate teaching qualification. Studies by Matzler and Woessmann (2010) and Long *et al.* (2014) confirm that lecturer's knowledge of their subject contributes most to students' satisfaction level.

Two statements relate to formative feedback, these are 'Feedback on progress is provided' and 'Feedback is timely after assessments'. Assessment is any process that aims to evaluate the extent of students' learning. There are two forms of assessment. Firstly, formative assessment, which is designed to have benefits for both learning and teaching, but does not contribute to an overall mark. This form is often referred to as assessment *for* learning (Earl 2003). Secondly, summative assessment, where the learner's performance is measured against the prescribed learning outcomes and a grade is awarded. This form of assessment advises a decision regarding the students' progression or award. This form is referred to as assessment *of* learning (Earl 2003). However, there may be a formative element involved in this form also. If feedback is provided in a timely manner to the student for continuous assessment tasks, then this feedback should improve the students' learning. Timely feedback is especially important in the semesterised system of teaching in order to allow the student time to improve their work before their final exams. Any feedback given to students should relate to the specific merits of their work and must include guidance on what they can do to improve their work (Black and Wiliam 1998). The responses chosen were quite similar for both these statements. The majority of participants, 83 to 85 per cent, selected either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' to both statements while between 13 and 16 per cent selected 'Neutral' and three per cent selected 'Disagree'.

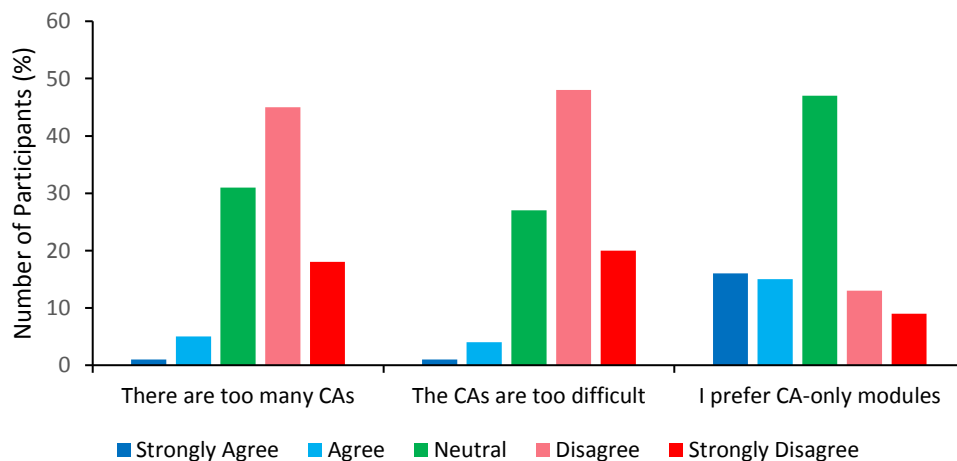
For the statement 'Student interaction is encouraged in class', 87 per cent of participants selected either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree', while 11 per cent selected 'Neutral' and two per cent selected 'Disagree'. Promoting student interaction in class promotes active engagement by the students which enhances learning because it is motivational and helps keep students interested (Race 2005). Research shows that students who work in groups develop an increased ability to solve problems and exhibit greater understanding of the material (Cooper 1990). This is verified by surveys of employers over the past 30 years which found that the most essential soft skill cited was the ability to communicate and interact with others in teams (Andrews and Higson 2008).

For the statement 'The aims of each module are being met', the majority of students, 84 per cent, selected either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree', while 12 per cent selected 'Neutral' and four per cent selected 'Disagree'. For the negative statement 'The course content is too complex', there were more mixed results, with 65 per cent selecting either 'Strongly Disagree' or 'Disagree', 27 per cent selecting 'Neutral' and eight per cent selecting either 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree'. The content level on both programmes aims to introduce students to the

various subject areas. For the negative statement ‘Not enough time is allocated to modules’, there were again more mixed results, with 52 per cent selecting either ‘Strongly Disagree’ or ‘Disagree’, 27 per cent selecting ‘Neutral’ and 21 per cent of participants selecting either ‘Agree’ or ‘Strongly Agree’. The results indicate that this is an area that requires further investigation and improvement.

Finally, for the statement ‘Learning from other students is encouraged’, 74 per cent of participants selected either ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’, 15 per cent selected ‘Neutral’ and 11 per cent selected either ‘Disagree’ or ‘Strongly Disagree’. Peer or collaborative forms of learning all help to promote deep learning by increasing students’ problem-solving and self-initiative abilities, leading to the development of essential work-related skills such as team work. Importantly, students cooperate better with one another when they have experienced collaborative approaches early on in their studies, preferably in first year or before (Race 2005) so pre-undergraduate level presents an ideal opportunity to encourage students to develop these skills. The results do however indicate that this is an area that requires some further improvement.

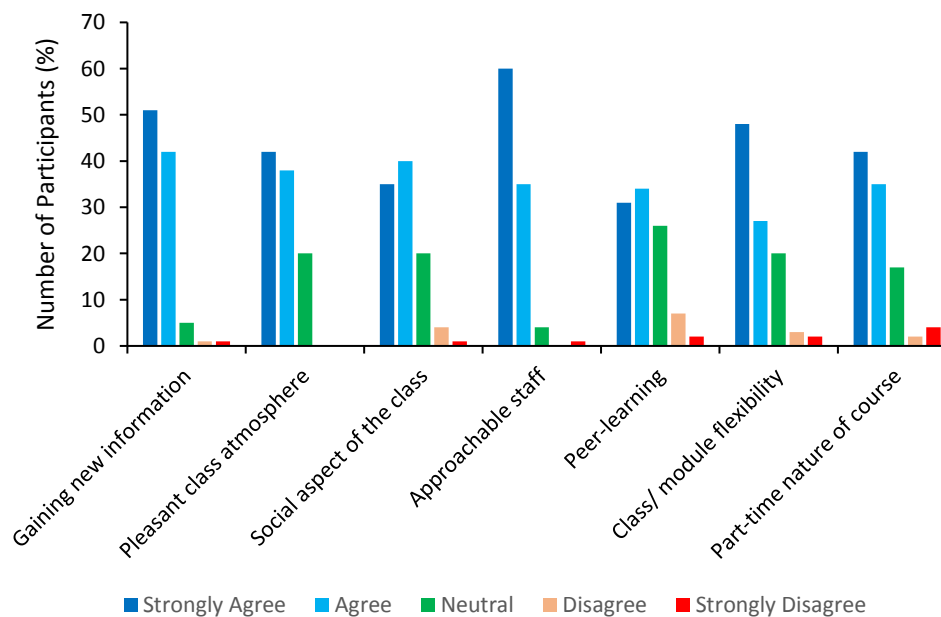
**Q 6. Regarding continuous assessments (CAs), please indicate your opinion of the following.**



**Figure 3.11** Research participants’ opinions on Continuous Assessment (CA).

Both Access/Preparatory Studies programmes serve as precursors to student progression, so it is essential that the students experience exam conditions to prepare them. However, as most of the students are returning to education after long absences, final exams are likely to induce anxiety. Therefore, the programmes are designed with most modules having at least half of the marks available for class continuous assessments. This reduces the weight of the final exam, while some modules have no final exam (LYIT 2010b). For the first statement – ‘There are too many CAs’ - 63 per cent of participants selected either ‘Strongly Disagree’ or ‘Disagree’ 31 per cent selected a ‘Neutral’ response, while only six per cent selected either ‘Agree’ or ‘Strongly Agree’. These results imply that both programmes are pitched appropriately in relation to CA. Similar results were obtained for the second statement – ‘The CAs are too difficult’ – as the majority of participants, 68 per cent, selected either ‘Strongly Disagree’ or ‘Disagree’, while 27 per cent selected a ‘Neutral’ response and only five per cent selected either ‘Agree’ or ‘Strongly Agree’. The third statement – ‘I prefer CA-only modules’ – received a more mixed response, indicating no strong preference by the participants. Almost half, 47 per cent, selected a ‘Neutral’ response, while 31 per cent selected either ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’ and 22 per cent selected either ‘Strongly Disagree’ or ‘Disagree’.

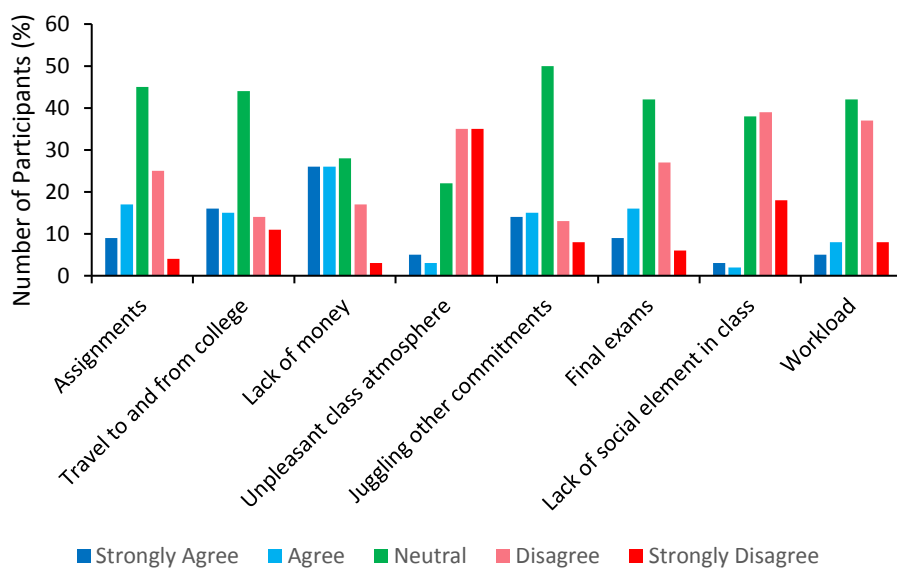
**Q 7. What do you consider to be the most enjoyable aspects of the course? Please indicate your opinion.**



**Figure 3.12** Research participants’ opinions on enjoyable aspects of the programme.

Overwhelmingly, for each of the statements provided in answer to this question, there was a very positive response from the vast majority of research participants. Some results of note include the response to the statement about the approachability of staff, as 95 per cent of participants selected either ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’ that this programme aspect was enjoyable, a similar result was found in the Hardiman study (2012). Also, the peer-learning result was interesting, as 35 per cent of participants either selected ‘Neutral’ or ‘Disagree’ that this was an enjoyable aspect of their programme. These two findings support the results found previously in question five regarding the lecturing staff and peer-learning. The fact that similar results were obtained for different questions on two aspects about the programmes serves to highlight the trustworthiness of the study design.

**Q 8. What do you consider to be the least enjoyable aspects of the course? Please indicate your opinion.**



**Figure 3.13** Research participants’ opinions on the less enjoyable aspects of the programme.

For six of the eight statements provided in question eight, there are quite mixed results with a high level of ‘Neutral’ responses selected. For the ‘Lack of money’ statement, over half the participants, 52 per cent, selected either ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’ which illustrated that they did not enjoy this aspect of programme completion and this corroborates a finding by Hardiman (2012). There was a definite negative response of 70 per cent for the ‘Unpleasant class atmosphere’, which is a welcome finding that indicates that the majority of the participants



enjoyed their class atmosphere. Again, this response supports that found by Hardiman (2012). The result for the statement ‘Juggling other commitments’ was quite low at 31 per cent, especially considering that 41 per cent of participants were parents and therefore had extra commitments on their time. The results also indicate that the programme workload is not considered an unpleasant aspect, with only 13 per cent selecting ‘Agree’ in response to this statement.

### **Q 9. Would you recommend this course to people considering a return to education?**

This was an important summary question for the research study at the end of section one that all participants completed. All 100 participants selected the ‘Yes’ option for this question, an extremely positive result which indicates that all of the participants would recommend the programmes to others considering a return to third level education.

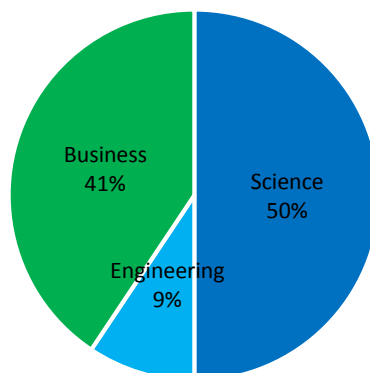
At the end of section one, a comment box was provided to enable participants to add any comments/suggestions that they had in relation to the course. Forty one participants chose to add comments, the majority of which were very encouraging and served to reinforce the overall findings from the research. Examples of these comments (emanating from students who had progressed) include: ‘brilliant experience, friendly staff and lovely atmosphere, would recommend it to everyone who wants a return to education’; ‘I found the course very useful, especially the Applied Writing module as being a mature student this was my main worry of not being able to write and communicate at the level required’; ‘I really found the course to be a great help as it introduces you to college life’; ‘having left school before taking any major exams, I found the exams at the end of the course most helpful in preparation for exams I have taken since’. Six participants commented on how the course has improved their confidence and self-belief, which is a very positive finding, this re-iterates research findings by Hardiman (2012). Finally, a current Computer course participant commented that ‘I only did the Preparatory course in order to get into Veterinary Nursing but once I was introduced to computing I changed my mind completely... I recommend the course to anyone even if they think they know what they want to study in college’.

There were also some less positive comments about the programmes, either criticising particular aspects or providing recommendations for change. These provide constructive opportunities for improvement to both programmes. The following comment from a current student in the Department of Design and Creative Media is particularly noteworthy: ‘We did

not have a Design module which would have been very useful'. This sentiment was echoed by two further participants who requested a greater range of electives in semester two. Two current Preparatory Studies participants requested that there be more than one break in three hour lectures. Three current Access programme participants commented that two hours per week for the Information Technology module was not enough to cover all the material at an appropriate rate. This criticism was also echoed by a current Preparatory Studies participant. Interestingly, a current Law student stated that 'I felt progressing was a massive change'. Another participant stated that they felt that the programmes 'are not advertised enough so people are missing out'.

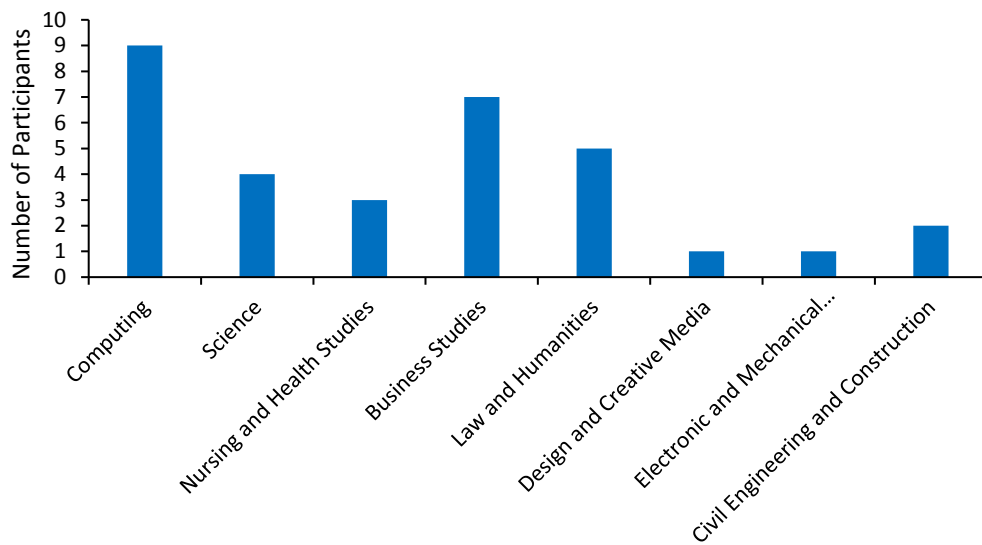
### 3.10 Evaluation: Questionnaire Section Two

A total of 32 out of the 250 progressed participants who were contacted completed this section of the study questionnaire. The low response rate caused an issue regarding the applicability of the study from a trustworthiness standpoint as a larger sample size would have provided more confidence and rigour in the research findings in respect of the three questions contained within this section.



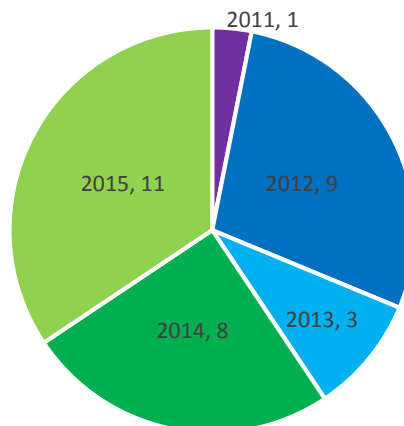
**Figure 3.14** Number of progressed research participants by School.

Three of LYIT's four Schools were represented - Business, Engineering and Science (the School of Tourism was not represented as the two students who were eligible to participate in the study had already graduated).



**Figure 3.15** Number of progressed research participants by Department.

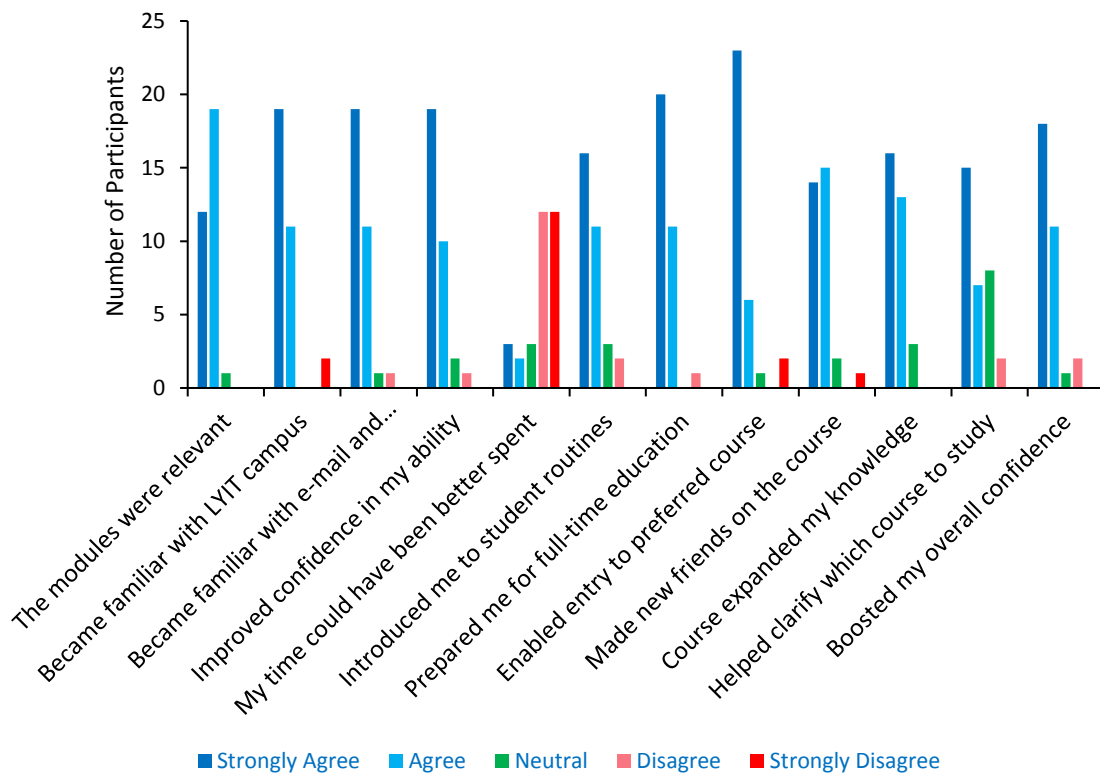
All eight departments spanning the three Schools - Business, Engineering and Science – were represented by research participants.



**Figure 3.16** Year that progressed participants completed their programme.

The majority of progressed participants completed their Access/Preparatory Studies programme in 2015, with only one participant having completed their programme in 2011. A possible explanation is that students from 2011 have since completed their courses and graduated.

**Q 10. Having completed the Access/Preparatory course, how strongly do you agree/disagree with the following statements?**



**Figure 3.17** Benefits/ drawbacks of Access/Preparatory programme completion.

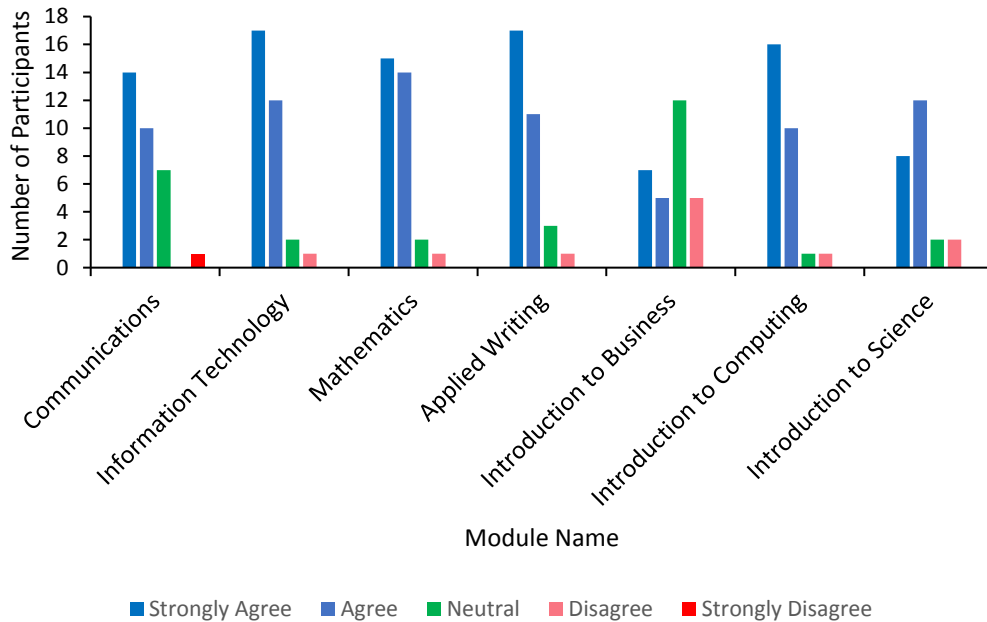
Twelve statements were provided regarding the Access/Preparatory Studies programmes. Overall, for most statements, the vast majority of the progressed participants selected either ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’ for each statement. The findings indicate that the participants gained many benefits from completion of the programmes, which is a very positive finding and corroborates results found by other researchers regarding mature students, namely Davies *et al.* (2002), Fleming (2010) and Hardiman (2012). The statement ‘It helped clarify which course I wanted to study’ received the most ‘Neutral’ responses, with eight participants selecting this response while two selected ‘Disagree’. However, the majority of participants, 22, selected either ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’ with the statement. A possible explanation for this is that a number of programme participants complete the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education programme solely to gain access to the quota courses in the School of Science and so they already know which programme they wish to complete. There were two statements related to confidence-building included in this question, as this particular benefit of programme completion was found to be most influential for mature students in the literature review. The

responses to 'Improved confidence in my ability' and 'Boosted my overall confidence', strongly confirm that the progressed participants agreed with both statements as 29 of the 32 participants selected either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree'.

For the negative statement 'My time could have been better spent', three participants selected 'Strongly Agree' and two selected 'Agree', this accounted for 15 per cent of the progressed participants. The vast majority, 24 participants, either selected 'Strongly Disagree' or 'Disagree' to the statement, and three participants chose a 'Neutral' response. This was an unexpectedly negative result and does seem at odds with the majority of the findings throughout this research, namely, that almost all participants enjoyed the programmes and found them beneficial for many reasons, and that all participants would recommend the programmes to others considering a return to education. Upon further analysis of the five questionnaires, it appeared that three of the five participants who had agreed with the statement had possibly not read the statements properly as they had selected the same 'Strongly Agree' response for all 12 statements in this question. Additionally, they had all added positive comments about the programme and selected responses to previous questions earlier in the questionnaire that contradicted their selected response to this question.

Unfortunately, this misreading is one of the drawbacks of using rating scales in questionnaires. Research suggests that people have different ways of filling out ratings scales (Austin *et al.* 1998). Some people are 'extreme responders' who like to use the edges of the scales (such as these three participants), while others like to embrace the midpoints and rarely use the most outer points. So, it is more probable that only two (six per cent) of progressed participants felt that their time could have been better spent. This was confirmed by examination of their questionnaires, as they had added comments and selected responses throughout that indicated their agreement that their time could have been better spent. It was expected that some participants would not feel that their Access/Preparatory Studies programme was overall beneficial to them, however both did recommend the programmes to others returning to education.

**Q 11. Having completed the Access/Preparatory course, how strongly do you agree/disagree with the following statements regarding the benefit of modules that you completed to your progression?**



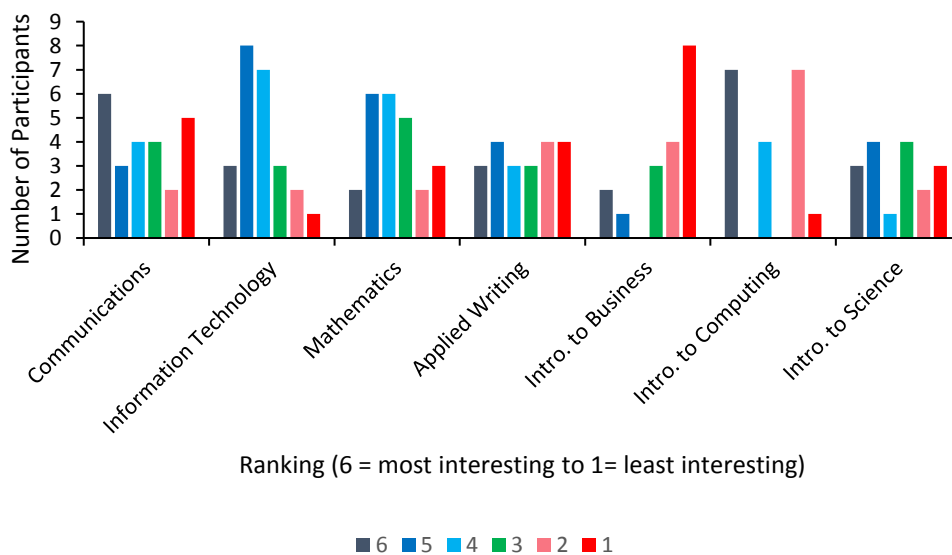
**Figure 3.18** Degree of module benefit to participant progression.

For both the Access/Preparatory Studies programmes, the first three modules (listed in Figure 3.18) are compulsory: Communications, Information Technology and Mathematics. In addition, for the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education programme, the Applied Writing module is also compulsory in the second semester, with students also choosing two electives from the available list for that year. No progressed participants completed either the Introduction to Arts, Design or Engineering modules that ran over some of the previous five years so there was no data collected for these modules. None of these three modules ran in the current 2015-2016 year due to lack of demand from the current students and limited resources.

The majority of participants reported that they found all the modules that they completed beneficial to their progression with the possible exception of the elective module ‘Introduction to Business’, which received more mixed results. Twenty nine participants completed this elective module, 12 of these participants selected either ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’ which indicated that it was beneficial to their progression, however, 12 reported a ‘Neutral’ result and

five selected ‘Disagree’ that it was beneficial to their progression. This is an interesting result and, upon further exploration of the questionnaires, it was found that three of the ‘Neutral’ responses were selected by participants currently completing courses within the School of Business. These three participants completed their Access/Preparatory Studies programmes in three different years. The five participants who disagreed that the module was beneficial were not currently studying courses in the Department of Business. Four participants currently completing Business courses all selected either ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’ which indicates that the module was beneficial to their progression.

**Q 12. Having completed the Access/Preparatory course, please rank the following modules that you have completed in order of those you found most to least interesting. (Access course- rank 3 modules only). Scale: 6 = most interesting to 1 = least interesting.**



**Figure 3.19** Degree of progressed participant’s interest in modules.

For this question, only twenty four participants completed the ranking scale correctly. Eight participants either misread the question or did not fully understand the question and assigned only the top two rankings to all their modules. Thus, it appears that there may have been an issue with the phrasing of the question that caused confusion among some of the participants (despite none of the ten pilot participants having identified such an issue). These eight responses were not included in the data analysis.

Most responses for this question were quite mixed. The Communications, Information Technology and Mathematics modules all received a majority of high rankings from the participants, confirming that these modules were interesting to the majority of participants. The Applied Writing module received an even split between high and low rankings for interest. Additionally, the elective Introduction to Science module received mixed responses, with eight of the 17 participants assigning one of the top three rankings and nine assigning the lowest three rankings. Of these, two are currently completing Science courses and both responded that the module was very beneficial to their progression in the previous question but was not that interesting in this question. Examination of the questionnaires revealed that the other participants currently completing Science courses did assign the top two highest rankings for this question. The elective Introduction to Computing module also received quite an even split between high and low interest, with eight of the 19 participants assigning the lowest two rankings and 11 assigning a higher ranking. Questionnaire examination revealed that, of these eight, only one participant was currently studying Computing and six current Computing course participants had assigned the top rank of six to the module.

It was found that 15 of the 18 participants who correctly completed the question, and who had chosen the elective Introduction to Business module assigned the lowest three ranking scores for interest to the module. Of these 15, four are current Business course participants which appears to be quite a perplexing result. A possible reason for the lower rankings in interest for both the Science and Business modules could be that these students had already completed their Leaving Certificate and studied Biology, Chemistry, Business Studies or Accountancy subjects. If so, then the module content would be very basic and less interesting for them than for those students who had not taken these subjects. However, the finding for Business taken together with the previous finding in question 11 suggests that some course participants did not find this module to be interesting and, more importantly, were neutral as to its benefit to their progression, a finding which does require further investigation.



## 4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

The research found that, overall, participants were of the opinion that both the Certificate in Access Studies and the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education at LYIT were beneficial in terms of, for example, confidence-building and preparedness for progression. Additionally, all reported that they would recommend the programmes to someone considering a return to education. These are very positive findings that should be used for future marketing of the programmes to prospective students.

The research did highlight a number of areas that require investigation in order to improve the teaching and learning and overall student experience, including: improved formative assessment and timely feedback is required, this form of assessment with timely feedback benefits learning, but does not contribute to an overall mark; more peer- learning is to be encouraged as peer learning helps to promote deep learning by increasing students' problem-solving and self-initiative abilities, leading to the development of essential work-related skills such as team work; reconsideration of module content (Introduction to Business); re-evaluation of the number of hours allocated to the delivery of modules (Information Technology); more choice of elective modules in semester two for the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education; and teaching staff should ensure that there is at least two breaks per three hour teaching session.

Regarding the advertisement, implementation and delivery of the two programmes, a number of recommendations are suggested: the reasons underlying some students' perception that progression is not always a possibility should be explored; data relating to all progressed programme students should be collected throughout their time in LYIT to obtain accurate progression and completion figures, as the collection and retention of such data would facilitate the survey of progressed students on a larger scale in the future and provide valuable information on the benefits of the two programmes to student progression at LYIT; the process of obtaining programme feedback from all students before their final exams should be reinstated; where they already exist, links with organisations and agencies involved in promoting and supporting adults returning to education (e.g. Donegal ETB) should be maintained and strengthened and, where none exist, such links should be forged; and the advertising and marketing of both programmes should be improved, with a particular focus on local media, and

a special emphasis placed on the fact that mature students represent 21 per cent of LYITs full-time new entrants and on the social aspect of college life for this cohort of students.

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## Appendix 1 – Access/Preparatory Studies Course Student Opinion Questionnaire

This questionnaire has been designed to help improve the course that you are currently taking/ have taken. This data is being collected anonymously to help encourage honesty in your responses. Most of the questions can be answered simply by ticking the relevant answer that you agree with, it should take approximately **5 minutes** to complete. Please remember- there are no right or wrong answers!

**Section 1: For all students to complete.**

**Section 2: Also for completion by students who have progressed only.**

### Section 1.

Age \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: Male  Female  Do you have children? Yes  No

Please choose which course you are taking/ have taken:

Access (Feb- May) \_\_\_\_\_ Preparatory (Sept- Apr) \_\_\_\_\_

1. At what age did you leave school? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Please select the highest educational level you had completed when commencing the Access/ Preparatory Studies course.

- The Group Certificate   
The Junior (Intermediate) Certificate   
The Leaving Certificate   
The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme   
The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme   
None of the above   
Other (please give details) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Why did you choose to complete the Access/ Preparatory Studies course?  
Please select all reasons that apply to you.

- A desire for learning   
To make better use of my time   
To progress to undergraduate course   
To improve career prospects   
Want to be a better role model to children   
To get a qualification   
To advance existing qualifications   
Because family/ friend also doing the course   
To increase chance of getting preferred course   
To alter the direction of your life   
Had always wanted to but could not   
For social welfare reasons

Other (please give details)  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Why did you choose to return to LYIT specifically?  
Please select all reasons that apply to you.

- LYIT's location
  - Friends' recommendation
  - Relatives' recommendation
  - Relative lives near LYIT
  - College reputation
  - LYIT prospectus
  - Course leaflet
  - LYIT website
  - Careers fair
  - Choice of courses at LYIT
  - Other (please give details)
- 

5. Regarding teaching and learning on the course; please indicate your opinion of the following.

	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	agree			disagree
Teaching methods are effective for your learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lecturers are approachable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A variety of teaching methods are used	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lecturers are knowledgeable of their subject	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback on your progress is provided	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feedback is timely after assignments/ CA's	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student interaction is encouraged in class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The aims of each module are being met	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The course content is too complex	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not enough time is allocated to modules	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning from other students is encouraged	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. Regarding continuous assessments (CAs); please indicate your opinion of the following.

	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
There are too many CAs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The CAs are too difficult	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I prefer CA only modules	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. What do you consider to be the most enjoyable aspects of the course? Please indicate your opinion.

	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Gaining new information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pleasant class atmosphere	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social aspect of the class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Approachable staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning from other students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Flexibility of the classes/ modules	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The part-time nature of the course	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

8. What do you consider to be the least enjoyable aspects of the course? Please indicate your opinion.

	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Assignments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Travel to and from college	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of money	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unpleasant class atmosphere	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Juggling other commitments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Final exams	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lack of social element in class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Workload	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. Would you recommend this course to people considering a return to education? Yes  No

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.**

Please add any comments/ suggestions that you may have in relation to the course.

**Section 2- For completion by students who have progressed only.**

Please state the name of your current course \_\_\_\_\_

Please state which year you completed the Access/ Preparatory course \_\_\_\_\_

10. Having completed the Access/Preparatory course, how strongly do you agree/ disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly
	agree			disagree
I found the modules to be relevant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I became familiar with the college campus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I became familiar with email and Blackboard	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The course improved my confidence in my ability	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My time could have been better spent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It introduced me to student routines	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The course prepared me for full-time education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It enabled entry to my preferred course	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I made new friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The course expanded my knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It helped clarify which course I wanted to study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The course boosted my overall confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

11. Having completed the Access/Preparatory course, how strongly do you agree/ disagree with the following statements regarding the benefit of modules that you completed to your progression?

	Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	agree			disagree
I found Communications most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found Information Technology most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found Mathematics most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found Academic Writing most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found Introduction to Business most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found Introduction to Computing most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found Introduction to Science most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found Introduction to Arts most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found Introduction to Design most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I found Introduction to Engineering most useful	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

12. Having completed the Access/Preparatory course, please rank the following modules that you have completed in order of those you found most to least interesting. (Access course- rank the 3 modules only).

Scale: 6 = most interesting to 1 = least

interesting.

Communications	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information Technology	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mathematics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Academic Writing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Introduction to Business	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Introduction to Computing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Introduction to Science	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Introduction to Arts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Introduction to Design	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Introduction to Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Thank you for completing both sections of this questionnaire.**

## **Appendix 2- Participant Information Sheet**

**Title:** Access/Preparatory Studies Courses: Experiences and Opinions of Students at LYIT.

**Name of Researcher:** Julia Wilson.

### **Introduction and aims:**

There is little known about the experiences of adult students who undertake Access/ Preparatory studies courses in Ireland and more specifically in LYIT. This is an exploratory study which attempts to address this lack of information and give a voice to these students. Possible benefits of the research findings include improvement of the Access/ Preparatory courses currently available at LYIT where feasible – in terms of content, delivery, timetabling, teaching methods and other factors impacting student experience. Participation in the research study will provide valuable information regarding the students' experience of completion of an Access/ Preparatory course in LYIT.

The objectives of this research are:

- (a) to determine student opinions regarding the teaching and learning on the Access/ Preparatory Certificate courses at LYIT.
- (b) to ascertain whether students who undertake either course believe that it has benefitted them in terms of, for example, confidence-building, preparedness for further academic study and such like.
- (c) to establish the various considerations that are relevant to students in deciding to undertake such a course and why they chose LYIT;
- (d) to discover students' opinions regarding continuous assessment and other aspects of the courses;
- (e) to determine whether students found course modules interesting and, more importantly, beneficial to their progression to undergraduate level.

### **Procedures**

The researcher will meet with all of you who are currently completing both the Access Studies Certificate and Preparatory Studies for Higher Education courses to explain the purpose of the research, provide information about consent and give you this information sheet. The researcher will depart and another member of LYIT staff (who is not a lecturer/tutor in the Access Dept) will distribute a Consent Form and Questionnaire to those of you who are willing

to participate in the research. The Information Sheet will be retained by you, the consent form must be signed and returned to the staff member, you will then be given the short questionnaire for completion. You are required to complete and submit the questionnaire at any time before the stipulated deadline of **Wednesday 27th of April**, completion of the questionnaire should take approximately 5 minutes. A box will be provided for the completed questionnaires if you choose to complete it at this time. Otherwise please refer to information below regarding return of questionnaires.

For students who previously completed an Access/Preparatory course and subsequently progressed at LYIT, your relevant Head of School/ Department, will forward an Information Sheet, Consent Form, and questionnaire to you on behalf of the researcher.

You should place their completed questionnaire and separately the signed consent form in the secure postbox of the researcher's supervisor Sharon Mc Laughlin. This postbox is located outside the Business Department on the ground floor of the LYIT Letterkenny campus. Please remember **not to attach** the consent form to the questionnaire as they must be anonymous.

### **Exclusion from the project**

The researcher has the right to remove any partially completed questionnaires.

### **Confidentiality and data protection**

Your identity will remain confidential, complete anonymity is guaranteed as names are not requested and completed questionnaires shall not be returned directly to the researcher. All data will be collected, processed, and stored in compliance with relevant data protection legislation and in compliance with LYIT's Guidelines for Electronic Data Storage.

### **Voluntary Participation**

You have volunteered to participate in this research project and signed a consent form. If you wish to withdraw from the project this may be achieved by not submitting your completed questionnaire. There will be no penalty encountered if you do not choose to participate or withdraw from the project.

### **Discontinuation of the study**

You understand that the researcher may discontinue the project at any time without your permission.

**Permission**

This project has Research Ethics Approval from LYIT.

**Further Information**

You may find more information about the research project or answers to any questions or queries you may have by emailing [Julia.wilson@lyit.ie](mailto:Julia.wilson@lyit.ie).



### Appendix 3 - Participant Consent Form

Title: Access/Preparatory Studies Courses: Experiences and Opinions of Students at LYIT.

Name of Researcher: Julia Wilson.

Declaration: I \_\_\_\_\_, acknowledge that:

- I have been informed of and understand the purposes of the study
- I have been given an opportunity to ask questions
- I understand I can withdraw up to the point of return of my completed questionnaire
- I understand there will be no penalty encountered if I do withdraw from the study
- I understand that my participation is voluntary
- I consent to the publication of results
- I understand that my personal information will not be identified in this study and all data will be collected, processed, and stored securely
- I agree to participate in the study as outlined to me

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 4 - Information Sheet- Heads of School/Department**

**Title:** Access/Preparatory Studies Courses: Experiences and Opinions of Students at LYIT.

### **Who Am I?**

My name is Julia Wilson, I am a student undertaking the MA in Learning and Teaching programme at LYIT. I am also an assistant lecturer/ learning support tutor in the Curve at Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

### **What is the Research About?**

The objectives of this research are: (a) to determine student opinions regarding the teaching and learning on the Access/ Preparatory Certificate courses at LYIT.

(b) to ascertain whether students who undertake either course believe that it has benefitted them in terms of, for example, confidence-building, preparedness for further academic study and such like.

(c) to establish the various considerations that are relevant to students in deciding to undertake such a course and why they chose LYIT;

(d) to discover students' opinions regarding continuous assessment and other aspects of the courses;

(e) to determine whether students found course modules interesting and, more importantly, beneficial to their progression to undergraduate level.

This information will then be analysed and, where feasible, will be used to inform the review of the courses in the upcoming Periodic Programmatic Evaluation (PPE). It is hoped that this study will provide important information for educators and policy makers regarding the planning for, implementation and maintenance of adult access/ preparatory studies courses in third level institutions in Ireland and beyond.

### **Why Am I Doing the Research?**

There is little known about the experiences of adult students who undertake Access / Preparatory studies courses in Ireland and more specifically in LYIT. This is an exploratory project which aims to address the lack of information in this area. Possible benefits of the research findings include enhancement of the Access/ Preparatory Certificate courses currently available at LYIT where feasible – in terms of content, delivery, timetabling, teaching methods and other factors impacting student experience.

### **How Will I Do the Research?**

I will set aside a date and time to meet with each of the five groups of proposed research subjects who are currently completing both types of course. I will explain the purpose of the research, provide information relevant to consent and distribute an information sheet to the students. Once this information has been provided, I will depart and another member of LYIT staff (who is not a lecturer/tutor in the Access Dept) will distribute a Consent Form and Questionnaire to those students who indicate that they are willing to participate in the research. The Information Sheet will be retained by the participant, the consent form will be signed and returned to the staff member, and the questionnaire will be disseminated to the student participants for completion. Student participants are not required to complete the questionnaire immediately upon receipt but rather to complete and submit the questionnaire at any time before the stipulated deadline.

In relation to those students who previously completed an Access/Preparatory studies course and subsequently progressed to study on other programmes at LYIT, I will enlist the assistance of the various Heads of School/ Department in making contact with this cohort of students. A letter will be emailed to the Heads of School/ Department explaining the purpose and scope of the research and requesting permission to survey the relevant students within their Departments/ School. The relevant Head of School/ Department, if agreeable, will then forward an Information Sheet, Consent Form, and questionnaire to the relevant students on behalf of the researcher.

Students participating in the research will be instructed to place their completed questionnaire and separately their signed consent form in the (locked) postbox of the researcher's supervisor.

### **Rights**

Permission for students to be involved in this research will be sought from the Heads of School/ Department and the students themselves. There will be no penalty encountered if either the student or Heads of School/ Department withdraw from the study. Students may withdraw from the study up to the point of return of their completed questionnaire. Heads of School/ Department may withdraw their consent up to the point of data analysis (late April 2016).

The data generated by this study will be used in my dissertation for a Masters of Art in Learning and Teaching, and may also be used in academic papers, journal articles and in future research

studies. The information gathered will **not** be used in a way that any student, School or Department could be identified. Students' names will not be requested so therefore cannot be used in the dissertation, reports, articles or presentations emerging from this research. If you would like to obtain more information about the study then please contact me via the details given below.

All material /data collected, will be kept securely on the researcher's laptop. All collected data will be stored in the School of Business, LYIT for five years after the completion of the research then it will be destroyed securely.

### **Further Details**

For more information please contact me at: Tel. 086 1766524, E-mail: [Julia.wilson@lyit.ie](mailto:Julia.wilson@lyit.ie).

## Appendix 5 - Consent Form Heads of School/Heads of Department

### Letterkenny Institute of Technology

#### Consent Form

Title: Access/Preparatory Studies Courses: Experiences and Opinions of Students at LYIT.

This study aims to discover the experiences and opinions of adult students who are currently completing/ have previously completed both the Certificate in Preparatory Studies for Higher Education and the Certificate in Access Studies in LYIT.

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary and students' involvement will only be allowed with your agreement. Student consent will also be required. Only adult students aged 18 or over will be allowed to take part.

Non-participation in the study will have no adverse impact on any of your future contact with myself, the School of Business or staff involved in the MALT programme at LYIT.

#### **Please tick:**

I have read the information sheet which explains the research study [  ]

I understand that all the information that students give will be kept strictly confidential and that students' name(s) will not be asked for, nor included in any reports [  ]

I understand that participation of students within my department is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent up to the point of data analysis (May 2016) [  ]

I understand that this research will be published as a dissertation and possibly in academic journals. The research may also be presented at conferences and seminars [  ]

#### **Please sign below.**

**School/Department name (in CAPITALS):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Your name (in CAPITALS):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Head of School/ Department:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please return this form to Julia Wilson c/o the Curve, by 30 March 2016. Thank you.**

## **Appendix 6 - List of Abbreviations**

Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)

Central Applications Office (CAO)

Central Statistics Office (CSO)

Continuous Assessment (CA)

Department of Education and Skills (DES)

Education and Training Board (ETB)

European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)

Further Education (FE)

Heads of Department (HoD)

Heads of School (HoS)

Higher Education (HE)

Higher Education Authority (HEA)

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Institutes of Technology (IoT)

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT)

National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

National Union of Students (NUS)

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Personally Identifying Information (PII)

Periodic Programmatic Evaluation (PPE)

Recognised Prior Learning (RPL)

Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI)

University and College Admissions Service (UCAS)

University of Ulster (UU)