Executive Summary

The topic of stress and its management is one which is both complex and subjective. Many different definitions exist and the topic is generally open to person interpretation. One group which is highly susceptible to experiencing high levels of harmful stress is the third level student population. The researcher has been a student of Athlone Institute of Technology for the past five years and thus decided to base this research on student services department in the institute.

Following extensive examination of past research, the author has concluded that students as a whole have been neglected in relation to stress research. The author aims to close this gap by assessing the level and type of stress experienced by the students of Athlone Institute of Technology. Furthermore, the author is keen to gain an insight into the type of coping strategies exercised by students.

Primary research in the form of a semi-structured interview and on-line questionnaire will be carried out in order to gain this data from all full-time registered students of Athlone Institute of Technology. The author was mindful of the respondents at all times and remained ethical during the complete process.

The data collected using the above methods led to the unearthing of a range of interesting findings. The main point of the discussion chapter is to expose the author’s key findings. Overall, the researcher found that stress was prominent in Athlone Institute of Technology with a total of fifty-two per cent of students rating themselves in the ‘Stressed’ and ‘Extremely
Stressed’ categories. In addition, it became evident that students of Athlone Institute of Technology who are under stress predominately practice positive coping mechanisms with the most common method of coping reported as ‘Taking Time-Out to Think’. This reflects positively on the student services department of Athlone Institute of Technology. Research revealed that although a broad range of exceptional policies and procedures are available to students, more work is needed in the area of advertising and promoting the service. Overall, it appears the counselling service is providing a remarkable service to its student users considering it is vastly under-resourced. A number of interesting conclusions have been drawn from the research and expanded upon in detail.

In conclusion, the author wishes firstly, acknowledge the work of the student services department in Athlone Institute of Technology. Without this service, statistics returned would be considerably bleaker. If asked to make a suggestion regarding the management of student stress, the author feels more non-clinical work would benefit the student body as a whole. Further acknowledgement is due to the students of Athlone Institute of Technology who juggle many daily dilemmas and stressful situations yet continue to live their lives as normal in the best possible way. The author was truly inspired by the perception of life they revealed through their responses.

To close, the author has identified interest aspects of the topic and related issues which requires further exploration in the future and provided a reflection of the process.
Chapter One

Introduction

“Stress should be a powerful driving force, not an obstacle” (Bill Philips)

1.1: Introduction

This introductory chapter has been compiled in order to provide a preface to the research and to set the scene for the reader. It will provide a background to the research and outline the research aims and objectives and the rationale for undertaking this research. Furthermore this section of the dissertation will provide the reader with an understanding of the data collection location. Finally, this chapter will outline a roadmap to the completion of the research project.

1.2: Background

Dr Hans Selye is known as the ‘father of the stress field’ and the most influential researcher with regard to the effects of stress on the human body. In 1936, he devised the word stress by defining it as the “non-specific response of the body to any demand for change” (Selye, 1976). An alternative definition for stress is “the reaction of our stress system to an internal or external stressor” (Barry, 2010). A stressor refers to the situation or factor(s) which causes an individual to experience stress.

Stress is now a very normal and accepted part of life and all individuals at some stage will experience stress. Stress affects different individuals in different ways which results in a difficulty when diagnosing stress and stress related illnesses. Stress can have both positive and negative effects.
on an individual’s life, for example stress can cause an individual to work harder to achieve a desired result but if stress is prolonged or is not managed it leads to the individual suffering negative effects. Stress is now one of the greatest threats to both our physical and mental health. Stress can lead to numerous negative health complications such as headaches, the onset of heart conditions, increased blood pressure, infertility, diabetes, fatigue, nausea, and digestion and stomach problems. In addition to the aforementioned health complications, high levels of stress if not adequately treated and monitored can result in the onset of mental illnesses such as depression, panic attacks and various phobias. Therefore stress needs to be carefully managed in order to reduce or inhibit the level of negative side effects an individual experiences from stress.

In recent years, stress has become more prevalent in society. The effect stress is having on individuals has become more extreme and harmful to the overall health of the individual. Factors which the researcher believes are contributing to this include the current economic recession, an increased lifestyle pace and factors such as low self-esteem. Employers are now seeing a major increase in the number of cases of stress related illnesses among their employees. This is negatively affecting the financial prosperity of the organisation due to the reduction in productivity and increased absenteeism.

Unfortunately this situation is no different within the third level education providers in Ireland. This research project is based on the student population of Athlone Institute of Technology. A student has been defined in the Oxford dictionary as “a person who is studying at a university or
other place of higher education” (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). The author aims to conduct further research into the causes and level of stress suffered by third level students in Athlone Institute of Technology. Additionally, the author plans to explore the coping strategies used by students and the preventative measures which could be employed to enhance the students quality of life and student experience. In addition to the stressors listed above, there are many auxiliary factors which result in third level students suffering excess levels of stress. These include exam pressure, problems with classmates, housemates and lecturers, financial pressures due to the recent adjustments made to student grant entitlements, unrealistic expectations of student live and poor time management.

1.3: Rationale for Undertaking this Research

The author chose to complete this research based on a wide variety of reasons. Firstly, due to both the increase in the level of mental health problems in our youth population and the current economic climate, the author felt there was a need for additional research in this area as it is both a complex and a topical subject at present. Rates of student and graduate mental illness are at an all-time high now with one in five 15-25 year olds suffering developmental, behavioural or emotional problems (Headstrong, 2012). It was this statistic which intrigued the author to conduct further research into the area. The author is curious as to why there is a dramatically increasing level of students who are dropping out of college, being diagnosed with psychiatric problems and a number who tragically commit suicide due to high stress levels and mental health difficulties.
Furthermore, the author observed that while previous research has been carried out on stress management in general, the effect of stress on employees and among specific occupations, such as medical professionals, there has been less emphasis placed on the effects of stress on students in Irish third level institutions and the coping strategies used to deal with the level of stress they experience.

In addition, the researcher has personally experienced high levels of academic stress while in college and has had to become aware of the condition, make lifestyle adjustments and implement various techniques in order to deal with this stress during the different stages of education. With this in mind, the author viewed the research topic in question as an area which was easy to relate to and worthwhile investigating.

The author also senses that insufficient measures are currently being taken to manage and prevent stress among students. The researcher anticipates a widespread level of interest in this research and expects a high level of response by participants. In addition, the author feels that the results of this research will be very beneficial to Athlone Institute of Technology in order to identify the main stressors affecting students and to ensure that policies and procedures are modified in order to detect, reduce and assist the number of students in need of support due to high levels of stress. Having an awareness of the causes of stress could help educational bodies to reduce the level of students who are unsuccessful in their examinations due to stress, develop health problems and or dropout of their course. It is a common occurrence that students do not realise the services, such as counselling and tutoring which are available to those struggling with
college life. The researcher also expects to discover a difference in the causes of stress for final year students when compared to students in the first year of their course. In first year, it is expected that stressors would be caused by the changes that starting third level education brings whereas for final year students, their main cause of stress may be caused by the lack of jobs available in their field or the pressure of maintaining their grades in examinations.

The author firmly believes that conducting this research will be advantageous when seeking employment. The author feels that an interest and knowledge into stress management will help when gaining managerial positions within an organisation as stress is unavoidable and must be managed sufficiently at both a personal and professional level.

The data required to satisfy the objectives of this research will be collected in Athlone Institute of Technology. The researcher plans to survey the student population by sending a questionnaire out through the student e-mail system. In addition, an interview with the college counsellor will be conducted in order to gain their perspective on the issue.

Athlone Institute of Technology (A.I.T) is the only higher education institute in the Midlands of Ireland. The institute was established in the early 1970’s and was previously known as the Regional Technical College. In recent years A.I.T has expanded in size, scope and influence. At present there are five thousand, seven hundred full and part time students in Athlone Institution of Technology studying under four main disciplines (Athlone Institute of Technology, 2012). These disciplines are Business,
Engineering, Humanities and Science. A wide range of courses are available at both undergraduate and postgraduate level and in recent years a number of new courses have been introduced. There is a strong research tradition evident in the college and the institute has developed strong links with educational, commercial, industrial and service organisations in the vicinity. A.I.T has also gained a reputation for engaging with non-traditional learners. One fifth of students in A.I.T are classified as mature students (over the age of twenty-three). Furthermore, the institute has been recognised for its facilities for students with disabilities. Within its population, there are fifty-three nationalities represented (Athlone Institute of Technology, 2012). Athlone Institute of Technology provides many supports to students who require assistance. These include the provision of an on-site doctor and nurse, career guidance personnel and a counselling service.

1.4: Research Aim and Objectives

The main research aim of this study is to examine the extent of student stress in Athlone Institute of Technology and identify the stressors experienced by students. The researcher also aims to identify the different coping strategies available to and used by students in A.I.T. In order to eliminate or reduce levels of toxic stress, it is important that an individual attempts to face the problem head-on by seeking support. Methods of coping such as avoidance should be addressed at an early stage as this will result in greater difficulties for the individual in the future.

Research Objectives related to this study are as follows:
a) To critically analyse the existing literature relating to stress and its causes and effects and to formally identify the types of stress evident among students in Athlone Institute of Technology.

b) To examine the policies and procedures in existence in Athlone Institute of Technology for dealing with and or preventing stress in students.

c) To explore the current level of stress experienced by students in Athlone Institute of Technology.

d) To identify the various coping strategies used by students of Athlone Institute of Technology.

1.5: Project Structure

This dissertation is organised into six chapters. The following gives a brief outline of the content of each chapter; this is designed to provide the reader with an overview of the structure of this dissertation.

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter defines the nature of the research and provides a clear background in order to set the context of the study. The research aim and objectives are identified and the author outlines the motivation behind choosing this topic. Moreover, this chapter gives a brief, concise introduction to the following chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The second chapter provides an evaluation of the literature which currently exists in relation to distress, stress, and stress management. It examines
both preceding and modern ideas which have emerged over the years. This chapter also includes the research that has been conducted in Irish third level institutions to date and the limited material available on students coping strategies. The main objective of this chapter is to provide context for the research and demonstrate the authors knowledge on the topic derived from secondary research.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

The purpose of the “Research Methodology” chapter is to outline and explain the research methods that were adopted in order to obtain the primary research for this dissertation. It also highlights the various techniques which the author could have chosen when conducting this research. The ethical considerations relating to the project and the limitations which exist have are also identified in this chapter.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Findings

The “Analysis of Findings” chapter presents the findings which were discovered through conducting primary research. The author conducted a semi-structured interview with a member of the institutes counselling staff and also collected data by using a questionnaire among the student population.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This fifth chapter will discuss the findings from chapter four whilst making a link between these findings and the research objectives outlined in the introduction chapter.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

This final chapter will present the findings after conducting this research, and will state whether the author believes the outlines aim and objectives have been satisfied. Possible future research projects which conducting this research identified will also be outlined. This chapter will conclude with a personal reflection of the research process and identify any changes the author would make if the research project was to be repeated.

1.6: Conclusion

The objective of this first chapter was to provide the reader with the research aim and objectives relating to the research and to set the scene for the research by outlining the rationale and background to the subject of stress management which is under investigation. The author hopes that the dissertation will sufficiently answer the research question outlined while also addressing the four research objectives.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

“Stress is something that we are not always conscious of; it can exist on a cellular level and hide, masked by our ingrained sensitivity” (Garripoli)

2.1 Introduction

The underlying principle of the following chapter is to conduct a critical review of the existing research and literature on the subject of stress and the coping mechanisms used to deal with stress. There has been a multitude of empirical research carried out on the general area of stress management to date but the approach the researcher has decided to investigate has received less exploration. The author discovered that students were not seen as a priority in the field of stress research. The author also noticed there was a lack of empirical research examining strategies used to reduce the level of stress experienced by students.

A literature review is a critical, in-depth evaluation of research already undertaken on a specific topic. It enables a researcher to demonstrate their ability to identify relevant work and outline existing knowledge. A literature review should identify gaps in the market for future study and allow the researcher to establish more detailed and defined objectives for their own research (University College Dublin, 2011).
2.2 What is Stress?

The term stress originated in the science of engineering and refers to “a line of force on a structure that is in a different direction or at a different degree from that of which it was designed” (Cantopher, 2007). To date, the majority of research into stress has predominately been from the areas of sociology, management, medicine and psychology. These four disciplines are poles apart in terms of comparison and can result in a difficulty when developing a coherent theory.

Stress is present in all walks of life yet it is a term which is both poorly understood and complex to analyse. Stress is something which all people experience at some stage but find it difficult to define. There are numerous definitions in existence in relation to stress. Justification for the many definitions relate to the individual’s perception of stressful situations, an event which one person finds very stressful may only be deemed mildly stressful through the eyes of another. Therefore different people experience various effects from stress and identify with separate definitions. In addition, the way in which stress has been defined over the years has evolved.

Originally, it was thought that stress results from extreme levels of pressure. When the external stimulus is deemed too great, the collapse of the internal stimulus becomes inevitable. This has been defined as the “stimulus-based definition” and encapsulates the cumulative nature to a satisfactory level. (Butler, 1993)
The response-based definition focuses on stress as a response to aversive stimuli (Butler, 1993). This is the type of stress which Selye investigated. Selye (1956) referred to this as G.A.S or General Adaptation Syndrome. This physiological response involves three stages. These stages are known as the alarm stage, the resistance stage and the exhaustion stage. Selye’s way of thinking has added great value to the area of stress management and led to stress being viewed as a dynamic process where both the perceived demand and the perceived resources of the individual relate to the level of stress experienced by the individual. It is now thought that cognitive factors such as attitudes, perception and beliefs can affect an individual’s psychological wellbeing.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines stress as “any environmental or physical pressure that elicits a response from an organism”. Stress is required in order for survival as it forces an organism to adapt to the ever-changing environmental conditions. In humans, stress is an especially complex phenomenon which is further complicated by the fast pace of modern lifestyles.

In humans, acute stress is characterised by immediate dangers which activate the fight or flight response. This response is well-documented and refers to a physiological reaction in relation to stress, evident by an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, increase in blood glucose levels and the production of adrenaline which in-turn prepares the body to respond to the perceived challenge (Farlex, 2013). Walter Cannon was the first to openly discuss this fight or flight response and defined it as “a series of biochemical changes that prepare you to deal with a perceived threat or
“danger” (Davis, et al., 2008). This instinctive response floods the body with adrenaline and cortisol, which increases heart rate, redirects blood flow to the muscular system, increases the breathing rate, tenses muscles and causes our blood to clot quicker than normal. Furthermore excess body fat is released into the blood system of the individual which gives additional energy as required (The Heart Foundation, 2011). These characteristics exist with the intention of helping an individual to avoid or escape from a threat.

In 1956, Hans Selye introduced the theory of stress. His core focus was on areas such as physiology and the medical sciences. (Selye, 1956) A decade later, Lazarus extended the area of stress research to include the cognitive domain. (Lazarus, 1966) (Choi, et al., 2011). One of Lazarus’s main conclusions is that many factors do not lead to significant levels of stress unless the individual perceives them as a stressor.

The term stressor was first defined by Selye as “an agent that produces stress at any time” (Selye, 1976). In concurrence, Barry (2010) simply states that a stressor is anything that causes an individual to experience stress. Stressors are referred to as psychological or physical elements that lead to the production of either positive or negative stress (AlleyDog, 2013). Stressors vary depending on the situation on hand but examples of typical stressors include promotion at work, family problems, change in career, impending examinations, relationship problems or a change in financial status.
Stress is generally viewed negatively in life but stress is a necessary and unavoidable aspect of life. A certain level of manageable stress is required in order for human beings to function and without this the human race would be “listless and apathetic creatures” (Ahmed, et al., 2013). Stress is constantly present in our lives and should not be avoided. Instead the individual should decide how the stress they are experiencing can best be used to their advantage. Stress is only deemed a problem when the stressor exists for a prolonged period of time and the source of stress starts to interfere with the daily routine of the individual.

2.3: Types of Stress

There are two main types of stress as defined by Selye. These are Eustress and Distress.

*Eustress:* is a ‘positive type of stress’ which keeps an individual focused and motivated to achieve a goal and respond effectively in an emergency. Eustress is often responsible for giving an individual a sense of fulfilment. It is also believed that a small amount of manageable stress is beneficial to our memory capacity and motivation levels. Harris, (1970) conceived that eustress can also refer to an individual’s perception of a stressful situation or stressor by viewing it positively. Harris believed a person’s perception of stress determined whether they experienced eustress or distress (Le Fevre, et al., 2003). In addition, (Barry, 2010) agrees that perception is a very important factor which must not be ignored. Examples of times in which eustress would be experienced include when an individual wins a marathon or successfully completes the driving test.
Distress: In contrast, distress is the negative form of stress which is more prominent in the public domain. It is this form of stress with which the author is most concerned, with regard to the student population of Athlone Institute of Technology.

One of the main problems in relation to stress is the fact that it accumulates over time if the main stressor is not identified and addressed. Prolonged distress is dangerous to the human body and has a wide range of effects which become evident to the body in both physical and mental capacity. Stress is evident at the beginning in mild symptoms such as a headache or nausea but if the stress continues more serious effects will appear. In the opinion of the author, stress is a condition which needs to be addressed and diagnosed promptly as it leads to very serious health complications which in the majority of cases can never be reversed. The author also feels that the stigma regarding stress and stress-related illnesses needs attention as it is having an influence on the level of people who seek professional help regarding the issue (Robotham & Julian, 2006).

2.4 How the Human Body Responds to Stress?

When an individual is experiencing negative stress for a long period of time, their body undergoes numerous physiological adaptations which cause changes in the heart rate, muscular system and hormone levels (The Heart Foundation, 2011). These systems are all put under increasing pressure. When in danger, the hypothalamus in the brain sends signals to the adrenal glands located on top of the kidneys. The adrenal glands then respond by
producing cortisol which increases heart rate, blood sugar and blood pressure.

If this pressure is temporary, our bodies remain unharmed but if a high level of this stress occurs in our body for a prolonged period of time, our organs are put under pressure and signs and symptoms of stress become evident.

2.5 Signs, Symptoms and Effects of Stress

Stress stems from four major sources (Davis, et al., 2008). Namely these are

1) **Our Environment:** The environment around us presents us with large amounts of stressors. Examples of such stress include weather conditions, a crying baby or heavy volumes of traffic.

2) **Physiological Sources:** Factors such as getting older, moving house, getting married as well as a change in lifestyle and perceived social threats can all affect the level of stress an individual experiences.

3) **Our Thoughts:** How an individual labels and interprets a situation directly links to the amount and type of stress an individual must endure. This results in every human being experiencing a unique response to stress.

4) **Our Coping Ability:** Similarly to how we perceive a situation, each person has a unique way of coping with negative experiences. Some choose to work through the problem while others are unable to deal with the situation and choose avoidance as a coping mechanism.
As previously stated, each individual experiences and deals with stress in a different way. This has led to the development of many different signs and symptoms to be vigilant for. The symptoms of stress are divided into the categories of physical and mental.

The following lists are by no mean exhaustive but contain the most common signs and symptoms of stress. The following was obtained from the following sources; Barry (2009), Barry (2010), Cantopher (2007), Davis et al (2008) and The Heart Foundation (2011).

**Physical Symptoms of Stress**

High levels of stress in the human body can have the following physical effects;

- Increase risk of heart disease
- Increased risk of stroke
- Increased blood sugar levels and therefore a greater risk of being diagnosed with diabetes
- Eradicate the level of white blood cells in the body which leaves an individual more susceptible to bacterial and viral infections.
- Increases an individual’s chance of developing cancer
- Increases risk of being diagnosed with osteoporosis
- Reduces an individual’s pain threshold
- Unhealthy levels of weight gain or weight loss
- Decreased libido in females and decrease levels of fertility in males
- Insomnia and Fatigue
• Deterioration in an individual’s eyesight
• Induces migraines and headaches
• Premature Aging
• In extreme cases, seizures may result
• Reduced lung function, which may lead asthma particularly in children
• Stress triggers Alopecia and the premature greying of hair follicles

Mental Symptoms of Stress

Prolonged stress can lead to an individual experience the following changes in their mental health and wellbeing.

• The onset of depression
• Mental Fatigue/Lethargy
• Increased level of anxiety
• Mood swings
• Increases the likelihood of suicidal thoughts
• Greater risk of the individual committing suicide
• Failed attempted suicides
• Behavioural Problems (common in children and adolescents)
• Problems managing anger/aggression
• Dependence on alcohol or illegal substances
• Personality Changes
• Unexplained change in personal habits (such as impatience)

Other Signs an individual may be experiencing stress
There are some key signs which have been linked to stress. These include:

- Commencing smoking or an increase in an individual’s level of smoking
- Over/Under exercising
- Common for people to lose interest in their hobbies and pastimes
- Level of drinking increases
- Loss of appetite
- Sleeping for longer periods of time compared to usually
- Inability to sleep
- Racing thoughts
- Dramatic weight gain or weight loss in a short period of time
- Sudden difficulty expressing their emotions to others

2.6 Stress and Mental Illnesses

Mental Health is defined as “a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her society”. (World Health Organisation, 2007)

Mental Illness can be defined as “the experiencing of severe and distressing psychological systems to the extent that normal functioning is impaired” (Mental Health Ireland, 2013). Unfortunately a stigma still remains surrounding mental illness in Ireland.

Mental Illnesses exist on a spectrum of severity. Conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar exist on the severe end whereas nervousness,
tension and mild social dysfunction are considered to be less serious and easier treated once diagnosed. In addition to the above conditions, stress is also considered a mental illness. Once an individual acknowledges the presence of distress, strategies can be implemented to keep its effects on their daily lives to a minimum.

If excessive levels of stress continue for a long period of time, the risk of the development of depression increases (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). Research suggested that high levels of stress have led to a significant rise in the level of depression evident in adolescents (Laney, et al., 2012). When an individual experiences stress in their developing years, there is a higher probability that they will continue to experience other mental health complications as they get older. In order to assist and control the level of future health complications, it is important that the adolescent population receive assistance in the area of health promotion and awareness of mental health complications. Barry (2010) is in agreement with this and feels that more resources should be allocated in order to prevent a mental health epidemic. He states “The development years of 15-25 is a time of increased stress and anxiety. An exposure to negative stressors for a long duration will lead to an increased risk of the development of mental illnesses with an increased level of severity”.

2.7 Coping Mechanisms of Stress

Any factor which causes stress endangers life unless adequate adaptive or coping mechanisms are introduced. Coping strategies are defined as the
strategies that individuals use to internally or externally manage a stressor (Laney, et al., 2012).

Coping was first defined by Folkman and Lazarus as “the cognitive and behavioural efforts someone makes to manage, master, reduce or tolerate a troubled person-environment relationship” (Butler, 1993). Lazarus identifies two broad categories of coping; these are problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. The dissimilarity between these two categories is an important.

Problem-focused coping refers to an attitude to coping where the individual will focus on changing, reducing or eliminating the stressor. It is aimed at finding a solution to the problem in order to alter the source of stress.

In contrast, emotion-focused coping involves the individual dealing with their unique internal emotions and feelings such as fear, anger, frustration and trepidation and regulating these distressing emotions. Emotion-focused coping mostly prevails where the individual feels that the stressor is something which must be endured (Carver, et al., 1989).

It is important to make a distinction between the two coping types as different stressors pose various demands on an individual. For example, a person who is about to complete a parachute jump will utilise emotion-focused coping styles whereas participants in an examination are inclined to turn to problem-focused coping styles. Each individual will have their own unique way of coping with stress. This is hugely influenced by personality.
Regrettably, individuals who experience extreme levels of stress are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours such as excessive drinking and drugging, violence and other forms of abusive behaviour (Hudd, et al., 2000). Another aspect of this research which the author found thought-provoking was the discovery that students who report high levels of academic stress have a higher probability of being less satisfied with their personal lives outside college and education (Hudd, et al., 2000).

For most people, coping is not an issue and they find their own way of adapting without encountering any problems but for an segment of the population, coping is difficult and they experience a great deal of distress in relation to coping. The author believes that there is cause for concern in relation to coping regarding the student population as students are operating at a high pace with often no time left aside for reflection. When a student starts college, this is often the first time that they move away from home and live independently. Most students successfully manage their own learning and their own relationships but for some these simple tasks become very stressful. For this reason, education providers must be aware of the period of transition which many students are undergoing. This is not exclusive to the students who progress to college from secondary school. Students who return to college from the workplace or mature students who return to improve their employability experience a different category of stressor as they often have young children to care for in addition to extra financial strain.

All individuals have a unique way of coping. According to research by (Carver, et al., 1989) people do not approach each stressful situation anew
but rather make use of a preferred set of coping mechanisms across time and circumstances.

In terms of coping with stress, humans usually respond by either accepting the stress or by ignoring the stressor and experiencing a stage of denial. Acceptance is a positive and functional coping mechanism which involves the individual accepting the reality of the situation and making provisions to deal with the stressor on-hand. In contrast, denial happens the when the stressor is completely ignored by the individual (Carver, et al., 1989). This is a controversial response to stress which usually leads to additional problems. Denial is often the simplest way for an individual experiencing stress to hide from the problem or stressor. Due to lack of experience in dealing with problems, it appears from many research sources that denial or avoidance is a prevalent method of coping in students (Aherne, 2001) (Misra, et al., 2000) (Robotham & Julian, 2006). Also, individuals who ignore problems are more vulnerable to depression and anxiety during their lifetime. The author is keen to examine the proportion of students who choose methods of coping which involve avoidance behaviour.

There is often a lack of information about institutional student support services available to students (Bojuwoye, 2002). The author is enthusiastic to investigate whether the current students of Athlone Institute of Technology feel that the above is accurate.

In addition there is existing evidence which suggests that there is a discrepancy between student perceptions of their stress levels and the perception of staff members regarding the level of student stress (Misra, et
Furthermore, research shows that females are more likely to express that they are experiencing stress and seek professional help (Oliver, et al., 1999). The researcher looks forward to examining this in relation to Athlone Institute of Technology while also researching whether the department of study has an impact on the students likelihood of utilising the student services department of the college.

2.8 Student Stress

Levels of student stress have soared in recent years and more resources are required in order to ensure the positive mental health of students (Sax, 1997). Research provides evidence that the level of student stress is growing on a yearly basis (Aherne, 2001). It is becoming more and more difficult as students face increased uncertainty regarding future jobs prospects and the poor economic environment which exists at present has resulted in an increase in student contribution fees and a reduction in financial aid from the government. Many students now face some tough decisions in relation to whether they can afford to progress on to third level education in Ireland.

Once a student starts college or university, they are faced with multiple new situations which they possibly never have had to face before. Factors such as having to move away from their hometown, develop new friendships, become self-directed learners and adapting to living independently from their parents and guardians can be very stressful on individuals particularly if it is their first time.
According to Lazarus (1966), when students view their education as a challenge, there is an increased capacity to learn. However, if an individual perceives their education as a threat, they will feel stressed and helpless. (Lazarus, 1966)

Being a third level student can be stressful and frustrating. (Baquatayan & Mai, 2012). There is a constant pressure on students to perform to their best ability, sustain relationships with classmates, friends and partners, gain suitable employment and meet societal expectations. Sources of research found that nineteen per cent of third level students experience a dangerous level of stress (Choi, et al., 2011). The author plans to examine whether this statistic is accurate in relation to the students of Athlone Institute of Technology.

Transitions which students must make when attending college include living away from home and independently from their parents and guardians, ensure that they maintain their usual grades as well as the added pressure relating to finding an appropriate job or suitable life partner (Ross, et al., 1999)

Over the past ten years, the number of young people choosing to progress on to higher education has rapidly increased and the range of students have become more culturally diverse. For the first time in centuries, students from areas which in the past had low rates of participation in third level education are getting an equal opportunity to continue on to universities and colleges alike. Furthermore, providers of third level education are seeing a surge in the number of international students applying for various courses.
Unfortunately, the economic recession and changes introduced by the Irish government has led to the withdrawal of financial support available to students. This has resulted in many students from disadvantaged areas no longer having the same opportunities to attend college as they previously had. (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011) Other social changes which have had an impact on the stress levels and mental wellbeing of students in Ireland at present include an increase in the level of family breakdowns, an increase in the incidence of bullying in schools and colleges and a growth in the number of non-traditional family units which exist in society at present.

Literature published by Headstrong (2012) indicates that by having at least one caring adult in their life, the stress levels and mental problems experienced by our adolescents can be minimised. In this study by Headstrong, 14,500 students between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five participated and results highlighted that in the majority of cases, it is a parent or grandparent who is most supportive to the individuals but for some students who participated in the research, the adult who provided support to the individual was an older family friend. This demonstrates that students who live with family members or close friends during college receive more support when they experience periods of stress or anxiety.

This study also examined the main stressors present in students. The results of the ‘Headstrong’ study established that the main stressor experienced by students was college or academic stress followed by financial stressors. The third most common stressor for students was work (Headstrong: The National Centre for Youth Mental Health, 2012). The researcher found these results interesting and was eager to investigate whether they were
accurate when related to the student population of Athlone Institute of Technology.

In 2012, Headstrong in association with the University College Dublin’s School of Psychology conducted a study into the mental health of students in Ireland. This study included students from both second and third level education providers in Ireland. This is presently the most current literature available into student stress levels in Ireland. According to the study, there will be a year-on-year increase in the level of stress an individual experiences until the age of twenty-two. (Headstrong: The National Centre for Youth Mental Health, 2012)

Research carried out in 2000 found that significant gender differences exist among students. It appears females employ better strategies of coping than males but experience greater levels of academic stress and general anxiety (McKean & Misra, 2000).

Hong & Zhang, (2011) have identified four major sources of stress for students. Namely, study conditions, economic conditions, employment conditions and personal factors. The author is in agreement with these stressors as many students are surviving on a tight budget while studying, they may be apprehensive about their future regarding employment opportunities. This has become a larger problem in recent years since the recession occurred. In addition, all human beings must live with the personal factors they have experienced in the past. For some this is a failed relationship and for others they may be troubled by the death of a loved one or direct involvement with abuse or addiction. Situations such as these can
have a major effect on the an individual during personality development and adolescent years. Furthermore, if they are not dealt with head-on they can continue to have an effect at all life stages.

Another disconsolate statistic which the author discovered when investigating the subject of stress in students was that forty-seven percent of students in Ireland have at some point in their adolescent lives thought about suicide with six percent of them attempting suicide (Headstrong: The National Centre for Youth Mental Health, 2012). The author feels that this statistic may be due to non-treatment or the incorrect treatment of mild and severe mental illnesses.

2.9: Student Stressors

Student stressors have been the subject of much research over the decade. (Schafer, 1996) identified the most prominent student stressors to be examinations, increased workload and pressure of new responsibilities. Further research led to the transition from home to independence to be considered a significant stressor as well (Robotham & Julian, 2006). Baglin concurred that being away from family and close friends was a major stressor for third level students (Baglin, 2003). A fear of failure is another cause for stress on students. Schafer, (1996) describes a fear of failure as “perfectly natural and can help motivate you to prepare well”. The author does not completely agree with this statement as some students tend to spend unnecessary time panicking instead of preparing for the assessment. The author feels it is important for students to find a suitable balance between the two extremes. The author believes that it would be impossible
to exclusively devise a list of student stressors but believes the main stressors experienced by students are work-overload, financial and relationships with others. As previously stated, a student’s college years are a time of rapid change and occur at a time which is delicate in terms of one’s development. Non-traditional students are also vulnerable to high levels of stress as they are often faced with juggling family problems and increased responsibility.

2.10: Conclusion

To conclude, stress is a complex issue as its causes are extremely subjective and its effects varied. Research to date indicates that the prevalence of stress among students in higher education is increasing rapidly. It also became apparent that the resources delivered by educational providers are not adequately supporting students. Concerns such as student retention and progression are now being raised in many of the higher education providers around the world. In addition, rates of mental illness, suicide and self-harm are increasing at a rapid pace.

At present, there is a lack of research available on this topic in an Irish context. The author plans to fill this gap by satisfying the given aim and objectives of the study. The main objective of this research is to examine whether the students of Athlone Institute of Technology are stressed, and if so, what the stressors affected them are. The author also wants to gain an insight into the perception of students in relation to how the institute deals with stress. In order to gain this data, the author proposes to conduct an interview with a member of the counselling department in Athlone institute.
of Technology and distribute a questionnaire to current students of the institute.

The following chapter will outline the researcher’s methodology in order to conduct the primary research necessary to gain this data.
Chapter Three

Methodology

“Pressure and Stress is the common cold of the psyche” (Andrew Denton)

3.1: Introduction

This purpose of this chapter is to outline the steps the author followed in conducting the primary research for this dissertation. The author will start by reiterating the research aim and objectives, and then proceed to discuss the research strategy, the data collection methods, the sampling strategy and the procedure followed to undertake this research project. The limitations and ethical considerations relevant to the research will also be discussed.

Research may be defined as “a process of finding things out in a purposeful and systematic fashion in order to increase knowledge” (Cameron, 2008). All data gathered during the research process will be analysed and interpreted systematically in order to satisfy the research aim and objectives.

3.2: Research Aim and Objectives

Throughout the research process the author was constantly aware that the research needed to be directed towards satisfying the research aim and objectives outlined. The main research aim of this study is to examine the extent of student stress in Athlone Institute of Technology and identify the stressors experienced by students.

The four research objectives relating to this study are as follows:
e) To critically analyse the existing literature relating to stress and its causes and effects and to formally identify the types of stress evident among students in Athlone Institute of Technology.

f) To examine the policies and procedures in existence in Athlone Institute of Technology for dealing with and or preventing stress in students.

g) To explore the current level of stress experienced by students in Athlone Institute of Technology.

h) To identify the various coping strategies used by the students of Athlone Institute of Technology.

3.3: Research Methodology

The researcher was aware that it was imperative that the data gathered be accurate and relevant to the research in question. The primary consideration of all research is the reliability and validity of the data. Reliability refers to “the degree to which a measure is free from random error” (Khadlid, et al., 2012). Cooper and Schindler (1998) define validity as the “extent to which a test measures what we actually wish to measure”. In order to gain conclusions regarding the aforementioned research aim and objectives, the author will apply the ‘research onion’ put forward by Saunders et al (2012).
The research onion consists of six distinct layers. Each of these layers will be outlined below:

1. Research Philosophies
2. Research Approaches
3. Research Strategies
4. Research Choices
5. Time Horizons
6. Methods of Data Collection
3.3.1: Research Philosophy

The research philosophy which a researcher chooses must be applicable to the type of research being carried out. Saunders et al (2012) states that “the research philosophy you adopt can be thought of as your assumptions about the way in which you view the world”. These assumptions will underpin the research strategy and the methods chosen as part of that strategy.

Various research philosophies options exist when conducting research but the author feels that the research philosophy most suitable to this research project is interpretivism.

Interpretivism advocates that it is necessary for the researcher to understand differences between humans as our role as social actors (Saunders, et al., 2012). The author recognised that all participants in the study would have their own unique interpretations and therefore remained open to new opinions and ideas during the research process.

It has been suggested that the perspective of the interpretivism philosophy is best suited to research in the areas of organisational behaviour, human resource management, business and management research.

Due to the topic of investigation, the author believes the interpretivism philosophy was most beneficial as it allowed the researcher to follow more personal and flexible research structures.
However, Saunders (2007) argues that it is challenging for an interpretivist researcher to “enter the social world of our social research subjects and understand their world from their point of view”.

### 3.3.2: Research Approaches

There are two distinctive research approaches which exist when conducting research. These are a) Qualitative and b) Quantitative.

Qualitative data is defined as “an unstructured, exploratory research methodology based on small samples that provide insights and understanding of the problem setting”. (Malhotra, 1999)

Quantitative research refers to the collection of numerical data which is analysed using mathematical based methods. These methods place a stronger emphasis on numbers rather than meaning and experience. (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2000)

The research approach which a researcher chooses is imperative as it allows the researcher to make more informed decisions regarding the research design. A researcher can choose to use qualitative, quantitative or a combination of both methods.

The researcher has chosen to employ a mixed method approach in order to complete this dissertation. The use of a mixed method approach is becoming highly encouraged in all research fields in recent years.

As stated above the author has chosen to use both qualitative and quantitative methods when collecting and analysing the data.
When choosing a research approach the author used the following table to aid the decision. The headings for the table below were taken from Saunders et al (2012) and the author has provided an explanation relating to the research project in question.

**Table 3.1: Reasons the author chose a mixed method approach**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation</td>
<td>During the course of the research, one method may lead to the discovery of new insights which inform and are followed up through the use of the other method.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complementarity</td>
<td>The use of multiple methods may allow meanings and findings to be elaborated, enhanced, confirmed, clarified and linked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>The initial use of a qualitative or quantitative methodology may be used to define the nature and scope of sequential quantitative or qualitative research. These methods also allow for the provision of a contextual background and a greater understanding of the research problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>The use of mixed methods may allow for a greater diversity of views to be discovered reflected in the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>The use of more than one method may help when the initial method used reveals unexpected or unexplainable results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>The method used may affect the findings of the research. The use of an individual method may make the nature of this effect impossible to identify. In order to avoid this happening, it is advisable that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mixed methods are used. This should lead to greater confidence in your conclusions.


The author chose this approach as it allowed for a complete picture of the stress levels of Athlone Institute of Technology to be achieved. The author believes using both qualitative and quantitative methods will allow alternative perspectives to be discovered.

Secondly, according to Denscombe (2010) “researchers can improve their confidence in the accuracy of findings through the use of different methods to examine the same subject”. A mixed method approach provides a mean to confirm the accuracy of responses. For example, in this research the author was able to examine the responses gained from the semi-structured interview against the questionnaire responses to improve the level of reliability.

Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of data collection methods can be compensated for by utilising two methods. There is no ideal way of collecting data as all data collection methods have negative points which must be considered when conducting research. By using a multiple methods, the consequences of these can be reduced.

3.3.2.1: Triangulation

Triangulation is defined by Saunders et al (2012) as the use of mixed methods “in order to combine data to ascertain if the findings from one method mutually corroborate the findings from the other method”. The author of this research used a questionnaire and performed a semi-
structured interview to further explore the issue under investigation. This data was triangulated using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Triangulation is essential in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the research.

3.3.3: The Research Strategy

Denscombe (2010) states that “there is no single strategy” which can be recommended as the ‘best’ in all circumstances”. Instead the researcher must choose a strategy which is ‘fit for purpose’ in relation to the research topic. After examining the various research strategies available and considering both the research aim and objectives which needed to be answered, the author adopted a survey strategy to conduct this research.

Malhotra (1999) has defined the survey strategy of obtaining information as “the questioning of respondents” through verbal, written or via computer in order to gain an insight into their behaviour, intentions, attitudes, motivations and lifestyle characteristics.

A questionnaire was designed by the researcher and distributed to all students of Athlone Institute of Technology through the student email system. The researcher also conducted an interview with a member of the counselling staff at Athlone Institute of Technology to contribute to the findings revealed in the student questionnaire. The author anticipated that gathering data from both the students and the college counsellor would enhance the quality of research as it allowed two perspectives of student stress to be examined.
Denscombe (2010) outlined the advantages and disadvantages of employing a survey strategy. The advantages include;

a) Surveys allow a wide span of vision to be used to produce data based on real-world observations.

b) Surveys are both an efficient and cost effective method of collecting data.

c) Surveys allow for the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data.

Disadvantages to using the survey strategy when conducting research include;

a) Saunders et al (2012) commented that response rates from surveys can be quite low and easily ignored. This is particularly true if the topic involves the sharing of information of a personal nature (Malhotra, 1999). The author was aware of this when designing questions for both the questionnaire and interview but felt that the positives outweighed the drawbacks of this method.

b) The use of the survey strategy can lead to the significance of the data being neglected.(Denscombe, 2010). The researcher was careful not to become too fixated on the data accumulated and remained open-minded during the process.
3.3.4: Research Choices

The author was faced with three main research choices when conducting this research. These three choices were; explanatory, exploratory and descriptive research.

Explanatory research places emphasis on establishing “the causal relationship between variables” (Saunders, et al., 2012). In other words, during an explanatory study the researcher attempts to elucidate why and how certain factors can cause a phenomenon.

Exploratory research aims “to seek new insights into a phenomenon” (Saunders, et al., 2012). This affords the researcher a chance to gain an insight into a topic by asking questions such as ‘What is the issue?’ Exploratory research is usually typical of a qualitative approach. Classically exploratory research starts broad and becomes more focused as the research progresses.

The final research choice available to the researcher was descriptive. The main objective of this choice is “to gain an accurate profile of events, persons or situations” (Saunders, et al., 2012). Descriptive research allows the researcher to ask questions such as Who? What? Where? When? Why? How much? and How often?. Usually descriptive research is a precursor to exploratory research.

The author decided to use a two-step approach by firstly conducting the student questionnaire to determine both the explanatory and the descriptive elements and later as part of an exploratory study carried out an in-depth
semi-structured interview with a member of the counselling staff in Athlone Institute of Technology.

3.3.5: Time Horizons

Due to academic time constraints, the researcher decided that a cross-sectional study was most appropriate to this research. Saunders et al (2012) state that cross-sectional studies usually follow the survey strategy which the author has employed in this particular research project. Cross-sectional studies refer to studies which are “carried out once and represent a snapshot of the exact point in time of the investigation” (Cooper & Schindler, 1998).

3.3.6: Methods of Data Collection

The final layer of the research onion is the data collection methods. There are various data collection methods available but the author decided to conduct a semi-structured interview and use a questionnaire to gather the data required. This is an important process to allow the researcher gain the data required to satisfy the research aim and objectives.

3.3.6.1: Questionnaires

Questionnaires are a “structured technique for data collection consisting of a series of questions, written or verbal, to which a respondent replies” (Malhotra, 1999).

There are a variety of questionnaire types in existence and the before making a decision, the author weighted up the advantages and disadvantages of each type. The author felt that conducting a postal
questionnaire would negatively affect the response rate as accurate postal addresses are difficult to source. This option was immediately eliminated. In addition, time and resource constraints meant that face-to-face and telephone questionnaires were not viable for the researcher.

After considering the above options, the author thought that conducting a ‘self-completed’ questionnaire via the internet was the best option due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and the time frame involved. The questionnaire was designed through Google Drive and distributed to all full-time registered students of Athlone Institute of Technology.

The factors which attracted the researcher to internet questionnaires include the fact that Internet questionnaires are a more cost and time efficient method in comparison to face-to-face questionnaires or postal questionnaires. Furthermore, Denscombe (2010) states that the quality of data gathered using an internet questionnaire is not significantly different to the data gathered using traditional methods such as postal questionnaires. This gave the author peace of mind that the quality of the data would not be compromised by the use of the internet to collect data regarding stress and coping mechanisms from the student population of Athlone Institute of Technology.

3.3.6.1.1: Questionnaire Design

Denscombe (2010) articulates that it is important to allocate sufficient time planning to a questionnaire before distribution. The questionnaire which was distributed to all full-time registered students of Athlone Institute of Technology was designed by the researcher. The questionnaire consists of
twenty-five questions which were designed to collect data relating to the topic of stress management and coping strategies. The researcher spent a great deal of time developing the questionnaire to ensure that it would gather the data required to complete the research. The questionnaire designed by the researcher in order to collect student data has been included as Appendix One in this research project.

Breadth and depth were also important to the researcher when designing the questionnaire. The topic in question included many sub-sections which needed to be examined. The breath of the study was important to ensure a number of these sub-sections, for example student smoking habits were covered. The researcher achieved depth in the study by applying a broad range of question types, such as multiple-choice, dichotomous and open ended questions to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was both descriptive and exploratory as it aimed to gain a wide range of data from the student respondents.

Questions one to eight of the questionnaire include questions which would allow the research get an insight into the life of the student. These questions refer to areas such as gender, age, course year and department of study.

Questions nine to nineteen refer to stress and allow the student respondent to rate their level of stress on a scale of one to five. These questions were designed in a way to get the respondent to think about the stressors which affect them and to reflect on the lifestyle they have.
The remaining five questions deal with coping mechanisms and include questions which aid the gathering of data on the perception of AIT students regarding the student counselling service at Athlone Institute of Technology.

3.3.6.1.2: Piloting of Questionnaire

The piloting stage relates to “testing the questionnaire on a small sample of respondents in order to identify and eliminate potential problems”. (Malhotra, 1999) The author was aware that it is not advisable to use a questionnaire to collect data unless it has been tested in the relevant field first. Moreover, the author was anxious to guarantee that the questionnaire would gather the data required to satisfy the research aim and objectives relating to the study.

Approximately one week before the questionnaire was due to go live on the internet, the author piloted the questionnaire. The questionnaire was piloted among both academic staff and a number of students ranging from first year to postgraduate level. A total of thirty individuals participated in the pilot stage. Minor adjustments were made to the questionnaire after the pilot stage. These changes were mainly grammatical in nature with the sequence of a number of questions also adjusted.

In general, the feedback from the pilot stage was notably positive. The author received comments on the clarity of the instructions and the informative introduction to the questionnaire. The author found piloting to be a very important stage of the data collection process as the feedback
reduced the possibility of respondents misinterpreting the questions asked of them and therefore improved the reliability of the data collected.

3.3.6.1.3: Population and Sample

A population is “the aggregate of all the elements, sharing some common set of characteristics, comprising the universe for the purpose of the research” (Malhotra, 1999). A sample refers to “choosing a small number of people or objects to represent the larger population or universe from which they are drawn” (Domegan & Fleming, 2007). In contrast, a census study is one which involves all “the elements of a population” (Malhotra, 1999). A researcher can choose to include the entire population or choose a sample which will represent the entire population.

The current population of Athlone Institute of Technology is five thousand seven hundred students. Approximately one thousand eight hundred of these are part-time students. This research was conducted among full-time students only. The researcher chose to carry out a census study which included the entire population in the study. The author wanted to allow each student an opportunity to contribute to the research. The student questionnaire was sent to all full time students of Athlone Institute of Technology through their student email accounts.

3.3.6.1.4: Questionnaire Distribution

On April 17th 2013, the researcher distributed the questionnaire to the student email accounts of all registered full-time students in Athlone Institute of Technology. The total number of registered full-time students
in Athlone Institute of Technology is three thousand nine hundred. The researcher included an introduction paragraph which stated the reason the questionnaire was being sent, the aim and objectives or the research. In addition, the author stated that participation was completely voluntary and all data collected would be treated with the strictest of confidence. The email was issued by the student welfare officer of the student union, Mr Daniel Coulter who also expressed to the students the importance of such research and urged students to be aware of any sudden changes in the behaviour of their friends or classmates as exam time approached. The survey remained open on Google Drive for four weeks and in those four weeks received a total of three hundred and fourteen responses. The author was satisfied with this rate of response but recognises that it could have been increased if the questionnaire was carried out earlier in the academic calendar as both social care and nursing students were completing placements in April and may not be regularly checking their student emails during this time. Furthermore, the questionnaire was completed approximately two weeks before the end of year student examinations started and the author felt this was an expedient time to assess the level of student stress. Although the author was satisfied with the timing of the distribution of the questionnaire, it is recognised that student stress levels may have been slightly higher at this time as semester two examinations were looming. The author is aware of the implications this posed on the research.
3.3.6.2 Interview

An interview refers to a formal discussion between two or more people to allow more information to be gained regarding a topic of interest. During an interview the interviewer asks a range of questions which they seek an answer to.

Denscombe (2010) has identified a number of advantages of using interviews as a method of data collection. These include:

a) Greater Flexibility: Interviews allow for greater flexibility for both the interviewer and interviewee as the area of enquiry can be adjusted during the interview. Also, details surrounding the topic can be probed by the interviewer to induce a more detailed understanding.

b) Contact: Direct contact with the interviewee during the interview allows details to be checked during the process. This increases the level of relevance and accuracy of the data collected during the interview.

c) Response Rate: Interviews receive a high response rate as they are pre-arranged and occur at an agreed time and location. Furthermore, it provides the interviewee with an opportunity to express their views and opinions which they may not normally have. Many interviewees find being interviewed a therapeutic experience.

The following weaknesses exist when using interviews to collect data:
a) Time Consuming: Interviews can be time consuming to transcribe and analyse. In addition, interviews when carried out face-to-face can be difficult to organise as the date and time must be suitable to two or more parties and a comfortable setting where you will not be disturbed must also be secured. These requirements are not always attainable for some researchers.

b) Skills Required: If an interviewer is not skilled in the art of interviewing and has not taken the time to gain some knowledge on the topic under investigation, an interview may not be successful and the level and validity of information gathered could be low. An interviewer must be able to convey trust and competence to a respondent. Furthermore, if a devise is being used to record the interview it can be off-putting for some researchers but with some reassurance from the interviewer any problems relating to this should be alleviated. The author was aware that the interviewer can have an effect on the quality of data and was adamant to study interviewing and the problems associated with this method prior to the interview.

The author chose to conduct a semi-structured interview with a member of the counselling staff at Athlone Institute of Technology. This allowed the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the research topic.

A semi-structured interview is a “wide-ranging category of interview in which the interviewer commences with a set of interview themes but is prepared to vary the order in which questions are asked and to ask new
questions in the context of the research situation” (Saunders, et al., 2012, p. 681).

The author felt this method of data collection was most suitable to this research for a variety of reasons;

Firstly a semi-structured interview allowed for the interviewee’s feelings, opinions and emotions to be explored. This nature of the topic being researched meant that it was important to gain a rich insight into such factors.

Additionally, the research involved quite a sensitive and personal topic and the researcher believed that the use of the interview method was best to ensure that an open, honest and trust-worthy setting existed. This method of data collection also allowed the interviewee to speak broadly on the topic.

3.3.6.2.1: Interview Procedure

As part of this research, the researcher decided to conduct an in-depth semi-structured interview with a member of the institute’s counselling staff in order to complement the research and also to allow a complete picture regarding stress levels and coping strategies to be obtained. The researcher began by making contact with the student services department of Athlone Institute of Technology. The student services department provided the author with an e-mail address for the student counselling service. They also supplied the researcher with some invaluable information regarding the assistance which is available to students experiencing stress within the
institute. The author had hoped to interview one full-time counsellor and one part-time counsellor as part of this research. Unfortunately, due to institute policy, part-time counsellors are not available for interview. The author contacted the full-time counsellor directly through e-mail. In this e-mail, the author explained the aim and objectives of the research as well as the motivation for conducting the research. This interview was scheduled for after the completion of the student questionnaire as the researcher wanted to use the responses received by the student population as a guide when creating a question schedule for the interview. The researcher designed this schedule which included sixteen questions relating to student stress levels, stressors, coping strategies and policies and procedures in place in Athlone Institute of Technology. During the process of the interview impromptu additional questions which the researcher deemed relevant were included. In total, twenty-two questions were asked during the seventy-eight minute interview.

The interview was conducted on May 16th 2013 in the office of the student counsellor. This location was chosen because it was quiet, private and there was a reduced risk of interruption compared to other areas of the college. An outline of the interview questions had been emailed to the interviewee prior to the interview. The interviewee was informed that these questions could change slightly as it was a semi-structured interview and additional questions may be included on the day. The author believes that forwarding a guideline of the questions to the interviewee was beneficial as it gave the interviewee time to plan, reflect and think about the content of the questions. This helped to certify that the respondent would not forget any
details they wished to add and therefore increased the reliability of the data collected. Before the interview began, the interviewee signed a consent form. An uncompleted copy of this consent form is included as an Appendix two of this dissertation. The actual consent form is available on request but has not been included as it would immediately identify the interviewee. The interview was recorded using a handheld device and was transcribed word-for-word.

3.4: Alternative Data Collection Tools

There are a broad range of data collection tools available which can be used when completing a research project. The author could have chosen to utilise other methods of data collection when executing this research. One data collection tool which the researcher strongly considered was the use of a focus group to gather data relating to the stress levels experienced by students and their chosen coping mechanisms.

Eventually, due to a lack of experience conducting focus groups, the author decided against this option. Another reason this option was discarded was the sensitive nature of the topic under investigation. The author felt that some students would not be comfortable discussing such an issue openly in front of their peers. In contrast the student questionnaire which was used to gather the information allowed all respondents to contribute their true feelings as their identity was unknown to others. This allowed for a true image of the situation in Athlone Institute of Technology to unfold.
3.5: Ethical Considerations

According to Cooper and Schindler (2008) ethics are “the norms or standards of behaviour that guide moral choices about our behaviour and our relationship with others. The goal of ethics in any research is to ensure that no one is harmed or suffers adverse consequences from research activity”. The author was determined to act professionally and with integrity while conducting this research. The author was adamant in ensuring participants would remain anonymous, data would be treated as strictly confidential at all times and that participants would be informed about the nature of the research before consenting to involvement. The author firmly believes that respondent privacy and confidentiality is imperative in order to retain validity of the research. The author stored the interview transcript on disk. There were no titles or labels displayed on the disk. This was to ensure the identity of the counsellor would not be revealed.

The author was aware that the topic under investigation was of a sensitive nature. Due to the use of Google Drive, the identity of respondents was unknown to the researcher. All data was used solely for academic purposes to complete this dissertation. The researcher intends to destroy all data collected after the research has been completed.

In addition, the identity of the member of the counselling staff at Athlone Institute of Technology was not revealed at any stage during the research process. Prior to the interview the interviewee was provided with all the relevant information regarding the research. The interviewee voluntarily
consented to participate in the research. A letter of consent was read and signed by the interviewee before the interview commenced.

3.6: Limitations of Research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of a research project. Bias and limitations exist in all research and the author has identified the following limitations in relation to this study.

a) Interviewer Skills: This dissertation is the first research project that the author has conducted. The author was aware that a wide range of skills was required in order to successfully interview another individual. Having researched interviewing and the skills required prior to the interview, the researcher is aware that small mistakes were made during the process. The interviewer would engage in better time management during the interview if the process was to be repeated.

b) Exams: The author is aware that semester two examinations were imminent at the time the questionnaire was distributed. There is a possibly that this may have had implications on the responses given by students and led to students reporting a higher level of stress. In contrast to this, it is also possible that stress will be lower as a result of the majority of group projects and presentations have been submitted and graded. Some students find group projects and practical college work very stressful in comparison to individual examinations.
c) One Counsellor: During the process of this data collection, the researcher only had access to one counsellor to complete the interview. In an ideal world, the author would have liked to gain the perspectives of two student counsellors in order to ensure additional validity and reliability.

d) Timing of Questionnaire: Another limitation to the research was the timing of the questionnaires. There were some students who had completed the academic aspect of their courses and were completing work placement when the questionnaire was distributed. Furthermore, due to the research topic, there were certain questions omitted that the researcher would have liked to add. These questions cover the area of self-harm and suicidal thoughts. According to research carried out by Headstrong (2012), self-harm and suicidal thoughts are common among students experiencing stress. The report stated that forty-three per cent of third level students reported that they had thought that “their life was not worth living at some point”. The author decided to omit these questions as there was a possibility their inclusion could cause distress to current students affected by suicide. The author also felt their addition could negatively affect the response rate.

3.7: Summary of Chapter

This chapter provided an insight into the research methodology which the author has adopted in order to satisfy the research aim and objectives outlined. Reasons for the choices made, alternatives available, the limitations of the research and the ethical considerations which apply were
also detailed in this chapter. The following chapter will develop and discuss the results of the primary research and provide an analysis of the data collected by the author.
Chapter Four

Results

“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another” (William James)

4.1: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings gained from conducting the primary research. The author employed the use of a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire to collect data. The semi-structured interview was carried out with a member of the student counselling service and a total of three hundred and fourteen A.I.T students responded to the questionnaire which was sent to their student e-mail account. The overall objective of the analysis is to examine the data obtained from the semi-structured interview and questionnaire in order to gain knowledge to satisfy the aim and objectives of this study.

To revise, the main aim of the study is to examine the extent of student stress experienced by students in Athlone Institute of Technology. The following objectives were designed to achieve this aim;

a) To critically analyse the existing literature relating to stress and its causes and effects and to formally identify the types of stress evident among students in Athlone Institute of Technology.
b) To examine the policies and procedures in existence in Athlone Institute of Technology for dealing with and or preventing stress in students.

c) To explore the current level of stress experienced by students in Athlone Institute of Technology.

d) To identify the various coping strategies used by students of Athlone Institute of Technology.

In this chapter, the author will extensively examine each objective by firstly analysing the responses of the student questionnaires in a quantitative manner. The research objectives will then be inspected qualitatively by utilising the data gathered during the semi-structured interview. The student questionnaire can be viewed as Appendix One of this dissertation.

4.2: Quantitative Research and Qualitative Research

In this sub-section, the author will dissect each question separately using the findings of the questionnaire.

4.2.1: Respondent Demographics

The on-line questionnaire was made available to all registered students of Athlone Institute of Technology through their student e-mails. This allowed the researcher gain access to a broad range of students.
4.2.1.1: Respondent Gender

A total of three hundred and fourteen students from A.I.T responded to the questionnaire. The gender breakdown of these respondents is one hundred and twenty one males and one hundred and ninety-three females. This accounts for thirty-nine per cent of male respondents and sixty-one per cent females.

During the interview which was held with a staff member of the counselling service, the interviewee commented that “we still have a predominance of females using the service”.

Figure 4.1: Gender of Respondents
4.2.1.2: Age of Respondents

The author was conscious of the growing number of mature students who were returning to education and therefore felt that gaining knowledge of the age of the respondent was central to the study. The following breakdown represents the age profile of respondents;

**Figure 4.2: Age Profile of Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-21 yrs</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-26 yrs</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27-31 yrs</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32-36 yrs</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37-41 yrs</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41+ yrs</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The largest numbers of respondents (forty-two per cent) were between the age of seventeen and twenty-one. A total of twenty-six per cent were between the age of twenty-two and twenty-six. The age bracket with the least respondents was those between the ages of thirty-two and thirty-six with six per cent of respondents.
4.2.1.3: Course Year of Respondents

In order to gain an insight into the level and type of pressure which students experienced, the author added a question regarding the stage of education the respondent was currently completing. The results found were as follows;

**Figure 4.3: Year of Study (No of Students)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of Study</th>
<th>No of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Student</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Year Student</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Year Student</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Year Student</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Year Student</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The highest number of students who responded were currently completing the first year of their various courses. The course year with the lowest level of respondents were fourth year students with a total of forty-two students responding to the questionnaire. All departments in A.I.T vary in size and the researcher felt that these statistics did not portray an accurate picture. However when the researcher delved further into this response level, it
appeared that the best response rate came from postgraduate students. The researcher contacted the student registration department of Athlone Institute of Technology to ask for a data relating to the total number of students who was registered in every course year of all courses. From this data, the researcher was able to calculate the response rate in percentages depending on the total number of students in each year.

Statistics for the academic year 2012/2013 show that there are one hundred and seventy nine students registered to complete postgraduate courses in A.I.T. Out of these, fifty students responded to the questionnaire. In percentage terms this equates to twenty-seven per cent of postgraduate students responding to the student questionnaire.

Following the postgraduate students, third year students were the next best group to respond. Out of the total six hundred and sixty-four students completing the third year of their course, sixty-eight per cent of them responded to the research. This is the equivalent to ten per cent of all third year students. The poorest rate of response came from the second year students. According to the statistics gained from the student registration department of Athlone Institute of Technology, there are nine hundred and ninety-nine second year student. The researcher received a total of sixty-five responses from the second year which compares to a mere six per cent of all second year students.

4.2.1.4: Department of Study

The questionnaire was open to all four departments on offer by Athlone Institute of Technology. In total, thirty-five per cent of respondents were
business students, twenty-six per cent were studying science, twenty-two per cent of respondents belonged to the humanities department and the lowest rate of respondents were from the school of engineering with seventeen per cent.

Figure 4.4: Department of Study

4.2.1.5: Grade Point Average of Previous A.I.T Students

This question was aimed towards students who had previously graduated from Athlone Institute of Technology and where now continuing their studies in the institute. The following visual provides the analysis of the question. Eleven per cent of students who previously graduated from A.I.T
received a distinction, Fourteen per cent gained Merit Grade one status, Eight per cent achieved a Merit Grade two and three per cent gained a pass.

**Figure 4.5: Grade Point Average of Previous A.I.T Students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Point Average</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distinction (70% +)</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merit Grade 1 (60%-69%)</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merit Grade 2 (50%-59%)</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass (40%-49%)</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know/Would rather not say</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.2.1.6. Relationship Status of Respondents

The graph below outlines the relationship status of the respondents at the time the questionnaire was distributed to students. This graph illustrated that one hundred and sixty or the equivalent of fifty per cent of students was single when they responded to the questionnaire. One hundred and eleven
students were in a relationship and twelve per cent were married. Separated/Divorced and other accounted for one per cent each and none of the respondents had lost a partner due to death.

**Figure 4.6: Relationship Status of Respondents**

![Pie chart showing relationship status]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a Relationship</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated/Divorced</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4.2.1.7: Pressure on Relationships Due to Academic Stress**

In order to gain an insight into the emotional wellbeing of the respondents, the author included the question ‘Do you feel relationships with your family, friends and/or partner have suffered due to academic stress?’ The results of this question were as follows;
One hundred and sixty-two students, the equivalent of fifty per cent felt that their relationships are suffering from academic stresses. One hundred and one students (thirty-one per cent) experienced no change in relationships and sixty students or nineteen per cent stated they would not allow this to happen.
4.2.1.8: Current Living Arrangements

Students were asked who they currently live with as part of this study into student stress and coping mechanisms. The researcher listed the following options for respondents: Family, Friends, Housemates, Spouse/Partner, Alone or other. The following graphs show a visual of the results.

**Figure 4.8: Living Arrangements of Students (Number of Students)**
Figure 4.9: Living Arrangements of Students (% Representation)

- Family: 43%
- Friends (known to me before I moved in): 17%
- Housemates (unknown to me before moving in together): 19%
- Spouse/Partner: 11%
- On your own: 6%
- Other: 4%
4.2.2: Student Satisfaction Levels

4.2.2.1: General Level of Satisfaction

The respondents of the survey were asked to rate their current level of satisfaction on a scale from one to five. Part one of this question asked students to focus on their lives outside of college when answering. A score of one represented a ‘Very Satisfied’ state and five denoted ‘Very Dissatisfied’.

The results of this question are shown below:

**Figure 4.10: Student Satisfaction Levels (Outside College)**
The above results show that thirteen per cent of respondents stated that they were ‘Very Satisfied’ with their lives outside college, thirty-six per cent responded that they were ‘Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied’ and five per cent stated they were ‘Very Dissatisfied’ with their lives outside college.

The next part of this question asked respondents to scale how satisfied they were with their college lives at the time the questionnaire was distributed. This question was scaled the same way as the previous part; a rating of one signified being ‘Very Satisfied’, three related to being ‘Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied’ and five represented feeling ‘Very Dissatisfied’.

The results show that nine per cent of students feel ‘Very Satisfied’ with their college lives while thirty-five per cent are ‘Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied’ and eight per cent are ‘Very Dissatisfied’.
4.2.2.2: Self-Rate Stress Levels

The next question included by the researcher was to assess the level of stress that the student respondents felt they themselves were experiencing. The question was structured by firstly defining stress and then asking respondents to scale how stressed they were. In this question, an answer of one represented ‘Not at all Stressed’ and five represented ‘Very Stressed’.
The students responded as follows; four per cent stated that they were ‘Not at all Stressed’, twenty-nine per cent responded in the mid-range category and twenty-one per cent considered themselves to be ‘Very Stressed’.
4.2.2.3: Stressors Experienced

The researcher wanted to investigate what types of stressors the students in Athlone Institute of Technology experienced. In this question, the author gave the following options for respondents to choose from; financial stressors, work overload, examination stressors, stress regarding maintaining grades, problems with classmates or group work, problems with lecturing staff, fear of failure, external stressors which have affected you academically and other. The results from this question highlight that the most common stressors are: 1) Examination Stressors (nineteen per
cent), 2) Financial Stressors (seventeen per cent) and 3) Work Overload (sixteen per cent). The following graph gives an overview of the stressors.

Figure 4.14: Stressors Experienced by A.I.T Students

- Financial Stresses
- Work Overload
- Examination Stresses
- Stress regarding maintaining Grades
- Problems with Classmates/Groupwork
- Problems with Staff
- Fear of Failure
- External Stresses
- Other
4.2.2.4: Smoking Habits of Student Respondents

The following visuals show the results from student respondents when they were asked about their smoking habits.

The first question was “Do you Smoke?” Twenty-nine per cent of people who responded were smokers. Seventy-one per cent (or two hundred and twenty four students) did not smoke.

Figure 4.15: Student Smoking Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Series1</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following question on the questionnaire asked “If you answered yes above, do you find that you smoke more or less at stressful times of the
academic year?” The following options were given by the researcher; ‘I smoke more’, ‘I smoke the same amount throughout the academic year’ or ‘I smoke less’. The following results relate to this question;

**Figure 4.16: % of Changes in Student Smoking Habits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Students</th>
<th>I smoke more</th>
<th>I smoke the same amount throughout the academic year</th>
<th>I smoke less</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Series1</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.2.2.5: Employment While Studying

The researcher included a question regarding engaging in part-time employment during the college term in order to investigate whether the pressure of having to work was adding additional stress to student’s lives.
The results identified that thirty-nine per cent of students that responded to the online questionnaire were working while studying in Athlone Institute of Technology. Sixty-one per cent were not working while studying.

**Figure 4.17: Student Job Status (% Representation)**

These respondents were then asked why they work while studying. The options given were 1) Necessity, 2) Financial independence, 3) Social reasons or 4) Other. Out of the thirty-nine per cent of students who are working while studying, the following breakdown was given when asked why;
The majority of students (fifty-three per cent) who responded were working out of necessity. Only six per cent of students reported that they worked for social reasons.

Figure 4.18: Reasons for Working While Studying

The remaining sixty-one per cent who were not working while in college were asked why did were not currently in employment. The four choices given to students were as follows; 1) ‘I did not look for a job’, 2) ‘I could not find a suitable job’, 3) ‘I would not be able to balance work and study’ or 4) ‘Other’.
The results of this question were as follows;

**Figure 4.19: Reasons for not Working while Studying**

- 46% stated that they would not be able to balance work and study.
- 28% responded that they could not find a suitable job.
- 15% said they did not look for a job.
- 10% selected the “other” option.
- 10% of student respondents.

From the sixty-one per cent of student who were not in employment, fifteen per cent (twenty-nine students) stated that they did not look for a job. Twenty-eight per cent of students responded that they could not find a suitable job. The majority stated that they would be unable to balance work and study and ten per cent of student respondents selected the “other” option.
4.2.2.6: Financial Assistance for Students

As part of this questionnaire, students were asked whether they were in receipt of a student grant or any other type of government funding. The results were as follows; Sixty-three per cent were in receipt of funding, thirty-one per cent (ninety-eight students) received no finding and six per cent reported that their application was pending at the time the questionnaire was conducted.

Figure 4.20: Government Funding
4.2.1.15: Returning to Education

The following question was included to access the level of students who were returning to education after being in employment and how they found this transition. The question asked; Have you returned to college after a period of time in a working environment? Students responded in the following manner; forty-six per cent (one hundred and forty-five students) responded that they were returning from a time in employment and fifty-four per cent (one hundred and sixty-nine students) answered that they had not worked prior to registering in college.

Figure 4.21: Number of Students who Returned to College from Work
Figure 4.22: % of Students who returned to College from Work

Out of the forty-six per cent who said they had been in employment previous to returning to college, fifteen per cent said it was a difficult transition, thirty-six per cent said it was somewhat difficult, forty per cent found the transition relatively easy and nine per cent found the transition from employment back to education extremely easy.
4.2.2.7: Students who Experience Sleep Difficulties

Subsequently students were asked whether they experience sleeping difficulties due to academic stress. Students were given the following five options to choose from; ‘Always’, ‘Regularly’, ‘Sometimes’, ‘Rarely’ or ‘Never’. The results to this question were as follows;
Eleven per cent of students who responded said they ‘Always’ experienced sleep difficulties due to college stress; seventeen per cent of students regularly experience difficulties sleeping; forty-one per cent of students ‘Sometimes’ experience problems sleeping; twenty-two per cent (sixty-eight students) rarely experience sleeping difficulties and nine per cent ‘Never’ have any sleeping difficulties in relation to academic stress.
4.2.2.8: Do you Look Forward to Coming to College Every Morning?

This question was put forward by the researcher to examine the student’s level of happiness. Students were asked did they enjoy coming to college every morning?. Students were then asked to give a reason for their answer. The two options available to students were ‘Yes’ and ‘No’. Out of the three hundred and fourteen respondents, fifty-seven per cent said that they did look forward to attending college each day. The remaining forty-three per cent did not look forward to college each day.

Figure 4.25: ‘Do you Enjoy Coming to College Every Morning’
Students gave a broad range of responses to why they gave the answer they
did when asked “Do you look forward to coming to college every
morning?”

Samples of the positive responses which the researcher received include the
following:

“Having worked in a very stressful industry previously, I find college
enjoyable”

“I love the social aspect”

“I am a positive person and therefore I have a positive experience”

“I get out of bed so I can see my friends and boyfriend”

“My lecturers are very helpful”

“I get the chance to see my friends”

“Friendly atmosphere in A.I.T”

In contrast to the above responses, the students who replied that they did
not look forward to attending college gave feedback which included the
following reasons;

“It is such an effort for me to leave my apartment every morning”

“I did not consider all aspects of my course before coming to college”

“Studying is boring”

“I am constantly tired no matter how much sleep I get”
“Although I look forward to seeing my friends every day, I find my course difficult and tiring and definitely don’t look forward to coming into college”

“There is a huge work load associated with college especially when you move into the final year”

“The parking situation stresses me out before I ever come in the door”

4.2.2.9: Level of Students who Sought Professional Help for Stress Related Conditions

The next factor which the researcher wished to investigate was whether or not the students of Athlone Institute of Technology sought professional help in relation to the treatment of stress and stress related conditions. A total of twenty-four per cent of the students who responded to the questionnaire said they did attend a doctor or medical professional regarding stress or stress related illnesses in the past. Two hundred and thirty-eight respondents (seventy-six per cent) had not attended a doctor or medical health professional in relation to stress.
The students who responded yes to the above question (seventy-six students in total) where then asked what the outcome of their visit was. A broad range of answers were given and the author has included a selection of them below;

“I was told I needed to take time out to relax”,

“I was put on short-term medication for depression”,

“I was hospitalised”
“I was given a sequence of techniques to follow to help reduce my stress levels”

“I was sent for more medical tests”

“I was certified medically unfit to work”

4.2.2.10: Students Coping Strategies

The next question which has been included in the questionnaire was “How do you personally deal with academic stressors?” This question was included to investigate the most common coping mechanisms used by students.

The largest proportion of students (fourteen per cent) responded that they “take time out to clear my mind and de-stress” in order to cope with academic stress, thirteen per cent choose to “turn to the TV or internet”, twelve percent experience a change in their eating habits, eleven per cent of student who responded stated that they “avoid thinking about the problem and behave as if everything is alright”, ten per cent “become emotional”, nine per cent of respondents chose each of the following options “seek help from family and friends”, “choose to do nothing”, and turn to “exercise” when stressed, six per cent “become aggressive”, five per cent reported that they consume excessive amounts of alcohol and illegal substances and increase their level of smoking, only two per cent of students “seek professional help” and one per cent choose “other” methods of coping.

The following pie chart gives a visual representation of these results;
Figure 4.27: The Coping Mechanisms of Students

- Avoidance: 91%
- Time Out: 11%
- Seek Help from Friends and Family: 12%
- Seek Professional Help: 10%
- Do Nothing/Keep the stress to myself: 9%
- Turn to alcohol/smoking or illegal drugs: 9%
- Eat more or less than usual: 5%
- Exercise/Sport: 14%
- TV/Internet: 9%
- Become Emotional: 9%
- Become Aggressive: 2%
- Other: 1%
4.2.2.11: Have Any of Your Peers Left College due to Stress?

Students who responded to the questionnaire were also asked whether any of their peers had left or dropped out of college in due to stress and its effects. One hundred and twenty-six students or the equivalent of forty per cent of respondents stated that ‘Yes’, they knew someone who had dropped out of college due to excessive stressors.

Sixty per cent of students replied that their peers had not left college due to stress.

**Figure 4.28: Withdrawing from College**
The student who answered ‘Yes’ (forty per cent) were then asked if they were aware of the reason they left and the following reasons were given.

**Figure 4.28: Reasons Students Dropped-Out**
From the forty per cent of students who responded that they did know a student who left due to stress; thirty-two per cent of students who responded said that the reason their peers left college was due to financial reasons, four per cent stated it was due to college relationship issues, twenty-seven per cent responded that the problem was related to work overload, twenty per cent had personal reasons for leaving the college system and twelve per cent of students did not know the direct reason behind their friend or peer leaving the college system.

4.2.2.12: The approach Athlone Institute of Technology (A.I.T) takes towards stress

Finally, the researcher wanted to examine how the current students of Athlone Institute of Technology perceived the counselling service in the institute and whether they felt changes were needed in order to improve it.

To assess this, the researcher included the following questions;

A) Do you feel stress is adequately dealt with by Athlone Institute of Technology?

B) Are you aware of the student counselling service available to students experiencing difficulties in A.I.T?

C) Have you used the counselling service in Athlone Institute of Technology?

Results of the questionnaire show that sixteen per cent of respondents were happy with how stress was dealt with by the institute. Twenty-nine per cent were not completely satisfied by how the student services department
managed stress in the institute. The remaining fifty-five per cent of students were undecided on the issue.

**Figure 4.29: Students Perception of Student Services in A.I.T**

![Bar chart showing student perceptions of student services in A.I.T.](chart.png)
Figure 4.30: Awareness of Counselling Services

- Yes: 29%
- No: 71%
Seventy-one per cent of students attending Athlone Institute of Technology were aware of the counselling service available in the institute. From these students, twelve per cent has used the service and found that it was helpful to them. Five per cent of students who used the service did not find it helpful and eighty-three per cent of students who were aware that the service was available and thus had not used it.

In order to gain a complete picture of the situation, the researcher asked the student counsellor whether she felt that the services provided where...
adequately advertised. The interviewee agreed with the student body. “We could be doing more; we are probably keeping a lid on it at the moment. We are probably not endorsing and advertising ourselves enough”.

The final part of the questionnaire asked students; “What changes if any, would you like to see introduced into A.I.T which could help improve the student experience and/or reduce student stress levels?”

The author was overwhelmed by the rate of response to this open-ended question with the majority of students giving feedback.

The most recurring subjects in regards changes that would lead to a better service for students were as follows;

A) Student Services: A large proportion of students felt that additional counsellors needed to be employed by the institute in order to deal with demand. “The counselling service is under a lot of pressure this year (so I read in an email) maybe more funding for extra counsellors would help”. “Let students know that counsellors are available, I have been here for over two years and I never knew”. I was refused a counselling session here in the college and had to use an external service”. Encourage students that no problem is too small, I think many students think they are just a number and no-one wants to know about their problems”. Other suggestions which were put forward regarding the counselling service included having every student visit the counsellor during the year at least once. “Meet with the counsellors at least once a year and let them decide who they feel needs to attend on a regular basis”. Respondents felt
that this would eliminate the stigma attached to seeking help from professionals. “We need to make stress a natural and easy topic to discuss and have alternatives to speaking with a counsellor available to students, maybe forming a support group made up of other students who are stressed. They could meet up in a non-clinical environment, such as the coffee dock and share their problems. Often, people just need a soundboard for their worries”.

B) **Facilities:** A number of students felt that an improvement in the facilities would result in a lower level of stress among students, for example one respondent stated “Have the library open for longer hours and 24/7 during the exams”, “We need more computers in open access”, “I am doing a very demanding computer based course and if we had our own lab the way the masters students do, we would be less stressed”. Students also felt that having an area in the college that would facilitate reflection and mediation would help the management of stress levels “A relaxation area for students would help the stress levels”, “Students need a quite area which would allow them process their thoughts”, “People have little or no money and we’ve things like clamping going on, it is not fair when there is no adequate parking to begin with”. Some students also felt that having lecturers delivered through video conferencing would benefit students who find it difficult to attend due to other commitments “Offer lecturers through video as well as in the classroom, it’s not always easy to be here every day”, “Every
student needs more space to themselves when doing their exams, the exam halls are very cramped”.

C) Students Unions: Suggestions which were included by students in relation to changes the student union could introduce in order to assist students who are experiencing stress include; “The students union should have a greater presence among students, I know very few people who regularly check their student emails”. Some students felt that the level of induction provided by A.I.T needed to be increased. “More induction is needed at the start of the college year and not just for first years”. In addition, existing students of Athlone Institute of Technology felt that changes needed to be made to the class representative system in place in the institute. “The training courses given to the class reps need to be structured to allow them to be a better help to students”. Another suggestion made by students was to incorporate outings for students to allow for bonding. “Outings as a class would allow for a stronger bond to form and would lead to better relations when group projects are being completed”. Many respondents mentioned that the students union need to advertise their services better “the student union should introduce more day events for students to deal with stress, and when they do have better advertising for them”, “the workshops which the union run should be early in the year and not the week before exams”. “I think the students union should highlight the effects of stress as it might make people act on their problems and
symptoms faster and reduce the other health complications involved”.

D) Exams: Many of the students who responded felt that amendments were needed in order to reduce the level of stress involved in sitting exams. The most common suggestions were to increase the amount of continuous assessment involved in order to eliminate some of the pressure for students “it would be better to have more continuous assessment and less emphasis on the end of semester exams”, “Continuous assessment is the way forward”, “Written exams are a test of your memory and not how good you will be at the job, more practical exams are needed to make it fairer”. Other students felt that the timeframe between assessments needed to be broader to allow for sufficient study. “Assignments should be spread out so you don’t end up having three in the space of a week”. Another suggestion put forward by a student was the introduction of a forum to allow students share their thoughts with others. “Students Union should provide an anonymous forum to allow students to get their worries off their chest, talking is one of the best and simplest stress relievers going and no-one has time to talk anymore”.

E) Lecturers: A large proportion of respondents who made suggestions felt that the lecturing staff of A.I.T could help reduce the level of student stress by changing the way assessments were marked. “Assessments should be peer-reviewed”. Other students felt that more time was needed to cover the course work. “More hours with the lecturer is needed, we only have three hours a week for the
“hardest and most important subject in the course”. Other stress reducing suggestions which were given by students include “easier communication with lecturers”, “the semester one exams should be after Christmas”.

F) Other: Further suggestions which did not fit into the above categories but the author felt could not be omitted related to extending the academic year to relieve student stress levels “I know everyone loves holidays, but perhaps extending the academic term by 2/3 weeks to allow the subject more time to be taught”. One respondent who had recently dropped out of college made the following comment “I have just dropped out of college in March due to stress from group project work and financial reasons too. I am very disappointed that I didn’t open up and talk to someone instead one day I just didn’t go in. I was in my level 7 ordinary degree and I am saddened that my studies are now over because I kept silent and all to myself”.

Additional comments relating to students who were satisfied with the current system included; “After studying for three years in a different college, I find A.I.T treats student stress more seriously than other colleges”.

4.3: Analysis of Semi-Structured Interview

In order to gain a comprehensive view of stress related illnesses and the coping mechanisms involved, the author arranged an interview with a
member of the counselling staff in the student services department of Athlone Institute of Technology.

For the purpose of completing this dissertation, the identity of the staff member will remain anonymous. A blank copy of the consent form which was used in the interview has been included as Appendix Two. In addition, the author has included the schedule of questions Appendix Three which was prepared prior to the interview. Inadvertent questions where included during the process of the semi-structured interview and these are presented in bold on the question schedule. The transcript of the interview in its entirety can also be found in Appendix Four.

The semi-structured interview provided the researcher with an invaluable insight into how stress is dealt with and how stress is perceived by the student services department of Athlone Institute of Technology.

Although numerous interesting points were discovered when analysing the interview the author has chosen recurring themes from the interview which help satisfy the aim and objectives of this dissertation.

The themes which the author will focus on are as follows;

1) The link between persistent stress and depression
2) Insufficient funding and resources
3) Student coping styles
4) Services and Procedures in Athlone Institute of Technology
The opinions put forward through quotations below are those of the student counsellor.

4.3.1: Theme One: The Link between Persistent Stress and Depression

It became clear to the researcher from an early stage in the interview with the student counsellor that stress which remains undetected and continues on a long-term basis will develop into depression. As previously stated a certain level of stress is required in order to ensure that a student focuses and concentrates on the many requirements of their academic studies. Problems occur when this stress is present on a long term basis and proceeds to take control of an individual’s life in a negative way. “As you know stress over a long period of time if it's not ameliorated, helped or assisted in some way or it hasn't been changed generally becomes a depression”. “Students who have tolerated and endured a level of stress going on for a number of months or even years get to a point where their functioning is effected and it moves to a mild or moderate depression range”. Once a state of depression is confirmed, an extreme response is required to assist the individual. “They have become quite helpless and quite hopeless and therefore need a very intensive response”. The counsellor informed the researcher that three or four times a year the student service department are faced with students who experience severe mental health breakdowns. “…for example a psychotic break or severe depression where they are no longer able to function. They are not getting out of bed, not going into college etc. so about three or four times a year we have to deal with students who are in that situation”. The interviewee also highlights the change which they have noticed over the space of ten years.
“The cases we see are very different now than they would have been say ten years ago, there are much more clinical levels of stress, distress and depression. There are more students at risk of withdrawing and at risk of harming themselves”.

The student counsellor displayed major concern regarding this trend and offered the following advice to students who are experiencing high levels of stress. “….talk to someone, they have to. When they are in the thick of it, they are not going to see the wood from the trees. They are not going to see their own resources or possibilities”.

The above information highlights to the researcher just how important the early detection of the symptoms of stress and stress-related illnesses are in addition to timely intervention. In recent times, the service has been inundated with student requests for counselling sessions and service providers fear that if the level of incoming requests continues, the health and welfare of students will be jeopardised. “The way I see it is its grossly unfair and probably very unprofessional to advertise a service that can’t respond when a student needs it”. One way in which this service can guarantee a prompt and efficient service for its users is to work towards ensuring sufficient funding and resources are available. The area of funding for student assistance will be examined as part of the next theme.

4.3.2: Theme Two: Insufficient Funding and Resources

One of the first departments to experience budgetary cuts following the start of the recession was the Department of Education. Unfortunately one consequence of this was the severe cuts to funding for the development of
student services. At present, the recommended ratios for the providers of third level education in the student counselling department “is one full-time counsellor to twelve hundred full-time students”. In Athlone Institute of Technology, there is currently one full-time counsellor and two associate counsellors. A.I.T is “way behind recommended average” and this is putting both existing students and the staff involved with the counselling service at risk. Due to this staff shortage, counsellors are put under extreme pressure. “We are in charge of all our own admin……taking and booking appointments…..all the clinical work, staff liaisons with external peoples and academic staff here, GP referrals, psychiatric service referrals, class rep training, PASS training. All of these come back to the primary counsellor which is far and way beyond what I can handle”. The growth of the waiting lists for the student counselling service in turn gives the impression that the student counselling service is not having the desired effect on reducing the stress levels of students. The interviewee also commented that this was an international problem with the United Kingdom and America reporting similar statistics. The student counselling department have delivered a total of nine hundred and one sessions to two hundred and thirty-six users in the academic year of 2012/2013. This equates to seven or eight sessions a day. This is also a point of concern as the recommended number is four or five a day to allow “for case management and background work”

The interviewee also informed the researcher that due to slightly shorter waiting list times, the service at the institute is carrying a substantial level of the work load of the HSE. “We don’t get additional funding for that”.
The student counsellor was then asked whether she felt adequate funding is available to allow the service to preform to the best of its ability. The interviewee was confident in her response of “NO, absolutely not”. Due to the lack of funding, developmental activities have been neglected. “I would love to be doing more with students in a non-clinical environment”. The interviewee commented that “there is a lot more we could be doing if we were adequately resourced”.

The interviewee also highlighted the fact that a high proportion of the students of Athlone Institute of Technology include those who are recognised as higher service users. For example half of the students are in receipt of financial assistance “two thousand out of the four thousand so by looking as socio-economic status alone we are in need of more resources”. Furthermore Athlone Institute of Technology has a higher percentage of mature students than other colleges and universities. Mature students are in need of a greater level of support and the interviewee reported that last year (2012), half of the service users came from the mature student population.

In previous years the counselling service of A.I.T would have sent an e-mail to all students at Halloween and after the February mid-term reminding them that the service was available and also providing information on how the service can assist students experiencing difficulty. Regrettably, due to the length of the waiting list this year, they service was unable to do that. “This year we were so overwhelmed that we didn’t send out that …..because we couldn’t cope with the influx that normally come on the back of that email. We were already into a three week waiting list
and if we got that influx you’re talking about increasing that to a six week wait and that is not adequate for students who are in distress because they need to be seen quicker that six weeks or two months”.

4.3.3: Theme Three: Student Coping Styles

During the process of the interview it became evident that the typical coping mechanisms used by students in the institute were the typical ‘fight, flight or freeze’ response. The interviewee proceeded to define these coping styles as; “fight would be to kind of get very aggressive or negative or quite passive aggressive, flight is to flee the situation and freeze is to do nothing”. Some of the coping styles are healthy and some are unhealthy. The interviewee has noticed in recent years that an increasing number of students are exercising healthy coping mechanisms. This reflects positively on the student services department. “There are fantastic structures in the college now in terms of support for students”. The student service department consists of many layers which is available to support students. These include the health services department, the counselling service, the chaplaincy, student access and the students union.

The interviewee displayed immense admiration towards the students who use the service. “They are such strong people, they are fighters and with a bit of support they fly again”. “Even the ones who fall to their knees in desperation impress me, they don’t know what to do but they still don’t want to walk away”.

Unfortunately there are always students who resort to negative coping styles when experiencing stress. The most common being the flight
response of “excessive drinking and drugging”. These individuals can often see no other alternative but to escape from reality for a while. “It takes the person away from the uncomfortable feelings or being stressed and unable to cope”. They later realise they have then lost control of the situation and then see no other option other than to withdraw. This causes problems in other aspects of their lives.

The student counsellor added that many students when stressed refocus their attention to other things. “…so they may become over involved in relationships, dramas that are going on at home etc”. This is a typical example of the freeze response where students believe if they don’t think about of act on a problem, it will go away.

4.3.4: Theme Four: Services & Procedures in existence in Athlone Institute of Technology in relation to Stress

An additional subject which the author found was prominent in many parts of the interview with the student counsellor was the countless services and procedures which are available to the students of Athlone Institute of Technology. The interview elucidated how there are multiple layers of support available to students. The counsellor explained that the student services department is “based on the premise of supporting and helping students deal with academic stress and other stresses that may be causing difficulty for them”. Services include the counselling department, the chaplaincy and the student disability and access services. The students union work closely with these services to raise awareness of mental health issues and health promotion. According to the student counsellor, there are
also many informal procedures which have developed over time which would be lost if they were to be formulised.

The interviewee did acknowledge that due to a lack of resources, the services are not always sufficiently advertised. “We are probably not endorsing and advertising ourselves enough”. The interviewee added that if the resources were available, the service would be able to run seminars and conduct more out-of-office work in a non-clinical environment.

There has been a shift in the type of service user which the counselling service of Athlone Institute of Technology experience in recent years. The service has had to adapt to this. Previously the service would have received the majority of their appointments from students in first year and mature students. In recent times, the service has had an influx of fourth year and masters students who cannot see their own capabilities and contemplate walking away when so are so close to the finishing line. “They are after enduring four or maybe five years of feeling secure and knowing what is on the agenda. The college has a fairly predictable system. This creates huge anxiety for students who are about to embark on the unknown, maybe for the first time in their lives”. This is resulting in an increase of final year and masters students using the service. The scarcity of employment is another factor which is leading to this level of uncertainty among these students.

4.4: Summary

The aim of this chapter was to present the primary findings of the research. The author has provided an analysis of the student questionnaire and semi-
structured interview. These findings will be discussed in the following chapter in order to satisfy each objective. In addition, the author will attempt to link where possible similarities to the previous research outlined in chapter two.
Chapter Five

Discussion

“Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one” (Hans Selye)

5.1: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to satisfy the aim and objectives of this research study by discussing the main primary findings established in the previous chapter and link them to the existing literature which was reviewed in chapter two.

5.2: Objective One

To critically analyse the existing literature relating to stress and its causes and effects and to formally identify the types of stress evident among students in Athlone Institute of Technology

The first objective which was outlined by the author in relation to this research was an analysis of current literature in relation to stress and to formally identify the types of stress present in the student population of Athlone Institute of Technology. Chapter Two of this dissertation includes an in-depth analysis of past literature. The author found that there was a wealth of information available on stress and its effects. Many academics have previously studied stress in general terms. The father of stress
research is Hans Selye who defined stress as “a non-specific response of the body for any demand for change”. This initial research on stress led to mass supplementary studies into the area of stress. After further investigation, Selye modified his definition to “the rate of wear and tear on the body”. He identifies three stages of physiological response. These are the alarm stage, the resistance stage and the exhaustion stage. An important issue as regards stress research related to the level of subjectivity which exists. A situation which one person finds stressful may not cause any stress to another.

In harmony with the results of the ‘Headstrong’ research, the author found that college was a substantial stressor for the students of Athlone Institute of Technology. The students provided the author with an insight into the academic stressors which affects them. According to the questionnaire responses, the number one academic stressor experienced by students is ‘Examination Stresses’, followed by ‘Financial Stresses’ and ‘Work Overload’. The author believes these results are due to a scarcity of jobs which has resulted in students seeking to achieve better results in order to make them stand out from the crowd when in search of employment. As the recession hit Ireland, a range of cuts to student funding and entitlements has ensued. The author believes that although financial stressors always existed for students, it has been brought to the fore since the recession occurred. The third most popular stressor reported by students was ‘Work Overload’. Due to the introduction of semesters to the academic calendar, students have less time available in which they can adjust back into the college routine. For some students time management can be a problem and
they end up falling behind in the level of work they must complete. This can cause a student to feel as if they are out of their depth and to experience large amounts of stress.

The researcher also probed the student counsellor about student stressors during the course of the interview. The interviewee felt it was impossible to pinpoint just one stressor and believed that it was a combination of personal history, the current context and the current environment which occur in the student’s life. “It is always going to be contextualised by a wider situation and history”. In disagreement to the student responses, the counsellor felt that although financial stressors were present they were not the main factor which determined the level of stress experienced by the student. The interviewee was eager to express that all staff members of Athlone Institute of Technology were aware of the immense levels of stress the student population is subject to and were more than willing to assist in any way possible.

To summarise, over the past decade, the volume of research available regarding stress has rapidly increased as a true account of how serious the condition is has become evident. It appears that stress can lead to a number of conditions. These conditions range from mild to life threatening in nature. Prolonged stress is especially harmful to the human body as it leads to unalterable changes which need immediate attention in order to reduce the severity of the damage.
Overall the author found that although research has been conducted on the topic of stress and the management of stress, the student perspective is undeveloped and further research into the area would be beneficial.

5.3: Objective Two

To examine the policies and procedures in existence in Athlone Institute of Technology for dealing with and or preventing stress in students

In order to satisfy this research aim, the researcher had to carry out an investigation into the policies and procedures which exist in Athlone Institute of Technology regarding the management of stress and distress. To date, there was no previous research conducted on the student service department of Athlone Institute of Technology.

Each and every workplace and place of study will have their own unique way of dealing with stress and the immediate effects of stress. The society we live in today has led to an increase in our stress levels as many individuals are living life at an extremely fast pace with no down-time or time for reflection. The transition which occurs when an individual progresses to third level education from either secondary school or a work environment can be a stressful experience for many. This often involves developing new friendship, moving out of home and learning to live on a tight budget. Many students find this an exciting transition which sees them gain more independence and mature accordingly but some students experience difficulties while making this transition.
Athlone Institute of Technology has a broad spectrum of students. A large proportion of students belong to the mature student category, in addition there are a large number of international students registered. In order to deal with this diverse environment, Athlone Institute of Technology must provide a service for students who need a ‘soundboard’ to help them reduce the consequences of their distress.

Athlone Institute of Technology provide a range of services for students who require assistance. Namely, these services include the chaplaincy service, the students union, the student access service, PASS, the student counselling service and financial assistance to students who are struggling financially. An essential service which is available in A.I.T is the student counselling service. This consists of one full-time counsellor and two part-time counsellors. Their job relates to providing counselling and advice to students who seek it.

The interviewee informed the researcher that many students who have withdrawn from lectures can be supported in a way which will see them return to class and “gain the rewards they would have if it was a normal year for them”. In cases where the student has withdrawn from the college, the counsellor liaises with the Head of Department involved to ensure that the transition back is as smooth as possible. Other ways which the student services department assist students include helping them manage their time better to ensure all necessary tasks are performed satisfactorily and by providing PASS classes for first year groups. PASS refers to Peer Assisted Student Support and involves past students assisting new students with any course work or personal problems they are experiencing.
Suggestion put forward by members of the student body found that the students did not feel as if enough was being done to assist students. Many students felt that the student union could have a greater presence in relation to stress management. Results from the collection of the primary research indicate that only sixteen per cent of students in Athlone Institute of Technology feel that stress is adequately dealt with.

Seventeen per cent of student respondents had used the service and out of this seventeen per cent, twelve per cent found the service helpful. Overall, the author views this as a positive statistic as the service is operating with one full-time counsellor and two part-time counsellors for the three thousand nine hundred full-time students who attend A.I.T. The current recommended ratios regarding counsellors are one full time counsellor for every one thousand two hundred full time students. If this ratio was to be applied to Athlone Institute of Technology, it would meet that three full-time counsellors would be employed in the institute. The interviewee informed the author that seven and sometimes eight sessions take place every day. Again, it is only recommended that four counselling sessions are carried out in a day to allow for the completion of background work and case management. Again the researcher would like to repeat that considering the lack of resources the service is providing an extremely good service which is assisting students when they need it the most.
5.4: Objective Three

To explore the current level of stress experienced by students in Athlone Institute of Technology

The third objective set out by the author involved gaining an insight into the level of stress which students of Athlone Institute of Technology were experiencing. Previous research from Aherne (2001) and Sax (1997) concluded that students in third-level education were the subject of prolonged periods of stress. Results from the student questionnaire found that twenty-nine per cent of students place themselves in the mid-range of stress, thirty-two per cent of student respondents consider themselves stressed with twenty-one per cent extremely stressed. While it was expected that college students experienced high levels of stress while studying, the author was surprised by the level of students who felt they were ‘Stressed’ and ‘Extremely Stressed’. In total these two categories equate to fifty-three per cent of students. The author views this as an alarming statistic which exceeds the levels of stress reported to be present in higher level educational providers in other parts of the world. According to Choi et al (2011), only nineteen per cent of higher level students felt they were under extreme levels of stress.

Prolonged high levels of stress may result in a wide range of health complications and social problems for the students who are experiencing such high stress levels. Overall, the primary data collected by the researcher would agree with the research completed by Aherne (2001) and Sax (1997) in relation to stress being a realistic problem for existing third
Fifty per cent of students surveyed reported that they feel as if relationships are suffering. This will increase a student’s level of distress. Periods of stress and distress represent a time when a student needs the support of their family and friends the most. Headstrong (2012) indicated that the presence of one supporting adult in the life of a student had an impact in lowering the level of stress experienced.

When questioned about their smoking habits, seventy-three per cent of the students who were smokers stated that they smoked more when stressed. There is a strong possibility that this increased level of smoking will negatively impact the long-term health of the student and may even reduce their life expectancy. It is well publicised that high stress levels increase an individual’s chances of being diagnosed with cancer. If a person is smoking heavily as a way of dealing with stress, they are further increasing their risks of being diagnosed with cancer.

Furthermore, the researcher attempted to examine the satisfaction levels of the students of Athlone Institute of Technology. According to the primary research conducted, only thirteen per cent of students felt satisfied with their lives outside of college. The investigator believes that this lack of satisfaction results from the high stress levels which infringes on their personal lives. The primary research carried out by the author corresponded with Hudd et al (2000) research which found that academic stress can lead to overall life dissatisfaction. Merely five per cent of Athlone Institute of Technology students are completely satisfied with their personal lives. The author perceives this as a concerning statistic. Nine per cent of students are satisfied with how their academic life is currently
progressing while the largest group of respondents (thirty-five per cent) stem from the ‘Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied’ category.

During the course of the interview with the member of the counselling staff, the author asked the student counsellor for her opinion on these student stress statistics present in the institute. In response, the counsellor indicated that in her experience rates of stress among students was higher. “My experience is certainly that it is higher”. The counsellor also expressed that the occurrences of extreme stress is more prominent earlier in the academic year. It often appears to students that there is a “wall of assessments” and no end is in sight. The questionnaire was distributed to students on the 17th April 2013. The interviewee felt that if the student population was surveyed approximately two months earlier, they would have reported higher stress levels as they would be in the process of completing many of their assessments and projects. The author recognises this and would allow for this if the research project was to be repeated.

Generally, it appears from the research that stress is present in Athlone Institute of Technology. As previously stated, stress exists for all individuals and in all places of work and study. When rates of stress are compared to other higher education providers, it seems that the amount of stress in Athlone Institute of Technology is largely higher. The author feels this is due to the greater number of mature students studying at the institute. Mature students are more likely to be juggling childcare and other responsibilities in addition to their academic pressures. They are more likely to recognise toxic levels of stress than traditional students and seek support in relation to it. Analysis of the semi-structured interview identifies
mature students to be higher users of the counselling service. According to the interviewee half of the service users in the academic year 2012/2013 were mature students. “The most predominant would be mature students, we would see about fifty per cent and this has increased dramatically over the last ten years”.

5.5: Objective Four

To identify the various coping strategies used by students of Athlone Institute of Technology

The final objective which the author set out to achieve in relation to this dissertation was to identify the various types of coping mechanisms utilised by the students of A.I.T. Coping refers to an individual’s ability to handle and deal with a negative situation or problem which occurs. Human beings have their own unique way of coping but broadly an individual’s coping usually refers to a ‘fight or flight response’. Another popular response although negative is to avoid the situation completely. This is known as the ‘freeze’ response. An individual’s coping style relates back to both their personality and their perception on life.

Research by Headstrong (2012) found that the majority of coping mechanisms used by students in Ireland were of the negative nature. This report stated that twenty-four per cent of adults used the excessive consumption of alcohol as a method of coping. Twenty-two per cent reported that they abused drugs (mainly cannabis) and eleven per cent resort to self-harming. Positive coping strategies used include talking to friends
and family and listening to music. When results from Athlone Institute of Technology were compared to the results from Headstrong (2012), it appeared that generally the students of Athlone Institute practice a higher proportion of positive coping mechanisms than the national average outlined the report. The most common stressors used by students in A.I.T are as follows; 1) ‘Take time out to clear my mind and de-stress’, 2) ‘Turn to TV or internet’, 3) ‘Eat more or less than usual’, 4) ‘Avoid thinking about the problem/Behave as if everything is alright’. The author was pleased to find that the highest level of respondents (fourteen per cent) chose to take time out to deliberate the issue before choosing a corrective action. Individuals who choose a coping mechanism similar to this are less likely to suffer long-term effects from stress as they are able to cope more efficiently. In contrast, eleven per cent of students in Athlone Institute of Technology choose to avoid the problem by responding they ‘Avoid thinking about the problem/Behave as if everything is alright’. Although it allows the students to ignore the cause of the stress, it does not help to solve the stressor. Often, avoidance strategies led to an increased level of distress as numerous stressors come to the fore at once.

From the student services perspective, it is felt that in recent years, the number of students choosing positive coping mechanisms is increasing. Popular negative strategies which the counsellor is often presented with include “excessive drink and drugging” while others “withdraw and retreat” from their academic studies.

The student counsellor was keen to reiterate that all members and layers of staff at Athlone Institute of Technology are aware that stress exists and are
willing and able to assist any students who are experiencing difficult times. “There are fantastic structures in the college now in terms of support for students”. Athlone Institute of Technology has an overarching ethos which exists to ensure that students are supported in every way possible to allow them to reach their greatest potential.

At present, the student counsellor is working on incorporating a stress management module into courses at Athlone Institute of Technology to assist students who experience difficulties in relation to coping. It is anticipated, in future years that this will have a positive impact on student stress levels. A reduction in stress has the potential not only to benefit an individual in the short-term by boosting their grade point average overall satisfaction in life but also in the long term by improving their health and welfare. Although provisions can be put in place to help reduce stress and distress for students, the author recognises a certain level of stress and fear is necessary to allow students to perform in examinations and assessments.

5.6: Conclusion

The main purpose for the inclusion of this chapter in the dissertation is to discuss the findings uncovered during the course of the research project. The author endeavoured to link the primary research to the previous findings of past academics. Conclusions and recommendations in relation to this research will be included in the following chapter.
Chapter Six

Conclusions and Recommendations

“Sometimes when people are under stress, they hate to think, and it is the time when they most need to think” (William J Clinton)

6.1: Introduction

This final chapter aims to present the author’s conclusions and recommendations for this dissertation. The author will consider the conclusions in conjunction with the research aim and objectives. Furthermore, the author will identify limitations of this study and offer suggestions for further research. The author will conclude this dissertation with a personal reflection.

6.2: Conclusions

The following conclusions have been drawn based on the evidence presented in Chapter Five. Conclusions 6.2.1 through to 6.2.4 relate directly to the objectives of this research and the 6.2.5 is based on the overall aim of the research.

6.2.1: Conclusion One: Objective One

The first objective outlined by the researcher was to critically analyse the existing research surrounding the topic of stress and related topics. The author also set out to formally identify the types of stress evident among students of Athlone Institute of Technology. After completing the research,
the author has concluded that just like every place of work and study, stress is evident in Athlone Institute of Technology. Results gained from the primary research show a slightly higher presence of stress in Athlone Institute of Technology in comparison to other third level institutes but the author has concluded that this is due to the higher proportion of mature students registered in Athlone Institute of Technology in comparison to some of their counterparts. Mature students are more likely to be juggling work and family commitments in addition to academic responsibilities and therefore be affected by higher levels of negative stressors. The research found that the top three stressors which affect students of A.I.T are 1) Examination Stresses, 2) Financial Stressors and lastly 3) Work Overload.

Stress has different effects on all individuals and symptoms become apparent in different ways and at different times depending on factors such as an individual’s perception of the situation and personality. In most circumstances, stress becomes apparent either mentally or physically in a wide range of symptoms.

To conclude, the author has learned that academic stress is largely present in Athlone Institute of Technology. The author feels that the main reason for the increased rate of stress in A.I.T is due to the larger number of mature students registered in the institute.

Overall, the author feels that further research is required into this area to highlight the level of stress that students in Ireland experience. Often, society reflects students in a negative light by portraying them as ‘devil-may cares’ who spend their time drinking or playing the X-box. In reality,
there is a great deal of pressure on third level students. The author views further research as imperative to ensure that the health and wellbeing of students is viewed as a priority

6.2.2: Conclusion Two: Objective Two

The second conclusion the author wishes to develop relates to the existing policies and procedures in Athlone Institute of Technology which assist students who are experiencing stress and stress related conditions.

After completing the research, the author believes that a broad range of high quality resources, policies, strategies and procedures are available to the students who seek support from the service. Aid is provided at both a clinical and non-clinical level within the institute. Financial assistance, peer mentoring and counselling are examples of some of the services available. One important aspect of the service is the multi-level layer of support which is present in the institute. The student counsellor was resolute that stress management and student assistance occurs at all levels in the institute. “The ethos of the college is one which commits to supporting the student in every way possible”.

While worthy services are available to students, one factor which displays room for improvement is the promulgation of the service to students, it appears that many of the students in A.I.T are not aware that such a broad range of quality services are available. Due to a lack of resources, it also appears that some students perceive the service as inadequate. In the author’s opinion, if the student services department was adequately resourced, it would provide a service which could successfully compete
with those offered by much larger organisations. To emphasis, it appears that resourcing is the main downfall and not the structure of the service itself. In order to obey current ratios, the student counselling service needs to employ two additional full-time counsellors. This would not only solve the ‘waiting list problem’ but allow for developmental work to be carried out in order to further improve the services available in the institute.

6.2.3: Conclusion Three: Objective Three

This third objective partially links with objective one of this research project as the amount of stress and the type of stressor are closely related. If an individual experiences a very high level of stress, this generally means that the source of the stress is something which they value greatly. On the other hand if the individual is not overly concerned about an issue, they will not suffer large amounts of stress in relation to it.

From data gained through primary research, it appears that academic stressors are genuinely present in the everyday lives of the students of Athlone Institute of Technology. The students voiced a broad range of issues which they felt increased their level of stress. These primarily related to issues surrounding examinations, group projects and timetables but other factors such the absence of childcare facilities in the institute and lack of parking were also raised.

Overall, this research demonstrates that although students are experiencing high levels of stress, a large proportion of the students of Athlone Institute practice positive coping strategies. A conclusion regarding the coping
mechanisms used by A.I.T students will be specified in the following subsection.

6.2.4: Conclusion Four: Objective Four

The fourth and final objective of this research is to identify the various coping styles and strategies implemented by the students of Athlone Institute of Technology.

After reviewing past research the author found that coping was a complex topic with many different factors contributing to it. Generally, research demonstrates that mainly positive coping strategies are utilised by the student respondents. A large percentage stated that they take time out to consider the problem on hand before taking any action, while others seek advice from family and friends. The interviewee noted that in recent years students have demonstrated more controlled learning styles by choosing to complete their academic duties prior to beginning counselling. “This shows great spirit and determination”. To conclude, it is evident from the research conducted that although students are subject to a high level of stress, they are also an extremely resilient group.

6.2.5: Conclusion: Overall Aim

The overall aim of this research project was to examine the current level and source of stress experienced by the students of Athlone Institute of Technology. The results, discussion and conclusions regarding these findings have been detailed accordingly throughout this dissertation.
After firstly investigating the topic extensively by reviewing past literature, the author then choose a methodology which would allow the collection of sufficient data to satisfy the aim and objectives of the study. Analysis was performed by choosing themes and by using Microsoft Excel.

In summation, the author considers the research project to be successful in gathering and reporting the findings it set out to achieve.

6.3: Recommendations

This research led to the discovery of many interesting findings relating to student trends regarding stress. Unfortunately, due to word count limitations, the author has decided to expand on the one which is most prominent in relation to this project.

The ultimate recommendation which the author would like to propose refers to the shortfall in resources at Athlone Institute of Technology in relation to the student services department.

The author recognises that this is largely out of the control of the management of A.I.T as there have been extensive cutbacks to the majority of the student services department in many educational providers worldwide. A combination of the global recession and other increasing demands on resources has resulted in a major lack of funds for imperative services.

It is predicted that in future years, more funds will become available to develop student services departments. The researcher would like to reiterate the importance of the student services in any education institute, but in particular Athlone Institute of Technology as it has a larger percent of
non-traditional students. In addition, new courses are coming on stream which will in-turn result in a greater level of student service users.

Overall, the student services department is performing well and the author envisages this success will continue for many years to come.

6.4: Limitations

In addition to the research limitations already discussed in chapter three of this dissertation, the author also experienced the following restrictions when completing this research project.

*Time Constraints:* The author felt that fully exhaustive and comprehensive research could not take place as the time allocated to the completion of the project was limited. If more time was available, the researcher would have liked to conduct a comparison study between an Institute of Technology and a University. This would allow the differences and similarities between both establishments to become evident.

*One Interviewee:* The fact that the author only conducted one interview opened up the possibility to bias as only the opinion of one professional counsellor was documented. The author made attempts to gain access to at least one other counsellor. This was unsuccessful. While the author was overjoyed to be given access to the student counselling service and feels that the insight provided by the student counsellor was invaluable and contributed greatly to this research, the author recognises that using the opinion of just one counsellor is a limitation.
The Definition of Stress: Stress is a very complex and subjective issue. Finding and agreeing on a definition which fits everyone is impossible as all individuals are moved by different stressors and all individuals experience different symptoms from stress and the related illnesses. For this reason, the author wishes to highlight that some respondents may have perceived the topic of stress and stress management as slightly different as intended by the researcher. The author tried to eliminate this by both stating a definition of stress on the student questionnaire and building a question in the interview around the same definition.

6.5: Suggestions for Future Research

The author believes that there is a wealth of potential in this topic and related areas. The topic in question is very current and one in which the author perceives as worthwhile investigating.

There are many alternative routes which could be investigated. Samples of the further research that the author would like to explore in the future are outlines below;

The Suicide Aspect: Unfortunately suicide is becoming a very common occurrence in our everyday lives especially among the young male population. Previous research has concluded that suicide and toxic levels of stress as well as mental illnesses has contributed to this increase.

The author would love to explore this topic further in the future but decided to omit research questions relating to this issue in order to ensure the response rate was not negatively affected. The author felt that probing
students about suicide may upset or lead them to become distressed. The author did not want to cause any upset during the completion of the research.

The author feels that the correct way to approach this sensitive issue would be to carry out the research from a distance. In the author’s opinion, students may feel that although confidentiality has been guaranteed that their identity may still be discovered. This would result in the collection of data which would display an inaccurate picture of the situation. The student imagines that if a country wide study was to preformed this would result in a more accurate reflection.

**Mental Health of Males:** This study uncovered a concerning reality that men do not share their feelings and thoughts with others. The student counsellor revealed that approximately five per cent of the students she sees are male and that only two per cent of the students in the engineering department (predominately male) use the counselling service provided to A.I.T students.

Overall, it appears that men carry the burden of their stress levels in silence. It pains the author to think that there are students in Athlone Institute of Technology who feel that the service could help them with the issues worrying them but because of their gender decide not to make an appointment. Undesirably, a stigma surrounding stress, distress, depression and mental illnesses as a whole still exists in our society. The author feels that although we have come a long way on this matter, there is still room for improvement.
The Excessive Consumption of Alcohol and Drug Abuse: In a society which depends strongly on alcohol to solve their problems, the author has an interest into gaining an insight into the trends regarding the quantity of alcohol consumed by students in higher level education. This release gained from excessive drinking is only temporary and often leads to more distress for individuals.

In addition, the availability of drugs is at an all-time high and the volume of people who use drugs is rapidly increasing. The majority of small towns and villages are now inflicted with drugs. Another worrying statistic surrounding this subject is the amount of Class A drugs available and the growing number who are becoming dependant on them. Sadly this is a reality which must be dealt with by the student services of both second and third level education providers around Ireland. A true reflection on the consequence of this problem will only become evident in the coming years and the author feels that this is an aspect which would be interesting to be involved in researching.

6.6: Personal Reflection

This research project is the first major piece of primary research to be completed by the author. Its completion presented the author with many new experiences. This experience was challenging but worthwhile as it allowed the author to work with a variety of people. This is one aspect of the dissertation which the author thoroughly enjoyed as the author has a high level of interest in people and sociology in general.
The author feels that completing this research project has awakened a desire within to partake in additional research in the future. Furthermore, the completion of this dissertation allowed the researcher to acquire a deeper knowledge into a topic which will be practical in the workplace. The author envisages that this research will assist her in her job search as it is practical and covers an area which relates to all workplaces and indeed all individuals. Choosing a topic which was of deep interest made it easier to complete the research; even though at times it was laborious there was always an interest in reaching the end result.

As previously stated, this was the first research project to be completed by the author and if the process was to be completed again from scratch minor amendments would be made. If this research was to be started again, the author would outline the topic to make it narrower and more specific as it was difficult at times to expand on all aspects of the project while adhering to the word count. Simply focusing on one school within the institute or comparing two schools such as Business and Engineering would have solved this problem.

When the author received the offer of a place on the Master of Business (MBS) course in July 2012, it created a dilemma as to whether now was the ‘right time’ to continue on to the next stage of education. Having realised that employment was scarce, the author decided to take the leap and progress on to the postgraduate course.

Although it was an extremely challenging year in many ways, the author discovered that challenges bring rewards. Since joining the MBS course,
the author feels that her self-confidence has improved as well as her time management and communication skills. These are all skills which are imperative in the working world.

The author believes that the last twelve months has also presented her with the opportunity to learn a great deal on a personal level. With only six weeks to go to dissertation submission, the author was the victim of a burglary in which both her laptop and thesis back-up was lost along with a large quantity of personal items. Previous to this I would never thought I had the strength or determination to restart the dissertation. While still overcoming the initial shock, the author had to start this thesis again. This was a major learning curve that allowed the author gain an understanding into the many up’s and downs which will occur throughout life.

To summarise, the past twelve months has been a rollercoaster journey but overall the author has no regrets as it provided many opportunities which would never have been available otherwise. The author has truly developed in both a personal and professional capacity. The author would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all staff members at Athlone Institute of Technology for sharing their knowledge and allowing me progress to this stage.
References (Main Body)


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