

Evaluation of Fáilte Ireland's Tourism Learning Networks (TLN) Initiative: Modelling of Best Practice

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Declaration

The author hereby declares that, except where duly acknowledged and referenced, this research study is entirely her own work and has not been submitted for any degree or other qualification in any third level institution in Ireland or abroad.

Jennifer Hussey, June 2009

Abstract

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The tourism learning network (TLN) initiative was developed by Fáilte Ireland as a key component of the tourism board's current five year strategy (Human Resource Development Strategy 2005:2010). The initiative has achieved national coverage, with all learning networks now engaged in their third year of operation. Although internal evaluation of each TLN has been provided for, a more holistic assessment of the TLN initiative had not been addressed, that is, the modelling of 'best practice' for the development and sustainability of a successful TLN. A review of the literature highlights that the literature on learning networks is in its infancy, particularly in the context of tourism; furthermore knowledge regarding 'best practice' is also lacking. Most previous studies are qualitative in nature and focussed on organisational learning, whereas, this study focuses on learning at an individual level. By determining a means of measuring the individual level learning, this study provides insights into the process and content of learning network evaluation, thereby contributing to academic knowledge as it represents an area of research which has received little attention. Furthermore, the study contributes to the substantive knowledge by empirically identifying the key practices that will enhance learning in a learning network context.

Following a review of the literature from the learning and network fields, a conceptual framework was formed to guide the evaluation. In keeping with the underlying social situational school perspective, the framework highlights that: (1) the influence of peer interaction, flexible learning approach, facilitation, and individual characteristics are major determinants of learning, and (2) that self-development, knowledge, skills and managerial capabilities are key measurable learning outcomes. The deterministic focus of the research lent itself to a nomothetic approach; hence, the data was collected via a postal survey sent to all the participants of the 2008 TLN initiative nationwide. The survey received a 55% response rate. Small group sizes, however, severely restricted the scope for comparative data analysis across the six TLN regions. Therefore, the comparative data analysis was conducted on a split between those participants whose TLN was facilitated by an academic institution and those whose facilitation was consultancy-backed.

The key findings of the research indicated that individual characteristics, the flexible learning approach and the facilitation climate were the major determinants of learning in the TLN. In addition, significant differences were discovered between the two types of facilitator, in terms of their participants' motivation, the peer interaction and the perceptions of the delivery methods. In contrast, the levels of learning, content and facilitation (climate and learner involvement) were not significantly different. The findings further indicated that while the participants reported learning from the initiative, thus meeting Fáilte Ireland's strategic learning aims, the participants' levels of learning could be considerably improved. The thesis concluded with the development of a 'best practice' model for future initiatives.

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List of Abbreviations

ALT	Adult Learning Theory
CoPs	Communities of Practice
IT	Information Technology
ITIC	Irish Tourist Industry Confederation
M	Mean
MANOVA	Multivariate Analysis of Variance
NoP	Network of Practice
PR	Public Relations
RBV	Resource Based View
SD	Standard Deviation
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
TLN	Tourism Learning Network
U.N.	United Nations
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor
WTO	World Tourism Organization

Glossary of Terms

Action Learning: Promotes the use of real world situations or problems; encourages the use of groups to challenge and question each others' preconceptions, and the opening up of dialogue which is driven by the search for solutions (Revans, 1982).

Blended learning or hybrid learning: The mixed mode of instruction combining traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning (Olapiriyakil and Scher, 2006).

Communities of Practice: This term refers to groups of people joined together through common activities and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities (Wenger, 1998). It involves shared practices that are understood and renegotiated by its members.

Development: A process focused on the individual participant's potential and their future role in the workplace, with the goal of learning or improving interpersonal, intrapersonal, problem-solving and decision-making skills (Garavan, 1997).

Experiential Learning: A perspective of learning as a cyclical process whereby "experience is translated into concepts, which are used as guides in the choice of new experiences" (Kolb, 1976, p. 21).

Exploration Learning: An element of experiential learning incorporating such behaviours as experimentation, trialling, innovation and risk-taking (Holmqvist, 2004).

Facilitator: The anchoring organisation providing the instruction in the TLN.

Flexible learning: A two-way flow of knowledge and reflects the level of interaction possible between the instructor and the participant (Goode et al., 2007).

Human capital: The stock of an individual's skills and knowledge (Baum and Devine, 2005).

Information: Includes facts and symbols, is the part of knowledge which can be easily transformed and transmitted (Lundvall, 1998; Kogut and Zander, 1992).

Knowledge: A complex product of learning, the result of the interpretation or processing of information through the mind of the individual (Huber, 1991; Alavi and Leidner, 1999)

Learning: "Changes in personal and collective forms of practice, skill and knowledgeability" (Sawchuk, 2003, p. 30) "that is dependant on social interaction with others" (Enos et al., 2003, p. 379).

Learning network: Learning networks "are based on collective learning built on the foundation of adult learning (Knowles, 1973) and action learning theories (Marquardt, 2004)" (cf. Bergh, 2008, p. 58).

Learning outcomes: Include knowledge, skills, managerial capabilities and personal self-development (Kraiger et al., 1993).

Metacognition: "The extent to which learners thought about, monitored, and controlled their learning activities" (Klein et al. (2006, p. 673) and is dependent on experiencing a sense of learning.

Motivation to learn: The direction, intensity and persistence of learning-directed behaviour (Colquitt et al., 2000, p. 678).

Networks of Practice: Geographically dispersed networks, generally characterised by ties that are looser than the generally co-located CoPs (Brown and Duguid, 2001).

Non-response Bias: Is present when a “significant number of people in the survey do not respond to the questionnaire and are different from those who do in a way that is important to the study” (Salant and Dillman, 1994, p. 20)

Relational capital: The knowledge about relationships with external collaborators, which is a combination of mutual trust, reciprocal commitment and bilateral information exchange (Erickson et al., 2002; Sarkar et al., 2001).

Relational Embeddedness: The degree to which non-economic and social aspects influence their interactions (Granovetter, 1985).

Resource based view: According to Peteraf (1993) and Barney (1991) this perspective of a business incorporates the assessment of the resources at its disposal and the deployment of these resources to achieve a competitive advantage.

Self-development: The deliberate process of learning from experience about oneself (Honey and Povah, 1986, p. 11).

Self-efficacy: The belief in one’s ability to perform a specific task (Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992, p. 415).

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises: Consist of micro-enterprises of fewer than 10 people, small enterprises of 11-50 people and medium enterprises of 51-250 people.

Social capital: “The set of resources, tangible or virtual, that accrue to a corporate player through the player’s social relationships, facilitating the attainment of goals” (Leenders and Gabbay, 1999, p. 3).

Tacit Knowledge: Describes how “We can know more than we can tell”, referring to that knowledge which is often personal, intuitive and difficult to formulate (Polanyi, 1966, p.4).

Training: A planned learning experience designed to bring about permanent change in an individual's knowledge, attitudes or skills (Campbell et al., 1970; Noe, 1986).

Tourism Learning Network: A multi-modular initiative built on networking principles, dedicated to providing learning opportunities for small and medium sized enterprises within the tourism sector.

Variance Inflation Factor: Indicates how much the variance of the regression coefficient is inflated by multi-collinearity problems (Hair et al., 1995).

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The current study examines the evaluation of Fáilte Ireland's Tourism Learning Network (TLN) initiative. This chapter serves as an introduction to the research, examining the key elements of interest. First of all, the background and rationale for the research are outlined with respect to the Irish tourism context. Then the level of analysis is discussed, in addition to the contribution and parameters of the study. The latter part of the chapter concerns an explanation of the overall study objectives and an outline of the methodology employed to answer the research questions. The chapter concludes with a review of the structure of the dissertation.

1.2 Irish Tourism Context

The U.N. World Tourism Organisation's (WTO) definition of tourism is "the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business, and other purposes" (WTO, 1995, p. 2). However, this definition fails to encompass the mix of businesses participating in tourism. This is unsurprising considering Sundbo et al. (2003, p. 2) argued that "it is difficult to delimit the nature of the tourist industry", highlighting that "different analyzes show the existence of marginal branches, which may or may not be classified as tourism (e.g. theatres, retailing and transport)".

Within this context, recent figures estimate that the Irish tourism industry contributes nearly €3 billion per annum in tax revenues to the exchequer and supports 250,000

full-time, part-time and seasonal jobs throughout the country (ITIC, 2008). Fáilte Ireland, the national tourism development authority, plays a key role in the support of this vibrant industry as their remit includes investment in the development of the human resource capability within the industry, in addition to their role in promoting Ireland as a tourism destination (Fáilte Ireland, 2007).

However, Ireland as a destination on the periphery of Europe has many challenges to face including the increasing global competition from new destinations in a tighter market, considerable changes in tourist expectations and adverse exchange rates causing value for money concerns (ITIC, 2008). Furthermore, the Irish tourism industry has undergone major changes in the last decade, precipitated by major international crises, namely 9/11, and more recently the international economic downturn. These international economic conditions are further aggravated by domestic circumstances in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger, such as high labour costs, energy prices and local authority charges, which provide a challenging business environment for tourism firms.

Travers et al. (2004) highlighted that the Irish tourism industry consists of mainly small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs¹) that are predominantly Irish owned. The scale of the average operation presents particular trading conditions and management practices not seen in larger operations. The SME owner-manager often has lifestyle objectives which compete with business objectives, for example, business growth may be foregone for the sake of time with the family (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). Further, the SME operation is commonly thought to be less strategically oriented, with practical operational issues taking precedence (Anderson and Boocock, 2002). Similarly, O'Leary and Deegan (2005, p. 428) highlighted the need for management to be multi-skilled and flexible, as they are expected to become involved in general operations in addition to performing more executive functions, thereby reflecting the 'hands on' nature of the industry. The scale of the average business also dictates that they have different problems, solutions and environments

¹ There is inconsistency in the literature regarding the definition of an SME; however this study follows Lawless et al. (2000) in considering SMEs to consist of micro-enterprises of fewer than 10 people, small enterprises of 11-50 people and medium enterprises of 51-250 people.

than their larger counterparts (Leitch and Harrison, 1999). Therefore, the SME owner-managers require learning opportunities developed specifically to reflect their needs (Storey and Westhead, 1997). Moreover, the SME owner-manager is unlikely to be interested in education and training for its own sake (Gibb, 1983). Indeed, feedback from the SME owner-managers indicated that they wanted training that was “short, snappy, relevant and local”². The next section provides further insight into the background surrounding this study.

1.3 Background to the Study

This study originates in the context of growing interest in the importance of human capital in the success of tourism enterprises (Baum, 2002). Furthermore, Fáilte Ireland’s policy document “Competing through People: A Human Resource Development Strategy for Irish Tourism 2005-2010” identified the benefits beyond the individual firm-level, to the wider economy of investing in the skills and knowledge of people in tourism. The tourism learning network (TLN) initiative was established by Fáilte Ireland in direct response to research indicating that the learning needs of the SMEs in the Irish tourism industry were not being met (Fáilte Ireland, 2006)³. Fáilte Ireland’s strategic aim was to meet the industry’s learning needs, highlighting the development of the SME owner-managers’ managerial capabilities in particular.

At the time the TLNs were established, ‘learning network’ was not a concept people were familiar with nor was it in common usage in the Irish tourism industry. Utilising general guidelines from Fáilte Ireland, thirty-three TLNs have been established in Ireland by two main types of facilitator (the providers of the learning initiative were either an academic institute or a business consultant); further,

² Fáilte Ireland’s policy document “Competing through People: A Human Resource Development Strategy for Irish Tourism 2005-2010.”

³ Based on research conducted by Price Waterhouse Cooper on their behalf; further Fáilte Ireland’s strategy document, *Tourism Product Development Strategy 2007-2013*, recognised that SME managers were reluctant to take part in off-the-job training and development due to time pressures and the lack of management cover in the business.

facilitators were free to customise the learning to suit the TLN's individual participant requirements. The foregoing resulted in a cross-standardisation of some TLN components as well as a variation between TLNs on delivery methods and other initiative elements. The standard components nationwide are as follows: (1) group meetings facilitated by professional facilitators, (2) residential learning events, (3) workshops on information technology (IT), finance, marketing and public relations (PR), (4) mentoring support from industry experts, and (5) regional conference participation. The differences identified between the facilitators range from variations in emphasis on a particular delivery method, for example the extensive use of mentoring used by particular facilitators, to the use of an accreditation scheme in some of the academically backed TLNs. There are also variations between TLNs facilitated by the same facilitator as the initiative content is adapted to suit the participants in the group. The foregoing indicates that each TLN provides a multi-faceted learning arena (Reason, 1999), embracing a variety of techniques which bring the participants together in a group setting or individually to develop and learn. The TLN incorporates a wide range of practices, from the formal workshops to the less formal social events, such as dinner and an overnight stay, provided as part of the residential module (as illustrated in Figure 1.1.). In the next section the key terms are clarified in the context of this study.

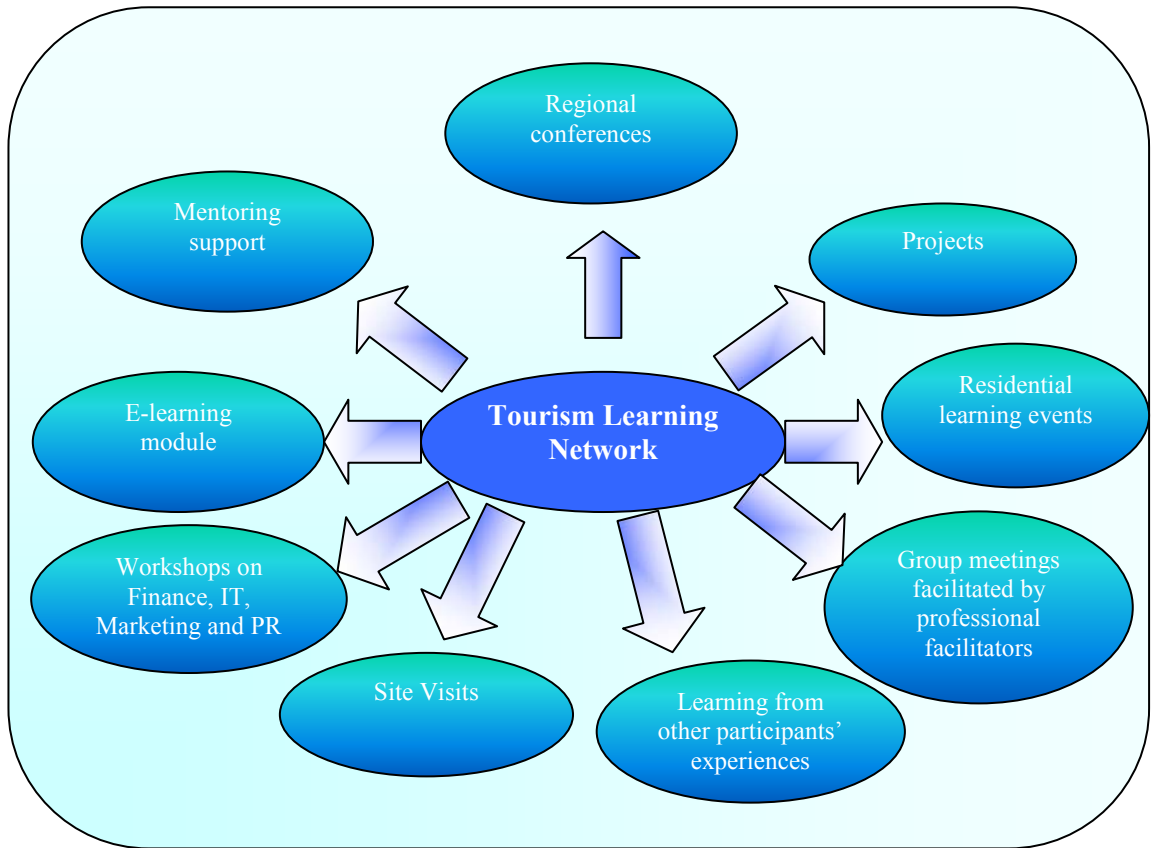


Figure 1.1: The Tourism Learning Network

Source: Author; adapted from Fáilte Ireland literature

1.4 Key Terminology

The meaning of a few key terms requires clarification, as Garavan (1997, p. 39) highlighted an issue in the literature with regard to the use and sometimes misuse of some of the key terms, as training, development and learning “are indeed synonymous to some”. For the purposes of this study, learning is defined as “changes in personal and collective forms of practice, skill and knowledgeability” (Sawchuk, 2003, p. 30) “that is dependent on social interaction with others” (Enos et al., 2003, p. 379). Others have argued that learning is the “lasting change in capability that will be applied in the workplace” (Kelliher and Henderson, 2006, p. 521⁴), reflecting the emphasis on the practical application of learning preferred by SME owner-managers (Choueke and Armstrong, 1998; Sense, 2008). In the TLN

⁴ Kelliher and Henderson (2006) cite Huber (1991) and Mayo (2004) in developing this definition of learning.

context, there are opportunities for learning, training and development. Training is defined as a planned learning experience designed to bring about permanent change in an individual's knowledge, attitudes, or skills (Campbell et al., 1970; Noe, 1986). Garavan (1997) identified development as a process focussed on fulfilling the individual participant's potential and their future role in the workplace, generally with the goal of learning or improving interpersonal, intrapersonal, problem-solving and decision-making skills. Having clarified the meaning of the key terms, the focus and level of enquiry for the study are described in the next section.

1.5 Level of Enquiry

A review of the extant learning literature identified that there are three possible levels of enquiry in learning: the individual level, the group level, and the organisational level (Huber, 1991; Crossan et al., 1999). Organisational learning, according to Anderson and Boocock (2002), is based on the premise that an organisation is capable, in its own right, of collective thinking, with learning by an individual dissipating to nothing if it is not shared at a group level and embedded in the routines and procedures of the organisation. This concern for transferring, embedding and sharing new knowledge is prevalent across the group and organisational learning literature. Furthermore, organisational learning has been recognised as an alternative source of competitive advantage for the firm (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994), particularly in terms of developing the firm's ability to react to their environment. However, Hwang (2003) argued that only people are able to learn, although firms may have knowledge, skills and expertise they are embodied in individuals.

Individuals may also learn within a group, and much recent research has focussed on group learning (Wilson et al., 2007). Wilson et al. (2007, p. 1042) differentiated individual learning from group learning by their argument that

it still is individual learning unless shared by members of the group. If an individual leaves the group and the group cannot access his or her learning, the group has failed to learn.

Indeed, the group learning literature highlights the criticality of sharing at this level of learning, hence Argote et al.'s (2001, p. 370) assertion that group learning represents "the activities through which individuals acquire, share and combine knowledge through experience with one another". The process is further described as the practice of 'sense making' (Edmondson, 1999) through which the group members develop shared assumptions and beliefs, or collective mind (Weick and Roberts, 1993). Group learning is further stimulated by reflection, lively dialogue between participants, experimenting⁵, and receiving feedback (Edmondson, 1999). The group literature is particularly relevant in terms of explaining the relationships between the individuals which stimulate learning, and in particular peer-to-peer learning (which is discussed further in Section 2.6 on peer interaction).

Despite the foregoing, the unit of analysis in this study is the individual learning because learning in its most basic form involves individual learning. Indeed, it is perceived that, similar to social capital theory⁶, an individual's learning aggregates to their situated network (cf. Burt 2005, p. 44). In the context of evaluating a learning network, the literature indicates that the individual level of learning allows the collection of specific data which will reveal patterns of behaviour on a group level⁷ while recognising the impact of individual characteristics. In narrowing the focus to the individual's learning, the role played by the learner is clarified. Furthermore, it is recognised that the micro-business nature of many TLN participants implies that the individual's learning closely parallels the enterprise's learning⁸. The interest in individual level learning is pursued further in the next section, within the context of the learning network, particularly as the network literature indicates that the development of networks offers the small business owner-manager an opportunity to broaden the scope of his/her knowledge and learn from other firms.

⁵ Experimenting was referred to as trial and error learning by Argyris and Schön (1978)

⁶ Social capital, as defined by Cohen and Prusak (2001, p.4), consists of the "stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding and the shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible".

⁷ That is, grouping all participants receiving the same intervention

⁸ Indeed, if people are the basic unit of learning (Crossan et al., 1999), the ultimate goal is to 'feed-forward' individual learning from the individual to the organisation (cf. Kelliher and Henderson, 2006; Cohen and Levinthal, 1990).

1.6 Learning Networks

Tinsley and Lynch (2007, p. 15) defined a network as “a set of relationships between individuals and groups to achieve a particular purpose”, whereas Human and Provan (1997, p. 372) defined SME networks as

intentionally formed groups of small and medium-sized, profit-oriented companies in which the firms: are geographically proximate, operate within the same industry, potentially sharing inputs and outputs, and undertake direct interactions with each other for specific business outcomes.

A small firm’s resource poverty can be overcome through the harnessing of relational capital achieved through networking (Julien, 2007). Furthermore, the seminal work by Hanssen-Bauer and Snow (1996) on the establishment of Nordvest Forum, a network which focalised learning, legitimised the concept of learning through networks. Bessant et al. (2003) described learning as a ‘by-product’ of network activities and they argue that shared learning is a primary feature of learning networks. The foregoing establishes the merit of learning in a network context.

However, there are many difficulties in evaluating these learning networks, as in the training literature, various academics have bemoaned the absence of theory in training research and in particular research into the evaluation arena (Campbell, 1971; Goldstein, 1980; Latham, 1988; Wexley, 1984; Kraiger et al., 1993)⁹. Similarly in the learning literature, several major difficulties are inherent in learning network evaluation: (1) many aspects of the learning network process are intangible (Henderson, 1998), (2) most of the benefits arising from the reshaping of an enterprise’s capabilities are intangible (Bessant et al., 2003), and (3) research on the evaluation of learning networks is in its infancy, particularly in the context of tourism, in addition to which, (4) knowledge regarding ‘best practice’ is also particularly lacking (Bessant et al., 2003). The next section develops these gaps in the literature further.

⁹ Indeed Kraiger et al. (1993) highlighted the use of the terms training evaluation and training effectiveness interchangeably has led to confusion (for example in Ostroff, 1991).

1.7 Research Contribution

It is anticipated that this study will make major contributions to both theory and practice. The major theoretical contribution of this study is to the evaluation of learning networks – as mentioned previously, research in this area is extremely scarce and even scarcer in the tourism and Irish context of this study. It is expected that this study will provide an increased understanding of the measurement of learning in a learning network context. Related to this, is the expectation that this study will extend previous research on learning outcomes. This increased understanding also extends to the antecedents to learning examined, in particular testing constructs associated with learning in other settings assessed for their merit in the learning network context. In addition, the examination of the provision of a multi-modular initiative by two groups of facilitators, will contribute to learning and training theory. Furthermore, this study has important implications for theory considering the impact of individual characteristics, the flexible learning approach, peer interaction and the facilitator on individual learning in a network environment¹⁰.

In examining the individual learning resulting from the TLN initiative, this study differentiates itself from many of the previous studies on learning networks, as in the past they have primarily been focussed on learning at an organisational level (for example, Kelliher and Henderson, 2006; Foley et al. 2006) rather than the individual level – which is centralised in this study. Studies such as the aforementioned have added to the literature in qualitative terms, providing a basis of understanding of what this study aims to expand, by determining a means of measuring the learning, and furthermore identifying the key practices that will enhance the learning. Indeed, while there have been studies in the past on the barriers to learning in the SME context (Lange et al. 2000; Kelliher and Henderson, 2006), this study is concerned with providing recommendations to Fáilte Ireland in a model of learning network ‘best practice’. Furthermore, this study extends previous research in the evolving literature on SME owner-manager learning, specifically adding to the extant

¹⁰ These aspects are expected to contribute to learning and are discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

knowledge in an Irish context. It is perceived that following examination of the intricacies of the pedagogy, results from this study will be of benefit to practitioners and academics alike for future initiatives. In the next chapter, the extant literature is consulted to formulate the key variables of interest with respect to the research objectives outlined in the next section.

1.8 Research Objectives

Based on the foregoing, the following are this study's objectives:

- To establish the major determinants of learning in a learning network context.
- To establish if Fáilte Ireland's strategic learning aims are being met through the TLN initiative.
- If the learning aims are not being met, to propose adaptations to ensure they are achieved.
- To develop a TLN 'best practice' model.

As indicated, this study is located within the context of the Irish tourism industry, specifically focussed on the SME owner-managers from this sector, who participated in Fáilte Ireland's 2008 TLN nationwide programme. While it would be of interest to investigate those SME owner-managers who decided not to participate, it is not within the remit of this study. Furthermore, this is a cross-sectional study of the 2008 participants' experiences, as the timeframe of the study did not allow for a longitudinal study (pre- and post TLN examination). Having presented the study objectives, the next section addresses the structure of the thesis.

1.9 Thesis Outline and Structure

The thesis begins by introducing the research problem and the context of the study. Furthermore, this first chapter presents the level of enquiry and aspects pertinent to addressing the research objectives.

Given the importance of developing a solid theoretical basis for the study, Chapter Two will review the major schools of thought in relation to the concept of learning, before providing a rationale for the theoretical school chosen. The chapter proceeds with an examination of literature relevant to the antecedents to learning in a learning network context, highlighting the role of key individual characteristics and peer interaction in the learning process. The latter part of this chapter will discuss the role of the flexible learning approach before identifying the learning outcomes of relevance to this study.

Chapter Three presents the research methodology beginning with an outline of the major discourse in the philosophical domain. This review will address the alternative approaches concerning ontology, epistemology and methodology before justifying the selections made. Drawing from the literature, the research hypotheses on learning are formulated and presented. This chapter will discuss the method chosen and rationale underlying the choice of a postal survey as this study's primary data collection instrument. The chapter will then detail the application of the methods employed, including the measurement items chosen and efforts to improve the response rate. The relevant evaluative criteria aligned with the quantitative approach will then be presented. Finally, the stages in the data collection process are outlined.

Chapter Four will detail the study's realised response rate and testing for non-response bias. The key characteristics of the respondent sample will be presented. The results of testing the reliability of the measurement items employed in the survey will then be detailed, highlighting any items removed. The latter half of the chapter will introduce the data analysis methods utilised, their underlying data assumptions and the requisite tests to ensure the data is in compliance. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the key data findings together with the results from testing the study's hypotheses.

Chapter Five will discuss the data findings from the previous chapter with regard to the existing literature. The findings in response to the hypotheses will be examined,

in addition to the findings from the regressions, with reference made to both previous studies and areas for future research. Conclusions will be drawn from the research leading to proposals for ‘best practice’.

Chapter Six will present the major contributions of the study and highlight future research arising from the results. The latter part of the chapter will address the limitations of the research, and detail the generalisability of the results to other fields of interest. Ultimately, the chapter will present the wider implications of the study.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the subject matter of the study, namely, the evaluation of Fáilte Ireland’s tourism learning network initiative. The extant literature regarding learning networks, highlighted areas of concern in their evaluation. Although flexibility is a desirable component of the TLNs, the variant nature of the TLNs represents a particular challenge to assessing the TLN initiative. The nation-wide assessment of the TLNs will involve, to some degree, a comparison of the different methodologies, facilitation and level of compliance with Fáilte Ireland’s learning aims. From Fáilte Ireland’s perspective, a key outcome of this study is to propose a ‘best practice’ model for the development and maintenance of a successful TLN.

A major challenge is to determine the components involved in assessing the TLNs because a review of the literature indicates that such a framework has not been developed prior to this. Hence it is expected that this work will make a significant contribution to substantive knowledge.

This chapter provided a definition of some of the key terms from the literature with a view to clarification of the scope and context. The next chapter develops the theoretical underpinnings of the research which will be used as a basis for the development of a conceptual framework to guide the study.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the concepts relevant to the learning network context, drawing from both the learning and network literature, in addition to highlighting certain examples and anomalies from the SME literature. Of specific interest to this study is the prior research in the educational psychology arena, in particular, research conducted into the antecedents to learning, the factors that influence the levels of learning and aid in establishing the prerequisites for fostering and promoting learning outcomes for adult learners. The literature is reviewed to highlight the major determinants of learning in this context and their relevance and inter-relationships are discussed, the attention then switches to the requirement to assess learning outcomes in order to ensure an effective evaluation of learning.

This chapter aims to explore the literature with a view to explaining theories of interest, highlighting issues where there is a lack of consensus, and identifying where there is a paucity of literature. The concept of learning has been defined in various ways by academics with differing theoretical perspectives, due to the complexity of the process (Hwang, 2003). This lack of consensus in the literature regarding the definition of learning (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999) and the multi-dimensional nature of this construct is explored. In the following section, each of these theoretical perspectives will be reviewed, in order to ascertain their relevance in this context, followed by the theoretical perspective and definition which will govern the study.

2.2 Introduction to the Schools of Thought

According to Ellström (1997), the literature shows a lack of theory-driven research concerning the related fields of adult education and vocational education and training. The individual psychology field has been the source of most of the current understanding of learning and has lead academic interest into the processes, antecedents and strategies for implementing and improving learning. There are a variety of schools of thought and research which add to the literature, both in terms of their definitions of learning, their understanding of the processes surrounding learning and their various perspectives on learning. As Shuell (1986) pointed out, much of this early research was from the behavioural tradition, with a shift towards cognitive principles in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In more recent times there has been a further shift, this time towards a humanist perspective, which, while accepting many of the components of the previous two schools, emphasises the role and value of learning in self-actualisation. Furthermore, the growing interest in the role of others in the context of learning has lead to the development of the social/situational school. The following subsections review each of the schools of thought and their contribution to this area of study.

2.2.1 The Behaviourist School

The psychology pioneers in the beginning of the last century primarily studied learning in animals. While Skinner's (1978) work focussed on reinforcement, Pavlov's (1927) research established the conditioning, cause and effect or stimulus-response, in animal testing. Their school has become known as the behaviourist school which is predominantly interested in the physical manifestations of learning in the response to stimuli. The underlying assumption inherent in this viewpoint is that humans are capable of reacting to their environment - that their responses can be very complex, but that such complex responses are combinations of simpler responses; furthermore, that at the most basic level, the response is automatic, or a reflex, with no thought before engaging in the action (Slife and Williams, 1995). The behaviourists explained how, provided there was contiguity, sufficient frequency

and reinforcement; the link between the stimulus and the response was created through a process of conditioning. This school of thought stressed the use of reinforcement of desired responses and rewards, for example, through trial and error learning. As the name reflects, the behaviourists viewed learning as a change in behaviour due to external factors, reasoning that all behaviour can be explained without the need to consider internal mental states or consciousness (Watson, 1924). Competency-based education and skill development and training are most closely associated with this school, with the emphasis placed on external stimuli in the environment prompting learning (Kramlinger and Huberty, 1990). Essential to the behaviourist viewpoint is the argument that research should concern itself solely with things that are observable, because only observable things can be studied scientifically (Slife and Williams, 1995). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, this rigid deterministic stance was questioned by academics and researchers who offered alternative insights into the source of complex behaviours; this era has become known as the cognitive revolution (Slife and Williams, 1995).

2.2.2 The Cognitivist School

This school's theorists, including Piaget (1967) and Gagné (1965), established the concept of learning as incorporating internal changes in understanding, information processing, memory and perception. The cognitivist school developed in response to the perceived neglect by the behaviourists to recognise the internal mechanisms involved in learning, insisting that humans were not programmed animals (Vygotsky, 1978). Many have argued that human behaviour is too complex to be explained through the simple stimulus-response perspective advocated by the behaviourists, for example, Chomsky's (1957) determination that language learning was more like following rules than reinforcement (Slife and Williams, 1995). Rebuking the claim of the behaviourists that the internal state of mind cannot be seen and, therefore, was not worthy of merit, the cognitivists argued that learning involved changes to the individual's mental models, and their associations between knowledge changed as a result of learning. The cognitive school maintained that in identifying the changes in the mindset undergone during the learning process, these mental links, schemas or

associations highlight the mechanisms involved in this process (Piaget, 1972). This interest in the mental links leads to a predominant focus on structuring the learning content in order to maximise the potential learning. Further, Gagné (1965) added much to the learning literature in terms of the principles of instructional design.

This school also introduced the process of experiential learning which was developed by Kolb (1984). His learning cycle model (Figure 2.1) proposes that learning occurs in a sequential, cyclical manner, starting with a concrete experience, making observations based on the experience, forming concepts based on those reflections and testing those ideas in new situations. The cognitive psychologist paradigm dictated that problem-solving is the result of the deployment of cognitive structures to reach a solution (Smith, 2003). More recently, a further school of thought has entered the arena, namely the humanist school, promoting a more personalised approach to learning, reflecting a move towards adapting the learning process and environment to each individual's needs.

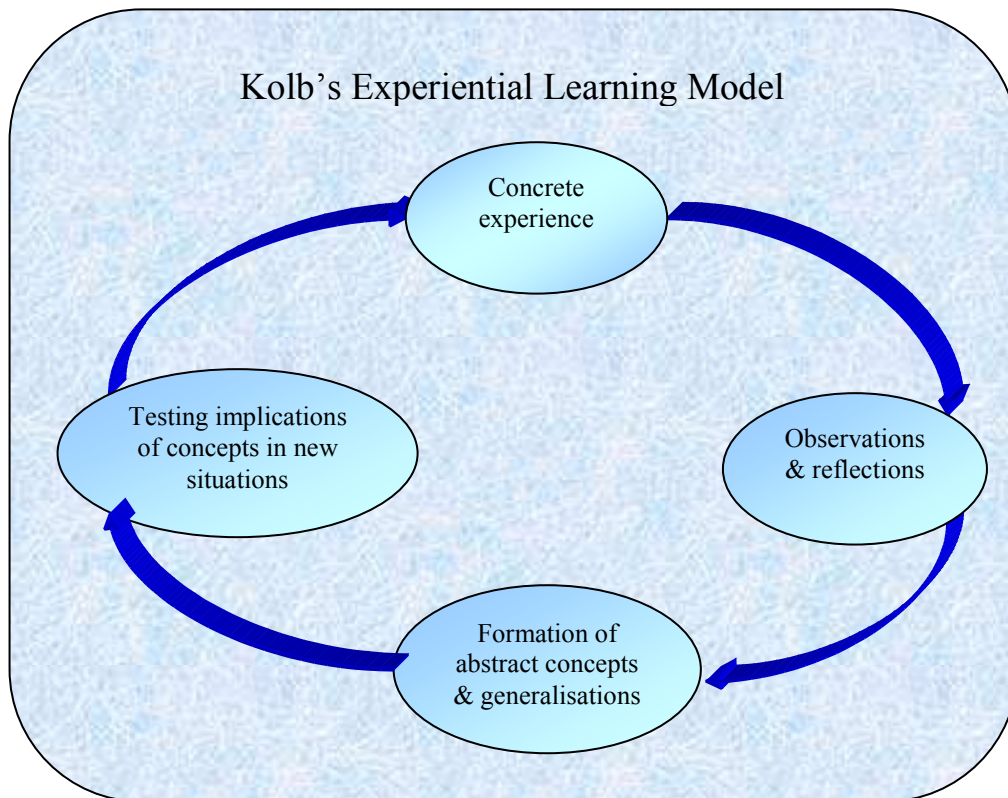


Figure 2.1 Kolb's (1976) Learning Cycle

Source: Kolb (1976, p. 22)

2.2.3 The Humanist School

In contrast to the two previous approaches, the humanist school perceived that learning is a personal endeavour to improve oneself. Led by Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1970), this perspective proposed that real learning is what one discovers for oneself, through extracting lessons from the learner's own insight and reflection on experience. The humanist school recognised that each individual learns in a distinct manner, with diverse learning needs, and that each individual reacts differently depending on their environment. Their position argued in favour of student-centred learning, focussed on each learner's unique affective and cognitive needs. This orientation conceptualises learning as a personal act to fulfil potential and is associated with a move towards personal self-development; a key theory from this school is Adult Learning Theory (ALT).

A major ALT document mapping the application of these humanistic principles is “The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species”, wherein Knowles (1973) developed a model of adult education entitled andragogy. His model highlighted that adult learning is distinct from the traditional pedagogy employed for facilitating learning in children. This new approach to learning and ALT made a point of recognising the experience which adult learners bring with them to any learning intervention, which Knowles (1973, p. 10) referred to as a ‘rich resource’. The andragogical model assumed that adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know something to become more effective in some aspect of their lives. Whereas the behaviourists contended that behaviour is controlled by environmental influences, the humanists argued that human beings have the freedom to make decisions and choose behaviours in order to fulfil their personal needs (Maslow, 1965). Indeed, in discussing the humanist school, “the key concepts that are emphasized in this approach are freedom and autonomy, trust, active cooperation and participation, and self-directed learning” (Spurgeon and Moore, 1997, p. 11). Specifically, Knowles (1973) advised that the learner be involved in decision-making regarding new learning, identify their own development needs, and be self-directed so as to participate actively in the planning and evaluation of their own training. This learner participation was advocated by a further school of interest, the social/situational orientation, as discussed in the following section.

2.2.4 The Social/Situational School

The advent of social learning theory, attributed to Bandura (1986) led to the recognition of the role played both by the learning environment and learning from others. This social/situational perspective identified learning as a result of relationships between people, their practices and their environment through socialisation and simple conversation. Sense (2008) argued that social participation and interaction within a practice was essential for knowledge development and learning, highlighting the practical nature of learning as part of everyday life and work. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) proposed that the social/situational school had roots in both the behaviourist and cognitive schools, with the major differences

arising from the recognition of the role of observation and reinforcement through feedback. The observation of others was deemed as an opportunity to learn through modelling processes or ‘vicarious learning’ (Gist, 1987). Furthermore, Gist’s (1989) work identified four component processes that govern this form of learning through modelling as: attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation. This school has made a significant impact on educational thinking, specifically, in the concepts of learning through developing an identity and the role of self-regulation of the learning process (Brown and Duguid, 2000). In particular, on the basis of social learning theory (Bandura, 1997) researchers have suggested that self-efficacy plays a major role in the learning process, which is discussed further in Section 2.3.1. A further distinguishing feature of this school is the function attributed to the context of learning, as Marshall (2008, p. 419) acknowledges “not simply as a container within which activities occur, but as crucially enacted whereby its elements are simultaneously influence on, medium of, and outcome of social activity”.

Other authors from this domain, Lave and Wenger (1991), offered the concept of learning through communities of practice (CoPs), whereby novices on the outskirts of the community learn from observing and interacting with experts. The learning process is described as moving from peripheral participation to a more central participation through exposure to the practices of experts, interacting with them and through opportunities to engage in those practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Learning in the CoPs is recognised as being a social act and demand-driven by the needs within the tightly-knit community (Brown and Duguid, 2000). Communities of practice, have been hailed as the bridge between organisational learning and organisational performance, in particular in terms of the knowledge transfer and competence development aspects they support (Bond, 2006; du Plessis, 2008). This acceptance of the social environment as a source of learning led du Plessis (2008) to propose that CoPs offer a means or platform for knowledge management for the smaller firm. However, by their nature, CoPs require the participant to take time to reflect and discuss opportunities before acting, an attribute which may not match the ‘resource poverty’ perspective (Welsh and White, 1981), and in particular, the time-impooverished SME owner-manager. A further limitation of the CoP environment,

highlighted by Duguid (2005), involved the question of whether the practitioners would be able or willing to share their information (information sharing is discussed further in Section 2.6.2).

Further interest in the literature has focussed on the opportunity for CoPs to be facilitated online, which continues to attract attention in spite of the aforementioned drawbacks; for example, Hung and Nichani (2002) developed the concept of quasi-communities online in recognition of the learning opportunities they provide while accepting their limitations. The difficulty in building social capital online is the major stumbling block (Cohen and Prusak, 2001) and in particular developing trust which will be discussed further in Section 2.6.1. Hence, Brown and Duguid (2001) developed the term, Network of Practice (NoP), to describe those more geographically dispersed networks. These NoPs are generally characterised by ties that are much looser than the generally co-located CoPs, which face different challenges in sharing their knowledge. Wenger (1998) distinguished between CoPs and NoPs, describing how, unlike the networks, the CoPs have an identity which shapes the identities of its members and they actively share practices. In the next section the influence of each of the schools is examined with a view to establishing the theoretical basis for the study.

2.2.5 Governing School of Thought

Having outlined the main schools of thought developed in the literature, the perspective most closely identified with the context of this study is the social/situational tradition. This is in light of this school's emphasis on learning as a practical activity, which reflects the SME owner-managers' preference for immediately applicable learning (Chaston et al., 1999; Lawless et al., 2000), and for results to be concrete to justify the time spent (Clarke et al., 2006). The social/situational school with its roots in the behaviourist school actively pursues an explanation for changes in behaviour and practice, subsequently encouraging the manipulation of the environment to stimulate learning. Indeed, one of the guiding principles in the foundation of the TLNs was that they should result in improvements

in the participants' managerial capabilities, a behaviour-based practical learning outcome.

The social/situational school goes beyond its roots in the cognitive school, appreciating the role of others in learning and encouraging an appreciation of the importance of the context of learning. This acknowledgement of the role of others in the individual learning goes beyond the cognitive school's narrow perspective of learning as the individual cognitive activity involved in the transfer of de-contextualised knowledge. Indeed, the recognition of the potential for vicarious learning made available to the SME owner-manager by bringing them into contact with their peers was a strong motivating force on the original creation and development of the TLNs¹¹.

Whereas the humanist perspective offers valuable insights into the learning process and in particular substantial progress in terms of our understanding of adult learning, the social/situational school also values the development of an identity through learning. Both schools share an appreciation for the pursuit of self-development, as for example, emphasis is placed on developing an identity as part of becoming an insider in the CoPs (Gherardi, 2001). Similarly, both schools recognise the criticality of context and prior experience in the learning process.

Having identified the school of thought most closely aligned with the TLN context, a review of the extant literature identified the following as appropriate for this study: individual characteristics of the learner, the facilitator, flexible learning approach (content and delivery methods) and peer interaction (specifically, trust and information sharing). The following section reviews the individual characteristics highlighted in the literature as having the greatest impact on learning in this context (self-efficacy, motivation to learn and expectations of learning).

¹¹ Fáilte Ireland's "Competing Through People: A Human Resource Development Strategy for Irish Tourism 2005-2010" promoted the principle of collective learning and developing clusters of SMEs.

2.3 Individual Characteristics

A major variable identified in the literature is the impact of individual characteristics in the learning process, hence it features highly in the field of educational psychology (Corno and Snow, 1986). Cronbach and Snow (1977) argued that all learners are different and some of the characteristics where people differ are correlated with learning success. Through the years, various studies have aimed to account for the variations in learning outcomes in order to give a sound theoretical basis for practical approaches and further improve training effectiveness (Noe and Schmitt, 1986; Baldwin and Ford, 1988; Chiaburu and Tekleab, (2005). These previous studies have identified the main individual characteristics, which are determinants affecting learning relevant to the context of this study, as the following: self-efficacy, motivation to learn and expectations of learning. The following sections will justify this selection of determinants in relation to the learning network context, beginning with a review of the literature regarding self-efficacy.

2.3.1 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is seen as a central concept in social learning theory (Bandura, 1997). In a learning context, self-efficacy has been defined by Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992, p. 415) as “the belief in one’s ability to perform a specific task”, which is similar in many respects to Campbell and Kuncel’s (2001) reference to self-efficacy as the belief that one can expand his or her capacity in certain domains. Bouffard-Bouchard (1990, p. 354) following Bandura (1977), distinguished self-efficacy as “assessments of how well one can perform in specific settings”, rather than generalised feelings of control or achievement; this further acknowledges that a person’s performance may vary from situation to situation regardless of their competence levels. It has been determined that individuals with high self-efficacy tend to outperform individuals with low self-efficacy (Taylor et al., 1984; Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990) and, in studies examining self-efficacy and knowledge gain, it has been found that an individual’s self-efficacy influences their learning (Gist et al., 1989; Martocchio and Webster, 1992). Individuals who approach learning secure in

the belief that they are capable of mastering course content are more likely to do so, than their counterparts who do not believe (Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992). Although the magnitude of the correlation may differ across samples that have had different treatments or interventions, a definite correlation has been established (Campbell and Kuncel, 2001).

The foregoing indicates that self-efficacy has an important effect on the design of the initiative, its implementation and the learning outcomes. Further, Colquitt et al. (2000) recommended that self-efficacy be leveraged early in the training process in recognition of its impact on participant engagement. This confirms a similar study by Compeau and Higgins (1995) that ascertained that course structuring should ideally progressively enhance the participant's self-confidence. They further argued that self-efficacy is positively influenced by the encouragement of others, thereby proposing that there is a relationship between peer interaction and individual characteristics. This view supports Bandura's (1997) social aspect of learning which highlighted the link between levels of self-efficacy, self-regulation and referent comparisons, all of relevance in a network context.

2.3.1.1 Self-efficacy as a Learning Outcome

An examination of the learning literature identifies self-efficacy as not just a characteristic that impacts participants' learning but it is also proposed as a learning outcome in itself, for example, Holton et al. (2006) identified improvements in self-efficacy as a learning outcome, reinforcing similar findings of Schmidt and Ford (2003), Gist (1987), Kraiger et al. (1993) and Latham (1989). Following on from this interest in self-efficacy as a learning outcome, Gist and Mitchell (1992) argued for the development of self-efficacy to be a priority in the design of interventions, for example, through mastery experiences, modelling and persuasion¹². Indeed, research by Martocchio and Webster (1992) demonstrated that positive feedback led to increases in self-efficacy with negative feedback having the opposite effect. The

¹² Self-efficacy has also been related to interest and participation in voluntary development activities (Maurer and Tarulli, 1994). Indeed, this construct was also related to development activity in Noe and Wilk's (1991) study.

dynamic nature of this component, particularly with regard to its interaction with other factors in the training process has also been given consideration (Gist and Mitchell, 1992; Colquitt and Simmering, 1998); the following section examines this relationship in more detail.

2.3.1.2 Self-efficacy and its Relationship with Motivation

There is a lack of consensus in the literature regarding the relationship between self-efficacy and motivation (Colquitt and Simmering, 1998). Expectancy theory is a key motivational theory developed by Vroom (1964), which argued that motivation was composed of two elements: the expectation of a link between effort and an outcome (expectancy) and the value and desirability of this result (valency). If the participant failed to appreciate the link between their effort and a change in performance, or the expectation of the value of the resultant outcome, then their motivation levels would be low. Noe's (1986) study argued that self-efficacy and expectancy are combined as components of the construct motivation to learn. Whereas, Gist and Mitchell (1992) proposed that self-efficacy is the driver behind expectancy, as it informs judgement regarding effort-performance. While Colquitt et al. (2000) argued that the effects of self-efficacy and expectations of the valence of learning were mediated by motivation to learn.

In this study, self-efficacy represents a distinguishable concept in itself, as it is perceived that it encompasses the self-belief element rather than the nature of the participant's aspirations captured in the expectations variable; or the level of commitment to effort and intensity of effort embraced by the motivation variable. The following two sections will clarify the specific differences between the aforementioned characteristics of motivation and expectations, as intuitively, it is perceived that the individual assessment of these variables will lead to a more holistic perspective on the factors impacting learning.

2.3.2 Motivation to Learn

Motivation in this context has been defined as the “direction, intensity and persistence of learning-directed behaviour in training” (Colquitt et al., 2000, p. 678) and has been identified as one of the most important antecedents to learning (Faction et al., 1995). Motivation has been associated with positive learning outcomes in many studies (cf. Colquitt and Simmering, 1998; Mathieu et al., 1992; Quinones, 1995) – people do not readily learn new behaviours when they are ‘forced’ (Argyris, 1990) and, even though individuals may have the ability to master the learning content, where there is no motivation to learn, they may fail to do so (Noe, 1986). Indeed, as Bessant et al. (2003, p. 21) argued, “...learning is not automatic – there must be motivation to enter the cycle, and if there is insufficient arousal, learning may not take place”. Furthermore, Baldwin et al. (1991) in their research found that trainees who enter a learning intervention with higher motivation levels learn more and are more likely to complete the programme than their less motivated peers (confirming previous studies by: Hicks and Klimoski, 1987; Williams et al., 1991; Tannenbaum et al., 1991; Ryman and Biersner, 1975). Quinone’s (1995) study further confirmed this relationship, in addition to confirming the relationship between motivation to learn and levels of task performance. The role of motivation to learn in the training context is readily accepted in the extensive relevant literature, which is reviewed in the following section (Colquitt et al., 2000).

2.3.2.1 Motivation and the Training Context

Notably, Campbell and Kuncel (2001) identified three aspects of motivation relevant to the training context: (1) the decision to attend or not attend the program, (2) the level of attention and effort the trainee decides to invest, and (3) whether or not the participant persists with the training program to completion. Due to the nature of this study, where the emphasis is on assessing the learning resulting from the intervention, the decision to attend is of lesser relevance; likewise, it is beyond the remit of this study to track the level or reasons for any drop-outs, as this does not add to our understanding of the actual learning facilitated by this intervention. Therefore, the focus of this study shall be on the second of these two factors, as a review of the

literature indicates that participants displaying higher motivation levels will engage more with the content and delivery (Colquitt et al., 2000). Specifically, participants with higher motivation to learn will be more open to the new experience, engage in more reflection on the topics, and come to conclusions on the merits and practical implications of the learning more readily.

In their meta-analysis on training motivation, Colquitt et al. (2000, p. 678) determined that motivation to learn explained “incremental variance in training outcomes beyond the effects of cognitive ability”. Colquitt et al.’s (2000) study identified three antecedents that directly influence the participants’ motivation: self-efficacy, valence and job involvement. Self-efficacy, as discussed previously exhibits a strong relationship with motivation in the extant literature. Valence is examined later as an element of expectations of learning, particularly as irrespective of the actual quality of learning intervention, participants may not be motivated if they perceive the results of the initiative of low value to them (Fecteau et al., 1995). Job involvement is defined as the degree to which an individual identifies psychologically with work, and the importance of work to a person's self-image (Brown, 1996; Lodahl and Kejner, 1965). As the owner-manager identity is woven strongly into their business activities (Jarvis et al., 2000), this would indicate that in order to enhance motivation to learn, the content must be relevant to the owner-manager – this is further discussed in the section on the initiative content, 2.4.1. The relationship between the levels of motivation and the instructional design elements of content and delivery methods has been given considerable attention to date (Colquitt et al., 2000). In particular, Klein et al. (2006) determined that the motivation to learn is influenced by both learner characteristics and instructional characteristics (discussed further in Section 2.4.2), explaining that the diminished motivation to learn often found in distance learning environments may be due to the potential for interruptions and the lack of face-to-face interaction (Knowles, 1973; Noe, 2005). Indeed, Brown et al. (2005) also found significant interaction between motivation to learn and delivery method on learning (discussed further in Section 2.4.2). Hence, other authors have aimed to develop motivational theories that will further explain

these interactions, for example, Dweck and colleagues' (1986, 1988) contention regarding individual differences in orientation, as discussed in the following section.

2.3.2.2 Mastery versus Performance Orientation

A further alternative perspective on motivation distinguishes an individual's orientation toward goal achievement, variously labelled as learning (or mastery) orientation and performance (or outcome) orientation (Dweck, 1986; Dweck and Leggett, 1988). Dweck and colleagues defined those with a mastery orientation as individuals who view the training process as an opportunity to learn something, feel rewarded by this, and find learning is reinforcing, regardless of the level of mistakes and difficulties during the process (Campbell and Kuncel, 2001). In contrast, those participants with a performance orientation are rewarded by the external acknowledgement for achieving the end-of-course recognition; they tend to view abilities and skills as difficult to change and gravitate towards the familiar (Campbell and Kuncel, 2001). Indeed, recent research by Smith et al. (2008), following Mathieu et al. (1992), established that the goal orientation element of motivation impacts on the participant's preparation prior to the programme, their concentration and further enhances their receptivity to new ideas. In previous studies of occupational training, those individuals with a mastery orientation have been more adaptive in their response, than those with a performance orientation; actively changing their approach in order to learn more effectively (Ford et al., 1998). However, there remains a debate in the literature as to whether these orientations are two separate constructs or a bipolar dimension of a single construct (cf. Campbell and Kuncel, 2001; Ames, 1992; Stevens and Gist, 1997), for example, Dweck (1986) described the two orientations as ends of a continuum, whereas Button et al. (1996) found support for them as distinct constructs (cf. Ford et al., 1998). There remains furthermore, a debate as to whether these orientations are malleable and can be changed (cf. Campbell and Kuncel, 2001). Of particular interest in this study is the impact of motivation on learning, however, other authors have argued that motivation may also be regarded as an outcome of learning (Latham, 1989). The following section will review this perspective for its relevance to this study.

2.3.2.3 Motivation as an Outcome

As discussed in a previous section, Latham (1989) indicated that both self-efficacy and trainee motivation should each be acknowledged as both an antecedent and a product of training, for example, Kraiger et al. (1993) discussed motivation as an affective learning outcome. Kraiger et al. (1993), following Gagné (1984) and Messick (1984), presented the need to expand traditional evaluations of learning beyond knowledge outcomes alone, to provide a more complete profile of both learning and the learning process. Kraiger et al. (1993) presented the concept of learning having a positive impact on the motivation of the participants of a learning intervention, arguing that there was an attitudinal shift as a result. While this viewpoint may have some merit, this study's remit is to identify the elements of the intervention which impact most on learning, in order to assess the intervention's provision nationwide and the secondary aim is to identify 'best practices'. Neither of these aims will be furthered by an analysis of the impact of motivation as a learning outcome, particularly as the TLNs were established with a view to providing an opportunity to learn rather than to motivate the SME owner-manager. As a result, this study is limited to assessing those determinants of learning and outcomes of learning which are compliant with Fáilte Ireland's original intentions. The review of the literature relevant to the determinants within the control of the initiative facilitator highlights the importance of the individual participant's expectations of learning which is discussed in the following section.

2.3.3 Expectations of Learning

Noe (1986) proposed that expectations of learning influence training effectiveness. Tannenbaum et al. (1991) found that trainees who have their expectations met (referred to as 'training fulfilment') develop greater self-efficacy. Tannenbaum et al. (1991) examined the importance of meeting trainee expectations, and in particular the influence it has on learning. Their proposition is that training fulfilment is composed of three elements, which can be modified for improved effect. The first of these components is the trainees' expectations of what the training entails, which can be improved through providing more realistic communication of what the training

involves (confirming similar findings by Hicks and Klimoski, 1987). The second of the elements is the trainees' perceptions, which they indicate can be influenced through the design and nature of the training itself. Finally, the third aspect they offer is in the selection and recruitment of the trainees, on the basis of choosing candidates whose expectations or desires match what the program offers.

Participant expectations are further influenced by their prior experience of formalised learning environments (Lawless et al., 2000; Garavan et al., 1999). Cunnington (1985) cited as problematic the clash between academic and managerial expectations in many learning interventions, highlighting differences in application of learning and expected outcomes but also the priorities which direct each. Specifically, Garavan (1995) argued that educational establishments focus on the breadth of content and the extent of attitude change produced through learning; in contrast the participants had a more utilitarian skills-oriented focus. Previous studies in the SME context have indicated an emphasis on the owner-managers' part on immediately applicable learning (Chaston et al., 1999; Lawless et al., 2000), whereas academics have stressed the value of first grounding any intervention in the theoretical principles and rules of the subject (Baldwin and Ford, 1988) to enable subsequent content transfer. The expected learning outcomes value in the eyes of the participant is a factor in their reaction to the modules and in their subsequent learning. Indeed, managers who believe in the value of training are more likely to apply skills learned in training (Baumgartel et al., 1984).

Hence, Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992) advocated that the learning process should be designed so as to enhance the participant expectations that the intervention will be successful and will lead to valued outcomes, thus encouraging a progression from simple to more difficult tasks as participants become more confident. It is also noteworthy, that Tannenbaum et al. (1991) recommended further investigation of the role of participant interactions on trainees' perceptions - a key element of whether the training meets expectations or not. This recognition of the role of others and the influence of social aspects of an intervention is pursued further in Section 2.6 on peer interaction. As discussed previously, the social element is just one part, as

Tannenbaum et al. (1991) argued that the design of the intervention plays a distinct role in terms of fulfilling expectations of learning. Indeed, much of the instructional design literature concerns itself with the study of the individual characteristics that determine learning. In the following section the flexible learning approach is discussed, with particular reference to its interaction with the core elements of the initiative content and delivery.

2.4 Flexible Learning Approach

Rather than the traditional classroom-based, teacher-centred approach, the flexible learning approach offers a variety of different delivery methods, designed to be more student-centred (Foley et al., 2007). Its structure also facilitates peer-interaction and enables social learning (Bandura, 1977). Flexible delivery implies a one-way direction from instructor to participant whereas ‘Flexible learning’ could be said to embody a two-way flow of knowledge and reflects the level of interaction possible between the instructor and participant (Goode et al., 2007). Indeed, the flexible approach embodies the increased openness and communication between learners and also between the learner and the instructor (Taylor et al., 1996). Additionally, the flexible approach to learning describes progressive approaches to pace, mode, timing, location and content that use a range of methods and resources (Goode et al., 2007). Further, this approach accommodates a range of learning preferences as the balance shifts towards a more learner-centred system, enabling learners to control more of the learning experience. Ford et al. (1998) noted this switch in emphasis and recommended further research into the learner’s decision-making and behaviour, and their subsequent impact on learning outcomes.

One component of the flexible learning approach is blended or hybrid learning, which is attributed to the Open University’s model of combining face-to-face support with distance learning (Sharpe et al., 2006) and encourages the development of skills and knowledge through engaging and challenging the learner in different ways. According to Olapiriyakul and Scher (2006), the terms hybrid learning and blended

learning are used interchangeably, both referring to the mixed mode of instruction combining traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning. Blended learning aims to combine the best features of the interaction between student and instructor with the advantages of asynchronous learning. By its nature asynchronous learning offers the participant the advantage of choice in time and pace of study (Lawless et al., 2000). Its major drawback is that, on occasion, a participant may fall behind schedule, whereas the blended approach reduces this risk by decreasing the isolation of the participant. The merit of the blended approach is further enhanced by including different models of teaching and learning styles (Heinze and Proctor, 2004). In comparative studies of blended learning versus the traditional face-to-face model, 19 out of 30 blended learning projects demonstrated superior effectiveness, while the remaining 11 showed no significant difference (Heterick and Twigg, 2003; Twigg , 2003). This finding suggests the need for further research in this area. Previous studies have examined elements of the blended learning approach and its impact on learning, such as content (Tannenbaum and Yukl, 1992; Facticeau et al., 1995; Ford and Wroten, 1984) and delivery (Cacioppe, 1998; Petrovic et al., 1998; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Garrison and Kanuka, 2004), yet a precise formula for what an optimum mix of content and delivery should be does not exist.

A further component of both the traditional learning approach and more particularly the flexible learning approach is the social element emphasised by Wegerif (1998), and confirmed in the analysis of learning as a 'social act' by Brown and Duguid (2000). This social element is neglected in Cacioppe's (1998, p. 47) review of development programmes where he argued that it is the "content, learning methods and presenters that deliver the 'moments of truth' that result in a worthwhile individual learning experience". This omission is surprising considering his acknowledgement of the impact of many other learning environmental factors that few other researchers have mentioned, for example: the way lecturing and support staff treat the participants, the food and the venue. The criticality of the social element is further discussed in the later section on peer interaction (Section 2.6). The foregoing suggests that the flexible learning approach must encourage the

development of a social environment as it critically impacts on the learning outcomes. Furthermore, the environment interacts with other aspects of the intervention, for example, the initiative content in terms of timeliness, relevance and matching the needs of the participants, which is discussed in the following section.

2.4.1 Flexible Learning Approach Content

In recent years the content of SME education and development has been subject to increasing scrutiny (Leitch and Harrison, 1999; O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2002), particularly as there has been a move away from the treatment of small businesses as little big businesses (Welsh and White, 1981). Previously many training initiatives offered to SMEs were designed with what is termed as an 'up-front menu', dictating what the participants needed to learn, rather than aiming to respond to the needs of the particular SME owner-manager (Sullivan, 2000). This resulted in content which lacked relevance, as its generic one-size-fits-all approach failed to meet individual business needs. This view confirms similar findings by Storey and Westhead (1997) that SMEs often find the content of training courses too general and also Stokes (2001) who argued for tailor-made content. Content is dictated by the learning objectives, hence, the initiative content must reflect the knowledge, skills and patterns of choice behaviour that the participant must acquire in order to meet initiative objectives (Campbell and Kuncel, 2001).

According to ALT, the following must be present as part of the course content: (1) the participant must see the issue involved as important, (2) it must involve some analysis, (3) it must involve some aspect of creativity, and (4) it must include the practical application of the suggested improvement (cf. Paauwe and Williams, 2001). Following on from this, the student-centred approach to decision-making on the initiative content is essential, particularly in the identification of the issues of importance to the participants. The analysis advocated by ALT is in keeping with the concept of a non-prescriptive approach, encouraging the participants to learn through problem-solving (Garavan, 1997). The aspect of creativity proposed by ALT

conforms with the SME owner-manager's experiential, hands-on preferences, and encourages the participant to play an active role in their own learning and self-discovery (Piaget, 1967). These arguments for creativity are further confirmed by Foley et al. (2006) as they recommended ingenuity in the initiative content to capture the interest of the participants and potential participants alike.

In their meta-analysis on the relationships between training characteristics, Alliger et al. (1997) distinguished between two reactions to training: affective or enjoyment of the training and that of perceived usefulness or utility. Their findings suggested that although affective reactions do not correlate with learning, perceptions of utility do. Indeed, the participant places a high value on the initiative content utility while emphasising immediately applicable learning in the small firm environment (Chaston et al., 1999; Lawless et al., 2000).

The literature also indicates that pre-learning should be incorporated into the initiative content as this reassures participants as to their own competence in context. Recognition of the participants' prior experience and competence aids in ensuring the initiative content helps individuals to learn rather than imposing prescribed training solutions on them (cf. Deakins and Freel, 1998; Gomez et al., 2004). Donovan et al. (2001) added that the perceived relevance of the content also includes the similarity of methods and materials used in the initiative to those used in the work environment, which highlights the interaction between these key determinants. Up until now, the content of the initiative was discussed with a view to highlighting the critical issues identified in the extant literature however, unless the content reaches the participants, learning will be limited, hence the next section outlines the instructional delivery methods.

2.4.2 Flexible Learning Approach Delivery Methods

Instructional delivery methods refer to the means by which the content of the initiative is conveyed to the participants, focussing on the methodology employed, for example, mentoring, group discussions, and workshops. In their meta-analysis,

Schacher and Neumann (2003) highlighted an increase in the scope and variety of instructional delivery options now available due to the technological revolution of recent years, in addition to the increased recognition of the role of learning in the workplace. Furthermore, Schwartzman and Tuttle (2002) proposed that instructional delivery methods can be plotted on a continuum between traditional face-to-face and totally online, recognising a move towards a more flexible approach to the design of educational delivery, both in terms of timing and location (Schacher and Neumann, 2003).

SME owner-managers have a strong preference for activity-based learning, as opposed to knowledge-based learning, which must be taken into consideration in delivering an intervention to them (Choueke and Armstrong, 1998). Learning-by-doing may be particularly appropriate for information technology training given the practical nature of the content (Stokes, 2001) and the hands-on way the owner-managers operate. However, Garavan and O’Cinnéide (1994), following Rowntree (1992), warned that an over-reliance on activity-based learning neglects the critical aspect of deliberation vital to learning; recommending the allocation of specific time for reflection.

In reviewing the literature on elements of flexible learning and the SME context in particular, research shows that owner-managers find that a multi-faceted approach is particularly appealing, that is a mixture of distance learning, face-to-face tutorship and mentoring by other mediums such as e-mails (Stokes, 2001). For example, the use of modules responds to owner-manager desires to keep the learning intervention ‘snappy’, that is, meeting the time constraints inherent to small and medium enterprises (Lange et al., 2000). Further, Lange et al. (2000) advocated the offering of learning materials to SME owner-managers in a manner that recognised their working environment, mode of operation and preferred learning methods. SME owner-managers expressed a preference for the use of mentoring and one-to-one meetings as a delivery method (O’Dwyer and Ryan, 2002) followed by workshops (Lawless et al., 2000); this has implications for the individual level of engagement and therefore learning.

In a learning context, Stokes (2001) argued that the following are the benefits of a mix of delivery methods: (1) the enhancement of co-operative learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), (2) the mirroring of the informal on-the-job approach to learning preferred by SMEs, and (3) the accommodation of tailor-made content to suit individual needs. In a leadership context, Zenger and Folkman (2003) advocated that the delivery methods should promote behaviour change and in so doing be practical, provide immediate application and also incorporate ownership of the results. Indeed, the facilitator should endeavour to make knowledge transfer easier (Gomez et al., 2004) by relating the delivery to the participant and their learning preferences. The facilitator role is highlighted in much of the extant literature, not alone for the function the facilitator performs in facilitating knowledge transfer, but also for the part they play in the network, which is reviewed further in the next section.

2.5 The Facilitator

Stuart et al. (1998) determined that the success of a network was dependent on the effectiveness of the facilitator; the facilitator's multi-faceted role in co-ordinating the programme is highlighted throughout both the learning network and training literature. The term 'facilitator' has a variety of meanings dependent upon the field of enquiry, for example, in the network context the facilitator denotes the external broker or information gatekeeper (Ingleby, 1999; Stuart et al., 1998), whereas in the educational setting the facilitator often refers to the instructor or coach role (Johnson, 2001). Indeed, the importance of facilitating a suitable learning environment has been identified in previous studies as worthy of attention (McGill and Beaty, 2001; Tell and Halila, 2001). In a learning network context, Henderson (1998) and Bessant et al. (2003) stated that there is a need for external facilitation, indicating that universities or government agencies should fill this role, particularly as SME networks are lacking the resources to form and manage themselves (Liston, 1996). In the same context, Tell and Halila (2001) advocated the role of the university as working with the network in providing a source of inspiration for SMEs, acting as a

sounding-board for the SME owner-managers. Hence, preventing introversion and, furthermore, offering an arena for reflection. This need for external facilitation is based, in part, on participant perceptions concerning learning network legitimacy. The legitimacy of the facilitator is discussed further in the following section, however for clarity, it is worthy of mention that for the purposes of this study the facilitator represents the anchoring organisation providing the instruction through the TLN.

2.5.1 Facilitator Legitimacy

Human and Provan (2000) discussed the role of legitimacy as a generalised perception that the actions, activities, and structure of a network are appealing and appropriate both to internal and external stakeholders. Specifically, in identifying the critical network success factors, Human and Provan (2000) distinguished between the legitimacy required by members as internal stakeholders (referred to as internal legitimacy), and that required by external customers and sources of external funding (referred to as external legitimacy). The facilitator must communicate the benefits of the network actions and enhance the perception of internal legitimacy. Indeed, research focussed on a failed learning network attributed the failure to the fact that the facilitator came from outside the region and from a different industry, as a possible explanation for the breakdown in communication (Human and Provan, 2000). They further argued that this facilitator not only neglected to communicate the real benefits of the network to the members, but also showed an over-dependence on external legitimacy at the neglect of internal legitimacy. Specifically, the facilitator's focus on developing the external recognition of the network in order to attract new investors and members was at the expense of looking after the needs of the current members (Human and Provan, 2000). The facilitator position plays a critical role in determining the focus of the learning network and balancing internal and external legitimacy.

Other research by Stokes (2001) argued that trust in the facilitator's credentials and the expertise that they offer is critical to overcome the kind of cultural barriers

towards continuing education and training found by Lange et al. (2000)¹³. Facilitator legitimacy is perceived as vital in the recruitment of new members to the learning network as potential participants' perceptions of the learning network are improved through the network's association with well-known and highly respected educational institutes (Lange et al., 2000). Specifically, Foley et al. (2006) presented the need for a strong anchoring organisation in order to ensure the learning process outcomes are in line with local, regional and national strategic planning, in addition to recommending accreditation of training for further legitimacy. However, there is a lack of congruity in the literature as to whether academically-backed providers are appropriate as facilitators, for example, Massey et al. (2003), in a New Zealand SME context, found that formal educational institutions were seen as intimidating, thus inhibiting interest and accrediting the course was not seen as desirable by those questioned. Notably, while questioning the role of educational institutes, a key finding of their study was that the more successful facilitators were those who had established long-term relationships within the community and were not dependent on this one programme length, thus confirming the significance of facilitator legitimacy¹⁴. Indeed, while the literature provides insight into this debate, it remains worthy of further research. The role of the facilitator is further explored in the following section, in particular in directing adult learning.

2.5.2 Facilitation and Adult Learners

As previously discussed, adult learners have requirements not recognised by traditional pedagogy, as in particular, the literature highlights the active role of the learner in the learning process supported by the facilitator. Indeed, the facilitator role involves collaborating with the learner in the diagnosis of their learning needs, in addition to nurturing self-direction (Brookfield, 1986). It is worth mentioning that throughout the adult learning literature the concept of the facilitator's role is focussed

¹³Lange et al. (2000) identified a culture prevalent in SMEs in which formal training and education were not seen as advantageous to the individual or of value to the business. They found that the predominant SME culture is owner-manager dominated; reliant on ad-hoc, informal training on the job, with formal training associated solely with compliance with minimum statutory requirements.

¹⁴ This study aims to add to the literature in this field, in particular the role of academically-backed facilitators compared to consultancy-lead facilitators as anchoring organisations.

upon enabling the learner to learn, quite a contrast with the traditional instructional techniques where the learner is the passive recipient of information. The concept of learner ownership of the process (Johnson, 2001) is expanded upon by O'Dwyer and Ryan (2002) in attributing improved participant commitment and perseverance, to this sense of ownership. Moreover, Klein et al. (2006) focussed on the trend towards increased learner control over the pace of instruction, when they learn, where they learn, and access to additional instructional material; all made possible through good facilitation (Lawless and Brown, 1997; Oblinger et al., 2001). Indeed, the adult learning literature is consistent in promoting the role of facilitation in enabling learning individually and in the following section the role at group level is discussed.

2.5.3 Facilitation of Groups

The facilitator must have an awareness of the dynamics of group processes to enhance the interactions at a group level through “collaborative exploration of experiences, the collective interpretation of learners’ individual realities, and the recognition of themselves, and their lives, in others” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 61), as well as providing guidance for understanding group experiences (Kuriloff et al., 1984). Furthermore, the facilitator is there to provide objectivity and prevent bias in a group’s focus of attention, and to ensure all participants get an opportunity to have their say (Cacioppe, 1998). Indeed, Campbell (1998) highlighted the power relationships between the participants of a network and the hazard of the dominant actor setting the agenda for learning in the absence of strong facilitation. Moreover, previous research demonstrated the key role the facilitator plays in ensuring that what is discussed in the network environment is not misused (Floren and Tell, 2004). Accordingly, Huxham and Beech (2002) stated that the power wielded by the facilitator has an enormous influence on the learning process, also highlighting their role in the recruitment of participants and decision-making within the network.

2.5.4 Decision-making and Recruitment

In discussing the recruitment of participants, Foley et al. (2006) recommended that the facilitator act to ensure the learning network composition is optimised for the participants' benefit. Studies have shown that multiple participants increase diversity, and their diverse experience contributes to exploration learning¹⁵ and to the development of new knowledge (Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Moorman and Miner, 1998). Furthermore, the facilitator must make decisions regarding the instructional design, choosing strategies most appropriate for the content to be learned (Smith, 2003) in order to develop the participant's skills in a way that makes it possible for them to improve the performance of their businesses (Massey et al., 2003). Hence, Stokes (2001) stressed the importance of creating a non-judgemental atmosphere for learning as, due to their positions, it is sometimes considered difficult for owner-managers to admit their ignorance. Indeed, the decision-making required of the facilitator role demands the resources and ability to take a strategic perspective on the issues facing the SME owner-manager (Foley et al., 2006).

An appreciation of the demands facing the SME owner-manager is just one aspect required of the facilitator. As discussed, the facilitator must forge internal legitimacy for the long-term success of the network, external legitimacy to ensure the funding required, and build long term relationships with the community. The facilitator makes crucial decisions in terms of the operation of the network, the recruitment process and ensuring the right mix of diverse experience in the groups, recognising the importance of the contact between the participants as a source of learning. The interplay between the participants has been acknowledged as providing opportunities for learning (Foley et al., 2007) and the following section examines this in more detail.

¹⁵ Holmqvist (2004) described exploration learning as an element of experiential learning; incorporating such behaviours as experimentation, trialling, innovation and risk-taking.

2.6 Peer Interaction

As discussed, social learning theory proposes that individuals can learn through their own experience and through observing other people's behaviour and its consequences, this, combined with the network context, explains the criticality of peer interaction as a determinant of learning (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Foley et al., 2007). Furthermore, peer-to-peer contact on an individual basis would facilitate participants in situations where confidentiality or inhibition present difficulties within the learning set context (Foley et al., 2007). Indeed, Tell (2000) argued that the support from peers in the network complemented advice offered by experts and consultants, and the nature of the interactions between the participants and the trust that developed between them determined the success or failure of the network. In a learning network context, Henderson (1998) described the workshop or forum as a Trojan horse to attract participants to the event, and then once present, the informal refreshments and informal interactions were vital in enabling networking – thereby highlighting the importance informalities play in generating an atmosphere conducive to learning and sharing.

In addition to the value of networks as a means of self-help for SMEs (Arzeni and Pellegrin, 1997), various studies have focussed on the role of peer interaction in providing stimulating new ideas, mutual support and challenge (Brookfield, 1986; Reason, 1999). In a tourism context, Morrison (1998) argued that peer support offers both relief from the isolation often encountered by SME owner-managers (particularly home-based ones) and reduces the potential risk of an introverted approach to business management. Moreover, Sadler-Smith (1995) propounded the effectiveness of introducing a social dimension to SME learning, reporting that SME managers experience a sense of learning when they introduce the voice of others into their decision-making. Similarly, Tell (2000) advocated the benefit of using peers as 'sounding boards' and further argued that only through dialogue and reflection between participants could access be gained to certain personal knowledge held by an SME owner-manager. Indeed, O'Dwyer and Ryan (2002) reported the interaction between the participants on a programme as important and advocated the use of role

models from within the group, for example, getting them to relate to the group their own experiences of running an SME, thereby enabling vicarious learning.

A possible impediment to peer interaction observed in a study of collective learning is the cognitive distance between the participants (Cappellin, 2007). Hence, Cappellin (2007) argued that this dissonance may be due to: (1) differences in educational and cultural backgrounds, (2) technological specialisations, and (3) the lack of broad diversified experiences. As previously mentioned the literature lacks consensus as to whether the mix of participants with diverse backgrounds and the benefit in terms of multiple perspectives, outweighs the distance issues which may inhibit information-sharing or restrict the ability to appreciate other perspectives (Argyris and Schön, 1978). The criticality of information sharing is explored further in Section 2.6.2. The foregoing highlights the value of investigating peer interactions, and particularly relevant in the development of these relationships is the trust between the network participants, which is reviewed in the following section.

2.6.1 Peer Interaction - Trust

There is a lack of consensus in the literature regarding the definition and measurement of trust (Rousseau et al., 1998; McKnight et al., 2002), with little agreement on the dimensions that constitute trust and how they interact (Keen et al., 1999; McKnight et al., 2002). However, it is generally accepted that trust is a multi-dimensional construct which plays a critical role in the building of relationships and is involved in reducing one's perceived sense of risk and insecurity (Rousseau et al., 1998; Blau, 1964). Zand's (1972, p. 230) seminal work examined trust in terms of personal disposition to "increase one's vulnerability to another whose behavior is not under one's control", leading to the disclosure of information. In the following subsections, trust shall be examined under the headings of its role in the network literature followed by examining trust in the context of the learning environment.

2.6.1.1 Trust in the Network Literature

The network literature presents trust as a non-economic understanding involved in all agreements to cooperate (Lubatkin et al., 2001). Indeed, there is a consensus in the literature that trust is a prerequisite to good relationships among a group (D'Aunno and Zuckerman 1987; Floren and Tell, 2004; Kirschner and Van Bruggen, 2004) and is critical to relational development (Altman and Taylor, 1973; Blau, 1964). Furthermore, Ring and Van de Ven (1994) proposed networks as a means of engendering more trust and loyalty between companies than normal commercial relations.

The level and nature of trust is made all the more pertinent in light of Gulati's (1998) research which highlighted 'moral hazard concerns' due to the unpredictability of partners' behaviour and the potential costs of opportunistic behaviour (Fukuyama, 1995). The development of trust is essential in providing an environment of psychological safety within a network, described by Edmondson (1999) as a shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks within the team. Notably, there is a strong relationship between psychological safety and team learning behaviour (Edmondson, 1999). In contrast, Braun (2002) contended that alliances do not have to be based on trust provided there are systematic mechanisms in place that ensure partners exhibit cooperative rather than opportunistic behaviour (Beamish, 1987; Das and Teng, 1997). As previously discussed, the facilitator may play a critical role in creating this safe environment, particularly as Sundbo et al. (2003) argued that tourism firms were by their nature opportunistic, calling into question the firms' ability to form networks.

Trust-building requires prolonged socialisation according to Nonaka (1994). Hence, Braun (2002) proposed that trust may be historical and already in existence between individuals, with interaction taking place in an atmosphere of continued trust building (Konstadakopoulos, 2000). The foregoing indicates the criticality of investigating trust in the network context, which Colucci and Presutti (2006) dimensionalised as involving: (1) sharing of common expectations and aims, (2) lack of opportunistic behaviour, (3) creation of common investments (commitment),

and (4) development of informal relationships. These components are essential to the development of trust in the network, particularly in terms of developing interpersonal relationships and sharing. In the following section, the criticality of trust in developing understanding and facilitating learning is more closely examined.

2.6.1.2 Trust in the Learning Context

Despite extensive study of trust between large organisations, the SME context is in need of further research (Sharif et al., 2005; Coulter and Coulter, 2002) as research has largely focussed on opportunities for the SME owner-manager to utilise trust to attract potential partners, customers and investors, through reassurance of their trustworthiness (Johannisson, 2001). In a learning context, Stokes (2001) determined that SME owner-managers required a climate of trust to feel safe prior to divulging information pertinent to their business and, in particular, their concerns and problems. Furthermore, participants found it easier to share their experiences once there was an atmosphere of mutual trust (Bottrup, 2005). Previous research found that SME owner-managers expressed a distinct preference for a network with solely non-competitors due to trust issues (Tell and Halila, 2001). Yet, Clarke et al. (2006) argued that action-learning engendered trust from working together, leading to SME owner-managers sharing good practice with others, including their competitors.

In a learning context, Kirschner and Van Bruggen (2004) argued that trust is a necessary pre-requisite for the community-building required for cooperative learning as it is involved in the processes surrounding getting to know the other participants. Indeed, Floren and Tell (2004, p. 304) stated that

...trust is necessary for the development of reciprocal relations; the learning actors' receptive and confronting capacity depends on the level of trust between them; and finally, trust is the foundation for a transparent dialogue.

The concept of trust as a social pre-condition for learning between individuals (Amin and Roberts, 2008) has drawn attention to trust between participants and in the facilitator. As discussed previously, the facilitator has a vital role to play in creating a climate conducive to learning, in particular by playing the role of a neutral partner

focussing the network's efforts on learning (Floren and Tell, 2004). Furthermore, Stokes (2001) has argued the criticality of establishing trust in the credentials and expertise of the facilitator to attract SME participation. As previously discussed in Section 2.5.1, the legitimacy of the anchoring organisation is seen as an essential element of the learning process and legitimacy has been identified as an antecedent to trust (Sharif et al., 2005). Hence, it is posited in this study that trust as an antecedent to learning is worthy of attention given its precedence in both the learning and network fields. Indeed, as discussed next, the degree of information sharing between individuals pivots on the level of trust in their relationship.

2.6.2 Peer Interaction - Information Sharing

This section reviews the concept of information sharing as the exchange of ideas and information are critical components in the learning process. In an organisational learning context, Huber (1991, p. 89) distinguished the terms information from knowledge, referring to the former as “data that give meaning by reducing ambiguity”, whereas knowledge is referred to as “more complex products of learning, such as interpretations of information, beliefs about cause-effect relationships”. Indeed, Lundvall (1998) indicated that information is the part of knowledge which can be easily transformed and transmitted¹⁶. For the purpose of this study, information sharing refers to the communication behaviour between participants of the network whereby ideas are exchanged (Mohr and Spekman, 1994) and follows Anderson and Narus (1990, p. 44) in encompassing both “formal and informal sharing of meaningful and timely information”.

The network literature highlights the role of relational embeddedness between firms, which refers to the degree to which non-economic and social aspects influence their interactions (Granovetter, 1985) and specifically, in an exchange relationship, Dacin et al. (1999) argued these can be characterised as either embedded or arm's length. Notably, Uzzi (1996, p. 678) argued that “Information exchanged in embedded ties is

¹⁶ Kogut and Zander (1992) differentiated information from know-how, offering that information includes facts and symbols, whereas know-how is tacit and difficult to transfer as it is composed of the skill and expertise in the performance of an act (Von Hippel, 1988; Kale et al., 2000).

more proprietary and more tacit than the information exchanged at arm's length", indicating the advantages of building on the social interactions as a means of improving access to information less likely to be in the public domain¹⁷. Indeed, interpersonal relationships are described in the network literature under the term ties, and categorised by Uzzi (1997) as strong or weak. Strong ties are usually the result of extensive interactions between the parties, and facilitate efficient sharing of complex information, however due to the closeness they engender, they may lead to some redundancy in the information (Rindfleisch and Moorman, 2001). If however novel diverse information is required, the network literature suggests that weak ties may be more productive, as advocated by Granovetter's (1973) seminal work "The strength of weak ties". Weak ties refer to those relationships which are infrequent, although these weak ties are usually the source of non-complex information, they do enable access to information beyond the network community¹⁸.

The role of ties was further endorsed by Kale et al. (2000, p. 218), who developed the term 'relational capital' to refer to the "mutual trust, respect and friendship that arises out of close interaction" which facilitates learning between parties in a partnership or network. Butler (1999) argued that information sharing is risky, as it leaves the divulger of information vulnerable to opportunism by the recipient. Whereas, a norm of information sharing enables the parties to cope better with the vulnerability, as the expectation that one will be kept informed of relevant changes reduces the sense of uncertainty (Heide and John, 1992). However, research by Reagans and McEvily (2003) highlighted the cost to the source of the information, extending it beyond the actual data to encompass the time and effort required helping the recipient understand the information.

In a learning context, Inkpen (2005) claimed that a climate of trust is a critical factor in the free exchange of information. Furthermore, Petrovic et al. (1998) asserted that a lack of trust between people can act as a barrier to learning through networking –

¹⁷ Tacit was the term used by Polanyi (1966, p.4) to describe how "We can know more than we can tell", referring to that knowledge which is often personal, intuitive and difficult to formulate.

¹⁸This study is limited to the information sharing within the network environment, however the impact of these weaker ties from outside the TLN offers an opportunity for further research.

this can be readily understood as research has determined that the nature of the interpersonal relationship has a major impact on the breadth, depth, and quality of information shared between individuals (cf. Altman and Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1984; Stohl and Redding, 1987; Holden and O'Toole, 2004). Indeed, Zand's (1972) model of the dynamics of trust found information sharing and trust were mutually reinforcing. Sharif et al. (2005, p. 410) concurred with this viewpoint and proposed that information sharing lead to improved predictability and acted as a "cushion against uncertainty" between the parties. Indeed, Dyer and Nobeoka (2000) argued that some minimum level of trust was a prerequisite for confidential information to be shared. In the SME context, social and business concerns are not easily separated, and furthermore the business culture is built on personal relationships (Anderson and Boocock, 2002; Scase and Goffee, 1987). Braun (2002) advocated the benefits of an environment of information sharing, such as learning about time and resource savings, which should be promoted in order to play down the SME owner-managers' perception of risk. Therefore, a key aspect of this study is in ascertaining the level of information sharing between the participants with a view to determining this component's impact on learning. The foregoing leads to an understanding of the major determinants of learning within the context of the TLN; the following section examines the extant literature regarding learning outcomes.

2.7 Learning Outcomes

As discussed previously, learning is a multi-dimensional construct and its multi-faceted nature and process are difficult to measure. This study as an evaluation of learning is "concerned with issues of measurement and design, the accomplishment of learning objectives, and the attainment of requisite knowledge and skills" (Kraiger et al., 1993, p. 312) and through measuring various results of the learning process a more holistic perspective is achieved (Gagné, 1984). Indeed, Campbell (1988) proposed that the most basic issue of evaluation is whether trainees have learned the content of training, meaning that in order to establish if the participants have learned, certain outcomes must be assessed. Gagné (1984, p. 377) defined learning outcomes

as “persistent states that make possible a variety of human performances”. Moreover, Gibb (1998) stated that learning involves the acquisition of skills, knowledge, habits and attitudes in such a way that behaviour is modified, while adult learning theorists posit learning as a form of self-actualisation (Sahakian, 1984). In establishing the classifications of learning outcomes as knowledge, skills, managerial capabilities and personal self-development, this study follows the work of Kraiger et al. (1993).

Alliger and Janak (1989) asserted that positive reactions to a programme do not imply learning, so it is imperative to examine the wider perspective of what the programme may deliver in terms of outcomes. Additionally, Gagné (1962) argued that the most fundamental design issue is the specification of what is to be learned, even if not stated explicitly can be inferred from what actually happens. In this study initiative content variability precludes the assessment of declarative knowledge, therefore, Klein et al. (2006) in these circumstances recommended measuring alternative learning outcomes (Alliger et al., 1997; Kraiger et al., 1993; Sahakian, 1984). Indeed, Noe (1986) argued that participation in training activities is a mode to: increase skill levels, improve job performance and elevate feelings of self worth. The improved self worth is measured in this study as personal self-development, which Kraiger et al. (1993) described as an affective outcome of learning, particularly as the value of this type of outcome rests on its impact on behaviour and performance (Gagné, 1984).

In discussing performance, skills are seen as the building blocks of a person’s capacity to undertake job-related tasks (Hinchliffe, 2002) while capabilities are focussed on the enhancement of productivity of firm resources (Makadok, 2001). In this study, the managerial capabilities are identified as the dynamic capabilities, which are perceived as visible in the SME operation, for example the adoption of best practice and innovation (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). Easterby-Smith and Prieto (2008, p. 246) argued that the process of learning is inextricably linked to the creation and renewal of dynamic capabilities; these dynamic capabilities are made evident in the exploration and exploitation of the firm’s knowledge and

competencies; hence, explaining their role in mediating between “environmental dynamism and the appropriate configuration of organizational capabilities”. As discussed, the extant literature highlights that SME owner-manager learning results in a variety of outcomes, in the following subsections, each of the learning outcomes will be reviewed in light of relevant literature to date, beginning with knowledge.

2.7.1 Knowledge

Nonaka (1994) argued that knowledge is a multi-faceted construct with multiple meanings. As discussed in the earlier section on information sharing, for the purposes of this study, knowledge refers to a complex product of learning, the result of the interpretation or processing of information through the mind of the individual (Huber, 1991; Alavi and Leidner, 1999). Knowledge is also referred to as “...a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information” (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p. 5). Others have argued that knowledge is the subjective storage of aggregate information (Strydom, 1994) or expertise (Machlup, 1984), and is considered relative, transformable and historically transient (Lawson, 1997). At its most basic level, knowledge is created by individuals (Nonaka, 1994) and “knowledge facilitates the use of other knowledge” (Powell et al., 1996, p. 120). Szulanski (1996) concurred with this viewpoint and added that the participant’s ability to both value and apply the new knowledge is the key to ‘best practice’. Access to knowledge of best practices is highly valued by SME owner-managers (Braun and Hollick, 2006). Indeed, in the context of a learning network, Henderson (1998) stated that knowledge acquisition is a key outcome, also highlighting its importance in attracting new members to join the network.

In discussing learning outcomes, Guidetti (2000) following Loasby (1996) and Lundvall (1998), defined five categories of knowledge: (1) know-what, (2) know-why, (3) know-how, (4) know-who, and (5) know-where. Moreover, Loasby (1996) combined **know-what** and **know-why** under the term **know-that**, encompassing the

knowledge of facts, theories and principles (learning of **know-that** is reliant on acquiring information) whereas **know-how** refers to both skills and capabilities and the timing required for their implementation (learning of **know-how** is reliant on trial and error, and practice). Know-what is also referred to in the literature as declarative or domain knowledge (Mezirow, 1991), while Anderson (1982) referred to know-how as procedural knowledge. Further, Wagner (1987) distinguished the category of strategic or tacit knowledge as incorporating know-which, know-when and know-why.

The extant evaluation literature reflects a bias towards measuring declarative knowledge, at the expense of the other categories of knowledge, primarily due to measurement issues. These tests of knowledge outcomes were predominantly recognition and recall tests, including speed tests and power tests which aimed to identify the speed and accuracy of recall in addition to the quality. However, given the SME owner-manager emphasis on practical, relevant learning this study focuses on the practical implications of knowledge as an outcome, not solely the know-what but also the know-how. Indeed, Sitzmann et al. (2006) argued that blended learning resulted in increases in both know-what and know-how knowledge for the participants. Notably, Kekale and Viitala (2003) argued that the quality of a firm's operations is now inextricably linked to the know-how of their network partners.

As discussed, Polanyi (1966) brought attention to the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge, however there is limited literature as to how to measure the tacit dimension (Busch and Richards, 2000). Wagner and Sternberg (1985) offered the practical application of an inventory of managerial tacit knowledge, which distinguished between levels of tacit knowledge between novices and experts; however there is a need for further research in this area. Much of the extant literature highlights the advantages of this tacit knowledge being shared, for example, in stimulating innovation (Johannessen, 2008), and originates predominantly from the knowledge management literature.

The discussion also encompasses the relationship between knowledge and skills, as declarative knowledge is seen as a prerequisite to skill development (Anderson, 1982). Further, in a training context, Baldwin and Ford (1988) cautioned against teaching an applicable skill without the underlying theoretical principles and rules that surround it. The aim of this study is to evaluate the learning facilitated by the TLN intervention, which must reflect the SME owner-manager emphasis on activity-based rather than theoretically-based learning (Choueke and Armstrong, 1998), and therefore provide insight into outcomes beyond declarative knowledge. Further, Deakins and Freel (1998) argued that SME owner-managers valued highly the transference of skills, particularly as Sullivan (2000) determined that initiatives which did not provide the practical skills to apply new knowledge were of little value to firms. Indeed, the practical application of new skills and knowledge is an essential element of any learning initiative (Paauwe and Williams, 2001). Although knowledge and skills are inter-related learning outcomes, this study follows Kraiger et al. (1993) in distinguishing between these two outcomes in the evaluation of the multi-dimensional nature of learning, as developed further in the following section.

2.7.2 Skills

In defining a skill, Knapp (1963, p. 4) argued that it is “the learned ability to bring about pre-determined results with maximum certainty, often with the minimum outlay of time, energy or both” while Hinchliffe (2002) added that skills are the foundations of the ability to complete job-tasks. The emphasis in this context is placed on the fact that this ability is a learning outcome (O’Donnell and Garavan, 1997) and furthermore skill acquisition leads to predictable levels of task performance and accuracy (Green, 1998). Additionally, Gagné et al. (1992, p. 47) argued that “the acquisition of a motor skill can be reasonably inferred when the student can perform the act in a variety of contexts”.

Learning involves process and Kraiger et al. (1993) (following Anderson, 1982; Fitts, 1964; Fitts and Posner, 1967) defined three stages in skill development: (1) initial skill acquisition, (2) skill compilation, and (3) skill automaticity. The first

stage involves the transition from knowledge that is declarative to knowledge that is procedural and can involve formal instruction (Neves and Anderson, 1981; Chapman and Lovell, 2006).

Anderson's (1982) work distinguished two distinct processes in the skill compilation stage: proceduralization and composition. Skill compilation occurs with continued practice beyond initial successes at reproducing the behaviour (Kraiger et al., 1993); similarly Weiss (1990) identified the need for mental rehearsals of the routines learned in order to reproduce the trained skill. Further, in this stage, skills move from being originally considered difficult and requiring energy to "...easy and automatic" (Hodgkin, 1985, p. 9). Performance at this stage is less error-prone, is deemed faster than at previous stages, and the steps in behaviour integrate into a single act (Kraiger et al., 1993). The proceduralization is the amalgamation of the individual steps in a skill into a routine, while composition refers to the linking of previously learned procedures into a more complex mental grouping so that the execution is a more fluid act. The compilation of the skill leads to the subsequent ability to generalise the skill to other settings and to discriminate from situational cues when to modify existing skills (referred to as generalisation and discrimination by Anderson, 1982). Kraiger et al. (1993) indicated that this level of skill development can be identified by the elimination of trivial steps and re-ordering for expediency, a sustained increase in the frequency of desired behaviours and the aforementioned decrease in errors.

Skill mastery is the result of continual practice, acknowledged as the third stage, skill automaticity. In this stage or point on the continuum between compilation and automaticity, there is a shift in operational modes from controlled to automatic processing (Schneider and Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin and Schneider, 1977). The characteristics of performance at this point are fluid, accomplished and individualised (Kraiger et al., 1993) with the learner no longer conscious of all the processes being initiated. Evidence of reduced variability in responses by participants would indicate compilation, whereas subsequent evidence of increased variability would support inferences of automaticity as trainees individualise

performance (Kraiger et al., 1993). Automaticity also leads to decreased attentional requirements, to the point where the learner may continue unaffected by external distractions and interference, with fine-tuning of the skills for further generalisation and applicability (Rummelhart and Norman, 1978).

There is consensus across the schools of thought in their recognition of skill as a learning outcome, but different interpretations on the methods and process, for example, the behaviourist theories underlie many of the techniques used in skill development today, for example, conditioning responses through reinforcement (practice) and an emphasis on behavioural modelling (Kramlinger and Huberty, 1990). Whereas, the cognitivist theories stress the internal intellectual aspect, whereby “the sequences of unitary motor responses are often combined into more complex performances called motor skills” (Gagné et al., 1992, p. 92) and advocate the use of timely and accurate feedback to improve performance levels. Meanwhile, the humanist school emphasises the advantages of the learner self-assessing their own skill levels and strengthening the response through mental rehearsal of new skills, in addition to advocating recognition of the learner’s prior experience and skills (Kramlinger and Huberty, 1990). Indeed, Kramlinger and Huberty (1990) argued that to reach peak performance or skill automaticity, humanistic methods are required as they stimulate initiative and creativity in the learner. The social/situational perspective, views learning as closely tied to practice, recognising methods such as apprenticeship, whereby the skilled expert shares their practices with the novice.

In reviewing the training literature, some authors differentiated between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ skills, referring to those skills that involve an element of physical exertion or technical aspects of performing a job as ‘hard’ (Page et al., 1993). Whereas ‘soft skills’ are seen as “interpersonal, human, people, or behavioral skills, and place emphasis on personal behavior and managing relationships between people” (sic) (Rainsbury et al., 2002, p. 9). The literature highlights that hard skills are easier to learn (Caudron, 1999) and easier to measure than soft skills, however there is a growing recognition that both skill types are complementary and necessary for

individual successful performance in the workplace (Rainsbury et al., 2002; Hodges and Burchell, 2003). Having identified the criticality of skill as a learning outcome, the following section refers to the extant literature regarding managerial capabilities, in particular dynamic capabilities as the visible application of the learning.

2.7.3 Managerial Capabilities (Dynamic Capabilities)

As indicated, similar to Huber (1991) and Mayo (2004), Kelliher and Henderson (2006, p. 521) described learning as the “lasting change in capability that will be applied in the workplace”, hence highlighting that managerial capabilities are an outcome of learning. Graves and Thomas (2004) argued that there are three components of managerial capability: management capacity composed of the human resources available, management expertise made up of the competencies available, and management processes involving the planning and control of the business. Following the behaviourist approach of identifying learning through changes in behaviour, in the context of the TLN’s overall objective to improve managerial capabilities; dynamic capabilities are identified as the observable managerial capabilities in action. Indeed, the social/situational approach would identify these dynamic capabilities as the practices implemented, following an apprenticeship with experts.

Dynamic capabilities originate from the resource-based-view (RBV) of the firm (Wernerfelt, 1984) whose framework holds that management’s top priority is to manipulate their internal and external resources for optimum performance. Teece et al. (1997, p. 516) argued that the manager needs to develop dynamic capabilities whereby they “integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments”. Further, Akwei et al. (2006, p. 4) defined dynamic capabilities as “a set of learned behaviours, which are fully or partially repeated resulting partly from tacit knowledge, specific organisational objectives” and involve the “combination of resources and activities which brings about change” (sic). Moreover, Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) highlighted that the speedy and astute use of the dynamic capabilities will lead to competitive advantage, for example,

through product development, acquisition, strategic decision-making and creating alliances. There is recognition throughout the strategic management literature, that the firm's ability to react quickly to the changes in the marketplace and wider environment is the key to success or failure. Hence the criticality of examining the changes introduced, situated in the processes embedded in firms, linked to organisational objectives or strategies to renew resources from within or outside the firm. Indeed, Lahteenmaki et al. (2001) argued that one should not try to measure change and learning separately as by studying both a more holistic perspective of results is achieved. It is the intention of this study to measure the changes implemented within the firm by the SME owner-manager, in addition to their intention to implement changes (as psychological research has illustrated that behavioural intentions are good predictors of actual behaviour (Mobley et al., 1979)). The changes and developments of interest are not found solely in the business, but also address personal self-development which the extant literature highlights as a learning outcome.

2.7.4 Personal Self-development

Honey and Povah (1986, p. 11) defined self-development as “the deliberate process of learning from experience about oneself”. They proposed using Kolb's (1976) learning cycle (see Figure 2.1.) as a guide to the four step process which involves not just having experiences but reviewing them, assimilating and making deductions and then planning what to do. O'Donnell and Garavan (1997, p. 131) added that the learner should experience an awareness of growth through “reflection on the processes inherent in the learning process itself, thus developing an increased sense of personal control, empowerment and autonomy”.

Indeed, ALT views learning as a form of self-actualisation (Sahakian, 1984) and Nordhaug (1989) perceived that an outcome of a learning intervention is ‘psychosocial development’, for example, increased self-confidence. In the tourism network context, Ahmad's (2005) research presented self-improvement as a positive outcome of participation, resulting from advice from senior or successful owner-

managers, thereby gaining new ideas. The importance of social relationships which foster and encourage self-development was established by Pedler et al. (1991), with the learning network identified as strengthening the participants' self-confidence in Floren and Tell's (2004) study. Similarly, Parker and Arthur (2000) advanced this concept proposing that the network can provide expertise, reputation development and support for personal development. In addition, the design of the programme and in particular the choice of delivery method will also play a role, as mentoring has already been identified as a possible means of promoting and encouraging self-development (Noe, 1988). Indeed, Kraiger et al. (1993) identified mentoring as a developmental activity that typically seeks to instil a mastery orientation in learners.

O'Donnell and Garavan (1997), citing Vygotsky (1978), stated that the only effective learning is that which advances self-development. In essence, the learner's ability to stand back from a situation and reflect on it, in the context of past experiences enhances the learning capability of the individual and the organisation in the small firm milieu (Sullivan, 2000). Unfortunately, due to the unique resource constraints associated with a small firm setting, there is little time for reflective thought in this environment (Ballantine et al., 1998). Indeed, findings from Kaplan et al. (1987) indicated that self-development becomes more difficult at high-level positions as there are several obstacles to learning. These obstacles included the hectic pace and unrelenting demands indicated by Ballantine et al. (1998), but also the manner in which executives tend to become isolated (a view confirmed by Stuart, 1986) as subordinates will not risk offending or criticising them. Kaplan et al. (1987) also revealed a further obstacle for the owner-manager, as success may foster resistance to change and hamper recognition of personal weaknesses. Moreover, Kaplan et al.'s (1987) findings endorsed the need for some form of group support to underpin the process of personal development.

In conducting their study into voluntary development activities, Maurer and Tarulli (1994) highlighted the relationship between self-perceived need for skill enhancement and interest in development activity. Maurer and Tarulli (1994) proposed that the value placed on development by the participant will have a

significant impact on their motivation. Further, Cacioppe's (1998) findings showed that individuals find value in their own self-development. In his research, participants in over thirty leadership programs run by Curtin University consistently rated highly those activities that contributed to self-understanding. In conclusion, the value placed on self-development reinforces the need to identify any changes in participants' perceptions of their own self-development, produced by the initiative.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter began by introducing some of the fields of research relevant to this study. In response to previous calls for educational research to have a theoretical base, the key schools of thought and their principles were presented, prior to presenting the approach most aligned with the objectives of this study.

In the subsequent section the literature was consulted in order to identify the major antecedents to learning. This review lead to the identification of key individual characteristics expected to influence the learning in the network context, specifically: self-efficacy, motivation to learn and expectations of learning. The literature also indicated that the TLN facilitator, the flexible learning approach and peer interaction, in particular, trust and information sharing between participants are critical antecedents.

In the final section of the chapter, the literature pertinent to the discussion of learning outcomes was examined. Following examination of the pedagogy's intricacies and the prerequisites required for the learning network to perform, particularly considering the experiential learning emphasis in the SME context (as supported by Deakins and Freel, 1998; and De Faoite et al., 2004), the critical learning outcomes are identified as: knowledge, skills, managerial capabilities and self-development. In the next chapter the framework for assessing the TLNs will be presented, incorporating both these outcomes and the previously identified antecedents to the learning process.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the research philosophy and methodology, the assumptions upon which they are founded as well as the issues surrounding this study's data collection technique. The research aims are presented first, before describing the philosophical perspective which underpins the decision-making processes pertinent to the research design. The philosophical discussion reviews the debate involving: ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology in order to bring clarity and rational thinking to the research process, as well as establishing a solid theoretical grounding. After the philosophical position adopted has been rationalised and the hypotheses articulated, the alternative research methods relevant to that position will be discussed. This is followed by an explanation of the chosen data collection methods, including relevant issues regarding their use. Finally, the design and administration of the survey questionnaire are detailed, concluding with a summary of the chapter.

3.2 Research Aims and Objectives

The objective of this study is to evaluate Fáilte Ireland's Tourism Learning Network initiative with a view to developing 'best practice'. Informed by TLN objectives (as specified by Fáilte Ireland) as well as an in-depth assessment of the literature, Figure 3.1 represents the conceptual framework which has been developed for the assessment of the TLN initiative.

The framework highlights the perception that: (1) the influence of peer interaction, flexible learning approach, facilitation, and individual characteristics are major determinants of learning, and (2) personal self-development, knowledge, skills, and managerial capabilities are key learning outcomes – these variables represent measurable dimensions of learning. Based on the foregoing, the following are this study's objectives:

- To establish the major determinants of learning in a learning network context.
- To establish if Fáilte Ireland's strategic learning aims are being met through the TLN initiative.
- If the learning aims are not being met, to propose adaptations to ensure they are achieved.
- To develop a TLN 'best practice' model.

Having indicated the research objectives, in the following section, the philosophy and assumptions underpinning the research are reviewed.

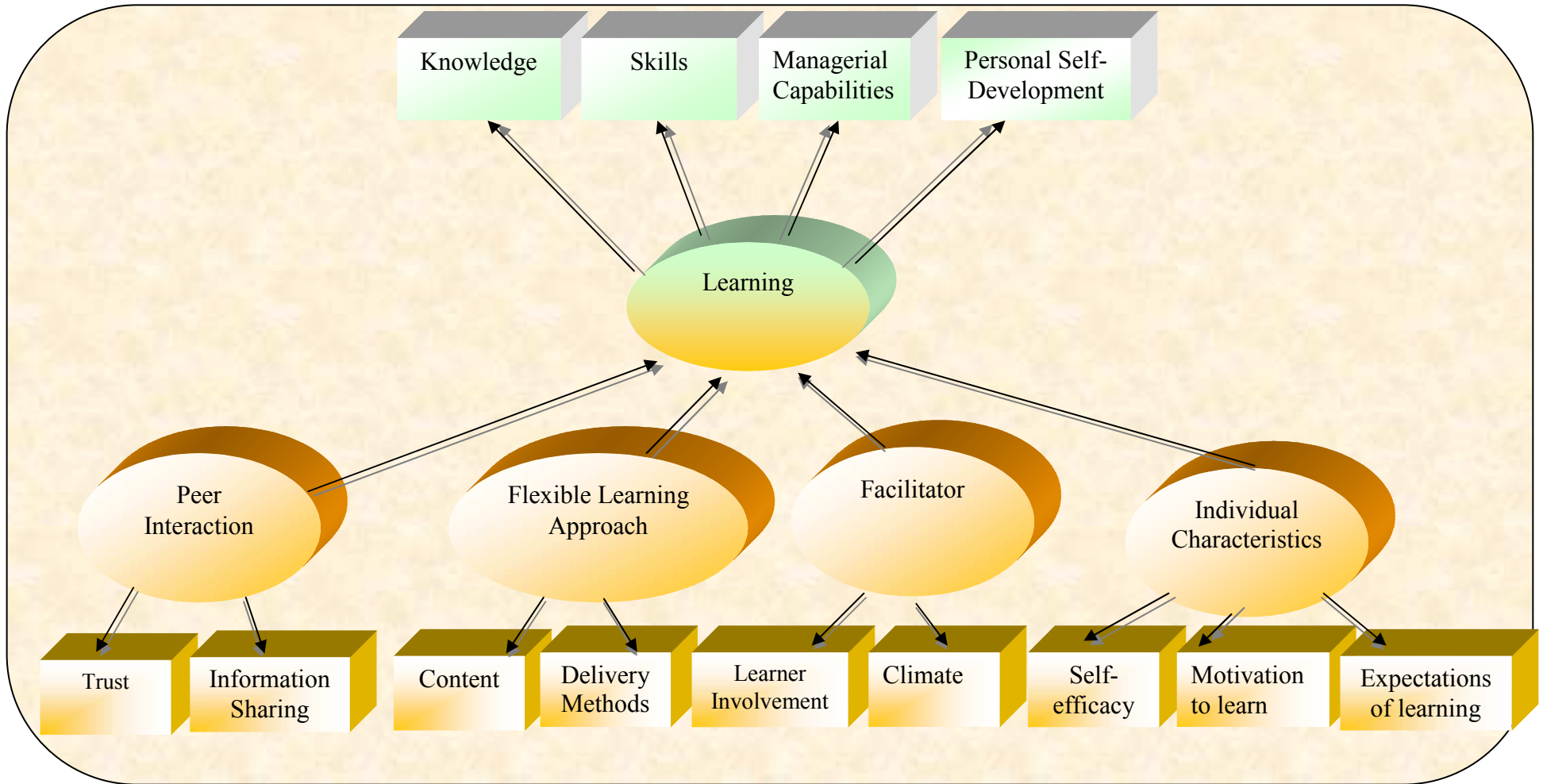


Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Author

3.3 The Philosophical Debate

Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) suggest three reasons why an understanding of philosophical issues is important. Firstly, it aids in clarifying research design in terms of what kind of evidence is required, from where and how this data is interpreted. Secondly, it aids the researcher in recognising which designs will best facilitate the research. Finally, this understanding of alternative viewpoints may assist the researcher in modifying or even creating a new design based on their knowledge of the philosophical concepts.

In discussing the researcher's philosophical perspective, two aspects should be identified as they pertain to the underlying assumptions which govern the philosophical position, the dimensions of the nature of society and the nature of science (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The assumptions on the nature of society involve two different domains: society evolves through radical change or through regulatory change. The radical change side offers that society is in constant conflict as humans seek to free themselves of the domination of social structures (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Whereas the regulatory change perspective sees society as evolving rationally in a cohesive and unified manner (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

The dimensions of the nature of science specifically relate to whether science is subjective or objective. Subjectivity and objectivity are at either extreme on a continuum, with a range of philosophical perspectives aligned between them (Holden and Lynch, 2002; Easterby-Smith et al., 2002; Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The objectivist position holds that science is value-neutral, whereas the subjectivist extreme recognises the role the researcher plays in shaping the research process. Depending on the nature of science perspective (subjectivity or objectivity), each of these approaches to research has four basic assumptions that will frame the debate: ontology, epistemology, human nature and finally methodology (as illustrated in Figure 3.2). Indeed, each of these is consequential on the next assumption, as the

ontology impacts on the epistemology, the epistemology on the assumptions on human nature and so on.

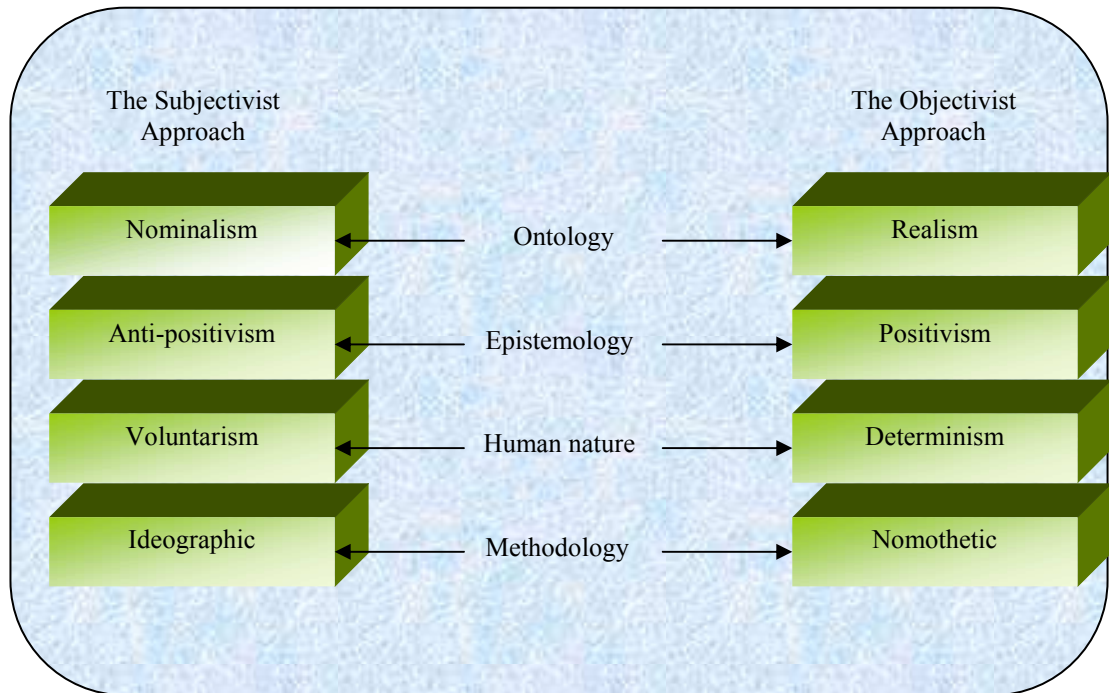


Figure 3.2: Research Method Assumptions – the Subjectivist / Objectivist Approach

Source: Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 3)

3.3.1 The Ontological Debate

This debate centres on the assumptions regarding the nature of reality, specifically whether reality is a product of the researcher’s interpretation which is socially constructed or whether reality exists independent of the researcher (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). This aspect distinguishes between those who are realists and those who are nominalists. Realists contend that reality is made up of tangible concrete elements, regardless of whether they are labelled or measured and independent of the researcher. On the other hand, the nominalists propose reality to be the product of an individual’s perceptions and dependent on individual consciousness. The next section explains the debate regarding the epistemological perspective.

3.3.2 The Epistemological Debate

Creswell (2003) describes the epistemological debate as how we know knowledge, while Saunders et al. (1997, p. 102) offer that epistemology “concerns what constitutes acceptable knowledge in a field of study”. The epistemological debate regarding the nature, limits and access to knowledge has two main dimensions: positivism and anti-positivism (also referred to as phenomenology or interpretativism) (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Specifically, the positivist epistemology holds that the researcher is an independent observer of the external world and its facts, knowledge of which can be identified and passed on. The positivist paradigm acknowledges Karl Popper’s (1959) concern that while it is relatively easy to collect data to support a theory it only takes one instance of refutation to falsify a theory (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002), hence the falsification of hypotheses underlying the methodology. Whereas the anti-positivists propose that research is influenced by and involves the researcher, particularly as knowledge is socially constructed. The anti-positivist perspective contends that in order to understand the point of view of the individuals involved, one must occupy the same frame of reference, thus rejecting the concept of science being capable of generating objective knowledge (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The next section illustrates the role of human nature.

3.3.3 The Human Nature Debate

This debate concerns the assumptions regarding how individuals relate to their environment; specifically, Burrell and Morgan (1979) distinguish between the major stances of determinism and voluntarism. The determinist position is that individuals’ activities are in response to external stimuli in the environment, one thing determines another thing. Further, Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) suggest that the determinist viewpoint holds that there are causal laws that explain the patterns of social behaviour. The alternative viewpoint, voluntarism, argues that individuals interact autonomously with their environment, resulting in individuals having the free will to determine their activities (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

3.3.4 The Methodological Debate

This final domain deals with the approach to research and the techniques used to investigate a situation, whether the methods are theory testing (deductive-nomothetic) or theory gathering (inductive - ideographic) (Gill and Johnson, 1997). The first of the two approaches, the nomothetic approach is associated with the philosophical perspective of objectivity. Hence, the methodological tools used under this approach are predominantly quantitative in nature, employing scientific tests in search of facts through reducing phenomena to their simplest elements, otherwise known as deduction. The nomothetic methodology values the measurement and tabulation of results with the researcher independent from the events, demonstrating an emphasis on systematic protocols (Falconer and Mackay, 1999). While, the ideographic approach uses qualitative techniques in search of meaning, developing ideas through induction from data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). The ideographic stance requires the researcher to get first hand knowledge of the subject in order to investigate phenomena in its natural setting, gathering different subjective perspectives as an aid to generating theories. Table 3.1 displays the key differences between these two methodological perspectives.

	Nomothetic Methods Emphasise		Ideographic Methods Emphasise
1	Deduction	V's	Induction
2	Explanation via analysis of causal relationships and explanation by covering laws	V's	Explanation of subjective meaning systems and explanation by understanding
3	Generation and use of quantitative data	V's	Generation and use of qualitative data
4	Use of various controls, physical or statistical, so as to allow testing of hypotheses	V's	Commitment to research in everyday settings, to allow access to, and minimise reactivity among the subjects of research
5	Highly structured research methodology to ensure replicability of 1,2,3, and 4	V's	Minimum structure to ensure 2,3 and 4 (and as a result of 1)

Table 3.1 Comparison of Nomothetic and Ideographic Methods.

Source: Gill and Johnson (1997, p. 37)

In more recent times, methodological pluralism (also referred to as triangulation or mixed method approach), where different research techniques are used to ascertain complementary sets of data about the phenomenon, have come to the fore. In the following paragraphs, the three main approaches to research are compared in terms of their benefits and drawbacks.

3.3.4.1 Quantitative Methods

Based on positivist knowledge claims, quantitative methods are predominantly of an experimental or quasi-experimental design, measuring information numerically. Creswell (2003) stated that these methods are pre-determined at the start of the research and involve statistical analysis. The quantitative methods aim to test theory, by providing numerical evidence which supports or rejects research hypotheses. The methods of data collection may include the use of closed-ended questions, tracking of performance, and attitude observation (Creswell, 2003). In quantitative techniques there is an overlying emphasis on ensuring standards of validity and reliability are adhered to, particularly in the statistical procedures used to analyse the data. The limitations of this research method include that it can be time and context free, treating social entities in much the same way as physical scientists treat physical phenomena (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

3.3.4.2 Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods recognise that personal values exist in the researcher's stance and way of thinking. The research can be narrative or ethnographic in design, with a variety of assumptions underlying these decisions including the degree of constructivism and participation (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). There is frequent use of open-ended questions and both text and image analysis (Creswell, 2003). The use of qualitative methods often involves the study of the context and setting of the participants and it usually focuses on a single concept or phenomenon. These methods are highly effective when the aim is to depict a process over time and how participants engage with each other during the process (Patton, 2002). This research method is driven by the search for meaning in the data and interpretations of the data

often create an agenda for reform (Creswell, 2003). The methods employed will often evolve or emerge as the research continues as new information comes to light. Qualitative methods are often criticised for their contention that logic flows from the specific to the general, as well as their claim that the knower and the known cannot be separated because the subjective knower is the only source of reality (Guba, 1990; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

3.3.4.3 Methodological Pluralism

The research techniques of methodological pluralism incorporate the best aspects of both quantitative and qualitative methods, using both pre-determined and more reactive techniques (Bryman, 1992; Patton, 2002). Webb et al. (1966) are credited with coining the term triangulation, which Denzin (1978, p. 291) defined as “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon”. Further, Denzin (1978) described four types of triangulation as follows:

- (1) Data triangulation - the application of a variety of data sources.
- (2) Investigator triangulation - the employment of multiple researchers.
- (3) Theory triangulation - the use of multiple perspectives to interpret data from a single source.
- (4) Methodological triangulation - the application of multiple methods to examine a problem.

This latter type of triangulation, methodological triangulation is also known as methodological pluralism. The philosophical perspective most aligned with methodological pluralism is pragmatism, as it is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality (Creswell, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007). Usually based on real-world practical issues, the pragmatic approach employs a strategy of inquiry which combines both open-ended measures and closed-ended questions or observations in order to gain a more rounded picture of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2003). Regularly, using statistical and text analysis, this method draws on these

multiple forms of data to offer explanations for what is being observed in order to base knowledge claims on pragmatic grounds (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). The data collection by different methods can be concurrent, sequential, or transformative, based on the rationale for mixing, with the final dataset containing both quantitative and qualitative information (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). Indeed, Creswell (2003) proposed that data collection through different methods can add depth and reduce researcher bias, in addition to facilitating convergent or complementary results.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 14) suggest that there are two major types of mixed method research: mixed-model designs and mixed-method designs, but they identify mixed methods research as frequently resulting in superior research compared to mono-method research. Furthermore, Patton (2002) argued that multiple methods and the variety of data types they produce can provide the opportunity for cross-data validity checks, while Robson (2002, p. 371) stressed that “the error due to methods is regarded as tending to average out when multiple methods are used”. Indeed, Brewer and Hunt (1989, p. 17) contended that the use of multiple methods offered “an arsenal of methods that have non overlapping weaknesses in addition to their complementary strengths”. Qualitative data can add “depth, detail and nuance to quantitative findings, rendering insights” (Patton, 2002, p. 220), which may aid in the development of plans for the future, an area where quantitative findings are less helpful due to their emphasis on what is or has been recently (Robson, 2002). However, Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) cautioned against using mixed methods to simply enhance the richness of the data as it opens up possibilities of contradictions and discrepancies between the different data sets. Having presented the alternative philosophical approaches, in the next section the selection of a philosophical position for the current research is detailed.

3.4 Philosophical Position Adopted

As previously indicated, the research objectives are examined once more to aid the selection of the most appropriate philosophical perspective and guide the decision-making process. The research objectives call for the nationwide evaluation of the TLN initiative; the scope of this task, in addition to the time limitations, contributed to the need for an approach which provided empirical data and suited a scientific method, where the sequence of hypothesis, observation or testing, and confirmation or disconfirmation of hypothesis is followed. Therefore, the objectivist perspective of science was chosen, as value-free hypothesis-testing was deemed most aligned to the research aims.

Following Burrell and Morgan (1979) in terms of the nature of society, the acceptance of a philosophy that society tends towards unity, which they termed regulation, reflects the cohesive, unifying background to the formation of the TLNs. This perspective, combining the objective viewpoint with regulation rather than radical change, is described as the functionalist paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Functionalism seeks to explain social phenomena and in choosing such an approach to research, it in turn leads to a positivist epistemological basis for the study. The positivistic stance is that the researcher is an objective observer independent of the variables being investigated, for example, the variables impacting on learning in the TLNs. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) highlight objectivity as being derived from the enlightenment prescription for knowledge of the physical world, describing knowledge as both separate and distinct from those who would know (Polkinghorne, 1989). This assumption infers that the researcher is separate from the research and determines that the researcher sources objective data in an objective manner, independent of any single person's opinion (Hair et al., 2003).

In order to explain individuals' responses to the stimuli in their environment (in this context the TLN), the researcher's deterministic viewpoint argues that human beings are a product of their environment. In order to establish the fundamental laws which govern the process under examination, reductionism is the goal, reducing the area of

study into its smallest component elements. Once the component parts have been identified, questions are formed for testing hypotheses. The chosen approach follows a nomothetic methodology, as theories are tested through the collection of data that either supports or refutes each hypothesis. The choice of this philosophy is in keeping with much of the literature in both the learning and training fields, acknowledging the strength of the positivist paradigm and quantitative methods in terms of the fast, wide and economical coverage they provide (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). The next section addresses the implications of the philosophical position adopted in terms of the research design.

3.5 Research Design

As indicated, following the philosophical position adopted, the research process adheres to the sequence of determining the hypothesis, observation or testing, and acceptance and rejection of the hypothesis. This sequence guides the outline of the stages of the research, hence, the first stage of data collection involves a thorough review of the learning literature with a view to establishing both the possible determinants of learning and the likely learning outcomes (as examined in Chapter Two). The following section briefly outlines the steps in the research design process.

3.5.1 Initial Steps in the Research Design

In addition to the literature review outlined in the previous chapter, in order to get background information on the TLN context, interviews were held with key figures in the local network and Fáilte Ireland. Dr. Anthony Foley, lecturer in Marketing at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) was interviewed in order to gain insight into how the South-East and South-West TLNs were instigated and developed. Ms. Anne-Marie Frampton, Programme Manager of the TLNs in these two regions, was interviewed for further insights into this development, in addition to obtaining an alternative perspective on the key aspects fundamental to the networks. These interviews were followed-up with interviews with both Mr. Colm Breheny, Manager

of Professional Development in Fáilte Ireland, and Ms. Jacqui Doyle, Programme Co-ordinator of the TLNs, in order to ascertain what the boundaries to the study might be and to seek clarity on the aims of the TLNs. These interviews, combined with the literature review, led to the establishment of a conceptual model which informs the study (see Figure 3.1) and the development of the following research hypotheses regarding the differences between the academically-backed and consultancy-lead facilitation types:

Hypothesis H₁ -There is no significant difference between the groups on the effect of individual characteristics on learning.

- Hypothesis H_{1a}-There is no significant difference between the groups on the effect of self-efficacy on learning.
- Hypothesis H_{1b}-There is no significant difference between the groups on the effect of motivation to learn on learning.
- Hypothesis H_{1c}-There is no significant difference between the groups on the effect of expectations of learning on learning.

Hypothesis H₂ - There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of a flexible learning approach on learning.

- Hypothesis H_{2a} - There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of the perception of the TLN content on learning.
- Hypothesis H_{2b} -There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of the delivery methods on learning.

Hypothesis H₃ - There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of peer interaction on learning.

Hypothesis H₄ - There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of facilitation on learning.

In the next section, the implications of the research hypotheses are considered in developing the most suitable data collection instrument with reference to the population of interest for the current study.

3.5.2 Data Collection

This section of the chapter pertains to the process of collecting the data, beginning with the population of interest.

3.5.2.1 Population and Sample Size

The target population in this study, as specified by Fáilte Ireland, was defined as the 2008 TLN participants. Access to contact details for the participants was provided by Fáilte Ireland. The participants number 435 nationwide, divided between six regional TLNs. The participants are geographically spread across the 26 counties of the Republic, and are all involved in the Irish tourism industry. The variations in the facilitation and methods employed by the different initiative facilitators demand that participants from each of the TLNs are sampled. Alternative sampling methods to a census were dismissed due to the need for sufficient response rates for statistical and comparative analysis.

3.5.2.2 The Decision-making Process

The second stage in the research process was to establish the most effective means of collecting data to support or reject these hypotheses. Given the approach adopted, there are two main strategies of inquiry: experiments and surveys. Experiments are often “unrepresentative...dealing with artificial situations...often failing to achieve the precision and control that might justify them” (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 12), therefore surveys offered a better alternative due to their capacity to deal with multiple-subjects in a real-world situation beyond the control of the researcher (Creswell, 2003).

As indicated, the lack of consistency in the provision of the initiative restricted the practical options available, as it effectively ruled out the use of structured record reviews and observations. In addition, the nationwide aspect of the evaluation required the design of a data collection device appropriate for the geographic spread of the participant subjects, and the intention to use the data for cross-group comparative purposes. Indeed, the aforementioned geographic spread and the time restrictions on the study meant that it was more amenable to a survey than direct observation (Oppenheim, 1992). Hence, the next key decision was whether a cross-sectional or longitudinal study was more appropriate and whether to employ questionnaires or structured interviews. As the time-frame of the study¹⁹ negated the opportunity to effectively implement a longitudinal study, a cross-sectional study was the only option available. Furthermore, the research aims to evaluate the TLNs on a nationwide basis; hence the cross-sectional nature of the methodology matches the study's needs, as it facilitates a survey of the entire population of interest, which should ensure that the research is replicable and the results are unbiased.

3.5.2.3 *Interviewer Bias*

The potential for interviewer bias (in addition to the time required to interview the sizeable population of interest) was a determining factor in the decision-making process. There is a need in interviewing for every respondent to understand a question in the same way, without deviations caused by, for example, the tone of voice or emphasis used by the interviewer, which Oppenheim (1992, p. 86) referred to as 'stimulus equivalence'. Reducing this interviewer effect or bias, is of particular importance when the research concerns attitudinal rather than factual data, as these questions "are much more sensitive, and no deviations should be allowed" (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 89). Given the nature of the current research, the decision was taken to employ a questionnaire survey for data collection. The method of administering the questionnaire is outlined in the next section.

¹⁹ The research commenced in February 2008, the 2008 TLN initiative was already in operation by this stage, thus ruling out the opportunity to use a 'before-and-after' longitudinal design for this study.

3.5.2.4 *Survey Type*

The use of a telephone survey was dismissed for the same reason as the use of interviews, intending to reduce the potential for interviewer bias impacting the results. The secondary reason for rejecting telephone interviews was the time-poverty of the SME owner-managers, and the gate-keeper technologies employed in most businesses which make access problematic (Braunsberger et al., 2007). Having ruled out the use of telephone surveys, the most effective alternatives available were postal surveys or online surveys. However, a lack of information regarding the computer literacy of the population meant that the option of an online survey was not pursued. The large sample size determined that a postal survey was the most suitable and economic instrument of data collection as it provided the benefits of access and coverage, while also enabling the respondents to complete the survey with time for reflection upon their answers and at a time that was convenient to them (Hair et al., 2003).

An additional benefit of the postal survey is the sense of anonymity it provides to the respondents, particularly as the research examines their own personal learning and this may be a sensitive topic²⁰. The nature of the research relies on self-reported²¹ data on both the learning process and learning outcomes, which according to Podsakoff and Organ (1986) could create some potential bias problems:

- (1) Common-method bias (the source of all data is the respondent – lack of multiple sources).
- (2) Consistency motif (whereby respondents feel the need to reply to the questions in a consistent manner).
- (3) Social desirability problem (whereby responses are chosen to present the respondent in a favourable light).

²⁰ Kraiger et al. (1993) recommend the use of self-reported data for measuring such constructs as motivation, self-efficacy and learning outcomes in their study on training evaluation.

²¹ The unit of analysis is the SME owner-manager's learning, however, the micro-nature of the business precludes the use of peers, superiors or subordinates reporting on the individual's learning, hence the reliance on self-reported learning.

However, Gable and Wolf (1993) argued that self-reported data is more likely to be accurate if the participants perceive the research as non-threatening, hence the confidentiality of their responses was asserted and reiterated at the end of the questionnaire. In relation to self-reported learning, Bergh (2008, p. 65) argues that while there can be reasons for respondents to overvalue or undervalue their learning, “the credibility of the interpretations can be increased if there is conformity between different participants”. Hence, the self-reported learning outcomes were deemed acceptable for the comparative purposes of this study. In the following section the focus shifts to the design of the actual questionnaire for data collection.

3.5.3 Design of the Questionnaire

In a mail survey where there is no researcher present to assist, the instructions are particularly important (Bryman, 2004), especially as there is no opportunity to answer any questions that may arise or to question the interviewee about their reasons for any responses (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 102). A further disadvantage of the self-administered questionnaire is the inability to build in validity checks as the respondent has the opportunity to go back and change their answers and this may influence item responses (Oppenheim, 1992). The self-administered questionnaire therefore must be very well designed to negate the need for assistance and ensure that the responses will collect sufficient data for the interpretation and analysis stage (Oppenheim, 1992).

A key feature of the aforementioned design is the use of a coversheet for the questionnaire. The cover sheet of the questionnaire contained general instructions as an introduction, including a reminder of the prepaid self-addressed envelope²² for return once completed (see Appendix A). In addition, each section of questions had an introductory few lines explaining the transition from one area of interest to the next. This introduction also explained the category headings being employed in each

²² Dillman (2000) recommends the inclusion of a prepaid self-addressed envelope as it increases the response levels.

section and finished with how/where their answer should be recorded. The respondents were required to tick a box to indicate their choice of response.

The questionnaire was made up of 95 items divided into six sections (see Appendix A). Section A incorporated 18 items relevant to the interaction between the participants in the network. Section B's 28 items related to questions regarding the participant's general attitude and feelings towards learning. Section C was made up of 20 items regarding the participant's opinion of the relevance and impact of the learning provided through the TLN. Section D's 15 items queried the extent to which each of the delivery methods employed by the TLN facilitators was of benefit to their personal learning. Section E's six items sought the extent to which the TLN had made an impact on the participant's business and practice. Finally, Section F's ten items concerned variables relevant to the participant's personal and business information for classification purposes.

In constructing the measurement instrument or survey, the objectivity of the wording and presentation is essential to prevent any bias towards particular answers (Black, 1999). Hence, the order of the questions was designed to avoid any source of bias, with each construct's items scattered over numerous sections (with the exception of managerial capabilities which were confined to Section E as they each examined variations in the implementation of changes to the business). In the following segment, the types of questions employed in the survey are reviewed.

3.5.4 Types of Question Used

Question content, phrasing and response format, are three critical aspects in questionnaire design (Brannick and Roche, 1987). As indicated previously, the intention was to use statistical analysis - this includes advanced multivariate procedures which require metric data (quantitative) rather than non-metric data (qualitative). Hair et al. (1998, p. 6) define multivariate analysis as "all statistical methods that simultaneously analyse multiple measurements on each individual or object under investigation", hence the emphasis on measurement scales which

influences the type of questions used. These procedures generally require interval-type variables, whereas nominal and categorical data are more difficult to handle (Oppenheim, 1992). Consequently, the majority of the items were declarative statements with 5-point Likert scales for the respondents to indicate their level of agreement. All the statements were less than twenty words, using simple vocabulary to avoid misinterpretation (Oppenheim, 1992). The use of a multiple item scale also offers the opportunity to capture the totality of each broad concept or construct, such as learning (Bryman and Cramer, 2005). Therefore, the decision was made to employ scales sourced from the literature, which had already demonstrated high levels of validity and reliability in measuring the variables of interest.

However, one section of questions (Section D) required the development of a formative indicator²³, as the researcher failed to identify a comprehensive scale from the literature which accommodated the range of delivery methods provided in the TLN. Furthermore, the decision to employ a formative scale reflected the observation that each of the delivery methods represented separate conditions for the emergence of the construct. In this particular section the delivery methods employed are listed, asking the respondent to identify the extent to which each of the methods influenced their personal learning, using a 5-point Likert-type scale with an additional option to choose non-applicable if this method was not part of their experience.

A further section (Section E) used questions to assess the extent to which the particular aspect was of benefit or impact in their business, each choice representing a certain degree of a single concept, rather than a more limited 'yes/no' answer. The final section contained the questions for categorical use, where possible, there was an option of 'Other (please specify)', to prevent any loss of rapport with the respondent due to frustration with the alternative categories provided (Oppenheim, 1992).

²³ Formative indicators (or causal measures) are multidimensional composites which define a construct, but are not a reflection of a construct, as each item is an independent component and changes in the indicators determine changes in the value of the latent variable (Bollen and Lennox, 1991; Howell, 2002). See Edwards and Bagozzi (2000) for a discussion of the difference between formative and reflective scales.

As indicated, this philosophical position is very dependent on the instruments of measurement used (Creswell, 2003), hence there is considerable emphasis placed on reducing bias and ensuring standards of validity and reliability (this is discussed in more detail in the following section).

3.6 Evaluation Criteria

Following the philosophical approach adopted, the evaluation criteria are conventional benchmarks of ‘rigour’: validity, reliability and objectivity (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The emphasis in this context is placed on measurement, which Bryman and Cramer (2005, p. 66) argued “allows small differences between units to be specified”. In particular, the focus is on reducing measurement error - that is “the degree to which the observed values are not representative of the ‘true’ values” (Hair et al., 1998, p. 9). The degree of measurement error present is addressed through first determining the validity of the scales employed, followed by considering the reliability of the measure.

3.6.1 Validity

According to Oppenheim (1992, p. 144) validity refers to “whether the question, item or score measures what it is supposed to measure” and “the degree to which it is free from any systematic or non-random errors” (Hair et al., 1998, p. 90). In the following section, each of the three main types of validity – content, construct and criterion validity are examined in more detail.

3.6.1.1 Content Validity

Hair et al. (1998, p. 88) define content validity as the “assessment of the degree of correspondence between the items selected to constitute a *summated scale* and its *conceptual definition*” (italics in original). Assessing content validity, also referred to as face validity, is a systematic process of judging the items chosen for their

suitability in measuring the construct. The process often involves the consultation of a typical sample and/or experts as it goes beyond empirical issues to also include theoretical and practical issues (Hair et al., 2003).

3.6.1.2 Construct Validity

The issue of construct validity involves determining whether an instrument relates to the theoretical assumptions underlying the construct and is based on establishing convergent and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2003). Each of these objective tests provides a numerical score which demonstrates “how well the construct conforms to theoretical expectations” (Hair et al., 2003, p. 174). Convergent validity has been defined as “the extent to which the construct is positively correlated with other measures of the same construct” (Hair et al., 2003, p. 174) whereas discriminant validity has been described as the extent to which the construct has a low correlation with another variable which is theoretically or empirically distinct (Simms and Watson, 2007, p. 255).

3.6.1.3 Criterion Validity

Hair et al. (2003, p. 175) determine criterion validity to be an assessment of “whether a construct performs as expected relative to other variables identified as meaningful criteria”. In determining if the scale items predict the dependent or criterion variable, one or two tests can be performed to identify predictive validity and/or concurrent validity. According to Hair et al. (2003, p. 175), predictive validity checks “the ability of a construct measured at one point in time to predict another criterion variable at a future point in time” whereas concurrent validity demonstrates that “some pre-specified association must be established between the scores on the construct being validated and the scores on a dependent variable as determined by theory”.

3.6.2 Reliability

Oppenheim (1992, p. 144) refers to reliability as “the purity and consistency of a measure, to repeatability, to the probability of obtaining the same results again if the measure were to be duplicated” (sic). Reliability illustrates the degree of consistency of the measure and research findings, as when reliable, the repeated application of the instrument results in consistent scores. Hair et al. (2003) describe the following three reliability tests: test-retest reliability, alternative-form reliability and internal consistency reliability.

3.6.2.1 Test-retest Reliability

Test-retest reliability is assessed by repeating the same measurement instrument on the same group of respondents under similar conditions within a short period. However, Oppenheim (1992) warns that this may cause resistance and/or a practice effect, which may bias the results of the retest.

3.6.2.2 Alternative-form Reliability

The alternative-form or parallel-form method involves the use of two sets of questions in identical tests except for the content of the items. Oppenheim (1992) recommends the use of these two sets of questions to reduce the problems of boredom or practice associated with the test-retest option.

3.6.2.3 Internal Consistency Reliability

According to Oppenheim (1992) the internal consistency method rests on classical scaling theory, meaning that the items in a scale measuring a construct should have a strong relationship with both the construct and with each other. There are two procedures for estimating internal reliability. The first alternative is to calculate the split-half reliability, tested by splitting the items into two halves at random, and the two halves are then inter-correlated (Oppenheim, 1992). Split-half reliability assesses the extent to which two items measure the same concept at the same level of

difficulty, in order to verify the level of internal consistency. The other alternative is to use the popular Cronbach's alpha that "calculates the average of all possible split-half reliability coefficients" (Bryman and Cramer, 2005, p. 77). The split-half tests of reliability produce a correlation coefficient, that is "an estimation of the proportion of the total variance that is not due to error" (Oppenheim, 1992, p. 160), which Bryman and Cramer (2005, p. 77) argued should be 0.80 or above, whereas Nunnally (1978) argued a Cronbach's alpha of over 0.70 is satisfactory or, in the case of exploratory research, 0.60 (Hair et al., 1998). In the following section the measurement scales identified in the literature are presented in light of the foregoing.

3.7 Background to the Items Employed

As indicated previously, this study employed measurement scales which had already been developed and tested in the literature. In the case where a variety of scales were available, the choice was made on the basis of the following: the construct definition, the prior use in a self-administered survey and the clarity of the wording. In this section, the scales selected from the literature for measuring each of the variables are presented (in their original wording²⁴); in addition, any data regarding their original reliability is also presented.

3.7.1 Self-efficacy

The self-efficacy scale utilised in this study comprises 17 items and has displayed high reliability in a range of settings. Originally developed by Sherer et al. (1982), they reported in their study a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86. The items Sherer et al. (1982) developed are as follows:

- When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work.

²⁴ The wording used in the current study is presented in the next chapter in Section 4.5.

- One of my problems is that I cannot get down to work when I should (reverse scored).
- If I can't do a job the first time, I keep trying until I can.
- When I set important goals for myself, I rarely achieve them (reverse scored).
- I give up on things before completing them (reverse scored).
- I avoid facing difficulties (reverse scored).
- If something looks too complicated, I will not even bother to try it (reverse scored).
- When I have something unpleasant to do, I stick to it until I finish it.
- When I decide to do something, I go right to work on it.
- When trying to learn something new, I soon give up if I am not initially successful (reverse scored).
- When unexpected problems occur, I don't handle them well (reverse scored).
- I avoid trying to learn new things when they look too difficult for me (reverse scored).
- Failure just makes me try harder.
- I feel insecure about my ability to do things (reverse scored).
- I am a self-reliant person.
- I give up easily (reverse scored).
- I do not seem capable of dealing with most problems that come up in life (reverse scored).

Following the pilot-testing, (outlined further in Section 3.8) many of the reverse scored items were re-worded to be more positive, encouraging higher response levels to the items.

3.7.2 Motivation to Learn.

Warr et al. (1999) employed a six-item scale for measuring motivation to learn, which had previously been used by Warr and Bunce (1995). Warr et al. (1999) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76 for their study, and their scale is composed of the following items:

- Generally, I am enthusiastic about learning new things.
- Generally, I prefer to keep away from training courses (reverse scored).
- Generally, I am keen to take up any learning opportunity offered to me.
- I am keen to learn more about the subjects covered in this course.
- I expect that this course will help me a lot in the future.
- This course is really a waste of time (reverse scored).

Slight adaptations were made to the wording; 'course' was changed to 'initiative' in order to reflect the multifaceted nature of the TLN.

3.7.3 Expectations of Learning

Despite a thorough review of the literature, the researcher did not find a scale for expectations of learning which identified closely with the construct's definition and suited the context of the study; however, an appropriate scale was identified through a review of the customer experience retail literature. This scale has high reliability

and it is perceived to capture the perception of the value of an experience. Babin et al.'s (1994) scale has proven convergent and discriminant validity, and the Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.80. Babin et al. (1994) developed the following four items:

- I accomplished just what I wanted to on this shopping trip.
- I couldn't buy what I really needed (reverse scored).
- While shopping, I found just the item(s) I was looking for.
- I was disappointed because I had to go to another store(s) to complete my shopping (reverse scored).

The items were adapted to suit the learning context, for example, 'In the Tourism Learning Network I learned just what I was looking for'. An additional item was formulated specifically for this study in order to capture the extent to which the participant's expectations were met by their participation in the TLN – "To what extent did your learning in the Tourism Learning Network meet your expectations?"

3.7.4 Flexible Learning Approach – Content

The initiative content scale was adapted from a scale used by Warr et al. (1999) in a training setting. Warr et al. (1999) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .80 for their three item scale. Their scale captured the perceived usefulness of the content of the training course. As discussed previously, for clarity reasons the wording was adapted slightly for this study from the following original items:

- This course was very relevant to my job.
- This course was of great practical value to me for my job.
- This course was closely related to my job needs.

3.7.5 Flexible Learning Approach – Delivery Methods

The multi-faceted delivery methods of the various TLN facilitators led to a difficulty in identifying a scale which captured all the components involved. The decision was taken to use a formative scale, thereby enabling the identification of the extent to which each delivery method was of benefit to the learner, in addition to allowing for the flexibility in delivery, which was a key aspect of the TLN initiative. Therefore, the participant who did not attend a particular event had the opportunity to identify that this element was not part of their experience. In contrast to the 5-point Likert style scales used elsewhere in the questionnaire, this section used a 6-point scale (1 = Not applicable, 2 = No Extent, 6 = Great Extent) as these items were measuring the extent of the benefit to the participant in terms of learning, rather than an assessment of their level of agreement.

The 15 key delivery methods have high face validity as they were identified from the literature surrounding the formation of the TLN, pilot-testing and contributions from Fáilte Ireland, and included E-learning modules, mentoring and various workshops. The formative scale presents a multidimensional composite with each of the indicators forming the construct delivery method, but they are not a reflection of the overall construct, hence it is inappropriate to employ a Cronbach's alpha or factor analysis to check reliability or validity of these particular items (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001; Bollen and Lennox, 1991; Chin, 1998).

3.7.6 The Facilitator

The contribution of the facilitator had two component variables, specifically capturing the level of learner involvement and the learning climate created by the facilitator. The level of involvement was measured using an adaptation of a scale developed by Morris and Koch (1979), which Clarke (2006) in a network context, reported a Cronbach's alpha = 0.82. The original scale items are as follows:

- I play a large part in making decisions in this network.

- I am able to influence the agenda in this network.
- Network members are receptive to my suggestions about how things could be done.

The learning climate created by the facilitating body was measured using items adapted from a study of training by Clemenz (2001). Clemenz (2001) employed a four-item scale with the following wording:

- The mood during training was supportive.
- The training environment was informal.
- I felt relaxed during training.
- I felt safe during training.

These items were reported to provide a Cronbach's alpha = 0.79 in a study on training in the hospitality industry in the United States. The learner involvement and the learning climate dimensions are integrated to provide a score to represent the overall facilitation level variable.

3.7.7 Peer Interaction - Trust

Chiu et al. (2006) in their investigation into the decision support systems available to SMEs adapted five items from McKnight et al. (2002), Ridings et al. (2002), and Tsai and Ghoshal (1998); to measure trust in the context of a community. The theory underlying learning networks is similarly dependent on creating an environment of trust in fellow participants. Chiu et al.'s (2006) confirmatory factor analysis revealed high validity and composite reliability = 0.89 for the scale. Hence, the following items were adapted for use in this study:

- Members in the BlueShop virtual community will not take advantage of others even when the opportunity arises.
- Members in the BlueShop virtual community will always keep the promises they make to one another.
- Members in the BlueShop virtual community would not knowingly do anything to disrupt the conversation.
- Members in the BlueShop virtual community behave in a consistent manner.
- Members in the BlueShop virtual community are truthful in dealing with one another.

The wording ‘members in the BlueShop virtual community’ was replaced with ‘participants in the TLN’ for the purposes of this study.

3.7.8 Peer Interaction - Information Sharing

There are many previous studies which have measured different aspects of information sharing, however, the items employed by Li and Dant (1997) suited the measurement of the TLN interpersonal communication and expectations of sharing. Li and Dant’s (1997) items were based on an adaptation from previous research by Heide and John (1992). The study by Li and Dant (1997) reported reliability = 0.83, and used the following wording:

- We keep each other informed about events that affect the other party.
- We often exchange information informally.
- We often exchange information beyond what is required by our agreement.

- We are expected to provide each other with any information that may be of help.

In this study, ‘required by our agreement’ was replaced with ‘what was required in the Tourism Learning Network’, and the wording was changed to reflect the past tense aspect of the TLN. Furthermore, the peer interaction variable integrated the trust and information-sharing components into one score to represent this variable.

3.7.9 Knowledge

The measurement of knowledge gained through participation in the TLN presented a particular problem given the cross-sectional nature of the study, as many similar studies have employed pre- and post-tests to measure knowledge. Given the timescale for this study, this option was not available to the researcher. Hence, a formative scale previously employed by Gray and Meister (2004) was chosen as it reflected the improvements in understanding in line with the construct’s definition. Furthermore, Gray and Meister (2004) provided evidence of internal consistency scores over 0.82, with items worded as follows:

- I now have a much better understanding of the right way to do my work than I did a year ago.
- Compared to a year ago, I now know much more about proven methods and procedures.
- I have been revising and adapting my knowledge to keep up with changes at TechCo this past year.
- Over the past year, new developments at work have caused me to revisit and update my work-related knowledge.

These items from the knowledge management literature were adapted to suit the context of this study and reflect the emphasis on knowledge as a learning outcome.

3.7.10 Skills

Given the TLNs non-prescriptive approach, which leads to high levels of variability in the content delivered, the researcher was unable to discover a traditional measurement scale which captured this construct adequately. Furthermore, as indicated the cross-sectional nature of this study was in contrast to the prevailing extant literature on learning outcomes, which tended to employ longitudinal pre- and post tests. Hence, the items reflecting skills as learning outcomes, originated from a previous study comparing blended learning with the traditional classroom, using a formative scale (Chen and Jones, 2007)²⁵. The items used by Chen and Jones (2007) were worded as follows:

- My writing skills have improved as a result of this course.
- My analytical skills have improved as a result of this course.
- My interpersonal skills have improved as a result of this course.
- My computer skills have improved as a result of this course.
- I am confident in determining what is relevant in solving problems.

Following pilot-testing the wording ‘course’ was altered to ‘initiative’ to reflect the broad nature of the TLN experience.

²⁵ As it was a formative scale no reliability or validity data was provided.

3.7.11 Managerial Capabilities (Dynamic Capabilities)

This aspect of learning outcomes was identified as capturing the element of change in the operation of the SME through participation in the TLN. Naveh and Marcus (2005) adapted items previously used by Argote (1999) in an organisational learning context for their scale. They employed the items in a study on the introduction of ISO 9000, which captured dynamism as a catalyst for change. Naveh and Marcus (2005) reported the results of confirmatory factor analysis as higher than 0.70 for all the items, and the Cronbach's alpha was 0.92, and employed a 5-point scale (1 = No Extent, 5 = Great Extent) enquiring to what extent the participant agreed with the following statements:

- To what extent was design and development of your ISO 9000 system a springboard to introduce new practices?
- To what extent has ISO 9000 led to the discovery of improvement opportunities?
- To what extent was your investment of time and resources in ISO 9000
 - A starting point for other more advanced practices?
 - A catalyst for rethinking the way you do business?
 - Understood as an opportunity to innovate?

For the purposes of this study, references to ISO 9000 were replaced with participation in the TLN. Following the pilot-testing, a decision was made to add a specific example of improvement opportunities – ‘such as implementing new operating procedures’. Additionally, the word ‘business’ was inserted before practices in the third item for clarity reasons.

3.7.12 Personal Self-development

The final scale was developed by Maurer et al. (2003) following a previous study by Maurer and Tarulli (1994). This eight-item scale proved to have a reliability of 0.90 and loaded on one factor in exploratory factor analysis, in Maurer et al.'s (2003) study. The original wording from the 2003 study is as follows:

- If I participate in work-relevant learning activities, my work would likely be more interesting as a result.
- I am likely to get more interesting work assignments and more stimulating work if I participate in training and development activities.
- My participation in learning or training activities will not make a difference in how interesting my work is (reverse scored).
- Training and development activities are likely to help me develop and reach my full potential as a person.
- If I participate in training and learning activities, I will be more rounded and a better person overall, at work and outside of work.
- Training and development activity participation will not help my personal development, self-esteem, self-confidence etc. (reverse scored).
- Career-related training and development activities seem very worthwhile to me.
- I think learning and development activities related to my career would be very beneficial to me.

Two of the reverse-scored statements were changed to positively worded statements in order to reduce problems for respondents identified during pilot-testing. Where

appropriate ‘training and development’ was replaced by ‘participation in the TLN’, and the wording was also adapted to reflect the past tense following testing. In the next section, the results of pilot-testing are reported.

3.8 Pilot-testing of the Questionnaire

Oppenheim (1992, p. 47) asserts that questionnaires “do not emerge fully-fledged”; rather they require progressive adaptations and pilot-testing. Furthermore, the testing should cover all aspects of the survey - from the design and layout to its administration (Oppenheim, 1992). The predominant motivation for pilot-testing is to ensure that the questionnaire will deliver data that will accurately answer the research question. Moreover, the response rate is considered critical to ensure that sufficient data is collected for analysis. This testing entails assessing issues such as the visual impact and feel of the survey, in addition to the manner in which it is administered.

The questionnaire was first examined by industry experts and practitioners involved in the TLN initiative in order to assess the relevance and face validity of the questions, in addition to ensuring the content was easy to understand. As mentioned previously, question phrasing has been highlighted as critical in the success of a questionnaire, particularly in the context of adapting questions used in previous studies. The question wording was specifically scrutinised for use in the Irish context. Indeed, the terminology used to describe component elements of the TLN was examined to reduce potential misunderstanding or ambiguity. Consequently, a few minor alterations were made to items for clarity and to reduce replication (as detailed in the previous section).

A further concern raised by the industry experts was the length of the questionnaire (95 questions), given the low response rates (20%) experienced with this same population in previous research conducted by Fáilte Ireland. However, after careful consideration, it was decided that all questions contributed to the research question

and were required for the proposed in-depth analysis. In particular, given the expectation from the literature review that each variable had a role in the learning process, items were not removed, but every effort was made to improve response rates (as detailed in Section 3.9.1). The next section focuses on the implementation of the data collection instrument.

3.9 Administration of the Survey

Dillman (2000, p. 150) developed the “Tailored Design Method” as an approach to achieving high response rates, which guided the administration of the survey process. Hence, the questionnaire was sent out with a cover letter by the researcher²⁶. This cover letter was printed on a Waterford Institute of Technology letterhead, and pre-approved by the sponsoring body and the researcher’s supervisor. Each letter was personalised and signed by the researcher in blue ink, as Dillman (2000, p. 152) argued that this provides “the look and feel of being from a real person, rather than a carefully programmed computer”. Every sentence in the letter served a distinct purpose, explaining the purpose of the survey and emphasising the benefits of response (Dillman, 2000). The letter aimed at building a rapport with the respondent, by stressing the researcher’s background in the tourism industry and promised a copy of the results. In addition, to facilitate contact being made with the researcher if so wished, the researcher’s contact details and e-mail address were provided in the letter, conveying accessibility as recommended by Dillman (2000). The content of the cover letter assured the respondent of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses (Dillman, 2000). This confidentiality was reiterated on the cover page and final page of the questionnaire. The letter also requested that the surveys be returned before a particular date, and included a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the questionnaire return, to encourage the respondents to complete and return the surveys promptly (Dillman, 2000).

²⁶ See Appendix A. for a copy of the questionnaire and Appendix B. for a copy of the accompanying cover letter.

Additional methods used to raise the response rate are developed further in the next section.

3.9.1 Methods Used to Improve the Response Rate

The response rate refers to the number of returned and completed responses obtained, as a percentage of the number of questionnaires administered, after adjusting for ineligible cases. There are numerous factors that impact on the decision whether or not to respond to a survey. Brannick and Roche (1997) argue that these reasons can be classified into two main categories: systematic reasons and random reasons. Systematic reasons are concerned with the underlying nature of the research, and may include issues such as fear of the consequences of response or lack of privacy. Whereas, random reasons are due to chance, for example when respondents forget to send back their responses, or due to time pressures, do not bother to participate.

Previous studies have found that the survey's aesthetics including its visual impact and professional appearance have a substantial impact on the response rates (Malhotra and Birks, 2006; Dillman, 2000). Consequently, the choice of a high quality envelope and use of stamps (rather than a business reply envelope) were employed to increase the impression of trust in the respondent and promote higher response rates (Oppenheim, 1992; Dillman, 2000).

The survey was designed to attract the attention of the respondent. Colour was used on the title cover page of the survey, and the Waterford Institute of Technology logo added an impression of legitimacy and professionalism. The survey design included formats to reduce item non-response error, for example, questions were laid out with plenty of white space. As indicated, there was a natural flow developed through the question sequence (Dillman, 2000), introducing the antecedents to learning before the questions concerning the outcomes of the TLN were presented.

3.9.2 Difficulties Encountered During the Survey Implementation

The lack of responses from two of the TLN regions with lower participant numbers required that a follow-up reminder letter be sent (a copy of which is contained in Appendix C.). The follow-up letter was personalised, and emphasised that each individual response would be critical in the statistical analysis to follow (Dillman, 2000). The next week, a second copy of the survey and follow-up personalised letters were sent to all the participants, to boost the response rates further (a copy of which is contained in Appendix D.). Dillman (2000) recommends a five-contact administration process, however, due to time constraints, a four-phase process was employed. Hence one week later, 197 non-respondents were contacted once again, this time by telephone, to increase the response rates further. The next section outlines the software employed to deal with the response to the survey.

3.10 Introduction to Data Analysis

The final component in the presentation of the research methodology involves the methods used in data analysis. In this instance, the software package SPSS 15.1 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used for the relevant transformation of the data to answer the research questions. Upon return of the surveys, they were dated, encoded and inputted into SPSS 15.1. The SPSS package was also employed for the multivariate analysis and regressions required for predictive analysis. Further steps regarding data cleaning, data assumptions underlying the methods employed and the results of the statistical analysis are examined in the next chapter. The next section highlights the concern of non-response bias.

3.11 Non-response Bias Analysis

Throughout the design and implementation of the research all efforts have been made to generate high response rates, however regardless of the rate of response, those

who have not replied must also be examined. This is to establish if the findings from the respondents represent the population they originated from and are therefore generalisable. Hence, it is vital to first rule out the possibility of non-response bias. Non-response bias is present when a “significant number of people in the survey do not respond to the questionnaire and are different from those who do in a way that is important to the study” (Salant and Dillman, 1994, p. 20).

There are three methods of testing for non-response bias. The first approach, which is not widely used, involves subjective estimates of the values of the non-respondents in comparison with the population (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). The second approach involves assessing the ‘known’ values or demographics of the population versus those who have not responded to see if there are any statistical differences (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). Oppenheim (1992) argues that this may show that a bias exists, however it does not tell us how the bias may impact on our results. The third method is based on the assumption that respondents who only respond following a stimulus, such as the wave of follow-up letters, share many of the characteristics of non-respondents (Pace, 1939). Hence, Armstrong and Overton (1977) argued that as these late respondents are similar to those who did not respond, their results can be compared with the early respondents, for any significant differences. Should the comparison of demographic variables highlight significant differences then non-response bias is an issue. The latter two methods were employed in this study, with the results of this analysis detailed in the next chapter.

3.12 Conclusion

This chapter commenced with an examination of the role of philosophy in the development of a research methodology. The main debates regarding research philosophy were reviewed, in addition to their respective underlying assumptions which guide the decision-making process throughout the research. Based on the research aims, the case was made for the selection of an objectivist perspective of science, with a functionalist view of the nature of society. This stance led to the

adoption of a positivistic position, in keeping with the deterministic perspective of human behaviour as a product of the environment. Following this perspective, reductionism was seen as critical to the research and was most aligned with a nomothetic methodology. The foregoing framed the decision to opt for quantitative methods rather than qualitative or mixed-methods, as it was deemed the most suitable in terms of meeting the research aims. Alternative data collection instruments were reviewed, leading to the choice of a survey as the most appropriate method, specifically a self-administered postal survey.

Given the selection of a postal survey, the relevant evaluative criteria which dictate the rigour of the research were then discussed. Consequently, the steps in the design and testing of the survey were described in detail, including a description of the process of data collection and the practices employed to improve response rates. The chapter concluded with an introduction to the techniques of data analysis which are developed further, with their respective results, in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Data Findings

4.1 Introduction

As discussed in the last chapter, a postal survey was deemed the most appropriate instrument for data collection. This chapter presents the results from the analysis of the data collected, beginning with the response rate and the profile of the sample. The previous chapter also indicated that a positivist approach places a major emphasis on reducing bias and ensuring standards of validity and reliability. This chapter then presents the results from validity and reliability tests of the scales utilised, as well as testing for relevant underlying assumptions of the statistical techniques employed, for example, normal distribution for certain statistical analysis. The results of the regression of the dependent variables are presented. The chapter then concludes with findings relevant to the support or rejection of the study's hypotheses.

4.2 Questionnaire Response Rate

From the original population of 435 participants, in total, the number of completed surveys returned was 241 (of which 237 were useable²⁷), hence providing a response rate of 55.4% (54.5% if counting just the useable data). This response rate was

²⁷ Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (1998), in the data cleaning stage the decision was taken to delete surveys where extreme responses had been used throughout the entire survey, as these outliers influence the results of data analysis techniques such as regression. Further, the data was examined throughout the data cleaning stage as well as the running of further analyses to ensure data assumptions underlying statistical techniques, including graphical and statistical testing for normality and homoscedasticity, with outliers replaced with the 'missing data' code in SPSS.

achieved utilising a three contact approach: (1) mailing of cover letter and survey, (2) followed by a reminder letter two weeks later, and (3) telephone calls were made two weeks after the reminder letter to those who had not returned the survey²⁸. Allowing for: (1) those participants whose businesses ceased trading, (2) wrong or insufficient addresses provided, (3) those who had moved on to alternative employment with no forwarding addresses, and (4) those who counted themselves out due to only attending one or two events, the response rate increases to 59%. A further seven participants refused to participate or returned their surveys incomplete. Table 4.1 lists the response rates for each of the TLN regions²⁹.

TLN Region	Population	Number of Responses	Percentage Return
Mid-West	125	59	47%
North East	49	28	57%
North West	31	21	68%
South East and South West	156	86	55%
West	74	43	58%
Total	435	237	54.5%

4.3 The Respondent Sample Characteristics

This section presents the findings from the survey regarding a range of participant characteristics, which are presented for descriptive purposes to aid understanding; these characteristics will later be used in the data analysis to highlight any significant trends. The respondents were primarily asked to give responses to questions regarding: their role in the business (see Figure 4.1), the type of business, their business size (based on number of full-time/part-time employed), and the age of their business. On average, the respondent was an owner-manager in a bed and breakfast or self-catering accommodation, which had been in business for 10-15 years. The

²⁸ Although Dillman (2000) recommends a five contact approach, time and resources did not allow for more than three contacts (with the exception of the two regions with smaller participant numbers, where four contacts were made, as a second letter was sent to these regions to boost response rates).

²⁹ The South East and South West TLNs were provided by the same facilitating body so were combined.

average business employed five or less full-time employees year-round and five or less part-time employees year-round. Similarly, the average number of employees full-time or part-time employed on a seasonal basis was five or less.

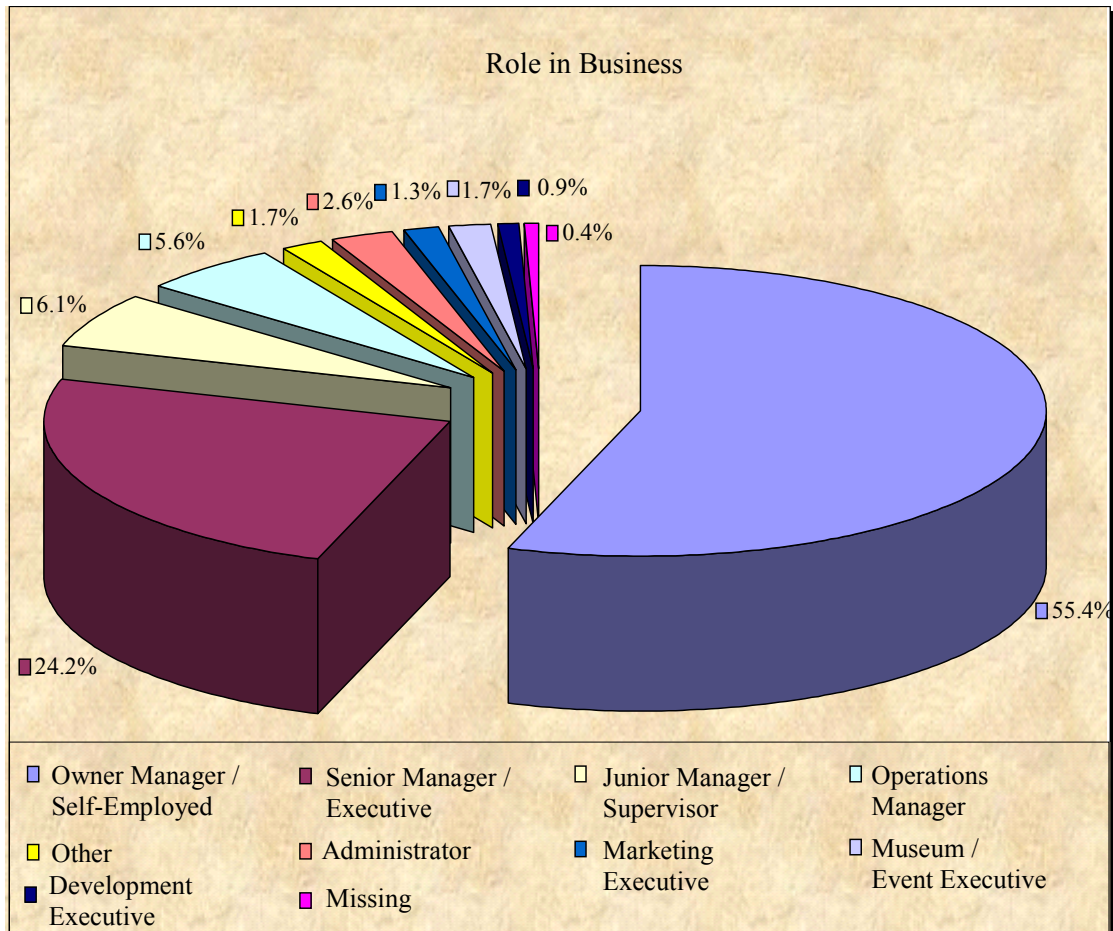


Figure 4.1: Role in Business

In terms of the business type, the largest grouping was the bed and breakfast (B&B) and self-catering group, followed by the tourist attraction grouping (as illustrated in Figure 4.2). An examination of the ‘other’ category indicated that many respondents indicated that they were involved in an arts and craft business and there were a substantial number of respondents who indicated they represented local authority and tourism bodies.

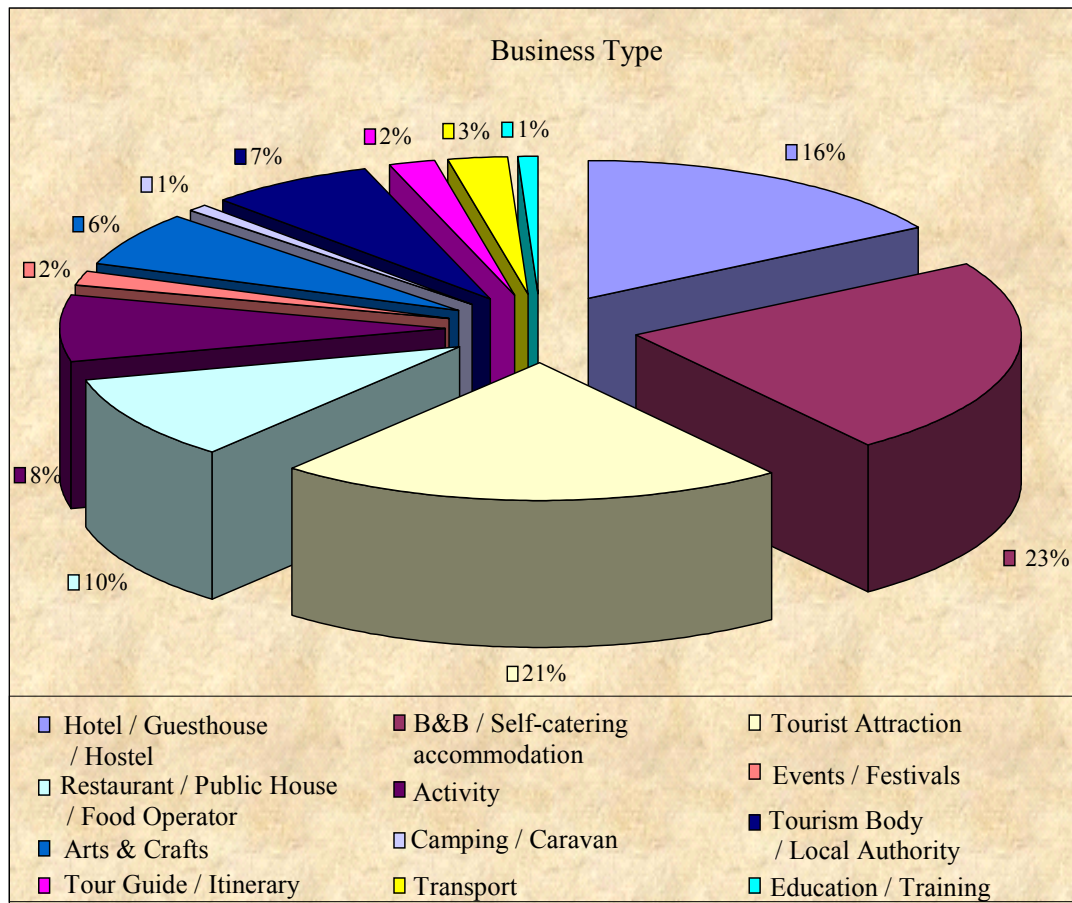


Figure 4.2: Business Type

A key feature of the development of the TLNs was the focus on providing for the small and medium sized business owner-manager; hence the scale of the business was of interest. The following graphs illustrate the predominance of businesses with five or less full-time and part-time employees in the sample. The latter two graphs (Figures 4.5 and 4.6) illustrate the seasonality factor predominant across the tourism industry³⁰. The seasonal variation in demand, with visitor numbers peaking in the summer months, has a knock-on effect on many aspects of the operation of the average tourism business, including the human resource, marketing and business finance practices (Baum and Lundtorp, 2001), and hence, the TLN content and timing. Furthermore, the reliance on a short time-period for the majority of their

³⁰ The majority of tourism businesses operate year-round, however, one third of self-catering / hostels/ caravan and camping and one quarter of tourism services and attractions operate solely on a seasonal basis (Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Employment and Training Survey, 2007).

turnover for the year makes the firms extremely vulnerable to external issues in their environment, particularly as for the most part, the product or service produced by tourism operators is perishable in nature (Lundtorp et al., 1999).

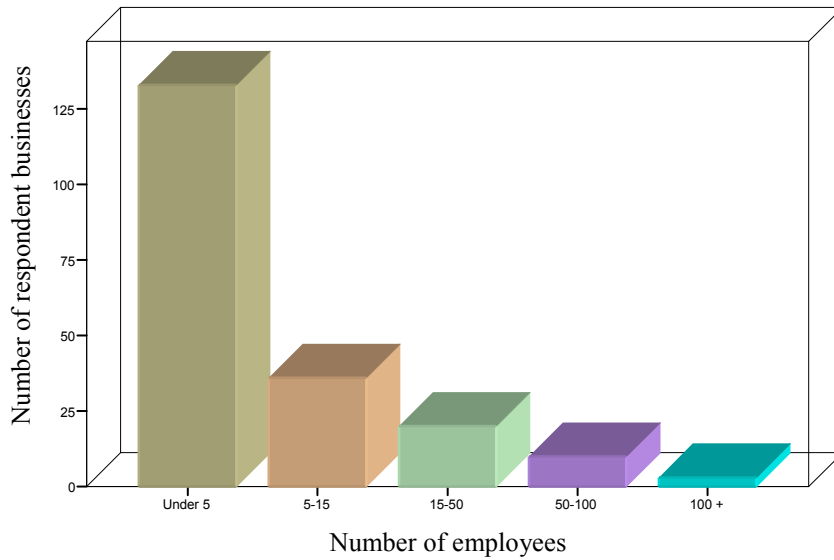


Figure 4.3: Full Time - All Year Employees

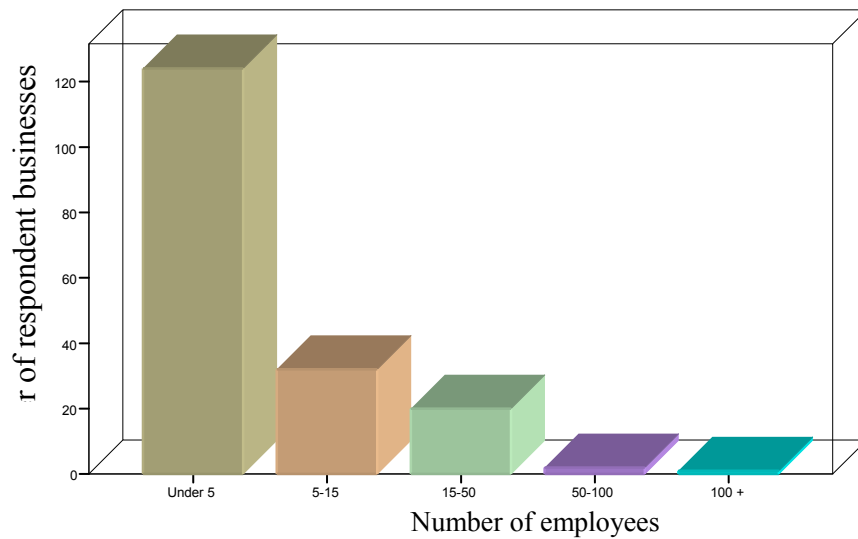


Figure 4.4: Part Time – All Year Employees

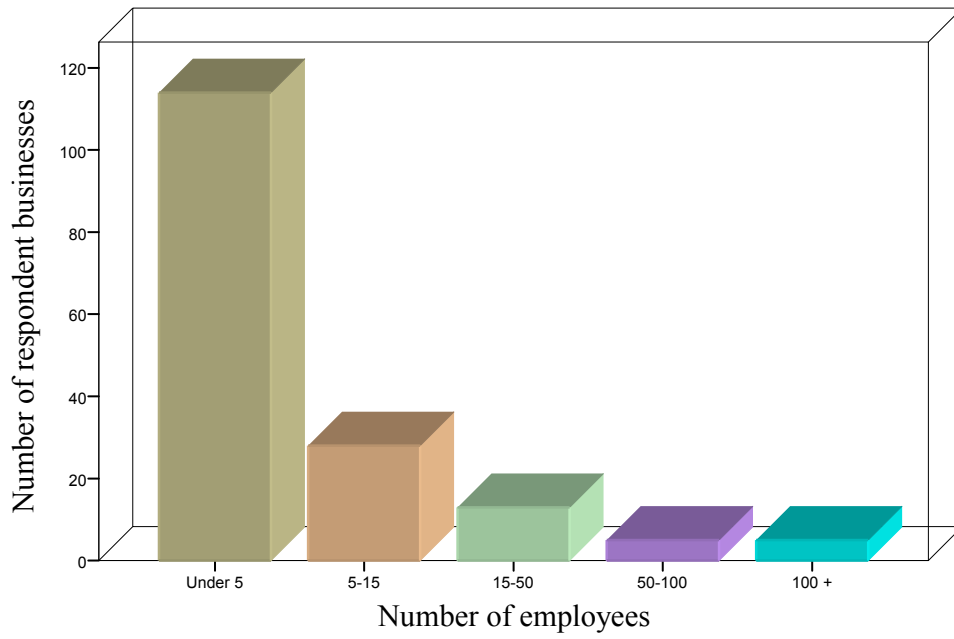


Figure 4.5: Full Time – Seasonal Employees

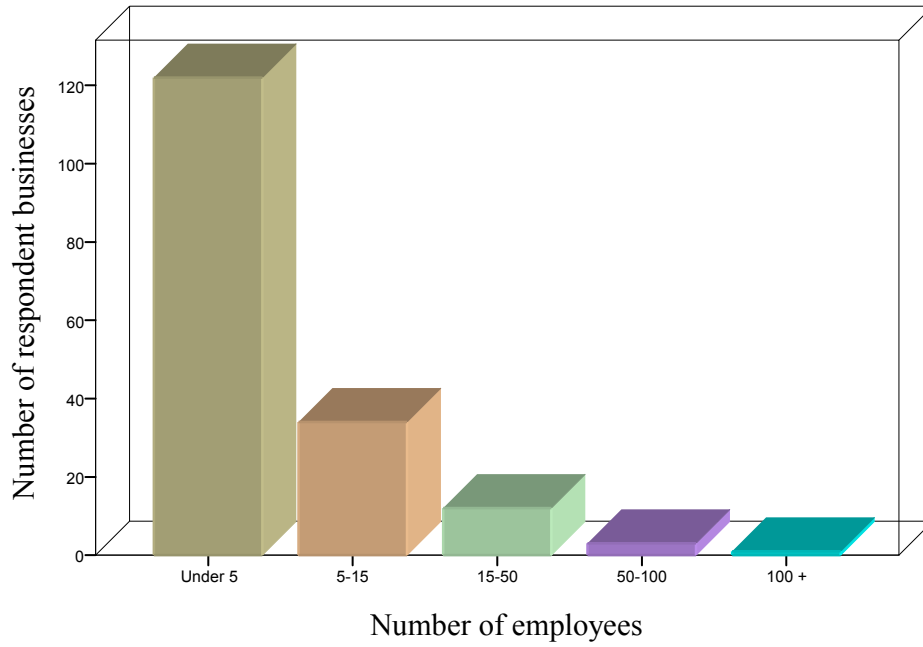


Figure 4.6: Part Time – Seasonal Employees

A key feature of the characteristics was the finding that 63% of the participants' businesses had been in operation ten years or less.

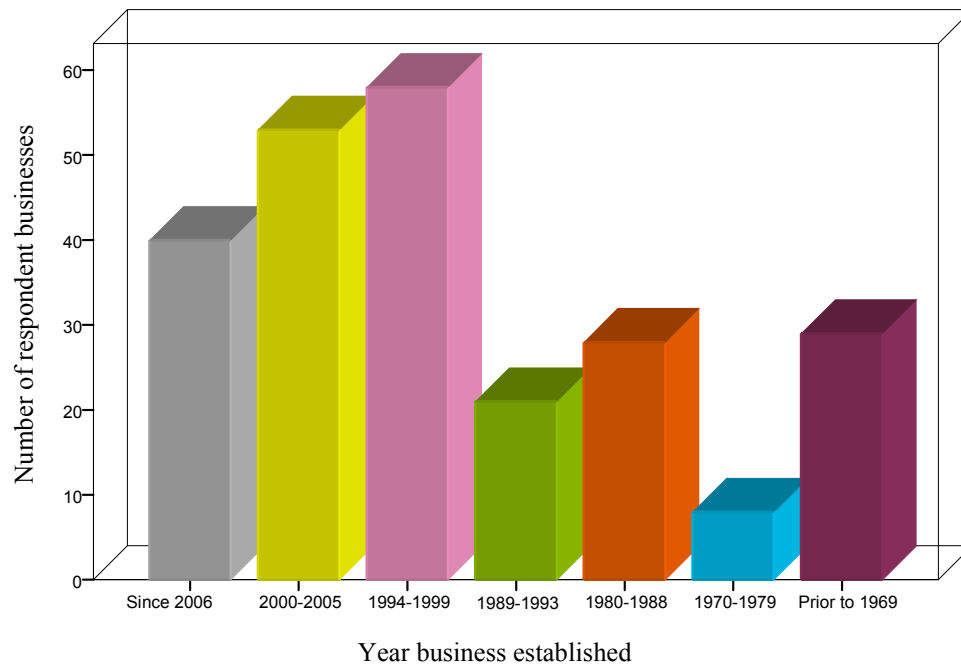


Figure 4.7: Year Business Established

In the following section the influence of those participants who did not respond to the questionnaire is assessed.

4.4 Non-response Bias Analysis

In order to ensure the findings of a survey are generalisable, it is vital to check whether the results are truly representative of the population. This involved assessing whether the views or responses of those who did not complete the survey varied significantly from the answers received from the respondents. Should these views be significantly different then this bias must be recognised when interpreting the results. According to Armstrong and Overton (1977), there are a number of methods which can be used to test for non-response bias; these include comparing the demographics of the respondents and non-respondents, or comparing the known

demographics of the population with those of the respondents to see if differences occur. However, this latter option was problematic due to lack of information on the population. Alternatively, Armstrong and Overton (1977) stated that late respondents are generally very similar to non-respondents; therefore an option was to investigate whether or not late respondents differed significantly from early respondents.

In conducting this test, the responses from the first wave (12.5% of the total returned sample) and last wave (12.5% of the total returned sample) of the respondents in regard to gender, TLN region, and response to one questionnaire item (the first questionnaire item), were compared to assess whether there were significant differences (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). Utilising cross-tabulation analysis and employing the chi-square statistic³¹, results indicated there were no differences between the waves in: (1) gender³² (chi-square = 1.022, $p = .600$ ³³), (2) TLN location (chi-square = 6.320, $p = .798$), or (3) item response (chi-square = 2.948, $p = .229$). The foregoing results indicated that response bias does not impact the study's findings. In the next section the measurement scales employed in the postal survey are tested for their reliability and validity.

4.5. Item Measurement Assessment

As mentioned in the previous chapter, measures or scales which had previously been used and tested for validity and reliability were utilised in this study. This section presents the results from testing the validity and reliability of the scales. This examination of the scales involved diagnostic methods such as item-to-total correlations³⁴, Cronbach's alpha³⁵ and exploratory factor analysis³⁶. All scales are

³¹ Low chi-square values "which result in significance levels greater than .05 or .01, indicate that the actual and predicted input matrices are *not* statistically different" (italics in original) (Hair et al., 1995, p. 683).

³² The population of the TLNs nationwide was comprised of 62% females and 38% males; similarly, the respondent sample consisted of 62.4% females and 37.6% males.

³³ Kinnear and Gray (2009) advocate the use of the exact p-values when data is scarce.

³⁴ Hair et al. (1998, p. 118) refer to item-to-total as "the correlation of the item to the summated scale score".

perceived to have face or content validity as they have been tested and presented in academic publications and the researcher, through her own review of the relevant literature, perceived that these measures reflect and define the concepts they are measuring (Hair et al., 1998). The following sections describe the findings of these tests and any steps taken to improve the reliability of the scales.

4.5.1 Self-efficacy

This scale had six negatively worded items, which were re-coded so that all items reflected a positive wording and the first reliability testing of the 17 items which were drawn from Sherer et al. (1982) obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .853. The scale's internal reliability was increased with the removal of one of the items (see Table 4.2) due to the low item-to-total score of .226. Following removal of this item, the corrected item-to-total scores were all above .30, as per the recommendations of Robinson and Shaver (1973), who argued that an item is likely to load on another construct if this figure is below .30. The scale's Cronbach's alpha slightly increased to .855.

The exploratory factor analysis of the reduced 16 item self-efficacy scale revealed that the scale loaded on to four dimensions (see Table 4.2). Similarly, Sherer et al. (1982) found multi-dimensions, they determined three dimensions which they described as: (1) willingness to initiate behaviour, (2) willingness to expend effort in completing the behaviour, and (3) persistence in the face of adversity. This study found a fourth dimension. A review of the scale items which loaded on the fourth component indicated that they were measuring a 'certainty in one's own ability' (captured in the questions regarding coping with problems – as highlighted in italics in Table 4.2).

³⁵ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Cronbach's alpha is employed as the coefficient of reliability for the scales, the scale is reliable if the Cronbach's alpha is .70 and above, with a threshold value of .60 or above deemed acceptable for exploratory research (Hair et al., 1998).

³⁶ Exploratory factor analysis is employed to ensure that the items developed to measure a construct are related to each other and are all measuring one factor (factoral validity). As recommended by Hair et al. (1998), principal component analysis was utilised as well as a varimax rotation in all exploratory factor analyses. Hair et al. (1998) state that the factor loading of an item on a component should be greater than 0.50.

Table 4.2 Self-efficacy Rotated Component Matrix

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work.	.130	.178	.454	.150
One of my problems is that I cannot get down to work when I should.	.369	-0.93	.463	.019
If I can't do a job the first time, I keep trying until I can.	.198	.716	.143	.026
When I set important goals for myself, I achieve them.	.388	-0.56	.623	.157
I give up on things before I have completed them.	.815	.092	.240	-.002
I avoid facing difficulties.	.782	.116	.113	.160
If something looks too complicated, I will not even bother to try it.	.734	.189	.208	.145
When I have something unpleasant to do, I stick to it until I finish it.	-.003	.464	.544	.068
When I decide to do something, I go right to work on it.	.112	.197	.768	.088
When trying to learn something new, I soon give up if I am not initially successful.	.786	.250	.082	.109
<i>When unexpected problems occur, I handle them very well.</i>	.053	.045	.229	.775
I avoid trying to learn new things when they look too difficult for me.	.686	.141	.137	-.004
Failure just makes me try harder.	.091	.722	.088	.162
<i>I am secure about my ability to do things.</i>	.109	.423	-0.27	.523
I am a self-reliant person. *				
I do not give up easily.	.435	.671	.137	.129
<i>I am capable of dealing with most problems that come up in my life.</i>	.115	.095	.122	.796

* Eliminated after scale purification.

4.5.2 *Motivation to Learn*

The six motivation to learn items were drawn from Warr et al. (1999), which had previously been used by Warr and Bunce (1995). This scale had two negatively worded items which were re-coded, and then the internal reliability was tested resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of .680. All corrected item-to-total scores were above .30. The exploratory factor analysis (see Table 4.3) of the items was found to load on two factors. These were found to be similar to the scale multi-dimensionality described by Warr and Bunce (1995); one dimension captures the interest in learning and the other captures the participants' future aspirations to learn.

Table 4.3 Motivation Rotated Component Matrix		
	Component	
	1	2
Generally, I am enthusiastic about learning new things.	.032	.795
Generally, I prefer to keep away from training initiatives.	.254	.700
Generally, I am keen to take up any learning opportunity offered to me.	.610	.374
I am keen to learn more about the subjects covered in the Tourism Learning Network.	.826	.112
I expect that this initiative will help me a lot in the future.	.114	.594
This initiative was really a waste of time.	.788	.057

4.5.3 *Expectations of Learning*

The four items drawn from Babin et al. (1994) were tested for their internal reliability, realising a Cronbach's alpha of .690. Adding in the aforementioned additional item regarding the extent to which the participants' expectations were met (see Section 3.7.3.) improved the internal reliability to .772, so the decision was taken to include this item in the scale (see Table 4.4). All corrected item-to-total correlations were above 0.30 and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

Table 4.4 Expectations of Learning
In the Tourism Learning Network I learned just what I was looking for.
I was disappointed because I had to pursue other alternatives outside the Tourism Learning Network to find the knowledge I was looking for.
Prior to enrolling in the Tourism Learning Network I had expectations of learning, which have since been met.
The experience of participating in the Tourism Learning Network was much as I expected prior to enrolment.
To what extent did your learning in the Tourism Learning Network meet your expectations? ³⁷

4.5.4 Flexible Learning Approach - Content

The Cronbach's alpha of .431 for the three items drawn from Warr et al. (1999) was unacceptable. By reducing this scale to two items, the internal reliability was improved to obtain a Cronbach's alpha equal to .754 (see Table 4.5). All corrected item-to-total correlations were above .30 and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

Table 4.5 Flexible Learning Approach - Content
This initiative was very relevant to my job. *
This initiative was of great practical value to me for my job.
This initiative was closely related to my job needs.

* Eliminated after scale purification.

4.5.5 Flexible Learning Approach - Delivery Methods

As this was a formative scale the usual reliability and validity tests were inappropriate (Oliver and Anderson, 1994). Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer (2001)

³⁷ This additional item was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = No Extent, 5 = Great Extent), formulated especially for this study to capture the extent to which learning expectations were met.

proposed that checks for multicollinearity³⁸ be used, to ensure both parsimony in the index and ensure that the unique effect of each indicator on the determinant was identifiable. Testing for collinearity between the 14 items resulted in the dropping of one of the items, namely, the workshop on Public Relations (PR) (workshops in Marketing and Public Relations, $r = .816$) (see Table 4.6). As previously mentioned in Section 3.7.5, this section questioned the benefit to personal learning of each delivery method, with higher scores representing higher perceptions of learning.

Table 4.6 Flexible Learning Approach - Delivery Methods
E-learning modules.
Group meetings facilitated by professional facilitators.
Mentoring support from industry experts.
One-to-one mentoring from the facilitator.
Regional conference.
Residential learning events.
Workshop on Finance.
Workshop on IT.
Workshop on Marketing.
Workshop on PR.*
Learning from other participants' experiences.
Learning from site-visits to other properties.
Learning from projects undertaken.
Guest speakers input.

* Eliminated following collinearity check.

4.5.6 Facilitation Climate

This scale was drawn from Clemenz (2001). The reliability value for this four item scale was .745 (Cronbach's alpha). In order to increase the Cronbach's alpha one of the items was eliminated (see Table 4.7) and the reliability increased to .784. All corrected item-to-total correlations are above .30 and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

³⁸ Collinearity refers to the "relationship between two (collinearity) or more (multicollinearity) independent variables" (Hair et al., 1998, p. 143). If the correlation coefficient between two items is 1, they are displaying complete collinearity, whereas if the coefficient is 0 there is a complete lack of collinearity. "As collinearity increases, the unique variance explained by each independent variable decreases and the shared percentage rises" (Hair et al., 1998, p. 157).

Table 4.7 Facilitation Climate
The mood during the Tourism Learning Network events was supportive.
The Tourism Learning Network environment was informal.*
I felt relaxed during the Tourism Learning Network events.
I felt I was able to freely contribute and ask questions during this initiative.

*Eliminated after scale purification.

4.5.7 Facilitation – Learner Involvement

The three items, drawn from Clarke (2006) (following Morris and Koch, 1979), were incorporated in the scale that returned an internal reliability score of .677 (Cronbach’s alpha) (see Table 4.8). All corrected item-to-total correlations were above .30 and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

Table 4.8 Facilitation – Learner Involvement
I played a large part in making decisions in this network.
I was able to influence the agenda in this network.
Network Participants were receptive to my suggestions about how things could be done.

4.5.8 Peer Interaction - Trust

The five items were drawn from Chiu et al. (2006) (following McKnight et al., 2002; Ridings et al., 2002, and Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998). Testing the five items revealed a Cronbach’s alpha of .631. A low item-to-total score of .262 for one item led to its removal (see Table 4.9), resulting in no change to the alpha score. Further testing did not indicate that the reliability of the scale could be improved; hence, trust was measured with four items. All corrected item-to-total correlations were above .30 and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

Table 4.9 Peer Interaction - Trust
Participants in the Tourism Learning Network did not take advantage of others even when the opportunity arose.
Participants in the Tourism Learning Network have always kept the promises they made to one another.
Participants in the Tourism Learning Network did not knowingly do anything to disrupt the learning.*
Participants in the Tourism Learning Network behaved in a consistent manner towards each other.
Participants in the Tourism Learning Network were truthful in dealing with one another.

* Eliminated after scale purification.

4.5.9 Peer Interaction - Information Sharing

The four item scale, drawn from Li and Dant (1997) provided a reliability alpha coefficient of .670. By reducing this scale through the deletion of two items (see Table 4.10) the internal reliability was increased to alpha = .710. All corrected item-to-total correlations are above .30 and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

Table 4.10 Peer Interaction - Information Sharing
We kept each other informed about events that affected the other party.*
We often exchanged information informally.
We often exchanged information with each other beyond what was required in the Tourism Learning Network.
We were expected to provide each other with information that may be of help.*

* Eliminated after scale purification.

4.5.10 Knowledge

The reliability testing of the four item knowledge scale, drawn from Gray and Meister (2004), resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of .715, with the removal of two items (see Table 4.11) the internal reliability score increased to .790. All corrected

item-to-total correlations were above .30 and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

Table 4.11 Knowledge
I now have a much better understanding of the right way to do my work than I did a year ago.
Compared to a year ago, I now know much more about proven business methods and operating procedures.
I have been revising and adapting my knowledge to keep up with changes this past year.*
Since my participation in the Tourism Learning Network, new developments at work have caused me to revisit and update my work related knowledge.*

* Eliminated after scale purification.

4.5.11 Skills

The testing of the five item scale, (see Table 4.12) drawn from Chen and Jones (2007), resulted in a Cronbach's alpha equal to .855. The item-to-total scores were above the .30 threshold recommended by Robinson and Shaver (1973) and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

Table 4.12 Skills
My writing skills have improved as a result of this initiative.
My analytical skills have improved as a result of this initiative.
My interpersonal skills have improved as a result of this initiative.
My computer skills have improved as a result of this initiative.
As a result of my participation I am more confident in determining what is relevant in problem solving.

4.5.12 Managerial Capabilities (Dynamic Capabilities)

The five items, drawn from Naveh and Marcus (2005), resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of .872 for internal reliability (see items presented in Table 4.13). All

corrected item-to-total correlations were above .30 and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

Table 4.13 Managerial Capabilities (Dynamic Capabilities)
To what extent has participating in the Tourism Learning Network been a springboard to introduce new practices?
To what extent has participation in the Tourism Learning Network lead to the discovery of improvement opportunities, such as implementing new operating procedures?
To what extent was your investment of time and resources in the Tourism Learning Network --- <i>A starting point for other more advanced business practices?</i>
To what extent was your investment of time and resources in the Tourism Learning Network --- <i>A catalyst for rethinking the way you do business?</i>
To what extent was your investment of time and resources in the Tourism Learning Network --- <i>Understood as an opportunity to innovate?</i>

4.5.13 Personal Self-development

The testing of the eight item scale produced a Cronbach's alpha of .887 with all corrected item-to-total correlations above .30 (see Table 4.14) and the exploratory factor analysis resulted in all items loading on one component.

Table 4.14 Personal Self-development
My participation in the Tourism Learning Network has made a difference in how interesting my work is.
As a result of my participation in the Tourism Learning Network, I have received more interesting work assignments and find my work more stimulating.
Participating in the Tourism Learning Network has lead to my work becoming more interesting.
Participation in the Tourism Learning Network helped me develop and reach my full potential as a person.
My participation in the Tourism Learning Network has lead me to be more well-rounded and a better person overall, at work and outside of work.
Tourism Learning Network participation has helped my personal development, self-esteem, self-confidence, etc.
Career-related training and development activities such as the Tourism Learning Network seem very worthwhile to me.
I think learning and development activities provided by the Tourism Learning Network have been very beneficial to me.

Having assessed the measurement scales for their reliability and factorial validity, the following section reviews the findings regarding the dimensionality of the learning outcomes.

4.6 Learning Outcomes Dimensionality

A further finding from the preliminary data analysis was that following exploratory factor analysis (presented in Appendix E) the four learning outcomes loaded on two factors, rather than the expected four dimensions of: knowledge, skills, managerial capabilities and personal self-development. Two items from the personal self-development scale loaded with the five items from the managerial capability scale on one dimension. A review of the items indicates that this first dimension captured the participants' impression of the specific improvements in their self-confidence, skills or knowledge (referred hereon as Learning_Know). Furthermore, the second dimension captured the participants' appreciation of the learning as a catalyst for change; including the application of the new learning in the business (referred hereon as Learning_MC).

Having reviewed the scales employed to measure the major variables of this study and the dimensionality of the learning outcomes, in the following section the techniques employed in the data analysis are reviewed.

4.7 Statistical Techniques Employed

Based on the objectives of this study which require examining differences between groups and relationships between variables, two main multivariate statistical techniques are employed in this study: independent-samples *t*-tests and multiple regression. The independent *t*-test "assesses the statistical significance of the difference between two independent sample means" (Hair et al., 1995, p. 261). This involves testing a difference between the means of the groups for statistical

significance, in other words, establishing the probability of the difference occurring by chance. According to Kinnear and Grey (2009, p. 9), the p -value of a test statistic is the “probability, under the null hypothesis, of obtaining a value at least as extreme ... as the one obtained”. A statistical test is deemed to show significance if the p -value is less than the significance level decided upon prior to the data collection; in this study, the social science conventional level of .05 is employed. If a statistically significant difference is found, the actual mean values can be examined to determine which group is scoring higher on the particular variable.

The other technique, multiple regression, reveals whether multiple independent variables on their own, or in combination with one another, have an impact on the metric dependent variables (Foster et al., 2006). Regression involves measuring the linear relationships between a metric dependent variable and several independent metric variables. This method provides a regression coefficient for each independent variable which facilitates ranking the relative influence of each independent variable in predicting the dependent variable. However, this technique has two major drawbacks, principally that “correlation does not establish causation” (Foster et al., 2006, p. 31) and that the technique is very dependent on the researcher choosing the right variables to include. In spite of these limitations, regression provides invaluable information on the statistical significance of relationships, provided that underlying data assumptions are met. The results of these techniques are presented in later sections, but prior to their presentation, there follows a short review of some of these assumptions.

4.8 Data Assumptions

The multivariate techniques employed are reliant on the assumptions of multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, linearity, independence of observations, and normal distribution of data. The first of these assumptions, multicollinearity, refers to a situation where a strong association exists between the independent variables. The independent variables were tested for any impact of collinearity, using the

commonly used statistics: (1) tolerance value and (2) variance inflation factor (VIF). The tolerance value is “1 minus indicates the proportion of the variable’s variance explained by the other predictors” (Hair et al., 1995, p. 146), with high collinearity indicated by low tolerance values. In the present research, all the tolerance values were above .440. The second statistic, VIF, is the reciprocal of the tolerance value and ideally should be close to 1 as it indicates how much the variance of the regression coefficient is inflated by multicollinearity problems; scores above 10 indicate collinearity issues (Hair et al., 1995, p. 146). The variables in the current study had scores from 1.605 to 2.271 for the VIF. These results indicate that the interpretations of the regression results are not impacted by multicollinearity.

The second of the assumptions underlying the statistical techniques concerns the homoscedasticity³⁹ of the data, which was tested using Box’s Test of Equality (see Table 4.15). Box’s Test of Equality tests the null hypothesis that the observed covariance matrices of the dependent variables are equal across groups. With a *p*-value >.05, there is no evidence to reject the null hypothesis that the variance-covariance matrices in the two groups were sampled from the same or similar population.

Box’s M	.262
F	.087
df1	3
df2	9574037
<i>p</i>	.967

The data was also scrutinised using graphical plots of the residuals to ensure it met the criteria of linearity and was normally distributed⁴⁰. This scrutiny highlighted an issue with normality with regard to the learning outcome Learning_MC, as the

³⁹ Foster et al. (2006, p. 38) refer to homoscedasticity as when “the variance of the dependent variable does not differ at different levels of the independent variable”.

⁴⁰ When the residuals have a straight line relationship with the dependent scores, this is referred to as linearity, whereas, normality is the condition when the residuals are normally distributed about the predicted dependent scores.

distribution was negatively skewed⁴¹. Following Foster et al.'s (2006) recommendation, the Learning_MC data was transformed⁴², substituting the square root of the scores for the original ones, thus remedying this issue.

Further tests were run to identify any outliers. Outliers are described by Foster et al. (2006, p. 36) as “items of data which are deviant, a long way from the mean” and by Hair et al. (1998, p. 205) as those observations “having a disproportionate impact on the regression results”. The effectiveness of the regression can be severely impeded by the presence of outliers; which can impact both in terms of leverage and discrepancy⁴³ (Foster et al., 2006). As previously indicated, the outliers identified were replaced with the ‘missing data’ code in SPSS; this reduced the number of cases for analysis to 228.

A final assumption which must be satisfied is the matter of independence of observations, what Hair et al. (1998, p. 142) refer to as the “effect of carry-over from one observation to another, thus making the residual not independent” and is measured through its independence of the error (residual) terms. This assumption is of more relevance with time-series data, therefore given the cross-sectional nature of the current study, the independence of the responses can be assumed. Having examined the data to confirm it was independent, linear, normally distributed, and complied with the underlying assumptions of multicollinearity and homoscedasticity, the next section discusses the issue of small group size.

⁴¹ Hair et al. (1998, p. 35) advise that skewness values which fall outside the range of 1 to -1 indicate substantial skewness (negative skewness indicating relatively few small values).

⁴² The analysis was run with the data transformed and without transformation to see if it was necessary. The results indicated a difference; hence, the transformed data was utilised in the analyses.

⁴³ Outlier leverage refers to the situation where the case is distant from other cases but along the same trend line, whereas discrepancy refers to the extent to which the case is out of line with the other cases (Foster et al., 2006). Each outlier's impact was assessed on an individual basis which determined whether or not to exclude the observation from the analysis.

4.9 Impact of Small Group Size on Data Analysis

It is worth mentioning that due to the small size of the population in particular TLN regions, for example, the North West region (only 31 participants, yet the region had a relatively high response rate of 68%); the size of sample was a determining factor in many of the decisions made in regard to the methods of data analysis. The differing size of groups also limited the options available for data analysis. Small group sizes have the effect of limiting the identification of findings to large effects in comparative analysis (Hair et al., 1998). This was indeed the case when the general linear model (GLM) method of MANOVA⁴⁴ multivariate analysis was employed to determine significant differences between the TLNs⁴⁵. Although the MANOVA identified certain significant differences between the TLNs, these significances were not identified in the post-hoc tests involving pairwise comparisons (see Appendix F), that is, all p values were greater than .05.

Efforts were made to increase the sample-size to counteract this problem, by grouping the smaller TLNs together but, similarly, the MANOVA highlighted significant differences between the five groups but was unable to clearly identify where the differences originated. The failure to distinguish where the significant differences between the groups existed, led to the decision to group the sample by facilitation; specifically to categorise the participants as either from an academically-backed facilitator or a consultancy-lead facilitator⁴⁶. This resulted in the academically-backed facilitation combining 127 cases, and the corresponding consultancy-backed group incorporating 101 cases. In the following section some of the key findings from the data are outlined.

⁴⁴ The statistical technique, multivariate analysis of variance is commonly referred to as MANOVA.

⁴⁵ As per Hair et al. (1998), MANOVA is the most suitable statistical analysis techniques when there are two or more dependent variables. Foster et al. (2006, p. 28) explain how this technique combines the dependent variables “in a linear manner to produce a combination which best separates the independent variable groups”.

⁴⁶ Excluding the two regressions where the full sample was used, all other data analysis was conducted on the basis of this categorisation (academic- or consultant-backed facilitation).

4.10 Key Findings

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two highlighted the key variables of interest, with the resultant conceptual framework (see Figure 3.1). The findings from the preliminary data analysis indicate that the learning outcomes loaded on two dimensions, Learning_Know and Learning_MC (rather than the original knowledge, skills, managerial capabilities and personal self-development). The peer interaction component combines the variables, information sharing and trust levels. The facilitator component of the framework combines the variables, learner involvement and climate. Hence a revised framework is presented in Figure 4.8, as a guide to the study.

In the following sections the findings of the survey are reviewed with regard to each of the variables outlined in the revised framework. The results of the first analysis, the independent *t*-test, when significant differences between the facilitation groups were found, are also presented (as illustrated in Table 4.16 and Appendix G). Further, this section of the chapter presents the mean score and standard deviation for each of the variables examined (see Table 4.17), beginning with the individual characteristics of the learner. Where there are differences between the two TLN groupings, these results are presented within each sub-section.

	t	df	p-value (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Self-efficacy	-1.486	224	0.139	-0.08134
Motivation	-2.359	226	0.019	-0.13108
Expectations	-1.005	226	0.316	-0.07942
Content	-0.615	225	0.539	-0.05748
Delivery Methods	-2.929	224	0.004	-0.28197
Peer Interaction	-2.897	226	0.004	-0.18763
Facilitator Climate	-1.649	226	0.100	-0.10156
Learning_Know	-0.560	226	0.576	-0.04742
Learning_MC	-1.546	226	0.123	-0.14806

Table 4.16: Independent *t*-test

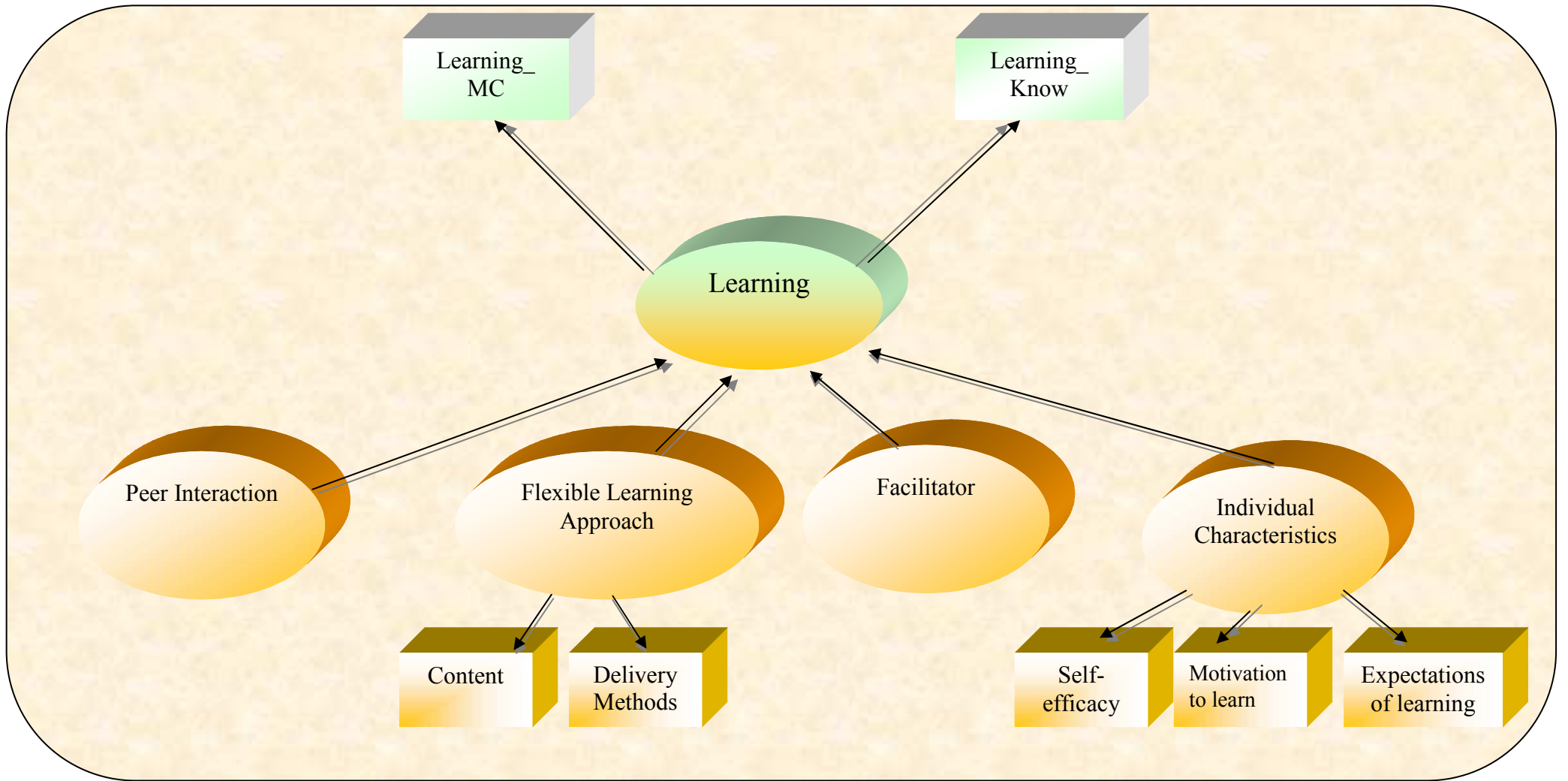


Figure 4.8: Revised Conceptual Framework

Source: Author

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Self-efficacy	226	2.69	4.81	3.8405	.40975
Motivation	228	2.50	5.00	4.1110	.42101
Expectations	228	1.60	5.00	3.5845	.59288
Content	227	1.50	5.00	3.6322	.69777
Delivery Methods	226	1.38	5.00	3.9420	.73072
Peer Interaction	228	2.13	5.00	3.8595	.49364
Facilitation Climate	228	2.33	5.00	3.8874	.46355
Learning_Know	228	1.31	4.85	3.3564	.63469
Learning_MC	228	1.17	5.00	3.7803	.72045
5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)					

Table 4.17: Descriptive Statistics

4.10.1 Individual Characteristics

Previous studies have indicated the importance of the individual characteristics of the participants in a training and development context; hence this section presents some of the main findings regarding the three elements measured: self-efficacy, motivation to learn and expectations of learning⁴⁷.

4.10.1.1 Self-efficacy

The mean (M) for self-efficacy overall was 3.84 (SD⁴⁸ = .41), indicating that there were generally positive levels displayed across the group, with the independent *t*-test showing no significant difference between the two facilitation types in terms of their participants' respective levels of self-efficacy.

⁴⁷ All the variables with the exception of the delivery methods and managerial capabilities were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

⁴⁸ SD refers to the standard deviation.

4.10.1.2 Motivation to Learn

The motivation to learn variable had a high mean score of 4.11 (SD = .42) overall, this indicated that the participants expressed high levels of enthusiasm for learning. The academically-backed participants (M = 4.17, SD = .39) showed a significantly higher level of motivation ($p = .019$) than their consultancy-backed counterparts (M = 4.03, SD = .45).

4.10.1.3 Expectations of Learning

The expectations of learning variable produced a mean score of 3.58 (SD = .59) across the entire group, indicating positive levels of response to this aspect of the TLN. There was no significant difference between the two facilitation types indicating general expectations were similar across the board. In the next section the response to the flexible learning approach is examined, beginning with the initiative content.

4.10.2 Flexible Learning Approach

As previously indicated, the flexible learning approach incorporates two variables of interest: the content provided by the TLN facilitator and the delivery methods employed to transfer that content. This section provides the mean scores for each of these variables, and then breaks down the delivery method into its constituent parts for further scrutiny, before indicating any significant differences between the facilitation types.

4.10.2.1 Flexible Learning Approach – Content

The response to the questions concerning the initiative content provided an overall mean score of 3.63 (SD = .70) indicating a general positive response to the content's relevance and practicality for the participants, with no significant difference between the facilitation types.

4.10.2.2 *Flexible Learning Approach - Delivery Methods*

The delivery methods were perceived positively across the participants, providing a mean score of 3.94 (SD = .73). This indicates that, on average, the delivery methods were perceived to be of benefit to the participant's personal learning. The results of the independent *t*-test (as shown in Table 4.16) indicated a significant difference in the mean scores between the facilitation groups. Specifically, the mean score for the academically-backed group was 4.07 (SD = .69), whereas the consultancy-backed group appear to have perceived the delivery methods as of less benefit to them, with a mean score of 3.78 (SD = .75).

In order to meet the objectives of the study, the formative scale was reduced to its individual items. The independent *t*-tests indicated that the mean scores for the delivery methods were significantly different between facilitator types in seven of the thirteen different types of delivery modes, as illustrated in Table 4.18.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the data indicates that all but one of the delivery methods registered a higher mean score for the academically-backed facilitation, the one exception being the one-to-one mentoring element of the TLN. The next section concerns the findings regarding the facilitator variables - climate and learner involvement.

⁴⁹ In Table 4.18 the delivery methods are ranked in terms of the overall across TLN scores for each of them, for example the delivery method with the highest mean score overall was the residential event and the lowest perception overall was for the projects undertaken.

	Facilitation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	<i>p-value</i>
Residential learning event	Consultants	71	3.8451	0.95091	0.11285	0.000
	Academic	119	4.3529	0.83957	0.07696	
Group meetings	Consultants	98	3.9898	0.97911	0.09891	
	Academic	115	4.2174	0.88637	0.08265	
IT workshop	Consultants	78	3.7692	1.06811	0.12094	0.000
	Academic	117	4.3162	0.91585	0.08467	
Learning form other participants' experiences	Consultants	95	3.9053	0.95732	0.09822	
	Academic	124	4.1855	0.97419	0.08749	
Guest speaker input	Consultants	97	3.8866	1.08854	0.11052	0.029
	Academic	125	4.1760	0.87126	0.07793	
One-to-one mentoring from facilitator	Consultants	97	4.1959	1.07664	0.10932	0.014
	Academic	106	3.7925	1.22449	0.11893	
Marketing workshop	Consultants	92	3.8478	1.0476	0.10922	
	Academic	115	4.0826	0.99545	0.09283	
Mentoring from industry experts	Consultants	87	3.9310	1.23696	0.13262	
	Academic	109	3.9541	1.14168	0.10935	
Regional Conference	Consultants	79	3.6456	1.07463	0.1209	0.001
	Academic	110	4.1455	0.98462	0.09388	
E-learning modules	Consultants	73	3.5753	1.06612	0.12478	0.003
	Academic	105	4.0751	1.06363	0.1038	
Site visits to other properties	Consultants	76	3.6974	1.07107	0.12286	
	Academic	97	3.8454	1.22763	0.12465	
Finance workshop	Consultants	67	3.6567	0.99319	0.12134	
	Academic	98	3.8469	1.1429	0.11545	
Learning from projects undertaken	Consultants	87	3.6322	1.04676	0.11222	
	Academic	110	3.8636	1.07922	0.1029	

Table 4.18: Independent *t*-test for delivery methods

4.10.3 Facilitator Climate

As indicated previously in Section 3.7.6., the facilitator score represents the integration of the dimensions of learner involvement and the learning climate created. With a mean score of 3.89 (SD = .46), results indicate that the learning environment is perceived positively by the participants (both academically and consultancy backed – no significant difference was found between them), yet there is considerable room for improvement in this variable across both facilitation types, as higher scores indicate greater involvement (a fundamental tenet of ALT). Of particular interest in this study is the part played by peer interaction, the next section presents findings regarding this component.

4.10.4 Peer Interaction

This variable combines the dimensions of information sharing and trust levels, hence, the positive mean score of 3.86 (SD = .49) indicated that there is a general positive level of trust and information-sharing across the respondents. The independent *t*-test highlighted that a significant difference ($p = .004$) existed between the facilitation groups, specifically, the academically backed participants' perceptions of the level of peer interaction (M = 3.94, SD = .45) was higher than their consultancy-backed counterparts (M = 3.76, SD = .52). The findings regarding the learning outcomes, Learning_Know and Learning_MC are reviewed in the subsequent section.

4.10.5 Learning Outcomes

As indicated in Section 4.6, when the learning outcomes were tested using exploratory factor analysis, they were found to consist of two dimensions: Learning_Know and Learning_MC. This section reviews the findings for each of these dimensions of learning.

The overall result for Learning_Know is the lowest mean score of all the variables in this study (M = 3.36, SD = .63), suggesting that while the participants generally perceive that they have gained some level of new skills, knowledge and self-

development, the level is not very high. Furthermore, when the scores were analysed in more detail, 25% of the participants reported an overall score less than three on the five-point scale for Learning_Know reflecting a level of disagreement with statements regarding increases in knowledge, skills or growth in self-development as a result of the TLN.

The mean score for Learning_MC is = 3.78 (SD = .72), suggesting that the participants acknowledge the benefits they have gained in terms of Learning_MC, (which is closely related to increases in their managerial capability). When the results were analysed in more detail, 15% of participants reported an overall score less than three on a five-point scale for Learning_MC, reflecting a level of disagreement with the statements for increases in this variable, thus indicating that the TLN had not been a catalyst for change for them.

The independent *t*-test did not indicate a difference between the mean scores of the two groups in terms of their perceptions of the learning outcomes, in spite of significant differences in motivation levels, delivery methods and levels of peer interaction. In the following section the results of the regression on these two learning outcomes are presented.

4.11 Regression Results

As previously mentioned, this study has two dependent variables: Learning_Know and Learning_MC, therefore two regressions were conducted. Each regression produced a model (as presented in Figures 4.9 and 4.10) and this section presents the variables which predict each learning outcome. First the approaches to variable selection for the regressions are discussed, before outlining the findings from each of the regressions undertaken.

4.11.1 Regression Techniques Employed

The primary approach to variable selection for the regression was the Enter method as there were no specific hypotheses about the order or importance of the predictors, this approach forces all the variables simultaneously into the regression (Foster et al., 2006, p. 60). Kinnear and Gray (2009, p. 465) explain this enter approach further as simultaneously entering all the variables “so that the tests for each regression coefficient effectively put it ‘at the end of the queue’ and test ΔR^2 in the presence of all the other variables”⁵⁰.

An alternative approach to this approach is a sequential method, the most popular is known as stepwise regression, however, it is not without controversy⁵¹. Stepwise regression allows the examination of the contribution made by each variable to the regression, the inclusion or exclusion of each decided on statistical grounds as the model is run (Foster et al., 2006; Hair et al., 1995). Given the theoretical problems with the stepwise method highlighted by Kinnear and Gray (2009), the enter method is employed in this study, with the stepwise employed merely to add insight into the proportion of variance each variable accounts for (that is, the ΔR^2 is reported for this method in SPSS). The first of the outcomes examined is the Learning_Know regression model.

4.11.2 Learning_Know Regression Results

The model presented in Figure 4.9 indicates that the independent variables captured 62% of the variance in Learning_Know. In terms of their predictive power, the evidence of the β weightings⁵² demonstrated that content, expectations, facilitator

⁵⁰ Delta R^2 (ΔR^2) refers to the squared semi-partial correlation that is the increase in the value of R^2 that results from adding that particular independent variable (Kinnear and Gray, 2009, p. 462), however the ΔR^2 is not reported with the Enter method in SPSS.

⁵¹ Kinnear and Gray (2009, p. 465) stated “many would say, however, that no statistical model alone can justify such ‘queue-jumping’: a substantive causal model is also essential”.

⁵² β or beta coefficients are standardised regression coefficients “that allow direct comparison between coefficients as to their relative explanatory power of the dependent variable” (Hair et al., 1998, p. 80) and provide “an estimate of the average number of standard deviations change in the criterion that will be produced by a change of one standard deviation in the regressor concerned” (Kinnear and Gray, 2009, p. 468-469).

climate, motivation to learn, and self-efficacy predict this learning outcome (in this particular order of predictive power based on the value of the β coefficients). Furthermore, the stepwise results highlight that the flexible learning approach content plays a very dominant role, accounting for 48.9% of the variation in Learning_Know. The results indicate that expectations of learning accounts for 10.7%, facilitator climate for 1.5%, motivation for 1.3% and finally self-efficacy for -0.7%⁵³ of the variation in Learning_Know. The results indicate that peer interaction and delivery methods lack predictive value in determining Learning_Know ($p > .05$). The next section presents the findings from the regression of Learning_MC.

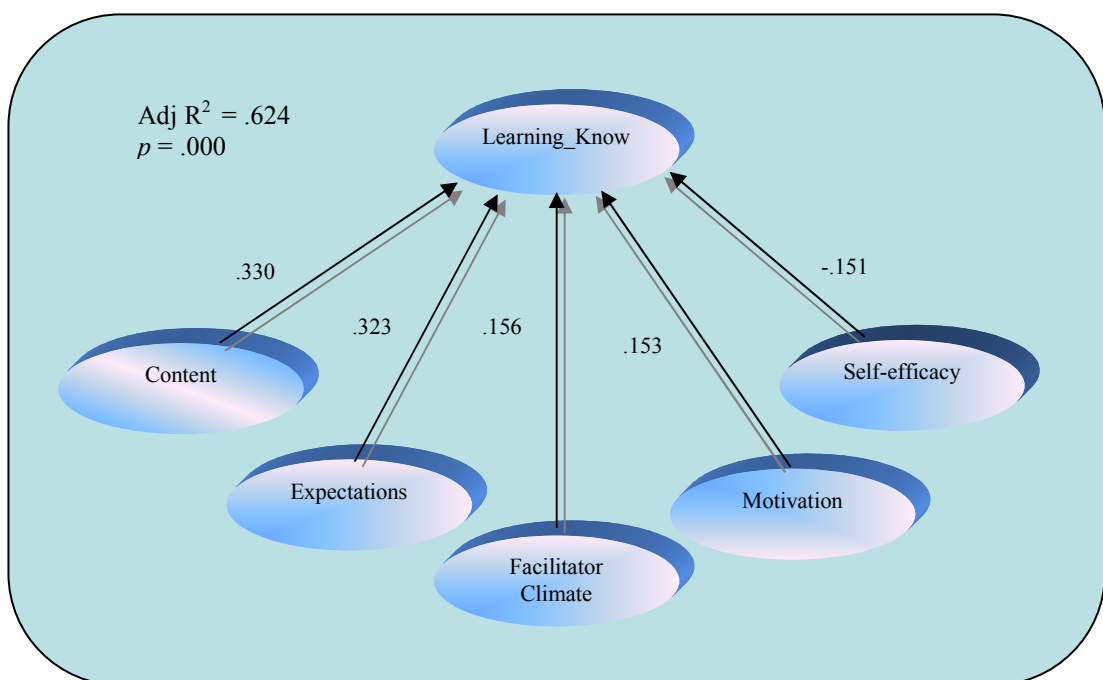


Figure 4.9: Regression model of Learning_Know

4.11.3 Learning_MC Regression Results

The second of the two regressions, as presented in Figure 4.10 demonstrated that the variables in the study predicted 68% of the variance in Learning_MC. This learning outcome was predicted by content, motivation to learn, the delivery methods and the

⁵³ Self-efficacy recorded a negative predictive relationship with Learning_Know, this is discussed further in Section 5.2.2 (all the other regression relationships were positive).

expectations of learning (in this particular order of predictive power based on the β coefficients). The stepwise results indicate that the flexible learning approach content is of vital importance in predicting this outcome, as it accounts for 50.4% of the variation in Learning_MC. The results further indicate that the flexible learning approach delivery methods account for 9.9%, motivation for 5.7%, and expectations for 2.0% of the variation in Learning_MC. The results indicate that self-efficacy, peer interaction and facilitation climate lack predictive value in determining Learning_MC ($p > .05$). In the following section, the results of testing the hypotheses are examined.

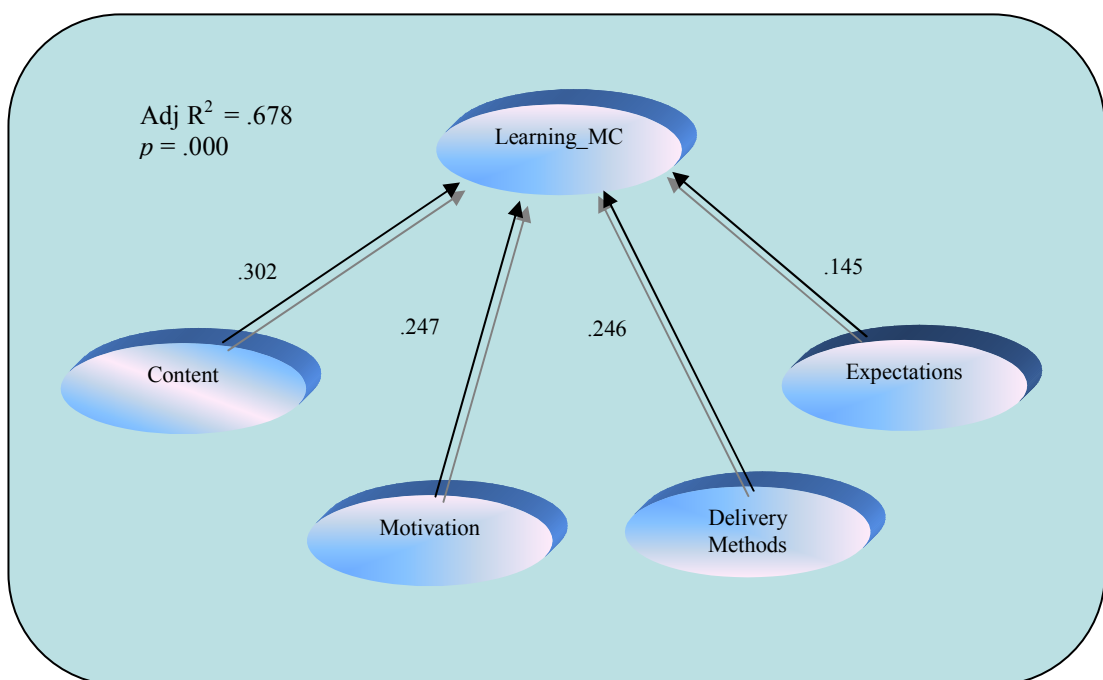


Figure 4.10: Regression model of Learning_MC

4.12 Hypothesis Testing

As mentioned previously, the issue of sample size constrained the data analysis to comparing the respondent sample under the categories of academically-backed facilitation or consultancy-backed facilitation. The results of testing each of the hypotheses will be presented in this section, resulting in the support or rejection of the hypothesis.

Hypothesis H₁ -There is no significant difference between the groups on the effect of individual characteristics on learning.

This hypothesis covers the three individual characteristics (self-efficacy, motivation to learn and expectations of learning); all of which have been found to impact on learning in previous studies (see Section 2.3). In this study, the impact of these characteristics on the learning outcomes is compared across the two groups (those facilitated by the consultants and those facilitated by academic institutions) to assess if there is a statistical significant difference, hence the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis H_{1a}-There is no significant difference between the groups on the effect of self-efficacy on learning.
- Hypothesis H_{1b}-There is no significant difference between the groups on the effect of motivation to learn on learning.
- Hypothesis H_{1c}-There is no significant difference between the groups on the effect of expectations of learning on learning.

The results of the independent *t*-test (shown in Table 4.16) confirm that the null hypothesis (H_{1a}) is supported as there was no significance difference between the groups self-efficacy mean scores ($p = .139$). Further, the null hypothesis (H_{1b}) is rejected as the motivation to learn variable result was $p = .019$, suggesting that there was a significant difference between the groups in terms of their motivation to learn. Finally, the expectations variable score was $p = .316$, indicating that the null hypothesis (H_{1c}) is supported, as there is no significant difference in this variable between the groups.

Hypothesis H₂ - There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of a flexible learning approach on learning.

As previously mentioned, the flexible learning approach consists of two elements, the content of the TLN and the delivery of the learning, hence the following:

- Hypothesis H_{2a} - There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of the perception of the TLN content on learning.

Results, as outlined in Table 4.16, highlight that this hypothesis, H_{2a}, is supported (Content: $p = .539$).

- Hypothesis H_{2b} - There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of the delivery methods on learning.

This hypothesis is rejected as the results of the independent t - test indicate that there is a significant difference between the groups in their perception of the delivery methods ($p = .004$).

Hypothesis H₃ - There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of peer interaction on learning.

In examining peer interaction, the results of this analysis indicated that the null hypothesis (H₃) should be rejected, as the combined trust and information sharing levels between the groups were statistically significant ($p = .004$).

Hypothesis H₄ - There is no significant difference between the groups on the effects of facilitation on learning.

Despite the different facilitation types, the combined learning climate and learner involvement levels created in both groups were not significantly different ($p = .100$), hence the null hypothesis (H₄) is supported, based on the findings presented in Table 4.16. In the following section a summary of the key findings of this chapter are presented.

4.13 Conclusion

This chapter began with a review of the response rates to the survey, which indicated a response of 55.4% overall, with 54.5% suitable for use. The data concerning the characteristics of the respondent sample was then presented, which indicated that on average the respondent was an owner-manager of a B&B or self-catering accommodation, in operation less than ten years, with five full-time employees or less. These key characteristic findings were outlined, prior to an examination of potential bias caused through non-response; the findings suggest that non-response bias is unlikely. While the rate of response to the survey was satisfactory overall, the manner in which the data could be analysed was severely curtailed by the small size of some of the TLN groups. This limitation determined the methods of analysis employed, and led to the categorisation of the sample into two main groups, those facilitated by the consultants and those facilitated by academic institutions.

An analysis of the measurement scales employed for reliability and validity followed. Having determined all the scales as acceptable for use, the next section discussed the data assumptions governing the use of multivariate techniques. The variables' mean scores and their respective standard deviations were then reviewed. This section was followed by the findings for the regressions run on each of the dependent variables (Learning_Know and Learning_MC). The regression of Learning_Know indicates that it is predicted by the flexible learning approach content, expectations of learning, facilitator climate, motivation to learn and self-efficacy. Learning_MC is predicted by the flexible learning approach content, motivation to learn, flexible learning approach delivery methods and expectations of learning.

The findings of the independent *t*-test data analysis were then presented in the format of testing each of the hypotheses. The null hypothesis, H_{1b} , concerning the individual characteristic of motivation to learn was rejected, as it was significantly different between the groups. The other individual characteristics (H_{1a} and H_{1c}) were not significantly different between the groups, thus their null hypotheses are

supported. The null hypothesis, H_{2a} , regarding the role of the learning content was also supported. No support was found for the null hypothesis, H_{2b} , concerning the role of the delivery methods impact on learning. The null hypothesis, H_3 , regarding the effect of peer interaction on learning was rejected highlighting differences between the groups in their levels of trust and information sharing. Finally, the null hypothesis, H_4 , regarding facilitation climate and learner involvement was supported, as statistically significant differences were not found between the facilitator types. In the next chapter these results will be discussed in more depth, with particular attention to how these findings will determine a ‘best practices’ model for the tourism learning networks.

Chapter Five

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings presented in the previous chapter are examined with reference to previous research. The chapter follows the format of outlining the key findings by providing an assessment of each of the variables of interest. As described in the previous chapter, due to sample size limitations, this research has had to alter its focus from examining TLN differences between six regions, to one which examines differences between two facilitation types (academic- and consultancy-backed). Results pertinent to the hypotheses which focalised the differences between the two groups indicated there are differences between the groups' respective participants' experience of learning in the TLNs. This chapter integrates the analysis of the significant differences found between the TLN facilitation groups with the regression findings, and addresses any unexpected results.

The regression models reported an adjusted R^2 value of .624 for Learning_Know and .678 for Learning_MC; this shows that each model explains a considerable amount of the variance in each dependent variable. The implications of these findings are explored in the context of previous studies and informing future practice. In response to the research aims, this chapter concludes with the formulation of recommendations which contribute to the development of a TLN 'best practice' model.

5.2 Key Findings

In this section of the chapter, the data analysis findings are explored in more detail. Each variable is examined, with particular attention to the reported impact on learning outcomes and significant differences between the facilitation types. This section begins with a review of the profile of the average TLN participant, before the role of each variable is assessed with regard to previous research findings.

5.2.1 Profile of TLN Participants

The two groups showed no statistically significant differences in terms of their demographics: gender, job roles, business type, and number of full-time employees. As indicated in the previous chapter, on average, the respondent was an owner-manager of a B&B or self-catering accommodation, employing less than five full-time or part-time employees. Furthermore, on average, the business had been in operation for 10-15 years. The foregoing would appear to indicate that the TLN should be aimed at dealing with issues relevant to mature businesses, rather than start-up issues. In addition, the seasonality of the tourism industry as shown in the seasonal employment figures provided in Chapter Four indicates the need for the TLN provision to be structured at times to suit the majority of participants. Moreover, the TLN content should also be adapted to suit the particular needs of the participants associated with the seasonal nature of their business⁵⁴, for example, the human resource practices associated with employing staff on short-term temporary contracts.

The TLN population shows a disproportionate number of females to male participants (62%: 38%) reflected similarly in the respondent sample (62.4%: 37.6%). Unfortunately it is not possible to ascertain if the population of the TLN reflects the wider industry, as gender figures are only provided at the full-time employment level regardless of the position held (51% female 49% male) (Fáilte

⁵⁴ As indicated in the previous chapter, Baum and Lundtorp (2001) indicated that the seasonality factor also had an impact on the marketing and business finance practices of the average tourism business.

Ireland, 2007). The influence of gender is beyond the remit of this study, however, when all the variables' mean scores were compared for differences between the genders the only difference found was for the facilitator climate ($p = .041$), the male participants indicated a higher mean score ($M = 3.97$, $SD = .401$) for their level of involvement and perception of the climate created, than their female counterparts ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .492$). Further in-depth research is required to ascertain if the gender imbalance in the TLNs reflects the industry population or is the result of recruitment policy or practice. The next section discusses the role played by the individual characteristic, self-efficacy, in the TLN learning.

5.2.2 The Role of Self-efficacy in Learning

The results of this study show that there is a negative relationship between self-efficacy and Learning_Know ($\beta = -.151$, accounting for .7% of the change in Adj. R^2). This was an unexpected finding as it is widely accepted that self-efficacy has a positive relationship with performance (Gist, 1997; Mathieu and Martineau, 1997). Self-efficacy generally has a positive relationship with learning in the literature, as participants with higher levels of self-efficacy will learn more (for example, Gist et al., 1989; Tai, 2006; Compeau and Higgins, 1995; Bouffard-Bouchard, 1990). Indeed, social learning theory (Bandura, 1997) acknowledges self-efficacy as a major antecedent to learning. This finding suggests that higher levels of self-efficacy are related to lower levels of learning in the context of the TLN.

The literature does indicate various explanations for the foregoing result. Powers (1991) revealed that perceptions of one's current state are built on self-efficacious beliefs. Therefore, if, following Colquitt et al. (2000) and others⁵⁵, efforts were made by the facilitators to engender greater belief in the participants' capacity to master the content, this may have led the participants to expend less effort to learn. Indeed, Vancouver et al. (2002, p. 514) caution against inflating participants' beliefs in their ability "via an intervention targeted to increase self-efficacy without a commensurate improvement in effectiveness". Particularly in the case of

⁵⁵ Others including: Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001) and Tai (2006) recommend direct interventions to increase the levels of participant self-efficacy in training and development initiatives.

preparations for learning, these false impressions of ability may lead to a reduction in the resources invested by the participant in the process (Vancouver and Kendall, 2006).

A further explanation is that the facilitators may have reduced the participants' self-efficacy through feedback mechanisms which lowered the participant's belief in their ability to learn. Vancouver and Kendall (2006) argued that in order to increase the level of planning and resources expended in learning, trainers might use negative feedback to reduce the participant's self-efficacy. However, they recommend prudence in these manipulations as some participants may decide to give-up and not devote any further resources to learning. Vancouver et al. (2002) found similar findings in their study suggesting that individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy were more likely to continue with a failed decision-making strategy due to their inflated self-views. Similarly, Nilsen and Campbell (1993) identified a tendency in those individuals with higher self-efficacy to reduce seeking feedback, which Bandura and Jourden (1991, p. 949) have argued leads individuals to a sense of "complacent self-assurance". Further research by Goffe and Scase (1995) has also found that SME owner-managers were over-reliant on their own self-belief. Indeed, Chaston et al. (1999) contend that SME owner-managers are generally reluctant to accept any form of criticism from their workforce or admit the need for external expert advice (McLarty, 1997; Freeman, 2000). Based on the foregoing, the negative relationship between self-efficacy and Learning_Know is understandable and reflects the need for a balance between over-inflating the participant's self-efficacy resulting in reduced effort and creating some doubt in the participant's ability to master a topic thus providing the incentive to them to acquire the new knowledge or skill (Bandura and Locke, 2003) without reducing their self-belief to the point where the participant decides to give-up.

The overall mean score for self-efficacy was 3.84 (SD = .41, on a 5-point scale), indicating that the participants across the TLNs held positive levels of self-belief in their ability, considering the job profile of the TLN participants this was unsurprising. In regards to the finding that there was no difference in self-efficacy

between academic- and consultancy-backed facilitators; the literature failed to reveal similar studies which compared self-efficacy between groups which would offer an explanation for this result. However, one possible explanation for the similarity across the groups may be the impact of employing a scale which measured general rather than context specific self-efficacy (that is, the learning context), as the data collected examined the overall belief that one can perform successfully across a variety of different situations (Judge et al., 1998). In so doing, the differences in specific self-efficacy in relation to a learning context may not have been captured in this study, thus explaining why no significant differences were found despite the varying learning contexts offered by the two facilitator types. A further possibility is that the cross-sectional nature of the study fails to provide insight into any variations in the self-efficacy levels generated by participation – that is, what was the participant’s level of self-efficacy prior to their TLN experience and what was it after completing the initiative? Future research employing a longitudinal pre- and post test might provide more understanding in order to explain the foregoing. The implications for the TLN in terms of the role of self-efficacy are examined further in developing a ‘best practice’ model in Section 5.3.4. As indicated above, the level of self-efficacy has also been shown to impact on the level of effort employed, which is relevant to the next section where the role of motivation to learn is reviewed.

5.2.3 Effect of Motivation to Learn

Motivation to learn has been found to be a key antecedent to learning in many previous studies in a variety of contexts (e.g., Klein et al., 2006; Colquitt et al., 2000; Noe and Schmitt, 1986). While the research on learning networks is still in its infancy, this study’s results confirm the importance of the participants’ motivation levels to learning in the TLNs. Specifically, in the case of influencing the levels of Learning_MC (see Figure 4.10), the results from the regression show that motivation is second only to the perception of respondents on the TLN’s content in its explanatory power ($\beta = .247$, accounting for 5.7% of the change in Adjusted R^2). Indeed, motivation to learn is also a major determinant of the dependent variable Learning_Know ($\beta = .153$, accounting for 1.3% of the change in Adjusted R^2), which

was in accord with many previous studies (for example, Colquitt et al., 2000; Noe and Schmitt, 1986; Mathieu et al., 1992). This relationship between motivation and learning outcomes confirms a number of previous findings (Campbell and Kuncel, 2001; Mathieu et al., 1992). Indeed, similar findings were produced by Colquitt et al. (2000) in their meta-analysis of training motivation, where motivation to learn was found to be positively related to declarative knowledge and skill acquisition. This research extends previous work that linked motivation to learn and learning (Mathieu et al., 1992; Fecteau et al., 1995) to a network setting.

This study has provided a relatively high mean score of 4.11 (SD = .42) for motivation levels across all the TLN participants, which reflects the self-selection aspect of the TLN, that is, the participants as SME owner-managers are likely to have chosen to enrol themselves on the TLN and attend the modules. While the study has confirmed that motivation to learn has a relationship with increased levels of knowledge, skills, managerial capabilities and personal self-development (both Learning_Know and Learning_MC), there is still room for further improvement in the motivation to learn levels. Hence, this finding informs future practice, as it suggests that the facilitator of a TLN must ensure that they address the motivation to learn of TLN participants, as they will engage more and exert more effort, thus increasing their learning (this is discussed further in the section on ‘best practices’ - 5.3.3).

One of the distinguishing features between the facilitation types was the significant difference in their respective scores for motivation to learn. Specifically, the mean score for the academically-backed participants (M = 4.17, SD = .39) was significantly different and higher, than their consultancy-lead peers (M = 4.04, SD = .45). Given this study’s focus on motivation’s role in terms of the attention and effort a participant decides to invest, this implies that the academic-backed provision stimulated their participants to engage more in the learning process. Klein et al. (2006) argued that motivation to learn is impacted by instructional characteristics so it may be that the academically-led TLN, in their provision of the delivery methods, provided more opportunities for face-to-face interaction (delivery methods and peer

interaction levels were perceived as significantly higher than their consultancy counterparts, see Sections 5.2.6. and 5.2.7). The face-to-face socialisation through a higher level of peer interaction in the academically-lead group, may explain the higher motivation levels. This is in keeping with findings from previous studies on distance learning environments such as those reported by Knowles (1973) and Lawless et al. (2000) which indicated that interactions with others had an impact on motivation levels.

An alternative explanation for the differences between the facilitation groups may be due to the framing of each module by the academics. Research by Tai (2006) found that framing a module in terms of how the content relates to the personal, career and business objectives and utility will improve the motivation of participants. This may be linked to the rigour attributed to the use of accreditation, as this process compels the facilitator to link each module to specific learning outcomes (Reinl, 2008). The certification at the end of the TLN process also acts as a goal to motivate the participants in addition to enforcing a structure on the learning, which requires reflection on the practical application of new knowledge (Kelliher et al., 2009). In contrast, consultancy-backed facilitation has been reported to rely more on the informal and unstructured approaches of coaching and mentoring to facilitate SME owner-manager learning (Dawe and Nguyen, 2007).

Relevant to the structuring of a TLN is the work of Dawe and Nguyen (2007) who reported that programmes that employ an integration of the informal and structured approaches work better than those that rely on a single approach. This current study's findings are consistent with this perspective, further suggesting that the TLN 'best practice' model requires the integration of the key components from each of the facilitation types. However, motivation is not the only individual characteristic which was found to impact on learning outcomes and the next section addresses the role of expectations of learning.

5.2.4 Impact of Expectations of Learning

This element of individual characteristics examined the role of expectations of learning and training fulfilment (Tannenbaum et al., 1991), whereby the assumption was that if the learning expectations of the TLN were met then the participants would realise higher levels of learning. As anticipated, those participants who perceived higher levels of fulfilment were shown to learn more, as the evidence from this study showed that expectations of learning accounted for variations in both the learning outcomes. In the case of Learning_Know, expectations accounted for a considerable proportion of the variation (10.7%, with a $\beta = .323$) in the levels of knowledge, skills and self-development. Expectations of learning also accounted for 2% of the variation in Learning_MC ($\beta = .145$), showing that this variable has some influence on the levels of managerial capability, personal self-development and, ultimately, when combined with the influence on the learning of new skills and knowledge, the success of the TLN. This confirms prior findings that emphasised the importance of fulfilling participants' expectations and the advantages to be gained from managing these perceptions (Tannenbaum et al., 1991; Hicks and Klimoski, 1987).

The evidence here suggests that the participants had similar levels of expectations of learning across the TLNs, with an overall positive mean score of 3.58 for this variable. The literature on this topic is scarce, as most previous studies that examined expectations did so between all participants, rather than between groups, and were frequently longitudinal studies employing pre- and post tests. However, research by Reinl and Kelliher (2008) in a learning network setting does provide some insight into the expectations variable. Reinl and Kelliher (2008) found that participants may not have held well-developed expectations of learning before entering the initiative, which may explain why no significant differences were found between the two groups. Clearly, in the future, the TLN facilitators must take measures to enhance the expectations of the participants prior to the initiative as this study's findings as well as the literature confirm that ensuring expectations closely resemble the reality of the experience will result in increased levels of learning.

Therefore, every effort should be made to ensure the participants' perceptions of the TLN experience are as realistic as possible to further their potential learning.

The analysis of the results indicates that the individual characteristics (self-efficacy, motivation to learn and expectations of learning) of the participants are a major determinant of learning in a learning network context. This study confirms and extends previous research (to the learning network context) which indicated that the individual characteristics play an important role in promoting learning, and is discussed further in the section on the development of 'best practices' (Section 5.3). The next section addresses the part played by the content before addressing the delivery methods' impact on the learning outcomes.

5.2.5 Flexible Learning Approach – Content's Key Role

The content variable has the greatest impact on the Learning_Know outcome ($\beta = .330$, accounting for 48.9% of the variance in Adjusted R^2) and the greatest impact on the Learning_MC outcome also ($\beta = .302$, accounting for 50.4% of the variance in Adjusted R^2). These findings provide empirical evidence of the critical importance content relevance plays in developing new knowledge, skills, managerial capabilities and personal self-development in a learning network context. This is in keeping with previous studies showing that unless the material covered in the training and development session is of relevance to the participants, they are unlikely to learn (Reinl and Kelliher, 2008). This is evident as in the past, SMEs have found the content of courses too general (Storey and Westhead, 1997). Furthermore, these results confirm previous research by Storey and Westhead (1997) and Stokes (2001), which argued that content lacking in relevance failed to meet individual business needs. In addition, the concept of content being closely related to the levels of learning supports similar findings in a meta-analysis by Alliger et al. (1997) who illustrated that perceptions of the utility of a course are correlated with learning. These findings further highlight the criticality of closely matching the content with the participants' requirements, both business and personal. Indeed, as previously discussed, ALT has highlighted that adult learners become ready to learn when they

experience a need to know something to become more effective in some aspect of their lives. This perspective is emphasised in small firms, as owner-managers seek out ‘immediately applicable’ learning, founded on the resource constraints of their environment – specifically time. Therefore the content must be adapted accordingly to represent an opportunity for the learner to ameliorate their abilities (Knowles, 1973) (this is discussed further in Section 5.3.1.).

The perceptions of the content were not significantly different between the groups indicating that both facilitation types provided content that was relevant and of benefit to the participants (Mean = 3.63, SD = .70). This finding was unexpected, as the perception was that the academically-backed facilitators would emphasise the theoretical principals and rules of the subject perhaps at the expense of the practical aspects of content transfer (Baldwin and Ford, 1988). It is also in contrast with findings from Gibb and Megginson (1993), who found that academic facilitators tend to offer courses that are too theoretical and lacking practical relevance. However, on the contrary, the facilitation types provided similar levels of content relevance, hence, one explanation for this may be due to the accreditation process⁵⁶. As mentioned previously, the accreditation process requires that each module is framed in terms of the relevance and practical application of the subject matter. The second element of the flexible learning approach reviewed in the next section, concerns the methods by which the content of the initiative was delivered to the participants.

5.2.6 Flexible Learning Approach – Delivery Methods’ Impact

As expected the delivery methods were identified by the regression as predictive of learning, but this was only for Learning_MC, the dimension of learning concerned with changes being introduced⁵⁷. This indicates that when it comes to increasing the managerial capabilities, this is done, in part, by increasing the perception of the

⁵⁶ A pivotal difference between the facilitation types is the accreditation process (certification is not pursued by the consultancy-backed facilitators).

⁵⁷ It may be that the relationship between delivery methods and Learning_Know is mediated by one of the other variables in the model (or one not identified), however this is outside the scope of this study and is a future research direction.

benefit of the delivery method ($\beta = .246$)⁵⁸. As a result, the delivery methods employed in the TLNs must be chosen with the aim of improving the participants' perceptions of being worthwhile for their learning.

Up until now, the discussion has been based around the links found between the delivery methods and the actual reported learning, however, the participants' perception of what was of benefit to their learning highlights different results (see Table 4.18). The ranking of the means for all the participants, shows that the residential event ($M = 4.16$, $SD = .91$) followed by the group meetings facilitated by a professional facilitator ($M = 4.11$, $SD = .93$), were perceived to be most beneficial to their learning. This is in contrast to previous work by O'Dwyer and Ryan (2002), which found that SME owner-managers expressed a preference for the use of mentoring and one-to-one meetings, followed by workshops (Lawless et al., 2000).

Interestingly, at the other end of the comparative means scale, the learning from projects undertaken ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.07$) and the workshop on finance ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.09$) were deemed by the participants to be of less benefit to their learning. This would indicate that each of these elements should be re-examined by the facilitators to ensure that participants are more aware of the learning forthcoming from these modules and its practical use in their businesses.

The overall mean score for the delivery methods ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .73$) indicates that the participants have generally positive perceptions of the delivery methods' benefit to their learning. The mean scores for delivery methods also indicated statistically significant differences between the two groups. According to these results, the provision of the modules through delivery methods was perceived to be dissimilar by the participants in the two groups. This finding was expected given the diversity in the implementation of the TLNs indicated in the interviews conducted at the beginning of the research with Fáilte Ireland. When the delivery method variable was broken down into its constituent parts and the mean scores for each were

⁵⁸ Stepwise regression results indicated that R^2 changed by 9.9% when the delivery method variable was included, this was second only to the increase caused by the content variable.

compared, six of the methods were significantly different between the groups. Five out of the six differently scored delivery methods were higher for the academically backed facilitators, only one-to-one mentoring was higher for the consultancy backed facilitators.

This last finding for the consultants was expected given that consultancy businesses are predominantly involved in one-to-one mentoring on a day-to-day basis, whereas academic institutions are by their nature more aligned with traditional pedagogy. Another possible differentiating feature is that the consultancy-lead facilitators met the participants in their own businesses for the one-to-ones (whereas this was not necessarily the case in the academically-backed version), suggesting that the site-visit gave added insight into the work environment surrounding the participant. The site-visit appeals to the SME owner-manager as they do not feel able to spend long periods of time away from their businesses (Lawless et al., 2000). Furthermore, previous studies have highlighted that participants see these sessions as an opportunity to talk more freely (Reinl and Kelliher, 2008), indicating that certain development needs may be considered by the SME owner-manager as confidential in nature. In a learning network context, Kelliher et al. (2009) recommended the introduction of mentoring to complement group facilitation, and the SME owner-managers' need for relevance is met by the individualised development opportunity provided by one-to-one mentoring (Stokes, 2001).

The mentoring aspect of the TLN is very much dependent on the learner's requirements and how the facilitator reacts to these needs. Devins and Gold (2000) suggested that mentoring should be aimed at one of the following three purposes: (1) involve a semi-structured appraisal of the vision of the SME owner-manager and produce an action plan on how to reach that vision, (2) involve the choice of an individual problem facing the business and approach how to solve it, or (3) offer the opportunity of using the mentor as a sounding-board. Therefore, the key to the success of this element is to ensure that there are set objectives agreed upon at the beginning of the session and this clarity of purpose should produce results. A further prerequisite to the effectiveness of this site-visit is that a certain level of trust has

developed between the participant and facilitator, which may be worthy of further research in this context.

The other aspects of delivery which were reported as significantly different between the facilitation types were: the regional conference, the residential learning event, the e-learning modules, the learning from guest-speaker input and finally, the workshop on IT. Further research is required to pinpoint the specific reasons for these variances, however, it is reasonable to suggest that the consultancy-backed facilitators might be well advised to revise these modules to more closely resemble those provided by the academically-backed facilitators, especially in the case of the residential event and the IT workshop (where the difference was most extreme, $p = .000$). Indeed, the choice of guest-speakers may need further attention, on the consultancy-backed provider's part also, in order to bring it more in line with the academically-backed participants' perceptions of benefit to their learning.

These findings regarding delivery methods tie in well with the concept of involving the participants in the decision-making for the network as it builds commitment and a sense of ownership (Knowles, 1973; Clarke, 2006). Additionally, this reinforces the importance of the content relevance even further, as the perception of being of benefit to the learner is inextricably linked to the content. The implications of these findings are developed further in the later section on 'best practices' (Section 5.3); the next section considers the impact of peer interaction on learning.

5.2.7 The Role of Peer Interaction

A review of the literature from both the learning and network fields led to the inclusion of peer interaction as an element in the conceptual framework guiding this study. As indicated, the learning literature, specifically the social situational school of thought, promotes the concept of learning from interactions with others, described as peer interaction. Thus, one of the possible antecedents to learning in a network was assumed to be peer interaction, which incorporated the levels of information-sharing and trust between the participants, as it promotes both vicarious learning (Gist, 1987) and sharing of practices. Indeed, Foley et al. (2007) identified peer

interaction as a critical determinant of learning in a network environment. The role of trust was of particular interest given Pechlaner et al.'s (2005) study which argued that there is a culture of little trust between tourism firms. Previous research had indicated that a climate of trust was a prerequisite to SME owner-managers sharing information and their experiences, therefore building a trust culture is vital in pursuit of individual learning (Stokes, 2001; Bottrup, 2005; Pechlaner et al., 2005).

Further research in this area is required to ascertain the criticality of this aspect of the TLN, in addition to increasing our understanding of how trust and information-sharing may be developed over time (Nonaka, 1994). Dyer and Nobeoka (2000) argued that some minimum level of trust was essential prior to confidential information being exchanged. This study failed to discover the role played by peer interaction in the learning network, as it was not predictive of either of the learning outcomes. This was a surprising result given the theoretical rationale outlined.

One explanation for this finding is that the current study failed to measure the learning network social learning outcomes (as suggested by Bergh, 2008) which might be the most likely result of peer interaction. This study confined itself to the measurement of self-reported knowledge, skills, managerial capabilities and personal self-development. Whereas, Bergh (2008, p. 63), following Lave and Wenger (1991), argued that the social learning outcomes, such as "heightened skills to solve problems within groups or networks, communication skills, ability to co-operate and develop business trust relations, development of relations where information may be shared" should be measured in this context.

An alternative explanation for this finding is that peer interaction may play an indirect role in the learning process; unfortunately it is beyond the remit of this study to pursue this possibility further at this point. A further explanation for this finding might be the recognition of learning from peers, as Lizzio and Wilson (2004, p. 481) found, similarly, that the participants in their study did not attribute peer interaction to learning, this they explained as due to "the comparative value...students place on interaction with their peers compared to more 'authoritative' sources of learning".

On the other hand, the mean score of 4.06 (SD = .97) for the delivery method item which explored learning from other participants' experiences in terms of the benefit to their personal learning, would seem to indicate that TLN participants appreciate this type of 'vicarious' learning (Gist, 1987).

The overall perception of the peer interaction levels across the TLNs was positive with a mean score of 3.86 (SD = .49); this implies that there was general agreement on the statements relating to trust and information sharing. However, peer interaction levels were significantly different between the two facilitation groups ($p = .004$), with higher levels of information sharing and trust recorded for the academically-backed participants; this finding was expected given that the different facilitation types have demonstrated variations in their delivery methods. An example of this variation is the emphasis placed on one-to-one mentoring by the consultants, as previously mentioned. It was perceived that the increased reliance and emphasis on the one-to-one mentoring would offer the participant the opportunity to save their queries or questions until they were in the one-to-one environment, rather than revealing their gaps in knowledge to other participants. The safety offered by the mentoring service, in addition to the perceived authority and expertise of the facilitator may have reduced the interactions between peers.

An alternative explanation for the differences between the groups in their levels of peer interaction may be related to the provision of networking lessons, as mentioned in the background interviews. At the beginning of the TLN's provision, one academically-backed facilitator prepared the participants to learn from each other by facilitating the learning of networking skills. By framing the TLN in such a manner, the participants may have had a greater appreciation of the value of the information at the disposal of their peers. In addition, this networking skills module provides the opportunity to break-down barriers between participants, and speed-up the socialisation process recommended in the literature for information-sharing to occur (Nonaka, 1994). Furthermore, the findings regarding the delivery methods show that the participants from the academically-backed group found the socially-oriented peer interaction dominated modules of the regional conference and residential event, of

more benefit to their personal learning than their consultancy-backed peers. A further area of interest is the role of the facilitator in promoting a learning climate, thus, the final theme presented reviews the facilitation climate and learner involvement.

5.2.8 Impact of the Facilitation Climate

The regression results indicate that the facilitation climate is the third most important variable in accounting for variations in Learning_Know ($\beta = .156$, accounting for 1.5% of the variation in Adjusted R^2). This variable captured two aspects of facilitation (learning climate and learner involvement), as previous research has shown a lack of consistency as to whether academically-backed facilitators are suitable for initiatives aimed at developing SME owner-managers⁵⁹. This study established that facilitation climate plays a role in predicting learning in a network context. This confirms previous findings that placed a value on a learning climate that encouraged questions, for example Billet (2002, p. 34), proposed that this environment assisted the learner to “appraise the scope and limits of their knowledge and evaluate the prospects of its transfer to novel tasks and new circumstances”. This sentiment also aligns itself with other findings from this study regarding both the importance of the content’s relevance to the SME owner-manager and the need for accurate self-appraisal in determining effort (Stokes, 2001; Vancouver et al., 2002). Given that the facilitation climate predicts learning, it must not be ignored when developing future initiatives, particularly, when the emphasis is placed on learning new knowledge, skills or stimulating self-development.

The mean score for this variable was 3.89 (SD = .46) indicating general agreement with the statements relating to the impressions of the TLN environment and learner involvement. However given that ALT highlighted that adult learners require a learning environment which promotes involvement in the decision-making process and creates an atmosphere conducive to the participants feeling safe to ask questions,

⁵⁹ Foley et al. (2006) argued that an association with a highly respected educational institute brought facilitator legitimacy, whereas Massey et al. (2003) argued that SME owner-managers found the academic environment intimidating, and that accreditation was not seen as desirable.

this would suggest the need for improvement. Following Merriam and Leahy (2005, p. 14-15) the current study also recommends:

Engaging participants in the planning of the program, even inquiring minimally as to their prior knowledge and experience with the proposed content and adjusting accordingly, should aid in predisposing participants to the learning.

Despite the different facilitation types, the learning climate created was not significantly different between the groups ($p = .100$). This is in contrast with previous studies, as others have found that SME owner-managers found the academic environment did not engender a climate where participants felt comfortable asking questions (O'Dwyer and Ryan, 2002). The atmosphere must be conducive to asking questions, as SME owner-managers often find it difficult to admit their ignorance (Stokes, 2001). Furthermore, in the context of SMEs, Wyer et al. (2000) argued that there can be suspicion of training input provided by academics, as the academics may not have sufficient understanding of the management of small firms to prescribe new approaches.

Conversely, Tell and Halila (2001) commended the role of the university in their study of learning networks, as it provided a source of inspiration and acted as a sounding-board for the participants. Consultancy-lead training has the reputation of providing a more practical application-based provision of the TLNs, especially with their emphasis on one-to-one mentoring (based on the background interviews conducted earlier). Devins and Gold (2000) revealed a mixed reception on the part of SME owner-managers towards consultancy mentoring services, due in part to the time requirements involved and also a belief that the specialised nature of their business was not amenable to outside assistance.

Knowles (1984) promoted learner involvement in the decisions regarding learning, as a key element of ALT, hence the interest in verifying if this aspect of the facilitation would impact in the network context. The assumption was that if the participants played an active role in the decisions they would be more engaged and thereby learn more. However, the findings suggest that there was no significant difference

between the two facilitation groups in their perceptions of their level of involvement. This implies that the participants experienced similar levels of influence on the agenda of their respective networks and had similar perceptions of the learning climate. The next section reviews the findings with regard to the learning outcomes with a view to 'best practice' development.

5.2.9 The Learning Outcomes

Up until now this chapter has presented the meaning of key findings with regard to the predictors of the dependent variables or learning outcomes. However, the findings also suggest that although the respondent sample recorded a positive mean score of 3.78 for Learning_MC and a positive mean score of 3.36 for Learning_Know, there is room for considerable improvement in these scores. This is further highlighted by examining the detail that 25% of the respondent sample recorded a score less than three on a five point scale for Learning_Know, which indicates a level of disagreement with statements regarding increases in one's knowledge, skill and personal self-development as a result of TLN participation. Whereas 15% of respondents recorded a score less than three on a five point scale for Learning_MC indicating a level of disagreement with statements regarding any changes implemented in the business and growth in self-awareness.

Owner-managers are unlikely to want training or development just for its own sake (Gibb, 1983), preferring treatments which focus on practical business-based needs and tend to recognise learning from experience as their biggest source of learning (Chaston et al., 1999; Anderson and Boocock, 2002). Furthermore, the informality of many of the aspects of the learning network may also lead to a lack of awareness on the part of the participant when particular knowledge or skills are transferred, due to their tacit nature (Anderson and Boocock, 2002). It may be that the Learning_MC reflects the practical objectives of managerial capability, particularly as it is more tangible than the Learning_Know variable, due to its emphasis on changes introduced. Unquestionably, these findings suggest the need for improvements in the

provision and implementation of the TLN, recommendations for these improvements are outlined in the next section.

5.3 Developing the TLN ‘Best Practice’ Model

This part of the chapter represents the contribution to practice resulting from this body of work, as it outlines the study’s recommendations guided by the empirical evidence as well as the literature. The implications of the findings from the previous chapter are developed with the arguments presented in this chapter, to form proposals for ‘best practice’ (see Figure 5.1). Given that the flexible learning approach content was the most important determinant of learning in the TLN, this dictates that many of the recommendations captured in Figure 5.1 are aimed at ensuring the TLN’s content is relevant to the learners. Hence, the importance of the content relevance is reiterated throughout the stages of the TLN diagnostic, module implementation and follow-up, as illustrated in Figure 5.1. Each of these stages involves a collaborative process between the facilitator and the participant, for example, during the diagnostic stage the facilitator visits the participant’s business so as to improve their understanding of the business practice and the challenges facing the participant.

Each of the variables which influence learning in the context of the TLN has a part to play in the ‘best practice’ model; their contribution is identified with a bullet-point in the model (Figure 5.1) and explained in more detail in the sections to follow.

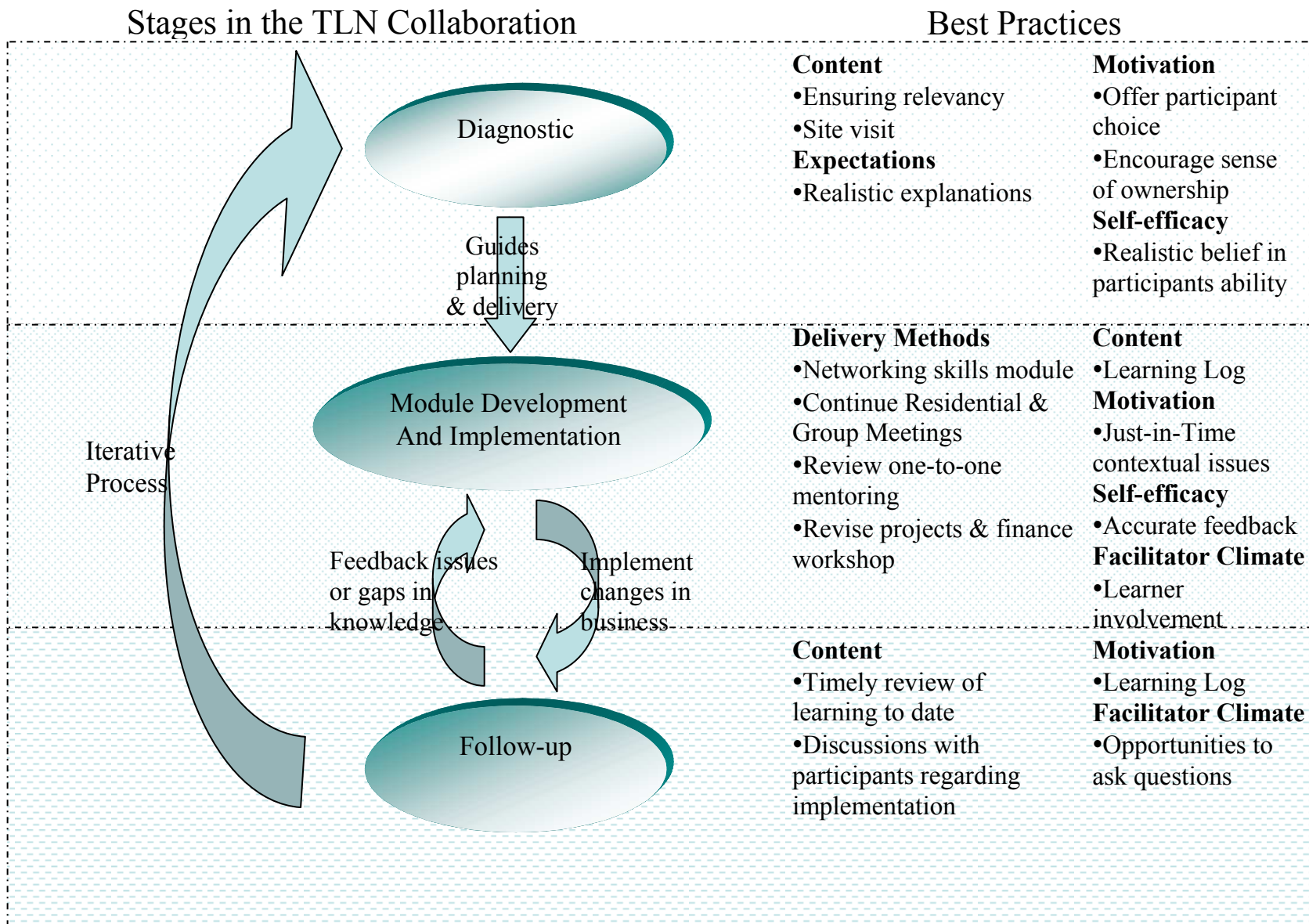


Figure 5.1: Model of 'Best Practice'

Source: Author

5.3.1 Flexible Learning Approach – Content

The previously mentioned dominant role played by content, emphasises the importance of the facilitator clarifying the relevance of the content to the participant at three major stages of the TLN: prior to the TLN formation, during the module development and implementation and an iterative follow-up after each module. Each of these stages will be addressed in turn, elaborating on the methods by which the relevance of the content to practitioners can be established in the TLN.

In the diagnostic stage, prior to the commencement of the TLN, the results of this study suggest that the facilitator can play a role in preparing the participant for the learning experience. This preparation should focus on what the participant requires most for their own self-development and the contextual issues facing them in their work environment, prior to the TLN. Previous studies have found that SME owners find the identification of shortfalls in their knowledge or skills difficult to isolate and prioritise, hence the significance of support before the TLN begins in assisting with the identification of development needs (Reinl and Kelliher, 2008; Chaston et al., 1999). This preparation prior to the TLN provides a structure and formality to the process of completion of the learning needs analysis for the SME owner-manager. The completion of the learning needs analysis requires the SME owner-manager to formalise their learning goals, identify contextual issues that are of importance to them and reflect on the learning outcomes of most benefit to them. Kearney (2000) promoted the involvement of the participant in the diagnostic process, so that the participants appreciate the link between their business needs and the initiative provided, thus, improving training fulfilment. The diagnostic process should also recognise the prior experience the participant brings to the TLN, otherwise the SME owner-manager is likely to question the relevance of the content (Moon et al., 2005). Furthermore, the facilitator can play a role in benchmarking similar businesses - to provide insights and uncover training gaps which will assist in developing a thorough needs assessment (Leskiw and Singh, 2007; Kearney, 2000). The resulting individualised needs-assessments can then be combined to form the source of the learning objectives for the TLN. By identifying these objectives in advance of the

learning process, the participant can build a sense of what the TLN will involve, hence developing a more realistic expectation of the learning the initiative will provide.

The second stage of building the perception of the content's relevance to the practitioner should be during the module delivery. At the beginning of any module the benefits of the learning in terms of their practical application should be crystallised. The facilitator should encourage the participants to relate the new learning to their prior experience and future practice through the use of a learning log. The learning log should be completed at the end of each session or module, this is different from a 'smile-sheet' or the internal evaluation forms as it focuses on building the participant's recognition of learning and its relevance. The learning log specifically deals with the participant's perspective of the learning⁶⁰, and would require a response to the following:

With regard to your participation in this module:

- 1) How does it fit in with your prior experience and knowledge?⁶¹
- 2) What new insights did you gain?⁶²
- 3) What changes will you introduce in your business or daily practice as a result of this learning?
- 4) What new gaps in your learning have you identified as a result of this module⁶³?

These questions should assist in contextualising the learning within the practices of the participant, which is in keeping with the social/situational school of thought.

⁶⁰ The learning log from the facilitator's perspective would require more questions to assess the depth of the participant understanding and learning, for example, examining what theory the participant found applicable to practice.

⁶¹ Following Kolb (1976), by encouraging the participant to reflect on their prior knowledge they can identify any changes brought about by the module, and this question also reinforces the link with real-world practice.

⁶² This question encourages the participant to reflect on their prior learning but also encourages a link between prior learning and their new understanding or knowledge. This creates the mental links promoted by the Cognitive school of thought as essential to learning.

⁶³ Any new learning gaps acknowledged should then be fed into the learning needs analysis document – providing the facilitator with up-to-date information to assist in the planning of future events.

The third stage of reinforcing the relevance of the content is the introduction of a follow-up session at the beginning of the next module. This follow-up should examine the learning logs and encourage a discussion between the participants of the practical implications of making the changes. Ideally, this should remind the participants of the experience of introducing changes as a result of their learning, and promote sharing of solutions found to any issues in implementation. The next section discusses the implications for the TLN of the new insight into the importance of expectations in predicting learning in a network context.

5.3.2 Expectations of Learning

As mentioned earlier, Tannenbaum et al. (1991), following Hicks and Klimoski (1987), promoted three methods of improving the expectations aspect: (1) providing realistic communication of what the initiative entails, (2) designing the initiative to reflect expectations, and (3) selecting and recruiting the participants whose expectations match what the initiative delivers. This research confirms the significance of these actions, given the importance of expectations in predicting learning, thereby informing future practice.

In particular, the aforementioned preparation prior to commencement of the TLN, offers the ideal opportunity for the participant to spell out their expectations and for the facilitator to establish if the TLN will match these expectations. A change of mindset may be necessary for the facilitator at this diagnostic stage⁶⁴. In previous times they may have attempted to sell the TLN to the participant. In future, the findings suggest that providing a more realistic explanation of the experience the TLN can provide will be of more benefit to the facilitator in the long-run in building long-term facilitator legitimacy (Human and Provan, 2000; Stokes, 2001). The benefit of not over-promising or under-delivering will reap benefits, particularly as SME owner-managers often rely on word-of-mouth referrals in choosing training and development opportunities (Leitch and Harrison, 1999). The next section revisits the

⁶⁴ This may be difficult for both types of facilitators as it requires ‘unlearning’ (Hedberg, 1981) the existing approach.

role of motivation to learn, and suggests the implications this has for the TLN provision.

5.3.3 Motivation to Learn

Motivation was found to predict both the learning outcomes in this study⁶⁵. What this means for future TLN initiatives is that an emphasis must be placed on encouraging and boosting participants' motivation to learn, as this will have a positive impact on the level of learning. The manner in which the TLN facilitators may encourage motivation to learn has two main elements. The first practice, as suggested by Baldwin et al. (1991), is to offer the participants choice in the content; this gives the learner a sense of ownership which increases their motivation to learn. This is important in the context of adult learners, and especially so in the case of owner-managers who are accustomed to a certain level of self-determination in their work environment (Boswell, 1973). This will be of most relevance at the diagnostic stage prior to the initiative, in preparing the learning needs analysis, but flexibility during the provision of the modules will also have a positive benefit. For instance, contextual issues may arise which require a change to the planned content or agenda. Lawless et al. (2000) similarly found a preference in SMEs for Just-In-Time training, whereby; the content provided would be flexible and react to the latest business need or crisis.

The second practice is to encourage in the learner a sense of ownership, self-direction (Brookfield, 1986) and active participation (Klein et al., 2006). Contrary to the passive learning promoted by traditional pedagogy, more active, hands-on learning should be promoted, in keeping with the work environment of the SME owner-manager (Kelliher and Henderson, 2006; Reinl and Kelliher, 2008; Hwang et al., 2008). This study is in accord with previous work by Foley et al. (2006), who argued that the effectiveness of a network was dependent on the enthusiasm of the

⁶⁵ The learning outcomes were identified as Learning_Know and Learning_MC.

participants, hence they advocated action learning⁶⁶ (Revans, 1982) as the ideal learning model for TLNs. Similarly, others have found that the use of practical learning tasks supports deeper processing of information as they involve more peer interaction than theoretical learning tasks (Ronteltrap and Eureleings, 2002). Furthermore, engagement predicts learning when the learner has a sense of control and ownership of the process (Fisher and Ford, 1998; Skinner and Belmont, 1993; Brown, 2005). The final aspect of the individual characteristics is developed in the next section, with regard to adaptations required.

5.3.4 Self-efficacy

This study has provided empirical evidence of a negative relationship between self-efficacy and the learning of new knowledge, skills and increased self-awareness (Learning_Know). Despite the negative relationship with learning, this does not imply that efforts should be made to decrease the participants' self-efficacy; rather, steps should be taken to discover any overinflated perceptions of ability, through accurate diagnosis of learning requirements and respective strengths. This confirms the criticality of the diagnostic stage previously mentioned, and points to the need for further research into the role of self-efficacy longitudinally, such as over the time-span of the TLN.

Furthermore, the observation of peers can also contribute to perceptions of one's own abilities, as interaction with peers exposes gaps in the participant's skill-set or development (Bandura, 1997). Given the dynamic nature of self-efficacy and the comparisons with peers, these findings suggest the benefit of timely reviews of learning needs as the TLN progresses, for example, through the use of the learning log, rather than relying entirely on the findings from before the initiative (Bandura, 1997). Indeed, the facilitator should also play a part in identifying the gaps in knowledge or skills of the participant, as their position is one of an unbiased observer, as discussed further in the next section.

⁶⁶ Action Learning promotes the use of real world situations or problems; it encourages the use of groups to challenge and question each others' preconceptions, and the opening up of dialogue which is driven by the search for solutions (Revans, 1982).

5.3.5 Facilitation Climate

The facilitation climate was found to account for variations in the levels of learning new skills, knowledge and self-awareness (Learning_Know). The facilitation climate incorporates two distinct aspects, namely, the learning climate engendered by the facilitator and the level of learner involvement in the decision-making in the network. The evidence here suggests that there is considerable room for improvement in terms of the mean scores recorded for this component of the TLN. As mentioned previously, SME owner-managers are accustomed to a certain locus of control in their daily lives. This must be respected in the learning environment, encouraging ownership of the process. The findings from this study suggest that the learning process should include building long-term relationships between the participants and their facilitator, and engendering a collaborative approach to the decision-making within the network. The relationship between the participant and the facilitator formally begins with the diagnostic stage and ideally should continue after the TLN initiative has finished, past participants being encouraged to be involved in inducting the next year's TLN participants.

Having invested time and effort into participating in the network for a year, some continuing support on the part of the facilitator should be encouraged, if only to encourage the network to continue informally. Further research in this area is recommended, in order to establish how the network can continue past the first year of operation with a minimum level of external support required. One alternative which is under review at present is the opportunity for the past participants to continue their education further through a BSc programme facilitated by the School of Business, Waterford Institute of Technology, designed specifically to address their needs following TLN participation.

The second aspect of the facilitation climate is the learning environment created. The facilitator as an unbiased observer plays a critical role in engendering an atmosphere which promotes the asking of questions and discussion between the participants. The facilitator ideally should ensure that sufficient time is set aside

during each module for questions, and actively encourage the sharing of experiences amongst the group. The next section addresses the flexible learning approach aspect of the delivery methods in light of their implications for future practice.

5.3.6 Flexible Learning Approach – Delivery Methods

As mentioned previously, the perception of the benefit to personal learning from the delivery methods predicted the learning of implementing changes in the workplace and growth in self-awareness (captured by Learning_MC). This finding implies that improving these perceptions will improve the level of learning, specifically benefiting the participant in terms of learning about the introduction of change. The evidence points to the residential learning event and the group meetings facilitated by a professional facilitator as the two delivery methods associated most highly with personal learning by the participants. This study provides insights into the participants' perceptions of the delivery methods benefit, which will inform future practice. The study highlights areas where more links to the participants' learning needs are required in order to stress the relevance and specifically the intrinsic benefit to the learner of participating actively in the module.

The research identified some important findings relating to the delivery methods employed. For instance, the academically-backed facilitators achieved higher levels for all the delivery methods with the exception of one-to-one mentoring with respect to the participants' perceptions of benefit to their respective personal learning. This indicates that the consultancy-lead facilitators should attempt to more closely mirror the academically-backed implementation of the TLN to improve the general perception of their provision. Similarly, the academically-backed facilitators should revise their implementation of the one-to-one mentoring component of the TLN. The empirical evidence points to the fact that by improving the perception of the personal benefit to learning overall, there will be an increase in the levels of learning⁶⁷. Having presented the study's contribution to practice in the form of a TLN 'best practice' model, in the next section a brief summary of the chapter is provided.

⁶⁷ Learning_MC is predicted by perceptions of the delivery method's benefit to personal learning.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter began with a review of the impact of each of the variables on the learning outcomes measured. Broadly, the findings of the present study indicated that individual characteristics play a role in determining learning, as increasing levels of motivation and expectations accounted for increased levels of learning. This chapter sought to explain the unexpected finding that the level of self-efficacy was negatively related to learning. The findings also indicate that the formal learning of skills and knowledge (Learning_Know) is predicted by a learning climate of involvement in the decision-making and feeling free to ask questions. The learning of how to introduce changes (Learning_MC) into the SME workplace is influenced by the appreciation of the delivery methods employed. This suggests that the perception of the benefit of certain modules accounts for variation in the levels of learning new dynamic capabilities.

Therefore, every effort must be made to ensure that the initiative's content is relevant and related to the learning needs identified by the participants. The flexible learning approach delivery methods also require review to optimise the learning outcomes. The implications of the current study's findings informed the recommendations formulated in a TLN 'best practice' model, which represents the study's contribution to practice. The next chapter outlines the study's contribution to theory and practice as well as summarising the response to the research objectives and presenting limitations to the study and future research directions.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The final chapter begins with a review of the research aims. A key aspect of these aims is the provision of the ‘best practice’ model as presented in the previous chapter. The review of the response to the research aims is followed by consideration of the generalisation of these findings to a wider context. The study’s contribution to both the literature and practice are then discussed. The limitations of the study are addressed before recommendations for future research are outlined. Finally, the chapter concludes by providing an overview of the results and the implications of the research study.

6.2 Research Aims

This section of the chapter outlines each of the research aims, before presenting the study’s response to each. As previously indicated this study, following feedback from Fáilte Ireland and a review of the literature, established the following objectives:

- To establish the major determinants of learning in a learning network context.
- To establish if Fáilte Ireland’s strategic learning aims are being met through the TLN initiative.
- If the learning aims are not being met, to propose adaptations to ensure they are achieved.
- To develop a TLN ‘best practice’ model.

In addition to assessing the success of the TLNs overall, the research also pursued a deeper understanding of the differences, if any, between the TLNs. In distinguishing differences in the provision, insight was sought into the roles played by each component of the framework. The response to each of these objectives will be presented in this section beginning with the identification of the major determinants of learning in a network context.

6.2.1 To Establish the Major Determinants of Learning in a Learning Network Context.

This study was successful in establishing the major determinants of learning in a network context. Following the literature review and background interviews with key figures in the establishment and operation of the TLNs, four learning outcomes were identified, namely, knowledge, skills, personal self-development and managerial capabilities. However, the results of the data analysis indicated that these learning outcomes loaded on two dimensions: Learning_Know and Learning_MC. Further analysis of these learning outcomes established that 62.4% of the variance in Learning_Know was accounted for by five variables. Specifically, the determinants of Learning_Know are the flexible learning approach content, expectations of learning, facilitator climate, motivation to learn and self-efficacy.

It was possible to establish that 67.8% of the variation of the second learning outcome Learning_MC was accounted for by four variables. The major determinants of Learning_MC are: flexible learning approach content, motivation to learn, the flexible learning approach delivery methods and expectations of learning. One of the most interesting findings was the importance of the participant's perception of content, as it explained the most variation in both of the learning outcomes. This study provides empirical evidence that the content must be closely related to the participant's job needs and be of great practical value to them to engender learning in the learning network context. The individual characteristics of the participant all play a role in determining the levels of learning outcomes (self-efficacy predicts only Learning_Know, with a negative relationship as previously discussed in Section

5.2.2). Indeed, the facilitator climate was found to explain variations in the levels of skills, knowledge and personal self-development (Learning_Know). The only variable not found to account for either of the learning outcomes was peer interaction (as discussed in Section 5.2.7), which requires further research in the learning network context. In the next section the evidence to support the second research objective is examined.

6.2.2 To Establish if Fáilte Ireland's Strategic Learning Aims are being met Through the TLN Initiative.

One of the key objectives of this research was to evaluate the TLN initiative, in order to establish whether or not it was meeting Fáilte Ireland's strategic learning aim of developing the managerial capacity of tourism SMEs. The participants' self-reported learning outcomes were at the high end of the scales (reflecting that a high level of learning did occur), which is proof that the initiative achieved its stated objective. This is based on the findings from the third year of operation of the TLNs and reflects very well on the facilitation and Fáilte Ireland, as there are considerable difficulties in providing education and training that meets the specific needs of SME owner-managers (Dawe and Nguyen, 2007). Moreover, no significant differences were identified between the facilitation types in terms of their respective learning outcomes.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, concern was raised that 25% of participants reported no overall increase in their levels of Learning_Know. However, the evidence suggests that the SME owner-managers are learning, but that the dimension of learning most reported by the participants was not related to new knowledge or skills, but rather in the implementation of changes in their businesses, that is Learning_MC (85% of participants reported positive increases in this outcome). This finding is indicative of the value placed by SME owner-managers in the practical aspects of learning, in keeping with previous research which suggested that they do not value learning for the sake of learning (Gibb, 1983). The next section addresses the third research aim regarding any adaptations required.

6.2.3 If the Learning Aims are not being met, To Propose Adaptations to Ensure they are Achieved.

The evidence from this current study suggests that the learning aims are being met, but the mean scores indicate that there is certainly room for improvement. While there were no significant differences between the facilitation types in terms of their learning outcomes, other aspects of the TLN provision were perceived differently. Specifically, the academically-backed participants reported higher levels of motivation, peer interaction and benefit from the flexible learning approach delivery methods. Indeed, when the delivery methods were analysed further, the academically-backed providers' modules were perceived more highly than their consultancy counterparts for all but the one-to-one mentoring aspect. As these scores were based on perceptions of benefit to personal learning, this indicates that the academically-lead facilitators need to revise their provision of the one-to-one mentoring module. Similarly, the consultancy-backed facilitators need to mirror their modules more closely to those provided by the academically-backed facilitators, in particular the e-learning module, regional conference, residential learning event, IT workshop and the guest speaker input (all of these aspects were significantly higher for the other facilitation type).

Having identified the major differences between the facilitation providers, this section identifies the variables associated most closely with increased levels of learning which will form the basis of the 'best practices'. In order to ensure the learning aims currently being achieved are improved upon, the empirical evidence demonstrated that the flexible learning approach content plays a critical role. Further, the evidence suggests that the facilitator climate and individual characteristics of the learner also have an influence in accounting for learning. The implications of these findings are outlined in the next section on the recommendations for a TLN 'best practice' model.

6.2.4 To Develop a TLN ‘Best Practice’ Model.

In the previous chapter, the key findings of the research were integrated in the development of a TLN ‘best practice’ model (see Figure 5.1). For reasons of parsimony the model is not replicated here, however key features of ‘best practice’ are the importance of emphasising the initiative content relevance, in addition to the critical roles played by the individual characteristics and the facilitator climate. Specifically, this model outlined the key practices aimed at ensuring the content was scrutinised for relevance at each stage of the diagnostic, module development and implementation and the follow-up stages of the participant-facilitator collaboration process. Further, the implications of the identification of the major determinants of learning were developed into recommendations for practice, for example, the offering of choice to the participant to increase motivation to learn levels. The ‘best practice’ model represents a major contribution to academics and practitioners alike, as it highlights areas for both development and assessment in a learning network to boost the levels of learning. Having reviewed the responses to the research aims, the next section presents an argument for the generalisability of the study.

6.3 Generalisability of the Results

The nature of this study provided for an examination of the determinants of learning in the context of a learning network. This involved a census of the entire TLN 2008 participant population, with a resulting response rate of 55.4%. Testing for non-response bias established that the findings from the respondents represented the population they originated from and were therefore generalisable. Hence the results are representative of the entire TLN population. However, it is not feasible to generalise these findings to a broader audience than the 2008 TLN cohort, as this is beyond the remit of the current study.

The study was based on clear theoretical foundations with great attention paid to construct validity and reliability, and expanded on previous work in the learning network field. Additionally, the large sample size, statistical assumptions

compliance and statistical analysis employed, lessen the potential for errors. The statistical analysis gives very clear results, upon which conclusions and inferences are drawn, minimising the threat to statistical conclusion validity⁶⁸. It is upon this basis that the ‘best practices’ are produced with a view to contributing to practice and the next section details the theoretical contribution of the study.

6.4 Contribution to Theory

A review of the extant literature indicated that a major gap existed in terms of the literature regarding the theory and evaluation of a learning network. Previous studies on learning networks were predominantly qualitative in nature and this study provides empirical evidence to support and extend prior research. Indeed, this study has extended the understanding underlying the assessment of a multi-modular learning initiative, by employing a comparative analysis of the key variables involved in the network. In particular, empirical research has not previously involved comparing the provision of such an initiative by two types of facilitator.

In determining a means of measuring the individual level learning this study also provides insights into the process and content of learning network evaluation. Furthermore, in providing and testing a framework for this evaluation the results provide new theoretical insights. Specifically, this study’s variables accounted for 68% and 62% of the variation in the respective learning outcomes measured. Moreover, this study has confirmed the importance of individual characteristics, the flexible learning approach and the facilitation climate as antecedents to learning in a network context.

The findings here also add to theory on individual characteristics, such as self-efficacy’s negative relationship with Learning_Know, in addition to furthering understanding of the flexible learning approach and the key practices of the

⁶⁸ Creswell (2003, p.171) describes the threat to statistical conclusion validity as “when experimenters draw inaccurate inferences from the data because of inadequate statistical power or the violation of statistical assumptions”.

facilitator. This study has generated conclusions relevant to the provision of a learning network and signals the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role played by peer interaction in the learning process (as discussed previously in Section 5.2.7). Furthermore, the theoretical contribution of this study extends previous work on SME owner-manager learning, specifically in the tourism sector and Irish context. This study explicitly provides evidence that highlights the integral role played by the relevance of content to learning for this cohort. The next section outlines the major contribution to practice provided by this study.

6.5 Contribution to Practice

In examining the learning network outcomes, this study provides empirical evidence to support Fáilte Ireland's decision to employ learning networks as a means of facilitating SME owner-manager learning. As mentioned previously, providing training and development for this cohort is a challenge, however, Fáilte Ireland's learning aims are being met by this initiative. Furthermore, this study provides Fáilte Ireland with valuable insights into the nationwide strengths and weaknesses of the two facilitation-types operating on their behalf in this arena. Specifically, this study highlights that while there was no significant difference between the facilitation types in terms of the learning outcomes, the academically-backed participants' recorded higher results in terms of their motivation to learn and peer interaction levels. Moreover, the academically-lead group perceived the delivery methods employed of greater benefit to their learning than their consultancy-lead counterparts. This study therefore provides insights for Fáilte Ireland regarding the content and process of learning network evaluation, and also contributes to practice at the facilitator level.

This research represents a major contribution to practice in the identification of the major determinants of learning in a network context, and also in its recommendations formulated in the 'best practice' model. The 'best practice' model prioritises those elements of the provision which will be of most benefit to SME owner-manager

learning, and highlights the importance of the relevance of the content in network facilitation. Furthermore, the recommendations emphasise the role played by the facilitator in creating a suitable environment for SME owner-manager learning, for example, through stimulating the participants' motivation levels and ensuring they have realistic expectations of learning and self-efficacy in relation to the TLN. Moreover, this study provides further insights into current practice in the provision of the TLN modules, highlighting areas requiring further development to enhance learning, for example the one-to-one mentoring component for the academically-backed facilitators. Ultimately, this nationwide study has provided an increased understanding of learning networks, in terms of their measurement and provision, fostering recommendations to guide future initiatives. The next section details the limitations encountered in the implementation of this evaluation.

6.6 Limitations of the Study

This section of the thesis deals with the limitations of the study, specifically those limitations which may be of importance in repeating a similar study or in generalising the outcomes from this one. The first of these limitations is the result of regressions of the learning outcomes, which indicated that not all the variance in the outcomes was accounted for by the variables in the conceptual framework. Specifically, as highlighted previously, the adjusted R² was .624 in the case of Learning_Know and .678 for Learning_MC, indicating that there are variables missing from the model which predict each of these outcomes. The conceptual framework employed to evaluate the TLNs focussed on the participants and the network provision, whereas there may be tourism industry structural factors (for example, the size of business or level of seasonality) or other factors which impact on learning. The implication is that while this study has accounted for a substantial amount of the variance, further research is suggested to ascertain what other factors determine the levels of learning in the tourism learning network context.

The second of these limitations is the issue of sample-size raised in Chapter Three. As indicated, although the response levels were relatively high, the actual size of the TLN groups mitigated against the use of comparative techniques across the six TLN regions. This restricted the comparisons to two larger groupings, those of the facilitating-body-type, resulting in less depth to the study than had been originally intended. Consequently, while the hypotheses provided insights into the provision of the TLN by the two groupings, the learning outcomes were not significantly different between the groups, which made the drawing of inferences from the data more challenging, particularly as there was no control group.

Not alone was there no control group, but due to time restrictions the current research was a cross-sectional study. Cross-sectional studies are useful for uncovering the relationships between different variables, but they are less well suited to studying changes in learning. Most similar studies in the literature employ a longitudinal design, using pre- and post tests to identify changes in knowledge and skills. However, as indicated previously, the time-span of the research project prevented the implementation of a pre-TLN test. Consequently, the study relies on the perceptions of the participants three months after the official conclusion of the TLN for 2008. This time lag was planned in order to allow the implementation of any changes in the business, as a result of participation. Indeed, the time-lag also allowed the participants to gain perspective on their experience, with regard to recognising their realised learning outcomes.

Podsakoff and Organ (1986) had previously highlighted the final limitation identified with regard to the current study, specifically the reliance on one source for the measurement of both the learning outcomes and learning process. Interviewing the facilitators of the TLN would have provided a more holistic perspective of the initiative, but this was not within the remit of the current research which focalised individual level learning. Furthermore, given the large sample size that underlies the research, the theoretical underpinning of the framework and following similar research in a network context by Bergh (2008), the potential bias is considered to be minimal. Having presented the limitations of the study, the section to follow outlines areas for future research.

6.7 Directions for Future Research

This study has extended the literature regarding learning networks and provided empirical evidence to support previous qualitative studies. However, some aspects of the findings have raised questions which require investigation, for example, the question of the contribution to the learning network played by peer interaction. As indicated in the previous chapter, the role played by peer interaction in the network requires further study. Specifically, this study has established that different levels of peer interaction were experienced between the facilitation types, but the groups reported similar levels of learning, and peer interaction was not identified as a determinant of either of the learning outcomes. As previously mentioned, it may be that peer interaction accounts for variations in social learning outcomes. Indeed, the social / situational school of thought argues that peer interaction contributes to learning; empirical evidence of this in a network context is still required. In addition, future research might make use of a longitudinal study to establish if there are significant changes in the level of peer interaction as the initiative progresses.

Further research is also required into the finding that self-efficacy had a negative relationship with one of the learning outcomes. Additional research would be desirable to replicate the findings here as this is in contrast with much of the literature, especially social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). This future research would be aimed at establishing if employing a specific learning self-efficacy scale rather than a general self-efficacy scale would result in similar findings.

The nature of the study as a piece of funded research with pre-determined requirements from the funding body, in particular the need for empirical data, also has implications for future research. This requirement influenced the decision-making process in the research design, leading to the adoption of a positivistic epistemology. The positivist epistemology offers much in terms of the rigour and reliability of the scientific method, however its drawbacks include the assumption that everything is ultimately measurable. Therefore there are further opportunities

through a qualitative study to research the human processes, relations and outcomes which could not be empirically captured in this study.

Two other important routes for further research are suggested by this study, for example, as mentioned in the previous section, not all of the variance in the learning outcomes has been accounted for by the variables measured in this study. It may be that tourism industry structural factors have implications for learning in this context, but this requires further study. An alternative suggestion proposed is that metacognition could contribute most to furthering our understanding of SME owner-manager learning. Klein et al. (2006, p. 673) referred to metacognition as “the extent to which learners thought about, monitored, and controlled their learning activities” and is dependent on experiencing a sense of learning. Other authors have highlighted that often the informal nature of learning in an SME context may lead to the owner-manager being unaware of learning (Birdthistle, 2006). The aim of the current empirical research was to investigate the factors that influenced learning in the context of a learning network, as metacognition determines the level of effort employed in learning this may account for some variation in the learning outcomes.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the finding that the delivery methods were not predictive of Learning_Know requires further examination. It may be that the relationship between delivery methods and Learning_Know is mediated by one of the other variables in the model (or one not identified), and this is a future research direction. In the following section the major findings and implications for theory and practice will be summarised.

6.8 Conclusion

This study originated from the need to assess whether Fáilte Ireland’s TLN initiative was meeting its strategic learning aims, and thus meeting the learning needs of the SME owner-manager. In response to the research objectives, this study has established that the initiative has achieved the learning targets. However, while the

participants have reported learning, there is considerable room for improvement in the levels of learning. The current research has indicated specific recommendations in the form of a ‘best practice’ model to support future TLNs and similar developmental initiatives.

This evaluation has improved practical understanding and adds to the growing body of literature regarding SME owner-manager learning, specifically in a learning network context. The most fundamental outcome of this research is the importance of the relevance of content in this context. The present research established that the flexible learning approach content accounted for the most variation in the levels of learning outcomes. Furthermore, the research identified some important findings relating to individual characteristics, the flexible learning approach and the role played by the facilitator as determinants of learning.

This evaluation through the modelling of TLN ‘best practice’ responds to a recognised gap in the literature and an industry need, in addition to providing a framework for other assessments in a network context and a basis for future research.

6.9 A Critical Reflection

Due to the reflective nature of this section, I am going to drop the usual third person language and conclude this thesis in the first person pronoun. This section proposes to capture in a few short paragraphs the research journey I have undertaken since returning to the academic world after a seventeen year stint in practice, specifically in the tourism industry. I bring this gap or break to the reader’s attention as it was a key influence in many of the decisions I have taken throughout the journey, including the choice of a research topic which aimed to be of high value to tourist industry stakeholders in addition to the wider research community.

As learning networks represent a real learning innovation not alone within Irish tourism but also the wider community, research on the evaluation of learning networks is in its infancy. Furthermore, in relation to the literature review process, I

found the breadth of the search a challenge, particularly as the nature of the research topic spanned a range of bodies of literature including educational psychology and adult learning, in addition to the network field. Many of these aspects were completely new to me, requiring a steep learning curve, in order to ascertain which elements were essential for the development of my conceptual framework. It was necessary for me to limit the variables measured to those that were within the influence of the TLN facilitation, and therefore of practical importance to the initiative. Indeed, the framework evolved through a process of elimination, for example, while it would have been of interest to assess the participant's learning style, there was no consensus in the literature as to which system of measurement was most appropriate. Furthermore, the respected measures required the use of extensive items and the questionnaire was measuring a further thirteen variables so this was not a viable option for me.

This piece of research was funded, and consequently the stakeholders had a say in determining the research aims and this led to the selection of a nomothetic methodology, as Fáilte Ireland required "hard" quantitative data on their initiative for future planning. Hence, I undertook a deductive approach in refining the research questions, with the focus on individual learning offering the most effective means of ascertaining what aspects of the learning network were the most conducive to learning in this context. If the resources had allowed, I would have enjoyed following up my quantitative study with qualitative inquiries, both in order to triangulate my data and to add "depth, detail and nuance to quantitative findings" (Patton, 2002, p. 220).

My prior experience in the tourism industry and specifically in situations of learning as an SME owner-manager provided me with insights which helped me to explain and interpret some of the more unexpected results. Specifically it enabled me to explain self-efficacy's negative relationship with the learning outcome Learning_Know, having observed my peers' over-confidence in their own learning abilities blinding them to potential new learning. I feel I understand the participants' sense of urgency, which engenders a demand for relevance in the content and

learning that is immediately applicable in their daily lives. My experience also meant I had a greater appreciation of what was most relevant to the participants, for example the value placed on introducing changes and innovation in their business, not alone gaining new knowledge or skills.

Originally I had intended comparing TLNs on a regional basis, but in hindsight the restriction to comparing groups by facilitator type actually was the optimum result since the facilitator typology is more meaningful than a geographic breakdown, and the results do indicate that the facilitator type is a key influence. I admit I was surprised initially by how much of a role the content relevance played in predicting learning, but upon reflection this made intuitive sense, hence the main objective in determining future practices were aimed at identifying learning gaps and providing the TLN facilitator with more opportunities to fill this gap and meet expectations. If anything, I come away from this research with more respect for Fáilte Ireland's initiative and their facilitators. Their task is by no means a simple one. While other researchers have focussed on the foundation and establishment of the network as well as the relationships in this context, what has made this study most worthwhile for me is that it has focussed on measuring multiple aspects of the initiative to provide stakeholders with substantive insights into future practices in the TLN collaboration. Furthermore, this study has brought considerable clarity to the interplay of the key variables in learning networks and therefore facilitates further scholarly work in this context.

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Appendix A: The Questionnaire

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12th March 2009

**Survey:
Evaluation of Fáilte Ireland's
Tourism Learning Networks (TLN)
Initiative – Modelling Best Practice**

Please read all questions carefully. This survey has been designed to facilitate easy answering. Answers require just a tick () to indicate your response. All survey responses are **confidential**. Please return in the pre-paid, self-addressed envelope.

Ms. Jennie Hussey, Bsc. H.Dip. (Hotel and Catering Management)
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Section A. The following statements examine how participants in your network interacted. Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Participants in the Tourism Learning Network were truthful in dealing with one another.					
2. Network Participants were receptive to my suggestions about how things could be done.					
3. We kept each other informed about events that affected the other party.					
4. I was able to influence the agenda in this network.					
5. Participants in the Tourism Learning Network have always kept the promises they made to one another.					
6. We often exchanged information with each other beyond what was required in the Tourism Learning Network.					
7. Participants in the Tourism Learning Network behaved in a consistent manner towards each other.					
8. I felt I was able to freely contribute and ask questions during this initiative.					
9. Other participants have shared confidential information to help me.					
10. We often exchanged information informally.					
11. I felt relaxed during the Tourism Learning Network events.					
12. Participants in the Tourism Learning Network did not knowingly do anything to disrupt the learning.					
13. I played a large part in making decisions in this network.					

14. We were expected to provide each other with information that may be of help.					
15. Other participants have shared information about their own businesses with me.					
16. The Tourism Learning Network environment was informal.					
17. Participants in the Tourism Learning Network did not take advantage of others even when the opportunity arose.					
18. The mood during the Tourism Learning Network events was supportive.					

<p>Section B. The following questions relate to your general attitude and feelings towards a learning experience, and <u>specifically the Tourism Learning Network experience</u>. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements</p>					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Since my participation in the Tourism Learning Network, new developments at work have caused me to revisit and update my work related knowledge.					
2. When I make plans, I am certain I can make them work.					
3. Generally, I am enthusiastic about learning new things.					
4. One of my problems is that I cannot get down to work when I should.					
5. I avoid trying to learn new things when they look too difficult for me.					
6. Generally, I am keen to take up any learning opportunity offered to me.					

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
7. If I can't do a job the first time, I keep trying until I can.					
8. In the Tourism Learning Network I learned just what I was looking for.					
9. When I set important goals for myself, I achieve them.					
10. Tourism Learning Network participation has helped my personal development, self-esteem, self-confidence, etc.					
11. I give up on things before I have completed them.					
12. I avoid facing difficulties.					
13. When trying to learn something new, I soon give up if I am not initially successful.					
14. If something looks too complicated, I will not even bother to try it.					
15. Generally, I prefer to keep away from training initiatives.					
16. When I have something unpleasant to do, I stick to it until I finish it.					
17. When I decide to do something, I go right to work on it.					
18. I have been revising and adapting my knowledge to keep up with changes this past year.					
19. When unexpected problems occur, I handle them very well.					
20. I was disappointed because I had to pursue other alternatives outside the Tourism Learning Network to find the knowledge I was looking for.					
21. I am capable of dealing with most problems that come up in my life					
22. Participation in the Tourism Learning Network helped me develop and reach my full potential as a person.					
23. I am a self-reliant person.					
24. I am keen to learn more about the subjects covered in the Tourism Learning Network.					
25. Failure just makes me try harder					

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
26. In deciding whether to participate in particular training and development activities the award of formal certification is important to me.					
27. I am secure about my ability to do things.					
28. I do not give up easily.					

Section C. The next set of questions relate to the relevance and impact of the learning provided by the Tourism Learning Network initiative, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I expect that this initiative will help me a lot in the future.					
2. I think learning and development activities provided by the Tourism Learning Network have been very beneficial to me.					
3. My writing skills have improved as a result of this initiative.					
4. My participation in the Tourism Learning Network has made a difference in how interesting my work is					
5. This initiative was very relevant to my job.					
6. My participation in the Tourism Learning Network has lead me to be more well-rounded and a better person overall, at work and outside of work.					
7. My analytical skills have improved as a result of this initiative.					
8. I now have a much better understanding of the right way to do my work than I did a year ago.					
9. As a result of my participation in the Tourism Learning Network, I have received more interesting work assignments and find my work more stimulating.					

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
10. My computer skills have improved as a result of this initiative.					
11. This initiative was closely related to my job needs.					
12. My interpersonal skills have improved as a result of this initiative.					
13. Prior to enrolling in the Tourism Learning Network I had expectations of learning, which have since been met.					
14. Compared to a year ago, I now know much more about proven business methods and operating procedures.					
15. This initiative was of great practical value to me for my job.					
16. As a result of my participation I am more confident in determining what is relevant in problem solving.					
17. This initiative was really a waste of time.					
18. Participating in the Tourism Learning Network has lead to my work becoming more interesting.					
19. Career-related training and development activities such as the Tourism Learning Network seem very worthwhile to me.					
20. The experience of participating in the Tourism Learning Network was much as I expected prior to enrollment.					

Section D. To what extent was the following method employed by the Tourism Learning Network of benefit to your personal learning (if an item was not part of your experience, please tick the Not Applicable box):

	Not Applicable	No Extent	To a Little Extent	Neutral	Some Extent	Great Extent
1. E-learning modules						
2. Group meetings facilitated by professional facilitators.						

	Not Applicable	No Extent	To a Little Extent	Neutral	Some Extent	Great Extent
3. Mentoring support from industry experts.						
4. One-to-one mentoring from the facilitator						
5. Regional conference.						
6. Residential learning events.						
7. Workshop on Finance.						
8. Workshop on IT.						
9. Workshop on Marketing.						
10. Workshop on PR.						
11. Learning from other participants' experiences						
12. Learning from site-visits to other properties						
13. Learning from projects undertaken						
14. Guest Speakers input						
15. Making new contacts						

Section E. The following statements relate to the impact, if any, the Tourism Learning Network has had on your workplace. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following questions:

	No Extent	To a Little Extent	Neutral	Some Extent	Great Extent
1. To what extent has participating in the Tourism Learning Network been a springboard to introduce new practices?					
2. To what extent has participation in the Tourism Learning Network lead to the discovery of improvement opportunities, such as implementing new operating procedures?					

	No Extent	To a Little Extent	Neutral	Some Extent	Great Extent
3. To what extent was your investment of time and resources in the Tourism Learning Network --- <i>A starting point for other more advanced business practices?</i>					
4. To what extent was your investment of time and resources in the Tourism Learning Network --- <i>A catalyst for rethinking the way you do business?</i>					
5. To what extent was your investment of time and resources in the Tourism Learning Network --- <i>Understood as an opportunity to innovate?</i>					
6. To what extent did your learning in the Tourism Learning Network meet your expectations?					

Section F. The following questions will aid in the identification of any significant trends. Please tick the box which describes you and your business best.

1. Please indicate your gender:

- a. Male b. Female

2. Which term best refers to your employment (please tick only one):

- a. Owner manager/
Self-employed d. Operations Manager
- b. Senior
Manager/Executive e. Other
- c. Junior
Manager/Supervisor Please state: _____

3. My business is best described as a ...

- | | |
|--|---|
| a. <input type="checkbox"/> Hotel/Guesthouse | d. <input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant/Public House/Food Operator |
| b. <input type="checkbox"/> B&B/Self-catering
Accommodation | e. <input type="checkbox"/> Activity |
| c. <input type="checkbox"/> Tourist Attraction | f. <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

Please state: _____

For the following, please tick the appropriate category of employee numbers:

	Under 5	5-15	15-50	50-100	100+
4. In terms of full-time <i>all-year round</i> employees my business has:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. In terms of full-time <i>seasonal</i> employees my business has:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. In terms of part-time <i>all-year round</i> employees my business has:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. In terms of part-time <i>seasonal</i> employees my business has:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

8. In what year was your business established?

9. How many participants were there in your Tourism Learning Network?

10. Please tick the Tourism Learning Network you participated in:

- | | |
|--|--|
| a. <input type="checkbox"/> Mid-West/ Slieve
Bloom Area | d. <input type="checkbox"/> South East |
| b. <input type="checkbox"/> North East | e. <input type="checkbox"/> South West |
| c. <input type="checkbox"/> North West | f. <input type="checkbox"/> West |

Thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your help is very much appreciated and your confidentiality guaranteed.

Appendix B: Cover Letter

2nd March 2009

<Participant Name>,
<Participant Address>.

RE: Fáilte Ireland's Tourism Learning Network (TLN) Initiative

Dear <Participant Name>,

Due to your recent experience in the Tourism Learning Networks, I am appealing for your help. Following my participation in a similar Fáilte Ireland initiative, I was inspired to complete a Masters by Research focussing on learning. I understand you may have been contacted a couple of times already, but I really need you to complete and return the survey as it is a major requirement for completing my Masters' thesis.

My research will provide suggestions to Fáilte Ireland of improvements which could be made to the TLN experience, so future participants will benefit from your feedback. Many of the questions in the survey may appear repetitive, but that is the nature of academic measuring – please answer each question! Absolute confidentiality is assured – I am the only one who will see individual responses. A prepaid self-addressed envelope for the survey's return is enclosed.

In return for your support, I would like to offer you a copy of my final report (just print your e-mail address on the cover of the survey). Please return the completed survey at your earliest convenience (if possible, by March 13th, 2009). Thank-you for your valuable time and consideration and wishing you the very best of luck in these challenging times.

Yours sincerely,

Jennie Hussey
Postgraduate Research Masters Student

P.S. If you have any further comments or suggestions to make please phone me on <Mobile No.> or contact me by e-mail at jhussey@wit.ie.

Appendix C: Letter sent to the Smaller Groups

13th March 2009

<Participant Name>,
<Participant Address>.

RE: Fáilte Ireland's Tourism Learning Network (TLN) Initiative

Dear <Participant Name>,

I recently sent you a questionnaire regarding your participation in the Tourism Learning Networks. To-date, I have not received your response (I apologise if this letter and your reply have crossed in the post).

While the number of questionnaires returned is encouraging, I need, at a minimum, 150 replies nationwide, and so far only 88 have been returned, with your region being currently under-represented. If I have insufficient responses, I will be unable to run any significant statistics or gain a representative view of the TLN in the <TLN Region>. I greatly appreciate your assistance, in order to offer opportunities for improvements based on industry needs. Once again, <Participant Name>, I wish to assure you of the strictest confidentiality of the survey.

If you were not involved in the TLN or do not wish to be involved in the survey, please send back the survey in the stamped self-addressed envelope so that I can remove you from my mailing list. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need another questionnaire or if you need clarification on any question. I will be very happy to assist you in anyway possible. I can be contacted on: <Mobile No.> or by email: jhussey@wit.ie.

In anticipation of your response, I thank you for your assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Jennie Hussey
Postgraduate Research Masters Student

Appendix D: Follow-up Letter

18th March 2009

<Participant Name>,
<Participant Address>.

RE: Fáilte Ireland's Tourism Learning Network (TLN) Initiative

Dear <Participant Name>,

Approximately two weeks ago, I sent you a questionnaire in connection with your participation in the Tourism Learning Networks. To-date, I have not received your response (I apologise if this letter and your reply have crossed in the post). I know how extremely busy you are, but your response is a crucial component in the completion of my Masters.

Once again, <Participant Name>, I wish to assure you of the strictest confidentiality of the survey. I acknowledge that surveys can be time consuming, but as my intention is to improve the provision of opportunities to learn, I feel it is worthwhile. If I have insufficient responses, I will be unable to run any significant statistics or gain a representative view of the TLN in the <TLN Region>. If by some chance you did not receive the questionnaire, or it has been mislaid, I have enclosed an additional copy for your attention. If you were not involved in the TLN or do not wish to be involved in the survey, please send back the survey in the stamped self-addressed envelope so that I can remove you from my mailing list.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need clarification on any question. I will be very happy to assist you in anyway possible. I can be contacted on: <Mobile No.> or by email: jhussey@wit.ie. Remember to put your e-mail address on the front cover of the survey, if you would like a report of the study's findings.

In anticipation of your response, I thank you for your assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Jennie Hussey

Postgraduate Research Masters Student

Appendix E: Exploratory Factor Analysis of the Learning Outcomes

	Component	
	1	2
Tourism Learning Network participation has helped my personal development, self-esteem, self-confidence, etc.	.546	.444
Participation in the Tourism Learning Network helped me develop and reach my full potential as a person.	.702	.312
I think learning and development activities provided by the Tourism Learning Network have been very beneficial to me.	.468	.599
My writing skills have improved as a result of this initiative	.784	.087
Participating in the Tourism Learning Network has lead to my work becoming more interesting.	.731	.325
My participation in the Tourism Learning Network has lead me to be more well-rounded and a better person overall, at work and outside of work.	.823	.240
My analytical skills have improved as a result of this initiative.	.804	.214
As a result of my participation in the Tourism Learning Network, I have received more interesting work assignments and find my work more stimulating.	.728	.236
My computer skills have improved as a result of this initiative.	.537	.302
My interpersonal skills have improved as a result of this initiative.	.719	.297
As a result of my participation I am more confident in determining what is relevant in problem solving.	.728	.390
My participation in the Tourism Learning Network has made a difference in how interesting my work is	.610	.316
Career-related training and development activities such as the Tourism Learning Network seem very worthwhile to me.	.206	.641
I now have a much better understanding of the right way to do my work than I did a year ago.	.753	.326

Compared to a year ago, I now know much more about proven business methods and operating procedures.	.695	.350
To what extent has participating in the Tourism Learning Network been a springboard to introduce new practices?	.184	.809
To what extent has participation in the Tourism Learning Network lead to the discovery of improvement opportunities, such as implementing new operating procedures?	.283	.746
To what extent was your investment of time and resources in the Tourism Learning Network --- <i>A starting point for other more advanced business practices?</i>	.272	.681
To what extent was your investment of time and resources in the Tourism Learning Network --- <i>A catalyst for rethinking the way you do business?</i>	.282	.712
To what extent was your investment of time and resources in the Tourism Learning Network --- <i>Understood as an opportunity to innovate?</i>	.244	.719

Appendix F: Pairwise Comparison for Differences between TLNs

Dependent Variable	(I) TLN No	(J) TLN No	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.(a)
Learning_Know	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	North East	-.124	.177	.485
		North West	.032	.210	.879
		South East	-.081	.169	.636
		South West	.009	.205	.964
		West	.132	.194	.500
	North East	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	.124	.177	.485
		North West	.156	.186	.403
		South East	.044	.149	.770
		South West	.134	.193	.493
		West	.256	.185	.173
	North West	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	-.032	.210	.879
		North East	-.156	.186	.403
		South East	-.113	.184	.543
		South West	-.023	.215	.916
		West	.099	.201	.623
	South East	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	.081	.169	.636
		North East	-.044	.149	.770
		North West	.113	.184	.543
		South West	.090	.154	.563
		West	.212	.165	.205
	South West	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	-.009	.205	.964
		North East	-.134	.193	.493
		North West	.023	.215	.916
		South East	-.090	.154	.563
		West	.122	.197	.537
West	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	-.132	.194	.500	
	North East	-.256	.185	.173	
	North West	-.099	.201	.623	
		South East	-.212	.165	.205

		South West	-.122	.197	.537
Learning_MC	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	North East	.052	.137	.703
		North West	-.014	.163	.930
		South East	.042	.131	.752
		South West	.162	.159	.311
		West	.219	.150	.149
	North East	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	-.052	.137	.703
		North West	-.067	.144	.644
		South East	-.011	.115	.925
		South West	.110	.150	.465
		West	.167	.143	.249
	North West	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	.014	.163	.930
		North East	.067	.144	.644
		South East	.056	.143	.697
		South West	.177	.167	.293
		West	.234	.155	.138
	South East	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	-.042	.131	.752
		North East	.011	.115	.925
		North West	-.056	.143	.697
		South West	.121	.119	.316
		West	.178	.128	.170
	South West	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	-.162	.159	.311
		North East	-.110	.150	.465
		North West	-.177	.167	.293
		South East	-.121	.119	.316
		West	.057	.152	.711
	West	Mid-West/Slieve Bloom	-.219	.150	.149
		North East	-.167	.143	.249
		North West	-.234	.155	.138
		South East	-.178	.128	.170
		South West	-.057	.152	.711

Based on estimated marginal means

a. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Appendix G: Comparison of Mean Statistics between Facilitation-types

	Facilitation	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	p-value
Self-efficacy	Consultants	103	3.7902	0.41735	.04112	
	Academic	126	3.8760	0.40198	.03581	
Motivation to learn	Consultants	104	4.0272	0.45189	.04431	.010
	Academic	127	4.1703	0.38603	.03425	
Expectations of learning	Consultants	104	3.5434	0.60780	.05960	
	Academic	127	3.6197	0.57401	.05094	
Peer Interaction - Information sharing	Consultants	104	3.7596	0.70360	.06899	.019
	Academic	126	3.9722	0.65515	.05837	
Peer Interaction - Trust	Consultants	104	3.7428	0.52398	.05138	.008
	Academic	127	3.9167	0.45680	.04053	
Facilitator - Climate	Consultants	104	4.2997	0.48515	.04757	
	Academic	127	4.3333	0.53121	.04714	
Facilitator – Learner Involvement	Consultants	104	3.3910	0.58972	.05783	
	Academic	127	3.5315	0.60594	.05377	
Flexible learning approach - Content	Consultants	103	3.6068	0.68831	.06782	
	Academic	127	3.6457	0.71578	.06352	
E-learning modules	Consultants	75	3.6000	1.06543	.12302	.010
	Academic	105	4.0286	1.10469	.10781	
Group meetings facilitated by professional facilitators	Consultants	101	3.9901	0.99494	.09900	
	Academic	115	4.2261	0.88912	.08291	
Mentoring from experts	Consultants	89	3.9213	1.24522	.13199	
	Academic	109	3.9541	1.14168	.10935	
One-to-one mentoring	Consultants	100	4.1900	1.07021	.10702	.012
	Academic	106	3.7830	1.22672	.11915	
Regional Conference	Consultants	81	3.6420	1.08753	.12084	.001
	Academic	110	4.1364	0.99057	.09445	
Residential learning event	Consultants	71	3.8451	0.95091	.11285	.000
	Academic	119	4.3445	0.84810	.07775	
Workshop on Finance	Consultants	67	3.6567	0.99319	.12134	
	Academic	98	3.8469	1.14290	.11545	
Workshop on IT	Consultants	81	3.8025	1.06560	.11840	.000
	Academic	116	4.3190	0.91935	.08536	

Learning from other participants' experiences	Consultants	98	3.8571	1.03545	.10460	.016
	Academic	124	4.1855	0.97419	.08749	
Learning from site-visits to other properties	Consultants	78	3.6923	1.08481	.12283	
	Academic	96	3.8438	1.23398	.12594	
Learning from projects undertaken	Consultants	89	3.6404	1.04715	.11100	
	Academic	109	3.8624	1.08413	.10384	
Guest speakers input	Consultants	100	3.9200	1.08879	.10888	.045
	Academic	125	4.1840	0.87422	.07819	
Workshop on Marketing	Consultants	94	3.8617	1.04314	.10759	
	Academic	115	4.0913	0.99908	.09317	