

**Perceptions of University**  
**Among Irish**  
**Children and Adolescents**

Submitted by Alan Lyons, BSc. Ed.

in fulfilment of the requirements of a

Master of Arts at Dublin City University

Supervisor: Dr. James O'Higgins Norman

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# **ABSTRACT**

## **Alan Lyons Perceptions of University Among Irish Children and Adolescents**

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative data to inquire into the perceptions that young children and adolescents have about university. The study seeks to understand what influences have affected the construction of these perceptions. The study population are pupils from primary and post-primary schools in the greater Dublin area which span the social and economic divide from middle to working class. The pupils are both males and females who are attending single-sex and co-educational schools.

I began my study with a literature review examining the work of historians and scholars who have sought to identify the idea of a university. I compared this with the continually evolving roles of modern universities. This provides a definition against which the perceptions of the pupils can be compared. The review then examines current research on the retention rates for first year university students and the causes which have been identified as influencing students' decision not to continue with their studies. I use this data to understand the complex relationships between these causes and the impact individual perceptions have on a pupil's decision to attend and remain at university. The review also looks at the role social background and cultural capital play in the formation of young children's and adolescents' perceptions about university. It outlines how cultural capital is gained and exchanged and looks at the imbalance of social classes in the student cohort of universities.

The findings of this research have implications for further research into how school and university bodies can prepare pupils for university. They imply that there is an aspiration to attend university amongst young children and adolescents across the social divide. But those pupils do not have a clear understanding of the consequences of their decision to attend or of what is expected from them as students at university.

# **CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the background, context, and purpose of the study. It looks briefly at university access programmes, their role in encouraging access to university places for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or the educationally disadvantaged, and the effect such programmes have on the perceptions of pupils who have been exposed to this intervention. The chapter includes my personal interest and motivation for undertaking the research and outlines the aims and objectives for the study. Finally it provides a short summation of the subsequent chapters of this report.

## **1.2 Background and Context**

There is significant and ongoing research into the numbers of students who progress into higher education in Ireland (Smyth et al., 2011; CSO, 2010). Individual schools have found that parents pay great attention to the school they choose for their children and as a consequence there is intense competition to attract pupils who show more academic promise. Competition is particularly prevalent in regions where parents have a choice of more than one local school with parents opting for schools they believe have a higher rate of pupil progression to university. While there are no formal league tables for schools in the Republic of Ireland, individual head teachers admit that this competitive selection has led to clusters of academic abilities in certain schools (Byrne & Smyth, 2010). Much of current research on pupil progression to university looks at the admissions to university from a purely quantitative perspective. Limited research has been done from the qualitative viewpoint on the perceptions of university which are held by pupils who are about to, or wish at some time in their future to, study at university (Higher Education Authority, 2012; Byrne, 2009; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). In planning this research I was conscious that most qualitative researchers would concede that the social meanings that people attach to the world around them are embedded in particular perspectives and contexts (Hunter et al., 2002).

Consequently, this research project, which was conducted during the academic years 2011-12 and 2012-13, sets out to examine the perceptions of university among pupils who are currently studying in both primary and post-primary schools.



It seeks to understand how these perceptions are formed and developed in the minds of pupils, and looks at the role that external influences have in manipulating the perceptions that pupils hold at both the general and specific levels.

The study asks if a family tradition of educational engagement and an understanding of educational practices, language and traditions can instil in the pupil a feeling of belonging to, and being at ease within, the educational arena. It asks if access to and involvement with social networks that value education, intellect and the cultural capital and social mobility inherent in these, inculcates in a pupil the same values that these social groups hold. Previous studies have shown that homes where educational progression is the norm, where the cultural capital inherent in being educated, having a particular accent and the display of intellect is valued as much as financial capital, are major influence on the young child's readiness for academia (Barone, 2006; Woessmann, 2004; OECD, 2002).

In research into educational attainment the social class of a pupil is defined by their parents' employment status. Working class refers to those in unskilled, semi-skilled employment or who are unemployed while middle class refers to skilled workers or those who hold employer or managerial roles in their companies. Previous research shows the social class of the parent as a determinant in their child's progression to university. A Higher Education Authority (HEA) report on Higher Education in Ireland for example shows that non mature undergraduates from middle class families i.e. an employer or manager, represent 22.1% of the university student population however this number drops to just 2.8% for undergraduates from an unskilled, or working class, background (HEA, 2012, p.88). The report does not ask however, if a pupil's social class influences their perception of university or their aspiration to study there. This study looks at the aspirations of young children and adolescents across the social divide and asks if those aspirations are equally strong in both the working and middle class pupils in this study. It also asks if the financial implications of a university degree impact on a pupil's perceptions of university.

Friends and the role of peer pressure are also examined in this study. It asks if a pupils desire to be accepted as a member of a social peer group and to gain the cultural capital that these groups value is influential in the development of the perceptions pupils hold. Are decisions either to apply for a university place or not affected by the influences of others within their peer group? The study questions therefore if these social networks,

which can be outside the family sphere of influence, have more or less influence as the family group in the formation of perceptions of university.

The study seeks to understand the role that schools and their guidance programmes play in the formation and development of perceptions of university in their pupils. A school which has a tradition of guidance and encouragement for their pupils' future education is, like an educationally supportive family, more likely to stimulate an understanding of university and higher level study thereby better preparing the pupil for the transition from secondary to third level education (McCoy et al., 2006).

This study explores how these perceptions are formed by the individual and how accurate these are when compared with the "Idea of a University" as explored in the literature review. It looks at research done on the retention of first year students in university and how prepared those students were for their coursework and the transition from second-level school (Mooney et al., 2010). The findings of that research are used to compare the perceptions held by the pupils in this study with the past experiences of others in their first year at university. The comparison of these two studies will help to identify perceptions which in the past have lead to difficulties in the transition to university.

My focus for this study were pupils in the senior three years of primary school and each of the six years which span the post-primary school programme i.e. 9 – 18 year olds. This age range allowed the study to analyse perceptions held by pupils of different ages and to draw attention to similarities and differences which might occur across the data. Although this is not a longitudinal study it provides some insight as to what perceptions have been constructed among young children and adolescents at different developmental and educational stages. The study does not intend to influence or change these perceptions only to understand the thoughts and ideas put forward by the pupils and to make a comparative study of these perceptions across 1) age range, 2) social class, 3) gender and 4) exposure to educational traditions within their families. The main focus of this research is to highlight young children's and adolescents' perceptions of university and to consider how those might be nurtured, by educators, guidance councillors and other stakeholders in order to better prepare their pupils for university.

The decision to include children from 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class in primary schools was taken when a review of the literature showed that pupils in this age bracket, between 9 and 11 years old, begin to form complex ideas about their future at this early stage in their lives

(Atherton et al., 2009). Children of this age begin not only to form ideas about what they would like their future career to be, but also about what their educational requirement might be if they are to achieve their goals. It has also been shown that differentiations in educational outcomes across the social divide begin to become evident at this early stage (Smyth, 2009). The review of the literature and the analysis of the data in this study intend to shed light on the complexities which face children and adolescents as they begin to form and develop their perceptions of university and their individual aspirations for future study.

Teachers, guidance councillors, parents and other significant stakeholders in the lives of these pupils play a major role in the formation of the perceptions they hold as they begin to consider a future beyond their current school. If handled incorrectly, these influences can have a detrimental effect on the potential or aspiration of a pupil to continue in education thereby limiting the choices and opportunities they have in future life. This study aims to provide these stakeholders with an insight into the influences which affect how young children's and adolescents' perceptions of university are formed. This insight will enable those who engage with these pupils, with a view to helping them to plan their future, to better understand the continual changes which take place during the development of these perceptions and thereby encouraging influences which guide these perceptions towards more positive outcomes.

### **1.3 The Researchers Position on the Study**

In 2011 I graduated as a mature student from DCU with a BSc. in Education and Training. In 1975 I had left school after completing my Intermediate Certificate Examinations and joined the Permanent Defence Forces (PDF) as an infantryman. I considered, at that time, that my formal education had been completed. After 6 years service in the army I spent a further 20 years in unskilled warehouse work. In 2005 I was made redundant due to the outsourcing of the warehousing and distribution operations of the company and found myself back on the jobs market but with no formal qualifications. To rectify this situation I decided to invest part of my redundancy payment to work towards gaining access to, and paying for, my studies at DCU.

I would consider myself a product of inaccurate perceptions of university. I believed that university education was for an élite section of society and that my lack of formal education meant that I would never be in position to be accepted onto, let alone graduate from, a university course. Having graduated with first class honours I am now a firm

supporter of the promotion of lifelong learning and believe that people from all social backgrounds should be encouraged and supported in their quest to realise their educational aspirations.

## **1.4 Aims and Objectives**

The motivation for this study arose out of my interest in the educational progression of learners from their first day at infant school to their graduation at university and beyond. The study begins by reviewing the literature to define a university and how children and adolescents obtain and develop perceptions about university. It looks at how these perceptions are formed and sets out to explicate what influences are at work in their formation. The research aims to analyse the responses of the study sample and to assess if their perceptions are a true reflection of the institutional realities of university. It intends to inform those who are in direct contact with potential university students how these pupils' perceptions are influenced and developed. It aims to encourage debate around the type of interventions educators and advisors can adopt to assist their pupils in forming positive and realistic perceptions of university. I will address these issues by asking the following questions,

1. What perceptions do young children and adolescents have about university?
2. What has influenced these perceptions?
3. Is there a difference between the perceptions of younger and older children?
4. To what extent do these perceptions relate to the institutional realities of university?
5. Are these perceptions influenced by social status or family educational traditions?
6. Can schools or guidance professionals inform these perceptions and therefore better prepare pupils for their transition towards university education?

## **1.5 Outline of Following Chapters**

This report is divided into 7 further chapters that describe the process of the study, the analysis of the data and the findings that this study has produced.

Chapter Two is concerned with a review of the literature on the nature of universities, and how the perceptions of university held by young children and adolescents compare with these definitions. It reviews current theory on the formation of perceptions of university, the influences that mould these perceptions and what impact both have on the educational decisions pupils make. Chapter Three describes the methodology of the study. It explains the methods used and gives the study its philosophical grounding. It reviews the political and ethical considerations, the limitations of the study and gives a

brief overview of the data collection process. Chapter Four discusses the interaction with the study group, from the initial request for access to the pupils through to the transcription of the data and its preparation for analysis. It concludes by outlining the analysis methods used and the rationale behind their choice. Chapter Five begins by describing how the analysis methods were applied to the data. The quantitative data is then presented in the form of tables and charts to give the reader an overview of the pupils who took part in the study. Chapter Six discusses the main themes which have emerged from the analysis of the data. It uses quotes from questionnaires and group interviews to explore these themes and the influences which are working behind them. Chapter 7 looks at how perceptions are formed and influenced. It looks at the key areas of concern which have emerged from the study where stakeholders can exact an influence in the formation of perceptions. These findings are distilled to present recommendations for future study and practice which are offered for debate. Finally Chapter Eight brings the study to a conclusion and summarises the outcomes and their relevance to young children and adolescents and those who encourage them towards university education.

# CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Introduction

This research sets out to answer 6 key questions which surround the formation of perceptions of university in the minds of young children and adolescents. This chapter looks at the interplay between these questions and the formation of perceptions of pupils who took part in this research. It is the study of this interplay which informs the analysis of the gathered data and provides the answer to the main research question. The six questions are;

1. What perceptions do young children and adolescents have about university?
2. What has influenced these perceptions?
3. Is there a difference between the perceptions of younger and older children?
4. To what extent do these perceptions relate to the institutional realities of university?
5. Are these perceptions influenced by social status or family educational traditions?
6. Can schools or guidance professionals inform these perceptions and therefore better prepare pupils for their transition towards university education?

This review looks at the literature which surrounds these questions to provide a rounded knowledge of the milieu in which they can be answered. It looks at previous work into how pupils' perceptions and subjective realities are influenced by the world in which they live, the people they interact with and their interpretations of the experiences they encounter. It gives a background into how these influences contribute to the formation of the pupils' perception of university. The review looks at the current guidance programmes which are active in schools and access or outreach programs which are operated by universities and asks what input these practices have in influencing the perceptions of university that pupils form as they consider their educational future. By looking across a broad area of literature this review allows the later analysis of the data to be conducted with an understanding of the environments in which pupils perceptions are formed and influenced. It achieves this by exploring the literature in the following areas.

Firstly the review takes a look at current Irish legal definitions of a university and what activities and services they, under this legislation, are obliged to provide. It looks at current and past definitions of what universities are, or what they are believed to be by those who have worked or studied in them. An historical look at the development of the role of the university in society delves deeper into the formation and evolution of the

idea of a university. The understanding gained from this part of the review provides a definition against which the individual and general perceptions of the study group can be compared.

Secondly the review looks at university students during their first year of studies and at research conducted into their retention and dropout rates during this period. The review of this research provides an understanding of the problems which face first year university students and asks if these have been caused by inaccurate perceptions and ill informed choices.

The review then turns its attention to the role of socio-economic background in the lives of young children and adolescents. It investigates the social literature to find the current understanding of the influences that upbringing and social class bring to bear on the educational abilities or aspirations of young children and adolescents. It also looks at the concept of cultural capital, how it's gained and exchanged, and the effect this has on how young people interact with the world around them. Finally it looks at the work of guidance and access programs in schools and how these can influence the perceptions young children and adolescents have of university.

## **2.2 What is a University? The Legal View**

Universities can trace their origins back to the ancient schools and academies which were centres of philosophical education and religious instruction in monastic Ireland and ancient Greece. This review however concerns itself with the medieval and modern eras where the idea of a university began to be formally established and developed into the institutions we recognize today. The legal definition of a university has its formal beginnings in the *Authentica Habita* written in 1155 by Frederic I Barbarossa. In that document he set out the rights and privileges that were to be afforded to travelling masters and students who were en route to and from the university at Bologna in Italy (Compayre, 2004). According to Rüegg (2003) sometime between 1155 and 1158 the university at Bologna adopted an academic charter called the *Constitutio Habita*. It is from this document that we get the term “academic freedom” as it enshrined the right to freedom of movement and travel for the purpose of study. This meant that travelling scholars were exempt from the “*Right of Reprisal*”, the seizing of foreign travellers’ personal goods or money in lieu of debts believed to be owed by foreign governments, or individuals, to that country.

These two documents are recognized as the founding documents of academic charters of universities from the medieval period to the present day. In 1988, to mark the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Bologna University, 430 university rectors signed the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (Bologna Process, 1998). This short document lays out the fundamental principles of what a university is and how it should conduct its activities for the benefit of all mankind in modern times. It identifies the vocation of universities as the spreading and development of knowledge across countries and generations. It sees the link between teaching and research as being vital to the continuing search for truth and the production of knowledge which is current and relevant to the needs of society. University autonomy to conduct this research, examination and handing down of culture is seen as vital to meet the needs of society and that this autonomy must be independent of political and economic power.

The government of Ireland in 1942 under the Adaptation of Enactments Act, 1922 adapted the British statute that was the Irish Universities Act, 1908 as part of the legislation of the new state (Irish Universities Act 1908 Adaption Order 1942). In 1971 the Higher Education Authority Act, led to the establishment of the Higher Education Authority, which is the statutory planning and policy development body for higher education and research in Ireland. Subsequent Acts for the establishment of the National Institutes for Higher Education, in Dublin (1980) and Limerick (1980) and the University of Limerick Act (1989) were added to the legislation concerning universities in Ireland. In 1997 the Universities Act, (1997) was enacted

...to constitute or establish certain colleges and universities as universities and to repeal the National Institute for Higher Education, Limerick, Act, 1980, The National Institute for Higher Education, Dublin, Act, 1980, and certain provisions of other acts and to amend certain other acts.

This act allows for the establishment, governance, and financial scrutiny of universities. It also provides for the powers of the governing authorities of the universities. Sections 12 and 13 of the act outline the objects and functions of a university as; 1) the advancement of knowledge through teaching, 2) scholarly research and scientific investigation, 3) the promotion of learning in its student body and in society generally, 4) the promotion of the highest standards in, and quality of, teaching and research and 5) to disseminate the outcomes of its research in the general community. Section 13-2 states that: the university achieves this by providing courses of study, conducting examinations, awarding of degrees and other qualifications and by promoting and facilitating research.



Under Section 36 1a, there is a legal requirement for universities to provide access to university education for people who are economically or socially disadvantaged are disabled or are from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body. Now more than ever universities are proactive in their attempts to attract a more diverse and equally representative student body. They have developed support services and programmes which encourage the growth of this diversity. In recent years this has seen the diversity of universities student cohort change dramatically for the better. However despite these initiatives rates of admissions to universities for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds still remain below those of other social groups (Higher Education Authority, 2010; Clancy & Wall, 2000). It seems that for a myriad of reasons, people from lower socio economic groups are less likely to engage with University access programmes.

### **2.3 Evolution of the Idea of a University**

It is indicative of the importance that society has placed on the idea of universities and their role in the establishment, development and enrichment of society over the ages that the core concepts of what constitute a university and the rights and privileges that are bestowed on those who teach, study or conduct research there have survived since the publication of the *Authentica Habita* in 1155. While the ideas of autonomy in the governance and activities of the university, academic freedom of its masters and students and the promotion and dissemination of knowledge for the greater good of society, and even how that society is defined, may have different meanings and relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these are ideas which date back to the very foundation of the institutions we now recognise as universities.

In his essay “*The Modern University: The Three Transformations*” Wittrock (1996) identifies three periods of transformation in the development of the modern university; the medieval period where modern concepts of a university were first developed, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, or modern era, which took place during the development of nation states and finally the mid to late 20th century where mass education and the proliferation of new universities began. He argues that the process of the emergence of the modern university “is intimately linked to the process of the rise of the modern nation-state” (1996, p.305). Further evidence of this link can be seen in the current development of newer types and definitions of universities in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It has been argued that the rise of globalisation, greater European integration and the

stronger links between universities and business has brought about a fourth period of evolution in the idea of a university (Trowler et al., 2012; Brown, 2010), or what Etzkowitz et al. call the “entrepreneurial paradigm” (2000, p.313). To clarify this evolutionary process the following sections look at the chronological key points which have brought the idea of a university to where it is today.

### **2.3.1 The Medieval Period**

In medieval times the abandonment of feudal systems in favour of the growth of cities and consequently of urban middle classes meant that there was a need for an educated class which would administer to the religious and secular needs of the new emerging societies. The education of religious and secular elites was provided by the universities that had evolved from the cathedral and monastic schools and guilds of masters and students of the arts (Riché, 1978). Universities were not formed, or invented, as a new answer to the need for an educated class; rather schools and guilds which had been identified as teaching higher education, meeting the identified needs, were given recognition by Papal Bull or Sovereign decree as *Studium Generale* (Rashdall, 1936). This term, initially evolving out of customary usage, referred to any institution which welcomed students, *Generally* (from all walks of life), and counted a number of masters within their organization (Rashdall, 1936, p.9). Later during the 13<sup>th</sup> century the term began to find use in defining a place which taught not only the arts but also at least one of the professional disciplines such as medicine, theology or law.

Further formalisation of the universities came when modifications to the requirements were added by the papacy of Innocent III (McKeon, 1966). Two basic requirements added at this time were that teaching within these institutions could only be conducted by masters who were registered in the Guild of Masters of a *Studium Generale* and that each school was required to have masters for each of the seven arts, cannon and civil law. A master thus registered was granted the *Livencia Ubique Docendi* or the right to teach in any university in the entire Christian Western World (Cobban, 1992).

The conferring of *Studium Generale*, up until the time of the reformation, was in the gift of the Pope, Holy Roman Emperor or the king and, as well as recognising the school as such, it gave the universities some protection from the threat of royal or civic interference in their core activities of teaching and learning (Pederson, 2000).

Though these universities were, in theory, open to all the tradition of conducting teaching and learning in Latin, the language of clergy and mercantile classes, effectively

restricted who could realistically attend and benefit from study at a university to the sons of wealthy nobles and merchants (Rait, 1918). A further constriction on access by the masses was that, unlike today's multiversity which offer courses across a wide range of disciplines, most medieval universities tended to specialise in liberal arts or offer study in law, medicine, theology or other professions. This meant that prospective students might have to travel, and remain abroad, in order to attend a university which offered instruction in the discipline they had chosen. A student, therefore, who chose to study at university, had to consider if they were capable of enduring significant financial expense and detachment from their family or employment for the duration of their studies.

Prior to attending a university students had to study for the "*trivium*" (Rauh, 2002). These were grammar, logic and rhetoric and formed the foundation of the medieval classical liberal education. If we consider what this was intended to inculcate in the minds of students; the ability to understand the complexities of language, (Latin), to study and understand the formation of argument and the ability to defend or refute an argument, then this period of learning could be seen as preparing students for academic rigor and for their future life as a member of the educated classes. Following on from the trivium students would then study the 4 mathematical arts of the "*quadrivium*": arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy (Hoyrup, 1994). These studies led to qualification in philosophical rather than practical arts such as medicine or law which were becoming more popular in the developing societies. Spread over 11 years this period of education, usually not undertaken in the town of origin of the student, meant that it was unlikely, but not impossible, that students from the lower classes could consider attending university.

The perception of universities, their students, and the role they played in the education of the learned society remained relatively unchanged for centuries mostly because universities continued to teach the liberal arts and in particular Aristotelian logic, which defied contemporary advancements in science and the arts, to the sons of nobles and wealthy merchants. At this time it was felt that universities were becoming less relevant to the needs of society as they continued to produce liberal arts graduates and masters. The view was that students came to these conservative universities, not to become part of a community of learners but to get the all-important arts or law degree that would give them entry into the expanding bureaucracies of government, and other important areas of society.

Grendler (2004) however argues that this is an unfair assessment of the role universities played in the formation of European religious and social history. The universities during this period, he concedes, did provide for the education of their students and prepared them to take their place in society. But, he contests; universities of the time had greater influence on society than ever before or since. It was at this time that humanists began to gain professorships in some of the European universities and their innovative research and teaching methods were to radically alter approaches to teaching in many fields of learning such as medicine, mathematics, philosophy and, to a lesser extent, law. European universities became divided into two areas with traditional Aristotelian universities in the north, primarily Germany, France and Great Britain, and scientific universities of the south, typically those in Italy.

### **2.3.2 The Humboldtian and Napoleonic Reforms**

When change did come it was once again influenced by the changing needs of the societies and the political landscape of the period. In Germany it was the development of the concept of a nation state which brought about change. In France, around the same time, the change from a monarchy to a revolutionary republic was the catalysis. Each required that the role of the university, the type of knowledge that was studied there, and the type of graduate that they produced, be re assessed in the light of the emergence of these new nation states. The French model, born out of revolution, was run on strict military disciplinary format and exercised tight control over all aspects of the running of the university (Rüegg, 2011). Whereas the German model, named for Wilhelm von Humboldt, as it was he who convinced the King of Prussia to adopt a free and open model for the university at Berlin, placed more emphasis on the exploration and development of new, verifiable scientific knowledge through the combination of research and learning (de Ridder-Symoens, 2006). The term applied in Germany for this ideal is *Wissenschaft* which describes knowledge as a dynamic process discoverable for oneself, rather than the characteristically medieval concept of revealed knowledge (Jaspers & Dutsch, 1965). It places the student as an active participant in the learning process rather than a passive, dependant receiver of someone else's opinion and perceived knowledge.

Humboldt (1809) argued that the only government intervention required in the running of universities is to guarantee their protection from outside interference in their activities and to appoint professors. This would give the university the freedom to

support the twin concepts of *Lehrfreiheit*, freedom to teach, and, *Lernfreiheit*, freedom to learn. In reality national government would demand much more input into the running of the universities was suggested by Humboldt as they saw the universities as essential to the provision of the nation's cognitive requirements.

By 1800 the Napoleonic interventionist model was the centre of university education in Europe. But by the 1830s the balance of power began to shift towards the German model with its central principal of the union of teaching and research in the work of the individual scholar or scientist (Anderson, 2009). Humboldt's model promoted scientific enquiry and the systematic pursuit of knowledge, learning and scholarship (Rüegg, 2004). At this time universities began to come under the increasing influence of national governments rather than their traditional influences of church and royalty. They began to adopt the role of providing graduates who would take their part in the building and supporting of the new emerging sense of national identity. The university was placed at the apex of institutions such as the military, economic, artistic and religious organizations which defined that identity. If national identity was to be upheld, then only the very best students would be selected for places within the universities furthering the propagation of the concept that universities were institutions run by and for the élite of society. Where previously the university served the community of learners and their immediate society it now had implicit obligation of service to the national community (Neave, 2000). Kwiek and Mickiewicz (2008) summarise this as serving the dual purpose of national knowledge production and the strengthening of national loyalties which, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was to lead indirectly to the motivation behind the next major change in the university model.

### 2.3.3 The Twentieth Century and Beyond

During, and after, the Second World War there was a rise in the number of students attending university. For nations involved in the war this growth in numbers was a direct result of the urgent need for scientific knowledge and an educated workforce to provide the research and development of new technologies in support of the war effort (Schofer & Meyer, 2009). The war years brought the governments and universities into an even closer and mutually beneficial relationship as the requirement for more practical forms of knowledge became a priority (Scott, 1993). In the immediate post war era the need to rebuild the physical and social fibre of the nation and to redefine nationhood drove this proliferation further. The élite universities of the period between the wars

began to appear less relevant with the development of a binary system where universities taught the more traditional academic disciplines while polytechnics, technical colleges and institutes of technology catered for the more practical, commercial or vocationally orientated disciplines (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003; Becher et al., 1978). In the post war years the concept of education as a commodity which would benefit the economic growth of the nation gained recognition. The World Bank's 2007 report "*Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*" confirmed the continued link between education and national wealth when it cited a nation's ability to produce, select, adapt, commercialise and use knowledge as a critical factor in its continuing economic development and improvement of living standards (p.7). In Ireland government and educational policies were traditionally tied to the British models but as the 20<sup>th</sup> century matured Ireland was building not only a sense of nationhood but a whole new economy which was, for the first time, independent of the jurisdiction, if not the influence, of the United Kingdom.

From the 1960s onward there was a global proliferation of new universities and other types of institutes of higher education. In Ireland there are 7 universities but the expansion in higher education was seen in the development of regional technical colleges, which later became institutes of technology, to meet the demand from students for the new emerging qualifications that these intuitions could offer at sub degree level (Clancy, 2008). In this environment the exclusivity of the university as the provider of higher education was under further threat and the distinction between universities and other intuitions providing higher education were becoming less clear (Enders & Musselin, 2008). However the older established universities across Europe tried to maintain their status and position in the political arena. The mass student demonstrations which occurred in Paris 1968 were in response to this and sought to bring about a cultural revolution which would lead to a more emancipated society (Seidman, 2009, p.1). Initially these protests by students were concerned with equality of access to university for all, conditions within the universities and prospects of employment for university graduates.

However French students began to voice their objections to other events around the world at that time such as the Vietnam War, the last vestiges of colonialism and the emerging civil rights movements. The coincidence of both student and worker revolt, particularly in Paris lead many revolutionary thinkers of the time to believe that they were witnessing the beginnings of a proletarian revolution (Katsiaficas, 1987). However

Touraine argues that later analysis suggests this was not the case and that the student revolt was in response to the “authoritarian rationalism” of an “archaic society with a modern economy” (1979, p.265). The students’ motives during the protests were not to overthrow their national governments or to support or partake in social revolution. Their aims were to bring about improvements in the facilities at their universities, the removal of student fees which would, they believed, lead to a more equitable intake of students across the social divide and the granting of more personal and political freedoms to society in general. Ferry and Renault (1987) define this period in university history as the ultimate expression of revolutionary individualism where large numbers revolted against hierarchies in the name of liberty and equality. The student revolts of 1968 changed the relationship between students and those in authority in their universities and helped move this relationship towards a more open and mutually beneficial stance. In modern universities the echoes of this period can be seen in the activities of student unions and their representation of student needs at faculty, university and national level.

University governing bodies and governments should not be surprised when from time to time the student population chooses to raise its collective voice on political, social and educational matters. Major theorists speak of the power of education to liberate both the mind and the person and the connection between education and the wellbeing of society as a whole. Dewey (1916) saw the relationship between the individual, their educational development and the meaning of society in the realisation of that society in the lives of its individual members. Freire (1970) continued the idea of education for social liberation when he spoke of education as being dialogical in that learning is a cooperative process between the student and their educator, a process which leads to the building of social capital and alters the way in which we perceive the world and our place within the social milieu. Meziro (1997) spoke of education as a transformative process where the content, environment, reflection and learning experiences transform the student and the way they react and adapt to experiences they encounter in the future. Education as a democratizing, liberating and transformative process is an attractive prospect in that it suggests that all who engage in education or lifelong learning of any kind will benefit personally from that process and in turn will contribute to the enrichment of the society in which they live out their lives.

In the 1970s and 80s the continuing rise in the numbers and diversity of students seeking places led universities to commence the development of faculties which offered degrees in disciplines that were previously available only in the vocational and technical

institutions. This expansion of faculties led to the use of the term multiversity to describe any university which reached out to students of many disciplines and offered degrees across a wide range of subjects. Kerr (1963) describes the multiversity as no longer being the traditional community of masters and students but a series of communities or schools held together by a common name, a common governing board and a common purpose. Mass education became part of the language to describe the ongoing increase in enrolment rates across the globe, a trend which is expected to continue for the foreseeable future (HEA, 2013; Vincent-Lancrin, 2004).

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century matured the relationship between universities and national governments were slowly relaxed and some universities became more dependent on private companies to fund their research and determine the type of graduate they should produce (Delanty, 2001; Matkin, 1990). In Ireland primary funding for universities comes from grants voted by the Oireachtas. The distribution of these funds is administered through the Higher Education Authority. Funding for research however is distributed through *The Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions* (1998). The programme includes exchequer and private matching funds with the objective of strengthening national research capabilities via investment in human and physical infrastructure. (Higher Education Authority, 2012) Commenting on the situation in Ireland, Hogan (1995) expressed concern about what he called the transfer of authorship of research projects to bodies whose first concern is not that of the traditional universities' commitment to the disinterested search for truth.

He does however point out that partnerships between universities and industry have been mutually beneficial in promoting research, the public perception and credibility of universities and the employability of their graduates. In the current economic climate where there is a temptation to cut cost rather than invest Irish government and higher education institutes have recognised the vital role that higher education plays in the economic, educational and social wellbeing of the nation. To this end a strategy is now in place which will inform debate and government policy over the coming decades. (Department of Education and Skills, 2013)

Globalisation and, more specifically from an Irish perspective, the closer cooperation within Europe under the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area, has seen the role of universities in relation to the needs of the nation state change again as they reach out beyond their territorial limits (Kwiek, 2000). The global village is now replacing the local village of the medieval period and the nation



state of the modern period (Kwiek & Mickiewicz, 2008). European ministers responsible for higher education supported the development of a Europe of Knowledge and the continued growths in the numbers attending universities across the continent. At the Bologna conference in 2009 they stated;

In the decade up to 2020 European higher education has a vital contribution to make in realising a Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative. Faced with the challenge of an ageing population Europe can only succeed in this endeavour if it maximises the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education (2009).

The ease of travel and the development of European initiatives such as ERAMSUS and COMMET (Dineen, 1992b) have seen the return of the travelling scholar who is prepared to travel to the university which provides the course which is relevant to their career aspirations. “Masters” are also likely to travel to universities but in the current context they are just as likely to be headhunted by institutions as they are to apply for a university post out of personal choice. Furthermore the advent of ICT has meant that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the university can now, electronically at least, travel to the student. Universities now offer more and more options for students to avail of forms of blended and distance learning and to submit assignments without ever setting foot on the university campus.

This world of mass communication has meant that the option of higher education could be opened to a far greater number of students from a wider social mix than ever before (HEA, 2012). While universities may be attracting and indeed promoting the selection of a student body which is diverse in age, race and social background and in which both genders are fairly equally represented, the typical idea of the modern third level student is one who engages in higher education not only for the love of knowledge or a disinterested pursuit of the truth, but one who aims to enhance their career prospects by choosing courses in areas which are seen as attractive to potential employers. The universities they attend are supporting this type of student by establishing ever closer links with the business community and providing modules on enterprise, not only in MBA degrees but, across all disciplines (Cooney, 2008; Delanty, 1998). More and more universities are embracing entrepreneurial pedagogy as they recognise the value modern companies place on graduates who bring enterprising attributes to their workplace (Fayolle, 2010; Hytti & O’Gorman, 2004).

In the current economic climate this relationship between universities and the national and global economic power bases can be seen as mutuality beneficial. Both can profit from the development of a skilled, educated and entrepreneurially focused workforce which can guide the nation towards economic recovery. Projects such as REAP are examples of how employers, the Universities and the Institutes of Technology have worked together to develop and deliver education and training outcomes to meet the needs of the modern workplace (Maguire et al., 2011). However universities must consider if their partnership with private enterprise will impact on their core value of the disinterested autonomous search for the truth (Ó'Riain, 2006). Private business, and the financial aid that large companies can offer to universities, may appear as valuable commodities in times when government funding is being reduced or cut. My concern is for the level of control over the autonomy of universities that these organizations may demand as the cost of their contribution to funding the work of universities and how difficult it may be for universities in the future to disengage from this relationship should they need to.

The modern idea of a university, whether they be long established or modern institutions based on the multiversity model, is not a million miles from the original concept which was formed 900 years ago and developed over the intervening years. However the modern university is able to reach out to a greater audience. They are no longer considered the *Ivory Towers* of the past, but rather centres of learning which are relevant to and accessible by the wider community. Universities now offer access not just to degree courses but also sub degree educational opportunities which benefit the wider community. The modern university is engaged with students and potential students both young and old not just on a local level, but also across political and physical boundaries. This has led to universities operating in a highly competitive global market to attract the modern entrepreneurially aware, ambitious student. The modern university has also changed to meet the needs of these students and the world that they will graduate into. However the traditional concept of educating the mind and creating a graduate who is able to take their place in society as a critical thinker is still a vital role for the modern university. This type of rounded education is an asset to the graduate student entering the modern skilled workforce where creativity, innovation, problem solving and the application of knowledge are vital core qualities that employers look for (Tomlinson, 2012).

## 2.4 The View from Within

Throughout this historical growth and development of universities many have turned their thoughts to defining what a university is. They have sought to define what its role is in the promotion of higher education and the search for new knowledge and how these activities can be of benefit to society in general (Scott, 2006; Birtwistle, 2003; Wright, 1944; Flexner, 1930). The word university is derived from the Latin phrase “*Universitas Magistrorum Et Scholarium*”, which translates roughly as “university of masters and students” (Verger, 1992, p.37).

In the middle ages the word university came to be understood as a course of studies that were recognized throughout the Christian world (Cobban, 1975). Cobban explains what he calls the theoretical privilege of granting a licence to teach in any other university to the recipients of Master and Doctorate degrees (pp.27-28). He describes the motivation behind this as the development of a European wide academic commonwealth which transcended race and provincialism in the pursuit and dissemination of learning (Cobban, p.28). This notion strikes a chord with the modern framework of qualifications currently in use in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) known as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System or more commonly ECTS credits. The framework applies agreed credits to modules and courses which are delivered in higher education institutes within the EHEA (Bologna Secretariat, 2007 - 2010). The ECTS credit system makes teaching and learning in higher education more transparent across Europe as it recognizes the total amount of personal work done by the student as well as the number of lecturing hours attended (European Commission on Education and Training, 2011).

Cardinal Newman argued that a university is to the sphere of philosophy and study, as an empire is to the political sphere. He clarifies this by adding that a university,

“...is the high protecting power of all knowledge and science, of fact and principal, of inquiry and discovery, of experiment and speculation...”

(Newman, 1854, p.459)

Despite his use of words like inquiry, discovery, experiment and speculation he believed that these, in the context of the university, could only be derived from teaching and learning. He did not support the idea of research being part of the activities of masters and students in universities. He was of the opinion that research was a different

and unrelated form of exploration of new knowledge and therefore should be conducted outside the university. He believed that the role of the university in the dissemination of new knowledge was to explore it through lectures, discussions, and argument. He defines this notion by saying,

“Many things are requisite to complete and satisfy the idea embodied in this description; but such as this a University seems to be in its essence, a place for the communication and circulation of thought, by means of personal intercourse...” (Newman, 1910, p.31).

In Britain the Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education , 1963) recommended that a university should have four main objectives which it believed were essential to any properly balanced organisation. While this report recognised the basic concept of the instruction in the relevant skills of a given discipline it also recommended that a university should be involved in the promotion of the development of minds which produce cultivated men and women as opposed to mere specialists devoted to narrow disciplines within the sciences. Unlike Newman it supported the role of research within universities and called for a balance between research and teaching to promote the advancement of new knowledge and the search for truth. Finally it stated that an important role of a university is to transmit a common culture and common standards of citizenship. The notion of universities as institutions where citizenship is nurtured and developed is sometimes forgotten by those who view the work of universities from without and even, at times, by those from within. The development of standards of citizenship is often seen as no more than a product of the hidden curriculum that studying at a university imparts to its students. But Fryer believes that the connection between universities and citizenship is “the forgotten dimension of higher education” (2005). This statement supports the idea of educating a student not just in domain-specific knowledge but also in the cultivation of citizenship and the application of free-thinking, exploration and argument in their daily lives and careers.

More recently Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, in his lecture "What Is a University?" given at Wuhan University, China concluded,

The university, then, sustains a culture of its own, a culture of conversation and mutual criticism and appreciation, in the context of which people may grow into a deeper understanding of what characterises human beings as such in their social interaction (Williams, 2006).

These views point us towards an understanding of what those who are involved with universities, and their activities, believe a university is or should be. They are in general agreement that a university is a seat of learning where both “masters and students” are involved in the exploration of knowledge and a continuing search for the truth. As this search has continued the role of research in that exploration has become recognised and has duly taken its place in the life of the university. They defend the autonomy of the university but recognise its role in, and duty to the enrichment of, society as a whole. A university must reach out to the citizens and be a champion of education and research within and for the greater good of the community. While some of these ideas may still ring true and be readily identified by those who are asked to define their perception of a university, it is important to realise that the idea of a university is a constantly changing concept which at times can seem imperceptible while at others appear almost revolutionary.

## **2.5 Research on First Year University Students**

When a student arrives on a university campus for the first time they are presented with new challenges which they must manage if they are to progress through their course. This may be the first time they have been away from home and responsible for their own well being. Gone are the disciplines of post-primary school, the wearing of uniforms, the rigid timetable and checking of attendance. The first year student who comes directly from post-primary school will be expected to make the transition within 3 to 4 months of taking their Leaving Certificate Examinations. These students will find themselves thrust into the middle of university life where they are just a small part of a vast educational community and where they will be expected to take personal charge of their studies and their day to day life on campus (Gibney et al., 2011).

Recent research has looked at the progression rates at first year in Irish universities and attempted to highlight the underlying causes of non progression (Patterson, 2010; Johnston, 2010; Morgan et al., 2001). These studies attempt to define the key to successful progression and are reviewed here to clarify the preparedness of young students for university life. A report by the Higher Education Authority looked at progression across all Irish higher education institutions (Mooney et al., 2010). In chapter 6.3.1 of their report the authors looked at the characteristics of students who do not progress across 4 areas which were; the gender, age and social class of the subjects, their Leaving Certificate attainment, if they were in receipt of grant assistance and at the

higher education sector, the field of study and the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ) level of the course they had chosen to pursue.

This study found that these were not factors that worked independently of each other in determining whether students progressed but that there was an interaction between each area and that they could directly influence each other. For example at first glance the data would suggest a gender imbalance in the students who do not progress to year two. When gender was used as an independent variable, males were 1.4 times more likely to be in the non progression group than females. However this rate was attributed to male lower achievement levels in the leaving certificate. When levels of results were used as the independent variable the male rate for non progression dropped to 1.2.

Gender imbalance was also insignificant when chosen field of study and the NFQ level of the course were taken into account. In fact it was shown that there was no gender imbalance once ability and choice of course were considered.

Leaving certificate results can have an influence on the progression of students across the social spectrum. It was found that students of all social classes were equally likely to progress if they had a good academic background. The one exception to this was those whose father was a semi – skilled worker. This was attributed to the reduction in the availability of grants and that students from this background were on the upper edge of the financial scale for grant qualification (McCoy et al., 2010). Grants played a further role in progression when it was noted that those who had attained a grant were more likely to attend to their studies as grant payments can be removed if a student fails an exam or has to repeat a year. This finding is backed up by studies in the EU, (Bettinger, 2004), and the United States (Dynarski, 1999). However Bettinger concludes by pointing out that improved retention, brought about by grant aid, may not be such a good thing. He cautions against grant aided students who may not have the relevant skills needed to succeed in their chosen course and for whom a collage degree may not improve earning potential (p.231). Lassibille and Gomez, (2007), add to this argument and warn against the temptation to lower standards of entry to meet the demand of increasing numbers of secondary school leavers for university education.

As has been stated earlier, some schools tend to measure the success of their pupils and staff by monitoring their pupils' results in the leaving certificate and how many of those students then progress to third level education. Progression however is not complete unless the student then goes on to finish their studies. There are many reasons why a

first year student does not progress beyond the initial year of study. Some of these are social and others are brought about by the perceptions they have developed which influence the decisions they make when choosing a university to attend and a course of study to pursue.

## **2.6 Social Equality in University Education**

Since the introduction of free post-primary education in Ireland in 1966 academics and policy makers alike have struggled to understand why some young people are able to enjoy the benefits of education while others seem to have difficulties in accessing their right to education:

While the prevalence of early school leaving has reduced over the years and now remains relatively stable at 14 per cent ... (representing almost 9,000 young people), males are more likely to leave school early than females, as are those from working class households and households with parental unemployment. Patterns over time suggest that males who leave school early have been increasingly more likely to cite the pull of the labour market as a reason for leaving school (Byrne et al., 2009).

This statement goes some way to explaining the causes behind the imbalance in social classes in university education. The literature shows that the traditional perception of university being the preserve of the middle and upper classes still pervades the thinking of young people when they look towards the next phase of their education (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993; Boudon, 1974). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds still have a minority representation in the cohort of most universities. Traditionally these students tend to have lower achievement rates in leaving cert results which can limit the choices available to them should they decide to apply for a university place (Byrne & McCoy, 2013; O'Connell et al., 2006). Despite the poorer representation of students from the lower end of the social divide, research points to these students believing that gaining a degree is likely to lead to higher social status and more secure employment (Connor, 2001). However the temptation of more immediate financial gain can influence the value attached to committing a number of years to a course of study leading to a degree qualification. (Archer & Hutchings, 2000). Indeed these considerations are not a uniquely modern problem. Confucius said, "It is not easy to find a man who can study for three years without thinking about earning a salary" (Ashliman, 2002).

Potential students will also have to consider how they will finance their studies and the many expenses outside course fees which they will incur during their time at university. While these considerations are relevant to all students they hold particular importance for those from less financially secure backgrounds. (Denny, 2010; Callender & Jackson, 2005). Research by McCoy and Smyth (2011), Becker and Hecken, (2009) and Grodsky and Jones, (2007), shows that a lack of experience of higher education in working class families can lead to over estimation of the financial implications of sending their child to university. They also point to parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds weighing the financial cost of university education against the likelihood of their child being successful in their studies. Other financial constraints such as cost of accommodation or transport to and from a university may curtail the choices available to these students. Therefore their parents' tend to choose which university their children will attend based on the convenience of location as much as the relevance of the course to their educational or career aspirations (Cullinan et al., 2013).

Another reason for the imbalance of social classes in higher education is the traditional attitudes that different classes have towards educational progression. Parental support for children's education from an early age promotes the ethos of learning and prepares them for the rigors of lifelong learning (Hartas, 2011). The cultural capital that is invested in the children of those social classes who traditionally experience university education helps to inculcate a positive perception of university and increase the likelihood of someone from that class being offered a place on a university course (Schlechter & Milevsky, 2010; Gayle et al., 2002). In many families of lower socio-economic background there may be little, if any, experience of studying at university. Whilst those of middle and professional classes have a long tradition of progression through university towards an occupational career, those from lower socio-economic background lack the cultural capital that these experiences and traditions bring. Therefore they are more likely to feel excluded from social circles where higher education is considered a normal aspiration (McCoy & Byrne, 2011).

The influence of peer pressure on a young person's decision to study at university and on their educational success once there cannot be ignored (Eggens et al., 2008). Being associated with a particular social class does not permit or preclude an individual from the chance to attend university. It does however influence how that individual perceives university and the likelihood of their considering an application for admission to university. What is perceived as the normal outcome for their social grouping tends to



have a greater influence on their decision process than their actual academic ability. It takes a strong character and sense of purpose to fly in the face of the perceived norm of a social class. Those who do can face strong opposition from their peers and family or they may indeed find an upwelling of support for their actions. Social class places so many assumptions and conditions onto the individual's habitus that it is very difficult for these not to influence the perceptions they have of university and education in general.

## **2.7 Cultural Capital**

The concept of Cultural Capital was first articulated by Bourdieu in his essay "*Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction*" (1973). In further writings with Passeron, he investigated the effects that different levels of cultural capital had on the educational achievement of students (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The term cultural capital refers to the non financial social assets which a person holds. The value placed on the cultural capital held by an individual might allow that person to attain social mobility which is deemed to be beyond their economic reach. These assets, although primarily acquired from parental influences, either by a conscious effort by the parents to inculcate their capital in their children, or by the subconscious absorption by the child, can also be acquired by the individual from their interaction with other social groupings. Cultural capital acquired in this manner is referred to as embodied capital. Cultural capital, like other forms of wealth, can be traded between social groupings in order to achieve further levels of cultural attainment. For example a child who comes from a background of high intellectual standing and is continually exposed to conversation about, and demonstrations of, high intellect will, it is argued, be better able to negotiate their place in other social situations, such as school, university, and the workplace, where these assets are given capital (Swartz, 1997).

Cultural capital, like other assets, assumes different values depending on the social situation that the person finds themselves in. Individuals can place more value on different types of cultural capital depending on the status they attach to the social grouping which holds those assets. A child's perception of university and the likelihood of their attending can be influenced by the value they place on the institutional capital gained from holding a university degree. A pupil who is not academically gifted will transfer capital onto non academic achievements and thereby lessen the value they place on education. Alves-Martins, et al, (2002) identified this phenomenon in their study on

self esteem and academic achievements as esteem protection. They found that pupils who were educationally disadvantaged, or those who believed themselves to lack academic ability, adopted this tactic in order to protect their self esteem at the expense of academic achievement they felt was beyond their reach. In the eyes of these pupils the institutionalized cultural capital gained from a university education has little value when compared with the capital they have gained from non academic activities in which they excel.

For Bourdieu, cultural capital could take on many forms from art to education to language. He saw it as an accumulation of cultural knowledge which confers power on the individual (1986a). The level of power that this accumulation can exercise is again determined by the social context in which it is wielded. These social contexts can range from the accepted norms of a given society, to subcultures within that society, to those groups deemed by society to be deviant. Each social group decides which non financial assets attain cultural value in their social milieu (Thornton, 1996). For example some groups can place cultural capital on objects which can be traded or used as symbolic representations of the status achieved by the individual, badges and insignia of groups which the person belongs to, or tools and equipment associated with a given trade or profession can be deemed to hold objectified cultural capital.

Institutionalized cultural capital is that which is applied to academic awards and qualifications which are held by the individual and even to the institution which has conferred these awards. All three subtypes of cultural capital, embodied, objective and institutional are relevant to the field of educational achievement. Each independently, or when combined, can give the holder substantial cultural capital within the academic world. The young pupil who aspires to attend a university may not have an understanding of the concept of cultural capital but they will be able to identify with the values others place on their qualifications and the impact that might have on their future career.

Weber (1978) identified this use of cultural capital to include or exclude individuals or groups as social closure. The theory of social closure states that sections of society, groups of like minded individuals or people with shared interests use cultural capital as a method to exclude or control entry to their group by others. This is done to control access to scarce resources that the group wishes to retain for themselves. In the case of educational attainment it could be argued that social closure is used to exclude those of

lower socioeconomic backgrounds from the financial and social rewards of higher education by the use of competitive qualification through state examination, CAO<sup>1</sup> points requirements and the financial costs of attending a university. Walter (2008) argues that attempts to breakdown the walls of social closure such as equality in access to university can only have limited effect. He suggests that once access has been granted to those outside the closed social group they, in turn, will seek to close off access to the same resources by those they now perceive to be outside the group. This concept feeds back into the idea of attainment and use of cultural capital for social mobility.

The theory of educational achievement being directly linked to cultural capital has many supporters (Andersen & Hansen, 2012; DiMaggio, 1982; Bourdieu, 1974). As was stated earlier those who can negotiate their place within a social grouping have a distinct advantage over those who cannot. In the educational context this difference can be a determining factor in how successful an individual can be, and how they perceive the value of continuing in education. Each social class carries its own set of objects and values which define its cultural capital. Differences in these values can be highlighted when the child moves from their own background and mixes with others in school. The embodied capital that a pupil brings to their school helps to determine how they will integrate into the routines of the school. Pupils who come from a background where simplified language is used may have difficulty in adapting to the language which they find in educational environments. If these pupils do not find a supportive and positive climate in their school or classroom then they will gradually disengage from their schoolwork. Positive teacher-pupil interactions and a challenging, but supportive, learning environment leads to a more positive academic self-image and higher educational expectations (Smyth et al., 2006).

While there is strong support for the link between cultural capital and academic success, there is also the argument that formal educational systems are designed to recognize and reward cultural capital. Jæger (2011) suggests that teachers often misinterpret children's familiarity with high status cultural symbols as a manifestation of academic brilliance. The consequences of this miss reading of signals is children receive preferential treatment and therefore a distinct advantage in their learning opportunities and preparedness for the transition to university over their counterparts from lower social backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1996). This leads to the assumption that cultural capital has a

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<sup>1</sup> Central Applications Office. Every person applying for a place on an undergraduate course is required to submit a CAO form to have their application processed on behalf of the relevant university. Places are offered on a competitive points based entry process. An applicant's point value is determined by their Leaving Certificate results.

direct effect on the opportunities which are made available to certain pupils regardless of whether they receive them through academic ability or the misinterpretation of signals by those who teach them. However Sullivan (2001), while admitting to the effects of cultural capital on academic achievement, has shown that in studies where cultural capital is allowed for, social class still has a significant influence on educational achievement and aspiration.

By the time adolescent pupils are about to make the decision to apply for university or finish their education after the compulsory stage, they will have experienced the effects of cultural capital for good or ill. Their decision will be informed by their own perception of the value of their current cultural capital and of that which they are likely to attain through higher education. If they in turn misinterpret the signals they are receiving then they too can mistake understanding of those symbols for academic brilliance. A pupil whose perceptions are influenced by these misinterpretations may find that they are quite unprepared for the rigours of university education.

## **2.8 Are Pupils Ready to Make Decisions?**

As has been seen in the latter sections of this chapter there are a lot of influences which can shape how children and adolescents develop their perception of what a university is and what it is like to study there. All of these forces are brought to bear at a time when they are also facing the prospect of preparing for and sitting their Leaving Certificate Examinations and the complexities of a Central Applications Office (CAO) points system and application process. In a matter of a few short months they will be expected to transfer from a school system where they and their work are subject to a strict disciplinary code to an environment where they will be seen as responsible adults who are required to take ownership of their own studies. This relaxing of the disciplinary code can result in some students not applying themselves fully to the requirements of their chosen course. At this point in their lives they are bombarded with information which is both positive and negative about the choices they are about to make. There is a lot of weight put on young shoulders when they begin to actually make the final decisions about their future educational path. It is hoped that they will be able to make rational decisions about their future and that the support structures that are available are actually helping to clarify their choices.

Chisnall (1994), spoke of 'marketing feedback' and how this is used to measure the success or otherwise of a marketing campaign. Marketing feedback measures the

success of a campaign by monitoring how buyers use advertising slogans when referring to a product whose advertising campaign they have been exposed to. Hemsley-Brown (1999), found this phenomenon in her interviews with post-primary students in the south of England. She found that those who had been exposed to access programmes, or had visited a university open day, and were exposed to the universities promotional publications, used phrases and statements which could be readily found in the literature, when giving reasons for their decision to study there. Her research points to the constantly changing perception that pupils have right up to the time they make their final decision.

On top of the professional marketing programmes of universities there are many other influences pulling at the mind of the pupil as they try to decide upon the university where their future study will take place. As we have seen family life and the traditions held by the family will have a big influence on the pupils' perceptions. If a parent has personal experience and is comfortable with university education then they can be more open to engaging in their child's educational progression (Ciabattari, 2011). The support, or lack thereof, that parents and siblings give the child will inform their belief in their own ability as a student. Those who lack this support may feel that they do not fit in with a universities cohort and are likely to invest their cultural capital outside academia. Family is considered to be the biggest influence on the decisions made by the child and this conversation between parents and their children can be seen as supportive, or a source of conflict. The formation of perceptions within the family unit leads to what Fosket and Hesketh referred to as the 'composite consumer' (1995).

A pupil can formulate their decision to progress into university based on the perceptions they currently have about what it means to be a student there.

These perceptions are moulded from information gained from sources as diverse as personal opinions, peer rumours and conversations or debates with friends or family (McCoy et al., 2006). They can be influenced by information received from professional personnel working in university outreach, school guidance programmes or their own teachers. These services need to be professional and consistent in their work if they are to be of assistance to the pupils who look to them for guidance (OECD, 2010). For the young student these diverse inputs must seem like a clamour of voices designed to confuse rather than enlighten. From within this maelstrom of ideas, suggestions and recommendations the adolescent pupil is expected to make choices which will have a

lasting effect on their future life. They are expected to know what they want from their future and what actions they now need to take to achieve this. Some may have this decision made for them as they are expected to continue with family traditions, while others find that their academic ability does not match the requirements of the course they aspire to attend.

## **2.9 Summary**

This review has looked across a broad selection of literature from different disciplines in order to gain an informed view on the many influences which play their part in the formation of a young child's, or adolescent's perception of university. It has looked at these influences and attempted to understand the interplay between each and how that effects the formation of these perceptions. It began by looking at past and current understandings and legal definitions of what a university is. It looked at the objectives that a university should aspire to and how these impact on the community of learners there.

That section led to a review of recent studies into first year university students and the numbers of students who do not continue beyond the first year of their chosen course. It was seen that while there are many reasons why a student will choose to leave a course of study the underlying indicator of their choice to do so leads back to the perceptions and aspirations they had of university before they arrived on campus. These findings raised questions about the preparedness of students coming to university for the first time and lead to a review of research into the effect both social status and cultural capital have on these students as they prepare for third level education.

Social equality, status, or capital, held by a pupil and their family each have influence on their potential for academic success. Those who come from the lower socio-economic backgrounds are still less likely to continue on to university due to real or perceived impairments which are placed in their way. Their decision not to continue can be influenced by the financial burden of attending a university, lack of support at home or school, the temptation of paid employment, miss reading of their academic ability or the lack of social capital, which lends support to educational improvement, within their social class.

Cultural capital can have a direct effect on how the pupil engages with their school and education. This in turn can affect not only the sense of self worth but also the mental

and physical health of the individual. Further reading on this subject introduced the concept of esteem protection. While this is seen as a method of protection of personal wellbeing it can have an effect on the young person's perceptions or aspirations towards university. If a pupil either believes or is told that their academic abilities are lower than the standards set by their school they will transfer their values of success, their social and cultural capital, to non academic activities or talents.

The latter part of this literature review showed that the perceptions formed by young children and adolescents are subject to a vast range of influences and are coloured by the interplay of these influences on the still developing minds of these young people. This mix of formal instruction, self evaluation, parental and peer pressure and rumour form the basis on which the young child or adolescent shapes their own perceptions in their mind. From these perceptions they are then asked to make an informed choice which will have a direct effect on their long term future prospects. The review suggests that these perceptions may not necessarily be a true reflection of what faces the first year student at university and that this conflict of ideas can affect the success or otherwise of their time at university.

## **CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter begins by outlining the objectives of the study in light of the findings of the literature review. It then gives context to the philosophical background to the study by placing it within a constructivist paradigm. It explains the methods used in the selection of the study sample and how access to the pupils was obtained. This is followed by a description of the data collection tools used and offers an explanation for the selection of these methods in relation to the study sample and to the philosophical approach adopted. Finally it outlines the methods used during the collection and preparation of the data for later analysis.

### **3.2. Purpose of the Study**

The review of the literature highlighted a complex set of influences which interact with each other and inform the construction of perceptions of university in the minds of young and adolescent pupils in primary and post-primary schools. It brought into view issues surrounding the accuracy of these perceptions when compared with the institutional realities of university and how the perceptions of university held by first year undergraduates can be a determining factor in their ability to succeed in the first, and subsequent, years of their studies. This leads me consider a number of important questions:

1. What perceptions do young children and adolescents have about university?
2. What has influenced these perceptions?
3. Is there a difference between the perceptions of younger and older children?
4. To what extent do these perceptions relate to the institutional realities of university?
5. Are these perceptions influenced by social status or family educational traditions?
6. Can schools or guidance professionals inform these perceptions and therefore better prepare pupils for their transition towards university education?

The study does not intend to inform or influence these perceptions but to look at how they are constructed and what influences have been brought to bear in the minds of pupils as they develop their own individual perceptions of university. By gaining a better understanding of this process the study seeks to inform the research based practices that are used by educational professionals who are involved in the guidance of pupils towards study at university.



### **3.3. Philosophical Perspective of the Study**

The indirectness and circular nature of philosophical questioning is conducive to the development of a rigorous research methodology. It helps to generate in-depth thinking and engenders further questioning of the topic under consideration (Crossan, 2003a). Esterby-Smith et al., (2004), have identified 3 reasons why philosophical exploration is beneficial to the development of research methodology. Firstly it can help to refine and specify the research methods to be used. Secondly it helps the researcher to evaluate the different methods and to design a methodology which is most appropriate for their study. Thirdly philosophical exploration helps the researcher to be creative in their choice and adaption of research methods for their project.

If this research seeks to discover the current perceptions that a cross-section of young Irish children and adolescents have of university, but seeks not to influence these perceptions in any way, then it must adopt a naturalistic and ethnographic methodology (Cohen et al., 2010, p.167) which allows the individual pupil to reveal their own construct of reality. This approach allows the inquiry to gather rich data which leads to a deeper understanding, not just of the individual's construct but also, of the complexities, contexts and social groupings which help to shape that construct (LeCompte et al., 1993, pp.31-2). As will be seen in later chapters the adoption of a natural and ethnographic approach allowed for the findings of the research to emerge naturally from the analysis of the data without the influence of preconceived hypotheses. Research such as this project which seeks to understand rather than measure the perceptions held by young children and adolescents must therefore adopt a constructivist philosophy. Constructivist theory states that each individual constructs their own reality based on their experiences and knowledge of the world (Kelly, 1955). Guba (1990) states that ontologically,

realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them (p.27).

In other words, these realities are not, as the positivist would have it, the results of a preordained set of natural rules which determine a universal construct of reality (Hume, 1930; Comte, 1858).

On the contrary, constructivist theory believes that each individual creates their own reality which is influenced by the context of their daily life, how they react to and

interpret the experiences they encounter during that life and by the social construct of the society in which they experience these. (Sandelowski, 2000, p.248). They contend that the complexities of realities are imbedded in the context of any given situation and therefore constructivists seek to explore these multiple realities. Post-positivism acknowledges the complex relationship between viewpoints, individual actions, environments and socio-cultural issues (Crossan, 2003a). Rather than seeking an absolute predictive truth, naturalistic and ethnographic research methodologies look for evidence for the existence of occurrences or trends and seek to interpret them and construct a representation of the lived experience and social context. The three main traditions in this type of research are:

**Phenomenography:** Outcomes are represented analytically as a number of qualitatively different meanings or ways of experiencing the phenomenon (called ‘categories of description’ to distinguish the empirically interpreted category from the hypothetical experience that it represents), (Åkerlind, 2005, p.322) *brackets in original*. It is important for this research that perceptions are viewed from the perspective of the subject and that the meanings they imply are deduced and understood during analysis. To this end I have used discourse analysis methods to explore the dynamics behind the responses of the study group and to guide me towards uncovering the meanings and covert signals which may be inherent in the responses of the pupils

**Ethnomethodology:** seeks to treat practical activities, circumstances, and sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study and by paying them the attention usually accorded to extraordinary events, seek to learn about them as phenomena in their own right (Garfinkel, 2003). Each person forms perceptions which are influenced by their subjective reality, their habitus and the schemata which they have developed or inherited. By studying this process and how perceptions are formed, modified and adapted, and the internal and external forces which influence them, we can better understand how that process works.

**Symbolic Interactionism:** (Mead, 1934b) May be envisioned as the study of the ways people make sense of their life situations and how they go about their activities, in conjunction with others, on a day to day basis. It is very much a “down to earth” approach which insists upon rigorously grounding its notions of the ways in which human group life is accomplished in the day to day practices and experiences of the people whose lives one purports to study (Prus, 1996). At the data analysis stage of this

study an understanding of symbolic interaction, the influence it has on the development of meanings which one places on things, how the societal interaction of the individual impacts on the development of these meanings and how the individual modifies them as they try to understand the situations they encounter will help to reveal how the perceptions of university young children and adolescents hold are formed.

Naturalistic inquiry is not tied down to just measuring and reporting the facts. The researcher can justify enquiry into a whole range of topics, from how people live and work within their social construct, to how they engage in, or disengage from education to why they choose to continue their studies at university or to move directly into the employment market once their compulsory educational requirements have been met. The researcher who is an instrument of the research rather than a detached observer can combine both theory and practice in their research and observe the interaction between them. Their motivations for and commitment to the research is central and crucial to the enterprise.

The post positive paradigm is the key paradigm in social research where the researcher is primarily interested in the social constructs of the subjects they have chosen to study and the role the situations and experiences their subjects encounter have in the development of these qualitative constructs. Quantitative data is only a small part of the work of the social researcher. The primary reason for gathering quantitative data, in social research, is to provide a set of independent and dependant variables to assist in the analytical comparison of constructs formed by the subjects of the study. In this study independent variables such as age, gender, and social class, are used to compare constructs when dependant variables such as access to guidance and family experiences are applied. For this reason a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection has been chosen. A post positive approach guides this research towards methods which allow subjective analysis of the data. It means that the data can be analysed to reveal the thoughts and ideas which inform the individual perceptions of the participants while allowing for an exploration of the under lying influences of these perceptions across the group.

### **3.4. Methodological Approach**

Research Methodology refers to a philosophy or philosophies, which are a set of assumptions and practices that guide researchers. It is the body of practice, procedures, and rules which the researcher applies to their project. Methodology includes the

research methods chosen, their use in the field and the final dissemination of the findings. The choice of methodologies will be informed by the research question and the philosophical approach to the investigation of that question.

The aim of this research was to gain a subjective and qualitative insight into the current perceptions of university that are held by primary and post-primary pupils. The construct of perceptions held by these pupils is shaped by a complex set of influences and experiences which makes them difficult to interpret by simple quantitative analysis. It is therefore important that this research looked towards the interpretative paradigm to understand the subjective world of human experience. To gain a true insight into the perceptions they hold. Once the data provided this insight, the research set out to compare these perceptions with the current and past understandings of what a university is, from both an experiential and a legal perspective, thereby testing the accuracy of the pupils' perceptions against these sets of criteria which are generally accepted as representing the current understanding. The research also set out to investigate how these perceptions are formed in the mind of the sample group and the myriad of influences which contribute to their formation paying particular attention to the important role that cultural capital plays in influencing the development of the perceptions and expectations a pupil has of university. The study of this formation process is intended to inform practical approaches to professional intervention in the preparation of young children and adolescents for the transition from post-primary level education to university. Once the objectives of this project were clarified the process of selecting the pupils who were to form the study group began. For the purpose of clarity and ease of reading I will from this point forward refer to the standard method used in Ireland for identifying pupils from primary school as being in 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> class while post-primary pupils are referred to as being in 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> year.

At primary school level 5 schools were selected for inclusion in this study. There were 2 gender specific schools, 1 boy single sex and 1 girls single sex, the balance being made up of 3 co-educational schools including one educate together school. The primary level schools were asked to provide 2 pupils, aged between 10 and 12 years, from each of the three senior classes, 4<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class. One school provided an extra 2 pupils, one from fourth class and one from fifth class giving a sample group for primary schools of  $n = 32$  pupils. The decision to restrict the primary schools to the senior classes was made after a review of the literature showed that the formation of perceptions of life

beyond school begin to take place in the minds of children from as young as 10 years of age (Atherton et al., 2009, p.1; Gottfredson, 2002, p.94).

At post-primary level pupils were chosen from 5 schools of which 4 were gender specific, 2 male single sex and 2 female single sex schools, the remaining school was co-educational. In each school 1 pupil from each year was chosen to represent the age range of post-primary pupils, (i.e. 12 – 18), giving a total of 6 students from each school. Once again one school provided two extra pupils, one from second year and one from fifth year, giving a sample group representing post – primary schools of n = 32. The 10 schools were chosen to reflect the socio-economic background of their pupils. In both sectors there were 3 schools from working-class or lower socio-economic areas and 2 from middleclass areas<sup>1</sup>

The mixture of age, gender, social class, single-sex and co-educational schools provided a broad cross section of pupils and helped to inform the research about the role that these variables played in influencing the pupils’ perceptions of university. During the initial analysis of the data these were used as dependant and independent variables to help explore patterns which might be contributing to the formation of perceptions. Although quantitative in nature this first phase of analysis helped to inform later qualitative analysis by revealing individual pupil profiles and leading to a better understanding of the influences at work in the formation of their perceptions.

Social research should be conducted in a natural, uncontrived real world setting with as little intrusiveness as possible by the researcher.

(Cohen et al., 2010, p.p. 168)

This statement guided me in understanding that contact with the sample group, either by myself or by a school figure of authority, could exert unwanted influence over, how the pupils would describe their perceptions of university during the research process. This research needed to have an insight in to the minds of the study group; it needed to allow them to express their thoughts in an unhindered and uninfluenced fashion. Promoting an environment where this could happen meant that a clear and accurate understanding of the pupils’ personal constructs could be revealed. Having consideration for this concept, it was decided to use questionnaires as the primary data gathering method. This meant that there was no direct contact between the pupils and myself on the content of the questions other than to explain the process and to issue and retrieve the questionnaires.

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<sup>1</sup> Schools which qualify for inclusion in the Dept. of Education and Skills “Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools” (DEIS) Action Plan for educational inclusion are considered to be from disadvantaged communities. Schools not on the list were considered middle class. (<http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/>)

The teacher's role in the process was explained as acting as a supervisor of my activities while in the room and not of the pupils. To further insulate the pupils from their teachers and fellow pupils they were arranged at separate desks, as they would be in a normal classroom, so that there could be no interaction between the pupils nor could their input be influenced by stronger-willed individuals.

The questionnaires, (see Appendix F page 124 & Appendix G page 128), were laid out in 3 distinct sections and began with section 1 which used open questions which prompted the pupils to respond with qualitative answers about universities and what they believed happens there. The decision was made to place this section first, after consultation with my supervisor, as it was felt that this would better suit the collection of good qualitative data on the individual's perceptions before gathering personal information which might influence how they responded to the qualitative questions. Section 1 asked the pupils to describe a university, the type of people they believed were likely to go there and what they thought happens there. At the end of this section the pupils were asked to name some universities they had heard of. This final question was used to check the level of knowledge the pupils had of actual universities.

Section 2 dealt with the pupils' aspirations to attend university. It began with a simple Yes/No Question which asked if the pupil would like to go to university. This was followed by two multiple-choice sections which allowed the pupils to offer reasons for answering yes or no. Both of these questions gave respondents the option to give "other" reasons where pupils could add their own personal thoughts. On the questionnaire for the post-primary pupils a further closed yes/no question was added at the start of this section which asked if they had visited a university as part of an access programme or open day. This question was asked as it had been revealed in the literature review that these visits do affect the pupils' perceptions and preferences for a particular university (Hemsley-Brown, 1999).

Section 3 dealt with the pupil's personal details. It began with their age and school year and asked about how well they felt they were doing at school. It then asked if any of their family had attended university and if this had any bearing on their perceptions, and their aspirations, towards going to university. This section was designed to show the pupils' family traditions in connection to university study. The data gathered here was used to explore the effect pupils' educational background had on the formation of their perceptions. The children who attend primary schools were surveyed and their data

analysed to provide an insight to perceptions held by children of different ages and to check if there were any similarities in the perceptions of both groups. The post-primary pupils were considered to be the main focus of the research as they were closer to making their decisions about their future studies at university. Therefore it was essential for the validation of the data from the post-primary study sample to select a further research method to triangulate the data. With the limits on time available to pupils within the curriculum I decided to return to each of the post-primary schools to gather further data using group interview sessions. These were used to clarify and confirm general ideas which the preliminary analysis of the questionnaire data had brought to light. Only one school, Ashgrove Post-Primary, declined access for the interview stage citing exam preparation as the reason.

There are recognised advantages and disadvantages to using group interviews (Watts & Ebbutt, 1987). While group interviews may save time the dynamic of a group may lead to data that does not truly reflect the thoughts of the whole group. However it was not the intention of these sessions to obtain an agreed group perception but to clarify statements which were made during the questionnaire phase of data gathering. Arskey and Knight (1999) point to problems which are particularly relevant in research with children. They mention that children have less ability to analyse what is important or relevant to the interview. They also warn of the importance of insuring that the children are made to feel at ease and that their contribution is seen to be relevant and appreciated. Despite these concerns it was felt that group interviews were the most efficient and reliable way to further validate the data received. The small number within each group meant that there was sufficient time to allow each pupil to contribute to the session and that the recording of the data could be done in a relaxed informal manner which could not be achieved in a one to one situation.

### **3.5. Limitations of the Study**

There are some noteworthy limitations to this study and this section aims to outline these and the impact they have on the findings of the study and its final recommendations.

This study was designed as an exploratory qualitative inquiry to meet the requirements in fulfilment of a Master of Arts at Dublin City University. Time limitations placed on a research student working alone necessitated the selection of a study sample which would be considered smaller than that normally considered sufficient for a more

rounded discovery of the answers to the questions proposed by the research. Consequently the study was not intended to provide results which could be generalised across a wider selection of primary and post-primary pupils. The research was intended to provide the basis for further study within the area of professional intervention in the preparation of pupils for transition to university. Time limitations imposed by publication and assessment requirements also prevented me continuing to access pupils on a longitudinal study through their own individual cognitive and personal development and therefore required the study to use comparative analysis with perceptions of pupils of different ages. The consequence of this for the findings is that any statement of linear progression of development is suggestive and is not intended to be a statement of fact.

Timing was also a consideration in gaining access to schools and their pupils. The school year is run on a timetable which takes up the full amount of time available to the pupil. Therefore the addition of a further distraction from the curriculum can be a source of frustration for both the pupils and their teachers. It was essential therefore that contact with the study sample was kept to a minimum without placing undue time pressure on the pupils to complete the questionnaires to the detriment of the quality of data they provided.

Time also prevented travel to include schools outside the greater Dublin area which meant that, while the profiles of the study sample reflect a cross section of socio-economic and educational backgrounds, it does not contain a sample from rural or agricultural backgrounds for comparison. However despite the relatively small sample group and the other limitations placed on the study which has been mentioned here, this study like other qualitative studies yielded data sets which are detailed and rich.

### **3.6. Ethical and Political Considerations**

According to Berg (2001) careful consideration of ethical issues is critical to the success or failure of any high quality research involving humans. All research which is conducted under the jurisdiction of Dublin City University is subject to ethical review by the university's ethics committee. As the subjects of this research were under the age of consent I was required to seek the approval of the ethics committee before I could proceed with my requests for access to the schools and their pupils. Having reviewed my application the ethics committee considered that the risk of harm the study and its



activities would pose to the pupils, the researcher and to the university was low and I was given approval to conduct the research.

Throughout the research project ethical considerations were of continual concern and were guided by my supervisor and the current ethical guidelines on best practice issued by the university's ethic committee (2006). Each pupil who participated in the study was advised of their voluntary status and also of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. They were further advised of the confidentiality of the data gathered and of the protection of their identity from persons or institutions outside the remit of the study. Further assurance of anonymity was guaranteed by stating that neither schools nor pupils would be identified by name in this report and that all questionnaires and transcripts of interviews would be held at a secure location and subsequently be destroyed after a period not exceeding 6 years. Each pupil who volunteered to partake in the study was issued with a plain language statement which outlined the process, and an informed consent form which they were required to sign and have countersigned by their parent or guardian before being allowed to contribute data to the research (see Appendix A page 119, B page 120 and C page 121).

There are also political considerations that needed to be taken into account while conducting this research. Unofficial league tables published by the *Irish Times* show that there are still significantly less pupils from disadvantaged areas taking up university places than there are from middleclass schools (2011). The influence that socioeconomic background and social and educational disadvantage can have on a child's perceptions of education as a whole have to be considered when approaching them to engage in this type of research. There are both ethical and political considerations to be taken into account when pupils are asked to provide personal information for research and what effect these might have on the truth and accuracy of the answers they give.

Furthermore head teachers and their staff will hope to present the activities of the school and its pupils in the best possible light when dealing with outside agencies. When a school is approached and asked to provide a sample of their pupils for research it is natural to expect them to provide access to pupils that they are confident will represent the school in a positive way. In consideration of the influence that this might have on the research it was vital to explain to the pupils the importance of their contribution to

the project and why it was essential that they feel confident to allow their true perceptions to be recorded.

### **3.7. Approach to Data Collection**

As has been stated earlier, it was essential that the collection of data for this research should be done in a way that caused as little disruption as possible to the daily school life of the pupils and teachers who had chosen to give their time to the project. The research entailed visiting the schools to conduct questionnaires and group interviews with a sample group from the pupil cohort. I began my request for access to the pupil cohort by writing letters to the school principals asking for their cooperation in the research (see Appendix D page 122 and E 123). The letters outlined the reasons behind the project, its objectives and requested access to pupils who fitted within the age range of the project. Schools were chosen using the primary and post-primary schools list which are available on the Department of Education and Skills web site (2011).

To help keep track of the selection process I prepared a matrix which listed the names of the schools on a vertical axis. On the horizontal axis I added key information I needed to know about the school and its pupil cohort. This matrix included data such as the school sector, its cohort size, and the schools socio-economic background. I also added contact details for the main contact person at each school and dates when initial and subsequent contact was made. Dates were also recorded for visits and for data returns and transcription. Once I began adding data to this matrix I could readily see if the different school sectors were equally represented in the sample group. This matrix guided me in targeting schools which were single-sex, boy or girl, or co-educational, and from both working and middle class backgrounds. Having the data in a quick reference display helped me insure that I maintained the socio-economic and school sector balance I had set out to achieve. The matrix also allowed me to check the current status of my contact with each individual school from selection to initial contact and through to transcription of data and its inclusion in the main data set.

Following confirmation by the school principal of their intention to cooperate with the study each school was issued with a copy of both the plain language statement and informed consent form for each student who wished to partake in the study. There were some minor linguistic differences between the primary and post-primary consent forms which were intended to reflect the cognitive and literacy abilities of the age groups.

As each pupil was below the age of 18 they were required to have the informed consent document countersigned by their parent or guardian.

Once a date had been agreed with each school the actual contact with the study group could begin. To help reduce the amount of influence from outside the pupils own perceptions, questionnaires were not revealed to any pupil or staff member in advance of the visit to the school. The pupils were brought to a classroom within their school and were given a brief explanation on the process of filling out the sections of the questionnaire. Each questionnaire was coded to protect the confidentiality of the respondents during the process. Only I had access to the codes and could directly link the information back to each pupil. This brought anonymity to the process which eased some of the ethical concerns as it helped to reassure participants' apprehension concerning invasion of privacy (Cooper & Schindler, 2001; Aronson & Carlsmith, 1969). The pupils were given 30 minutes to fill out the questionnaire while under the supervision of a school staff member and myself. This supervision insured that each pupil filled their questionnaire privately and was not influenced by, or was able to influence, other pupils in the room. The staff member and I were available to offer clarification if required but school staff members were informed not to assist any pupil in adding content to their responses. No pupil was excused until the time period had expired. This helped to prevent rushed responses to the questions and promoted a fuller engagement with the study. At the conclusion of the 30 minute period I collected the questionnaires and took them away for later transcription and analysis. No information on the content of the data was given to the schools at this stage but the preliminary findings from each school were used to inform the choice of questions for the group interview stage of the research which was carried out only with the post-primary school pupils. These interviews, which were designed to gather further qualitative data and to seek clarification of comments entered in the questionnaires, were conducted as soon after the questionnaire sessions as was practical for all concerned. Once again it was crucial that the work involved in the gathering of the data did not in any way influence or change the perceptions of the pupils. Serious concerns have been voiced about the appropriateness of interviews as a method of gathering rich and reliable data from adolescent study subjects (Breakwell, 2000; Baily, 1994).

However Freeman and Mathison, (2009) believe that group interviews or focus groups can be used to gain some sort of aspect on the group perspective and shared

experiences. This further perspective would help to confirm or refute the influences of peers on the development of individual perspectives.

Each group interview session was restricted to 30 minutes because of concerns about the imposition and disruption to the school timetable and the effect shorter attention spans of adolescents could have on the quality of the data gathered (Arskey & Knight, 1999). This time restriction also meant that the interview could be restricted to the topics of concern and that deviation was kept to a minimum. An audio recording was made of each interview session for transcription at a later date and formed part of the overall data set.

### **3.8. Conclusion**

This chapter placed the research project within its philosophical grounding and described how the study required that this be a constructivist, post positivists, philosophy. This approach is essential to allow the rigorous collection, analysis and dissemination of the qualitative data which is the main focus of this study. By adopting this philosophy the study intends to get to the true subjective thoughts of the study group, the perceptions of university that they hold and to reveal the influences which contrive to inform those perceptions.

# **CHAPTER 4 – DATA COLLECTION AND PREPARATION FOR ANALYSIS**

## **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter looks in more detail at the methods used in the collection of the data and how those methods were applied in the field. It explains the workflow of the study beginning with the initial requests for access to the pupils, follows through the preparation and coding of questionnaires for the visits to the schools and looks at the practicalities and issues encountered during the gathering and preparation of the data for analysis. The workflow section finishes with a review of the collection process and the preparation of the data for analysis.

The final section of this chapter explains the analytical methods used to analyse the data. It briefly explains the theories which define the methods chosen, the rationale behind their choice and discusses the strengths and weaknesses each method presents in analysing qualitative data.

## **4.2 Collection of Data**

The initial request for access to the pupil cohort of each school selected for research was made in writing to the school principals. I had requested a supply of DCU School of Education Studies headed notepaper and envelopes from the school office for this purpose as I felt that school principals would be more likely to respond to a request for access which was written on official headed notepaper. However this proved not to be the case as a number of schools did not reply to this initial request. I could not simply assume that their lack of response to the letter meant that they did not want to be involved in the research as letters can be miss directed or lost, either in the postal system or in a school administration office. In an effort to either confirm or deny a school's involvement in the project, I made a further attempt, by email where an email address could be identified, to contact schools which had not responded to my initial request. This email informed the principal that a letter had been sent and that no response had been received. It also repeated my request for access and a copy of the original letter was attached to the email for their attention. If this did not illicit a response within a week I then selected another school of similar criteria from the list of schools and began the contact process with them. I continued with this process until my

original target of 5 primary and 5 post-primary schools had agreed to be involved in the project.

I do not believe that there was any ulterior motive behind decisions by schools not to be involved in this project or that there was a lack of support or understanding of the relevance of my research. One school principal did reply to refuse access and cited their busy schedule while preparing for Leaving Certificate Examinations as the reason for their refusal. There are a lot of demands placed on schools by the curriculum throughout the year and in the current environment of staff shortages and cut backs it is easy to understand why some schools chose not to be involved in research which is additional to the demands already placed on their programme. In the same context it has led me to appreciate all the more the efforts made by the staff and pupils of the schools who chose to give their time and opinions to the project. Their welcoming approach and eagerness to engage in the process was greatly appreciated.

The schools that did respond assigned their vice principal, guidance teacher, home school liaison officer or another member of their teaching staff to coordinate with the project and these contacted me by email or phone to confirm their participation. At this stage I sent six copies of a two page document which contained the Plain Language Statement and the Informed Consent Form to the school. The staff member assigned to the project was asked to have the informed consent form filled in and signed by the parent or guardian of each pupil who had volunteered to partake in the project. A copy of the plain language statement was retained by the parent or guardian for their records. The informed consent form was inspected by me on the day of my visit to insure that each pupil, as well as their parent or guardian, fully understood the implications of their participation in the study and had signed the form giving consent for their child to take part in the research. Once all was found to be in order these forms were retained by me and form part of the research documentation. The pupils had been approached by the teacher who was chosen as the liaison for the project so therefore I must assume that instinct would lead them to choose pupils which they felt would best represent the school. My concerns regarding the impact this might have on the data gathered was discussed in chapter 3 under Ethical and Political considerations. (see page 42)

Once the consent forms had been countersigned by the pupils' parents or guardians I contacted the school to arrange a suitable time for my visit. I then prepared a set of questionnaires which I brought to the school on the day of my visit and each pupil

involved in the research was issued with a copy which had a unique pupil code, along with a page number, printed in the header of each of the four pages. The page number insured that the pupils received the questions in the correct sequence and the pupil codes insured that if the pages of a questionnaire were to become separated at any stage during the analysis then the content of those pages could not be inadvertently assigned to the wrong pupil.

The design and implementation of these codes insured that I was able to control, organise, and identify the source of each piece of data and that I could readily identify each school and the individual pupil that had provided data from that school. I used a simple alpha numeric code which firstly identified the school as a primary (PS) or post-primary (PP) school. This was followed by a two digit number which identified the schools in the order in which they were initially visited, 01 for the first school and 02 for the second etc. The second part of this code identified each pupil and, like the school identifier, consisted of an alpha numeric sequence. A single letter identified the school that was been visited by its sector, Boys (B), Girls (G) or Co-Educational (C), and the final two digit code represented the pupil. Therefore in the first primary school I visited, which was a boy single sex school, the first pupil to enter the room was assigned the code PS01B01. The next number in the sequence was issued to each student as they entered the room so the second pupil was then designated PS01B02 and so forth. Similarly the first post-primary school visited, which was a Co-Educational school, was assigned PP01C, adding 01 to 06 for each pupil in the room.

This system meant that each student had a unique code by which their data could be identified, traced and isolated from the main data set as required throughout the collection and analysis process. On the day of my visit to a school the pupil's names were assigned to their code in a separate note book. If a school provided their pupils' names in advance then this matching process was carried out before my visit and the appropriate copy of the questionnaire was issued to the pupils once I had identified them by name. The pairing of names and codes was later transcribed to a workbook of spreadsheets titled "*Data Analysis Workbook*" which I had prepared to store all data collected during my visits to the schools. For the analysis writing stage I assigned random, fictitious school names and first names to each pupil rather than using the codes outlined earlier as I believed this made for easier reading of the report of the findings in the later chapters. Protecting the identity of the pupils and the schools behind this double layer of coding meant that confidentiality was maintained at all times.

I believe it was important to maintain anonymity of the schools and pupils during the analysis of the data and the reporting of the findings as this had been promised in the plain language statement issued to each pupil when requesting their participation in the project.

Because of the difficulty encountered in getting permission to access schools and the time constraints placed on this project I decided to use the first primary and post-primary schools visited to pilot the questionnaire. This gave me a pilot group which was equal to 18% of the study group. With this in mind I issued a sample questionnaire to the schools and asked the principal and assigned staff member to advise me on the appropriateness of the language and layout used in relation to the age profile and cognitive ability of their pupils who would be taking part in the research. The pupils from these schools who had volunteered for the research then completed the questionnaire and this first data set was used to assess if the questionnaire was fit for purpose. Once this had been established I decided that the data gathered from these pupils could be incorporated into the main data set.

On the day of my visit to a school the pupils were arranged at desks in a classroom much as they would be in their normal class. They were issued with their questionnaire and pointed to a brief explanation of the motives behind the research and why they were being asked to take part which was printed at the top of the first page of each questionnaire. I then explained the layout of the questionnaire to the pupils and asked them to fill out the forms to the best of their ability. The member of staff who supervised the session and I then retreated to the front of the room and were available to the pupils should they need clarification on any aspect of the questionnaire. At the end of these visits I thanked the pupils and staff for their cooperation, gathered up the questionnaires and brought them away for later analysis.

On my return to the post-primary schools for interview sessions I prepared an interview question prompt sheet, (see appendix H page132), which contained two columns; one for the questions I intended to ask the pupils and one for writing notes against each question. For practical reasons, such as time constraints on the school programme and ethical concerns about individual interviews with pupils, these sessions were conducted as group interviews but some questions were directed to individuals or to each pupil in turn. The group interviews were used as opportunities to clarify statements which were



written in the questionnaires as well as to expand on, or test theories which emerged during the initial analysis of the questionnaire responses.

As the pupils entered the room I asked them to confirm their name and directed them to sit around a table according to their original code numbers. The pupils were not told that the codes were being used to assign their seat but this arrangement allowed me to write that number i.e. 01, 02 as they spoke on the prompt sheet opposite each question. This method of note taking meant that I was able at all times to maintain eye contact with the group during the recording process and to insure that each pupil was given the opportunity to respond to the questions. I used the prompt sheet to insure that I could limit deviation from the topics and used the pupil code later when reviewing and transcribing the data to insure that data was assigned to the appropriate pupil.

### **4.3 Preparation of Data for Analysis**

Upon my return from each visit I transcribed the data from the questionnaires into two documents. These were the "*Data Analysis Workbook*" mentioned earlier which held the quantitative data and two documents laid out in table form which I called "*Primary Qualitative Analysis*" and "*Post-Primary Qualitative Analysis*" into these documents I transcribed the qualitative data from each pupil under headings which were the questions posed in the questionnaire.

The "*Data Analysis*" workbook contained two spreadsheets for both primary and post-primary schools. These were called "*Quantitative*" and "*Cross Analysis*" sheets. On the quantitative sheet I entered data which would provide a quantitative analysis of the whole study group in areas such as age, gender and the class or year they were currently in at school. The cross analysis sheet contained some of the same data but also other quantitative data which would provide a method to analyse the data from the group using different dependant and independent variables. This data was filtered so it could readily provide figures for different combinations of the data. For example, how many pupils were from single parent families, 2 from primary schools and 3 from post-primary schools, or how many had family experience of university, 22 from primary schools and 10 from post-primary schools. Filtration of the data also allowed for combinations of data to be tested. It allowed me to see for example how many pupils from working class families had a relatives who had been to university, 3 from primary schools and 5 from post-primary schools.

In the “*Qualitative Analysis*” document I prepared a simple table which had three columns. These were labelled “*Pupil No.*”, “*Response*” and “*Comment and Analysis*”. This table was subdivided horizontally for each qualitative question in the questionnaire and the data supplied by each pupil was added to the subdivisions in the following manner.

1.1 If I was from Mars, how would you explain to me what a university is?		
Pupil No.	Response	Comment and Analysis
PS01B01	I think that university is...	

**Figure 1** Example of Qualitative Analysis Document

If this pupil also responded during the interview stage I added:

**In Interview:** I think that university is...

below the original questionnaire entry. If the interview response was to a question not on the original questionnaire then that question and response was given a separate section later in the document.

Studying the data in this table allowed me to see how the responses for each question compared across the study group and allowed for themes within the thoughts and ideas that were shared by the pupils to become more readily apparent than if each questionnaire was read and analyzed only in isolation. In the Comment and Analysis column for each pupil I added any initial comments which I felt might be relevant to the subsequent coding process. During the coding process I used codes which were simple words such as “Career” or “Education” as I feel this method of coding is more explicit and makes for easier analysis and comparison of the data than using abstract or alpha numeric codes. The codes were added to the Comment and Analysis column and helped to reduce the data down to a manageable size for analysis. Subsequently the codes were transferred to a further workbook which I called “*Qualitative Analysis Spreadsheets*” with the pupil codes on a vertical axis and the analysis codes on the horizontal axis. Each pupil was given a score of one in any cell where their data could be represented by the code at the top of the column. By returning to the table containing the raw data and reviewing the full answers to each question I was able to ascertain if all data was capable of being represented by a code that had been placed on the matrix, if a further code was required to be ascribed or if groups of codes could be combined under a single heading or category. By having my qualitative data clearly presented in its raw format

in the table and in its coded format in the spreadsheet I was able to insure that full data saturation was achieved.

The scores for each code in this spreadsheet were then totalled and sorted so that I could review the coded data in descending order of occurrences. This gave me a clear and verifiable reference to the issues which were the key influences in the formation of the perceptions which are held by the study group both as individuals and as a collective. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) suggested that matrices can be used to display co-occurrence or one piece of data in terms of another. By checking back with the spreadsheets I had designed for the quantitative data I was able to explore if certain findings were representative of co-occurrences and if these were reflecting influences which were having an effect on the formation of the pupils' perceptions. For example I could filter data to match pupils' age or gender with socio-economic background and conduct an analysis across the full set of qualitative data for that particular grouping to see if co-occurrences were prevalent. Also by returning to the "*Data Analysis*" spreadsheets I could readily check if these groupings had shared the same ideas and issues in their responses to the questionnaire and interviews. This type of filtered data analysis has helped to reveal co-occurrences within the data that were not readily apparent when looking at the entire quantitative data set.

#### **4.4 Analysis Methods**

The qualitative data gathered during this research provided a rich collection of thoughts and opinions which needed to be analysed rigorously in order to allow the patterns and themes embedded in the pupils' perceptions to emerge. Qualitative data analysis involves organizing, accounting for and explaining the data; in short making sense of the data in terms of the participants' definition of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities (Cohen et al., 2010, p.461). While conducting the analysis of the data I used methods which have their practices rooted in constant comparison, content analysis, grounded theory and discourse analysis. These four forms of qualitative data analysis, while adopting different approaches to the task, provide an all encompassing rigor to the analysis of the data which has been generated by this research. This section gives a brief explanation of the four data analysis methods mentioned above, outlines how these methods benefited the analysis process and highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses inherent in these methods.

Content analysis uses strict and systematic procedures for the rigorous examination of the content of written data (Mayring, 2004). Originally designed for the analysis of the growing amount of data emerging in the mass media of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, content analysis used coding and categories to analyse frequencies and themes within the data and to provide quantitative analysis of the content. It has however developed into a qualitative method for analysing both structured and unstructured written data such as qualitative answers in questionnaires or interview transcriptions (Altheide, 1996; Mostyn, 1985). Content analysis of quantitative data uses coding and categorisations which are generated by the researcher and later applied to the data. The coding often exists before the data and is generated either from the research question or from the hypothesis. However qualitative data often generates theory which emerges from the data during analysis and therefore in these circumstances the analysis is not carried out to test or prove a predefined theory which forms the research question but rather to understand what is happening within a given situation and to learn about the processes which are operating within the area being studied.

Webber (1990, p.70) defines four key aspects of content analysis procedure which are, *measurement*: the assignment of numbers which stand for some aspect of the text, *indication*: the inference by the investigator of some unmeasured quality or characteristic of text from those numbers, *representation*: techniques for describing syntactic, semantic or pragmatic aspects of text and *interpretation*: the translation of the meaning of text into some other abstract analytical or theoretical language.

Krippendorph (2004, p.18) defines content analysis as the use of replicable and valid methods for making specific inferences from text to other states or properties of its source. In other words the inferences derived from the data by one researcher can be replicated and confirmed as valid by others who analyse the same data.

However this research does not set out to just present quantitative findings from the data that has been gathered; it looks also to seek out the perceptions of the pupils, the influences at work around them and the circumstance in which their perceptions are formed. It therefore needs to look closely at the data and examine the content at a deeper level than merely searching for themes and repeated phrases which might reveal a perception of university which is held at the general level but not reveal variations which may only be found by looking at the individual or sub-group level. Becker and Lissmann (1973) have described separate levels of content. Themes and the main ideas of the content are defined as primary content while the context in which the information

is provided is regarded as latent content. It is this latent content within the data gathered for this research which will provide the greatest insight into how young children's and adolescents' perceptions of university are formed.

Grounded theory is a general methodology which allows for a more inductive form of analysis and promotes the emergence of theory which is grounded in data which have been systemically gathered and analysed (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Sandelowski (2000, p.247) states that grounded theory has a naturalist imperative to not manipulate or impose a priori conceptualization on the target phenomenon making it ideally suited to theorizing human understandings. In this method patterns and themes are latent within the data and are waiting to be discovered. With grounded theory the researcher develops and modifies the coding and categorisation of the data as they work through the analytical process allowing the theories to emerge, or as Glaser (2011) puts it, the researcher must trust in emergence by starting to constantly comparatively analyze their data.

Constant comparison is a method which compares new data with data and categories already available in order to achieve a perfect fit where all data can be accounted for. If parts of the data do not fit into categories or emergent theories then either the categories or the theories have to be modified until all data can be accounted for. The purpose of this stage is to generate theory by using explicit coding and analytic procedures which lead to data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p.102). The constant comparison, generation and regeneration of codes and categories allow the theory to emerge from the data in an unforced manner and leads on to the writing up stage of the process. Before writing, the validity of the theory should be evaluated. Glaser & Strauss (1999, p.237) suggest that the emergent theory can be evaluated against several criteria the main four being, 1. the closeness of fit between theory and data, 2. is the theory readily understandable to lay people working in the field, 3. can the theory be generalised across diverse situations within the area researched, 4. is the theory adaptable enough to make it worth trying. Once these criteria are met then it is safe to proceed to the writing up stage of the analysis.

There is a danger however that qualitative data can lose its richness when it is subjected to coding and categorisation. It is easy for the researcher to become caught up in the measurement of occurrences of themes and lose the original meanings intended by the respondent which can be hidden within the context in which the response was made and

the language they used during the research. Besmer & O'Quinn (1993) suggest that the researcher can kill the muse of creativity within their analysis of the data by over scrutinising it. Discourse analysis allows the researcher to examine not just the written responses in a questionnaire, transcribed data from a taped interview or other sources of written text but also the circumstance in which those responses were given.

Cooke (2004) refers to the linking of the formal discourse which refers to the facts that are present in the analyzed text and the contextual discourse which refers to the outside world, the knowledge or schemata which is not included in the written text under analysis but has an influence on the meaning intended by the respondent. Saussure (1993) divided the broad meaning of language into two concepts; *langue*, which he suggests is the system which enables people to speak to each other, and *parole*, which is a particular set of produced statements. Discourse can be defined as *parole* as it is interplay between the producer and interpreter of statements both of whom play significant roles in the proper understanding of the message being sent. It is the work undertaken to insure understanding and accurate interpretation of the data gathered during qualitative research which leads to rigorous analysis and valid, reliable findings.

Fulcher (2012) argues that discourse analysis can, in terms of validity, have greater ecological validity since it deals more with everyday experiences than those that are often studied in the laboratory. It deals with people who are defining their realities within the context that they believe they are living their lives and tries to explore the richness of their discourse and to capture the meaning behind the *langue* and *parole* that they employ in their attempts to communicate with the researcher. Bates Averill supports this idea by saying that,

The beliefs, passions, concerns, contexts, and lived experiences of any population possess a richness and uniqueness that would be missed without creative expression beyond numerical information (2002, p.865).

She however points the reader towards a caveat that qualitative researchers are continuously challenged to address which Denzin (1997, p.3) calls, "a triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis" in their efforts to authentically honour polyvocality in their investigations.

However Hayes (1997) cautions about the ability to guarantee reliability while using discourse analysis. As this method relies on interpretation of more than just the spoken word it is possible that other researchers may reach a different interpretation of the

messages being sent by the interviewee. When a researcher chooses to interpret the context in which words are spoken and the messages the respondent might be trying to send it is difficult for the researcher not to allow their own motivational factors, expectations, familiarity, avoidance of discomfort to influence their interpretation. Unlike quantitative analysis of data which leads to verifiable measurements, or grounded theory and constant comparison of qualitative data which lead to coded representations of the data, discourse analysis is open to subjective interpretation of the latent content and therefore the findings of one researcher may not be reliably arrived at by another. The researcher who chooses to use discourse analysis should be aware of the pitfalls that this reflexivity presents in their work and be vigilant in their efforts to reduce the impact that their own personal assumptions can have on their interpretation of the data and of the context in which it was gathered. Hammersley (1992) advises the qualitative researcher to be internally reflexive in taking account of the effects they, and their research methods, have on the findings that have been produced. Using other methods such as grounded theory and constant comparison will give the researcher tools to back up the points they are trying to put forward. But they must accept that reflexivity will also be present in their readers and that they may in turn either refute or agree with the researchers findings based on their own interpretation of the data.

# CHAPTER 5 - QUANTITATIVE OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY GROUP

## 5.1 Stages of Data Analysis

The data gathered for this research was analysed in four stages each supporting the other and leading to a fuller understanding of the answers provided by the pupils and the context in which they were offered. Firstly I carried out an exploratory analysis across the quantitative data to provide an overview of the profiles of pupils within the study group (Tukey, 1977). This exploration looked at age, gender, social class, family status, the level of contact each pupil had, either directly or indirectly, with university and with family members who have graduated or are currently studying at university. Using the “*Data Analysis Workbook*” discussed in the previous chapter I was able to provide quantitative values for each of these areas. This quantitative data was used to demonstrate the mix of age, gender and socio-economic class of pupils within the study group. The same data also provided the short identifiers which are used to insure that quotes used from the questionnaires and interviews during the writing up of the findings in this and the following chapters are credited to the correct pupils. These identifiers were arrived at by referring to the pupil codes mentioned earlier and identifying the substitute name that I had given to the pupil and the school they attend. These identifiers are presented throughout the subsequent chapters in the following format: (Pupil Name, Age, Year of Study, School), for example; (Brian, 11, 4<sup>th</sup> class, Bushfield Primary). Only the pupil’s first name and the name of the school were changed to maintain confidentiality. Other data such as age, gender year of study, etc. refers to the actual data supplied by the pupil.

Analysing the quantitative data in this way also offered an understanding of the context in which the research was carried out and provided dependant and independent variables which could then be used to test theories which emerged during the analysis of the qualitative data. For example if family experiences of university, social class or gender have an impact on a pupil’s perceptions of university. Filtration of this data also allowed comparisons to be made across the data to test if pupils from a similar background or gender, for example, were developing analogous or dissimilar perceptions. It allowed theories to be tracked across the data and helped to reveal insightful or subtle messages behind the comments made by the pupils.



Secondly a constant comparative analysis (LeCompte et al., 1993) of the qualitative data was carried out by gathering together all responses given to each question in the questionnaire and in the group interviews into either the “*Primary Qualitative Analysis*” or “*Post-Primary Qualitative Analysis*” documents. Reading each question, and the responses, in this way helped to reveal commonalties and differences between each reply, allowed themes to emerge and guided me in choosing the quotes I used to demonstrate and support the points I have presented in the analysis of the qualitative data in the subsequent chapters.

Thirdly all data supplied by each pupil was analysed in isolation using discourse analysis methods (Foucault, 2002). This analysis provided an insight to the individuals’ perceptions of university and was used to probe deeper into the schemata which individual pupils might have constructed or inherited and are using to guide them in the construction of their perceptions. Referring back to the two analysis documents which contained the responses for each question allowed me to run comparative tests across the group to help reveal the influences which are operating in the formation and development of pupils perceptions of university. Using the exploratory analysis carried out earlier allowed these individual perceptions to be matched with the pupils’ profiles and checked for emergent themes which might be influenced by status, gender, age and so forth. Finally the data was analysed using content analysis methods, (Krippendorff, 2004), to test the pupil responses against the six research questions posed for consideration earlier. These questions are;

1. What perceptions do young children and adolescents have about university?
2. What has influenced these perceptions?
3. Is there a difference between the perceptions of younger and older children?
4. To what extent do these perceptions relate to the institutional realities of university?
5. Are these perceptions influenced by social status or family educational traditions?
6. Can schools or guidance professionals inform these perceptions and therefore better prepare pupils for their transition towards university education?

This final analysis was used to inform the overall findings revealed in chapter 6 and the discussions and recommendations in chapter 7. The analysis process was designed to reveal how children and adolescents perceptions of university are formed, what influences are working during their formation, if these perceptions are accurate when compared with current understandings of university and finally, where this is not the case, it highlights these misperceptions so that stakeholders, who advise young children

and adolescents on their future education, can put in place research based strategies which may guide their pupils' thoughts towards a more accurate perception of university.

## **5.2 An Overview of the Study Group**

This section uses quantitative data supplied by each pupil to provide the reader with an overview of the study group. It does this by looking at the age range and gender mix of the pupils and the school they attend. It provides figures for their family status including numbers of parents and siblings and for the experiences and second hand accounts of university each pupil has encountered within their family. Finally this section provides quantitative analysis of universities most frequently named by the pupils in response to question 1.8 in the questionnaire, *“Can you give me the names of some universities?”* and for the choices they provided in Question 2.4 when asked *“If you had a choice, what university would you like to go to and why.”* I am presenting this quantitative data in this section to provide a view of the choices the pupils had made and also to show the different universities that they are aware of and which universities were named most frequently.

The first table in this section provides figures for the amount of pupils in each age bracket and the sector of the school they are attending. This table does not deal with the social status of the schools as this is shown in Figure 3. For clarity I have divided the table into two halves to represent both genders separately. It should be noted that this table does not reveal the year of study that pupils were in at the time this study was conducted as this can vary by between one and three years throughout the pupils' school career depending on their age when they start school.<sup>1</sup> The age at which a pupil will complete their secondary education can be determined by whether the school provides a transition year option between a pupil taking the Junior Certificate Examinations and beginning the final two years of study which concentrate on the Leaving Certificate Programme.

There is continuing debate about whether those pupils who take a transition year and therefore sit their Leaving Certificate Examinations one year later than those who do not are more prepared for the transition to university than their younger counterparts

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<sup>1</sup> Most schools operate a cut off point for children enrolling in school for the first time. This means that children whose fourth birthday occurs after the Easter term will not be enrolled in that year. As a consequence they could begin their school life after their fifth birthday. The Education (Welfare) Act 2000 section 17 requires that all children must be attending school by age six.

(Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2005). This debate is continuing and while interesting and perhaps relevant to the formation of these pupils' perceptions it is beyond the reach of this study to analyse the arguments for and against transition year. The option to take transition year is mentioned here purely to clarify the age difference across the study group.

<b>BREAKDOWN OF STUDY GROUP BY AGE, GENDER AND SCHOOL SECTOR</b>							
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Boys</b>			<b>Girls</b>		
<b>School Type</b>		<b>Single-sex</b>	<b>Co-Educational</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>Single-sex</b>	<b>Co-Educational</b>	<b>Totals</b>
<b>Age</b>	9	0	0	0	1	0	1
	10	3	5	8	2	5	7
	11	2	3	5	3	2	5
	12	2	3	5	0	2	2
	13	1	0	1	4	1	5
	14	3	0	3	2	1	3
	15	2	0	2	2	1	3
	16	2	1	3	4	0	4
	17	2	2	4	1	0	1
	18	1	0	1	1	0	1
<b>Totals</b>		<b>18</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>32</b>

**Figure 2** Breakdown of Study Group by Age, Gender & School Sector

The following two tables provide information relating to the schools, and the pupils from their cohort, who volunteered to take part in the research. To maintain the anonymity which was promised in the plain language statement each school is given a fictitious name in these tables. These names are used throughout the rest of this report in the short identifiers which accompany the quotes of the pupils. Each school name is followed by either Primary or Post-Primary to assist the reader in identifying the level of school that the pupil quoted is attending. The first table shows the name assigned to each school and this is followed by the gender of the pupils and the socio-economic class of the school catchment area. As noted earlier this distinction was arrived at by referring to the list of schools included in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Action Plan for Educational Inclusion which is available on the Department of Education and Skills website (2012).

<b>SCHOOLS BY GENDER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND</b>		
<b>Primary Schools</b>		
<b>School Name</b>	<b>Gender Type</b>	<b>Socio-economic background</b>
<b>Bushfield Primary</b>	Boys	Middle Class
<b>City Primary</b>	Girls	Working Class
<b>Old Church Primary</b>	Co - Educational	Working Class
<b>Newtown Primary</b>	Co - Educational	Middle Class
<b>Mayfield Primary</b>	Co - Educational	Middle Class
<b>Post-Primary Schools</b>		
<b>School Name</b>	<b>Gender Type</b>	<b>Socio-economic background</b>
<b>Plunket Post-Primary</b>	Co - Educational	Working Class
<b>Heathlands Post-Primary</b>	Boys	Working Class
<b>Riverside Post-Primary</b>	Girls	Middle Class
<b>Ashgrove Post-Primary</b>	Boys	Middle Class
<b>Birchfields Post-Primary</b>	Girls	Middle Class

Figure 3 Schools by Gender and Socio-Economic Background

The second table looks at the age range of the pupils in each school. It does not present ages for each gender but is designed to show the ages of the pupil cohort of each school.

<b>PUPIL AGE BREAKDOWN BY SCHOOL</b>													
<b>Primary</b>						<b>Post-Primary</b>							
<b>School</b>	<b>Age</b>					<b>School</b>	<b>Age</b>						
	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>		<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Bushfield Primary</b>		3	2		1	<b>Plunket Post-Primary</b>		1	1	1	1	2	
<b>City Primary</b>	1	2	3			<b>Heathlands Post-Primary</b>	1		2	1		2	
<b>Old Church Primary</b>		2	3	1		<b>Riverside Post-Primary</b>		3		1	3		1
<b>Newtown Primary</b>		5	1	2		<b>Ashgrove Post-Primary</b>	1		1	1	2		1
<b>Mayfield Primary</b>		3	1	2		<b>Birchfields Post-Primary</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1	

Figure 4 Pupil Age Breakdown by School.

As can be seen there is a two year overlap between the primary and post-primary schools. A pupil aged 12 or 13 can be in 1st year at secondary school or in 6th class at a primary school depending on their date of birth and their progression through primary

school. In the entire study group there was only one 13 year old who was still in 6th class at primary school. If this pupil was to opt for transition year at secondary school he would be 19 years old when he finished secondary school. However the two boys of the same age who are in 1st year at secondary school will be in the same situation at aged 18 if they too decide to opt for transition year or just 17 if they opt for a five year secondary school programme. It is in this area where the debate surrounding the maturity of pupils and their preparedness for study at university is at its most contentious. The argument in favour of a compulsory transition year is that the pupils are more mature and therefore more cognitively developed when they arrive at university (Geffers, 2007). The following table shows the numbers of pupils at each age and how many are represented in the age crossover between primary and post-primary levels.

AGE CROSSOVER BETWEEN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY PUPILS										
Age	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Primary	1	15	10	5	1					
Post-Primary				3	4	6	5	7	5	2

Figure 5 Age Crossover between Primary and Post-Primary Schools

Question 3.2 asked the pupils to choose from three options to describe how they believed they were currently coping with their studies at school. The options were OK, Good, and Very Well. This question was asked to allow analysis of the pupils' perception of their current academic abilities. It also allowed me to check if group or individuals responses to other questions were being influenced by the option they selected in this question.

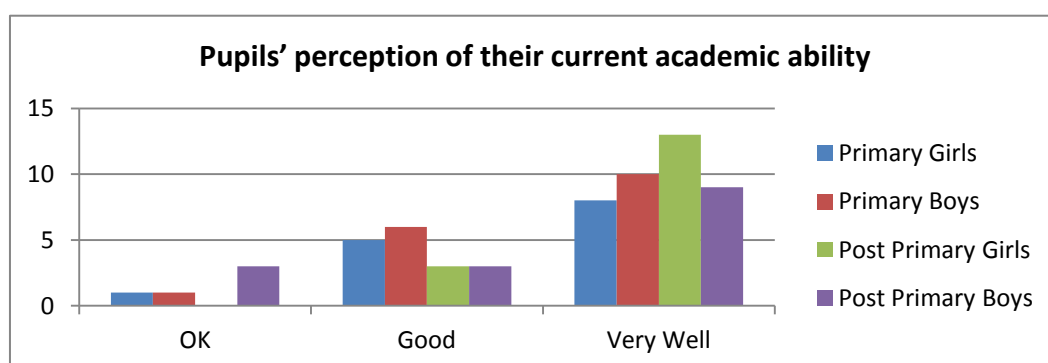
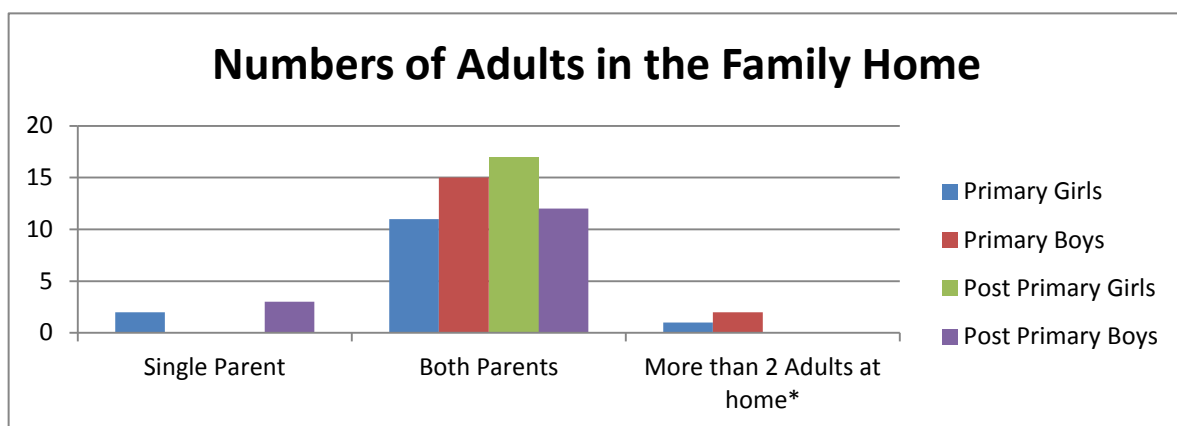


Figure 6 Pupils' Perception of Their Current Academic Ability

The chart clearly shows that two Primary and three Post-Primary pupils believe that they are doing *OK* at school. The rest of the group are clustered in the *Good* and *Very*

*Well* bands with the highest figures for all four groups choosing *Very Well* as their response. This chart also reveals that despite the pressures of Junior and Leaving Certificate Examinations most post-primary pupils who took part in this study expressed confidence in their abilities to cope with their study requirements.

The following charts reveal the family status of the pupils. The data contained in them are gathered from quantitative questions in the questionnaires. Once again I have divided each chart by gender to present a clearer picture. In the first chart the pupils were asked to enter the numbers of adults, brothers and sisters who were currently in the family home. This data was requested to reveal the actual family status of each pupil and to provide dependant and independent variables which could be used to explore the influence of family size on the development of perceptions. The chart shows that the vast majority of pupils are from a typical two parent family with only 5 pupils or 8% of the study group stating that there was only one adult in the home.



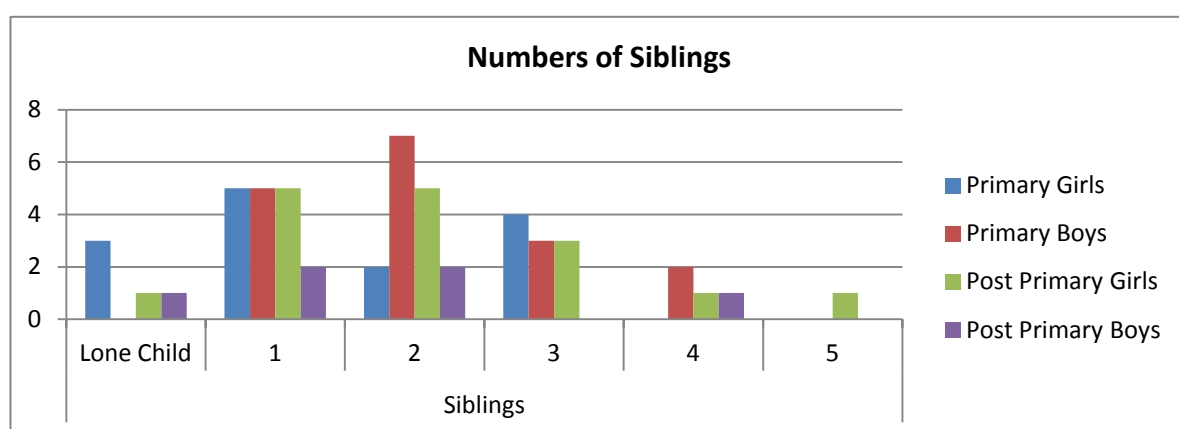
**Figure 7** Numbers of Adults in the Family Home.

\*These pupils included adult siblings and other adults living in the family home.

The following chart looks at the numbers of siblings that the pupils have. It is important to review this data as each family will have to consider the expense of sending one or more children to university. As the numbers of siblings grow in a family the cost of financing multiple university courses becomes more acute. O’Connell, Clancy and McCoy (2006, pp.80-81) found that those of lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to delay their application by several years citing family/personal reasons or time taken to save for college as their reasons for the delay.

*I think it is easier for those from a wealthier background to get to college, more opportunities (like grinds<sup>1</sup>). Motivated people. I don't think you can really categorise or stereotype people who go to university because people from all walks of life and backgrounds attend college. However I do think family income etc impacts on no. of people attending college.*  
(Margaret 17, 6<sup>th</sup> year, Birchfields Post-Primary).

Margaret's comments concerning her perceived advantage that wealthier pupils can gain through taking grinds are supported by longitudinal research carried out by Smith et al (2007) into the experience of third year secondary school pupils, as they prepared for their Junior Certificate Examinations, which showed that the majority of students taking grinds are from middle-class backgrounds.



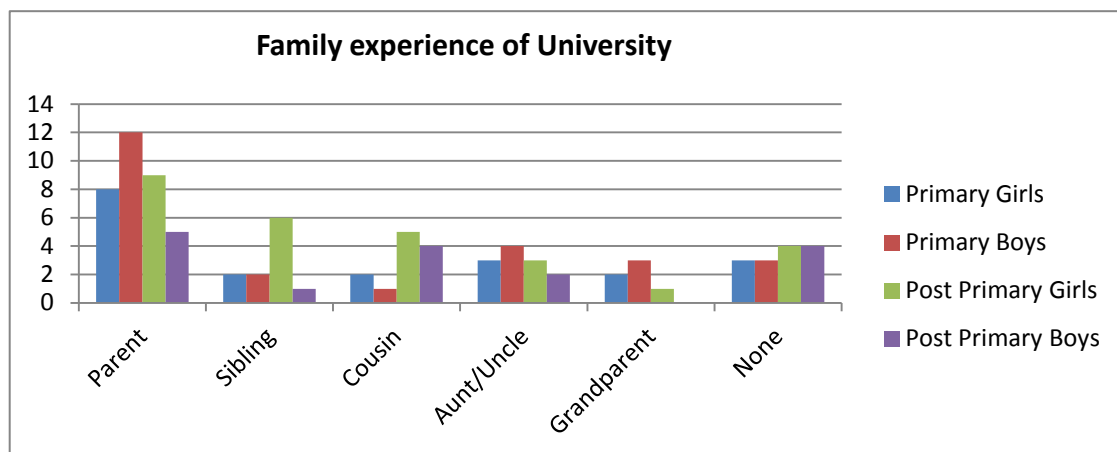
**Figure 8** Numbers of Siblings

However despite her lone parent status, Laska who is aged 10, from a working class background and in 4<sup>th</sup> class in City Primary, stated that her parent, brother and one of her two sisters had attended university and that she had a desire to attend Trinity College Dublin when her time came to go to university. While her case might be unique in this study and perhaps rare at a national level it does point towards positive educational aspirations across the social divide despite financial or other restrictions which may be seen as a block to educational advancement by these pupils and their families.

As young children and adolescents begin to explore the possibility of a university education it is beneficial for them to be able to call on the experiences of close family members. These experiences help the pupil to develop an understanding of the differences between their current school and university, the educational and social language used and the commitment to self motivated study that is expected of a student

<sup>1</sup> Grinds are fee paying private tuition in individual subjects offered outside school hours. There are many institutions and private individuals offering grinds in Ireland, particularly at secondary school level.

at university. The chart below shows the level of direct family experience of university that the pupils have been exposed to. Some of the pupils have more than one family member who is either currently at university, has graduated in the past or was about to start their studies in the academic year subsequent to those in which this study was conducted.



**Figure 9** Family Experience of University

If we now look at the university experience of the immediate family, parents and siblings, and present the values as percentages of the study population it shows that the primary school children are more likely to have a parent who has been to university. This difference reflects the generational change in aspirations towards university study. In the recent “*Celtic Tiger*” period more parents were able to consider third level study for their children (Marcus, 2012). It could be argued that some of these children are now parents of primary school children themselves while some older parents of post-primary pupils may not have had the opportunities that these younger parents might have had. However, when the percentages for siblings are added together it shows that the post-primary pupils are almost twice as likely as the primary pupils to have a sibling with experience of university study. This imbalance is most likely to be a reflection of the age profile of the siblings of the primary school pupils. The primary school pupils in this study are just as likely to be the eldest child in a family as they are to be the youngest.

Primary n=32			Post-Primary n=32		
Parents	Brother	Sister	Parents	Brother	Sister
62%	9%	3%	44%	12%	12%

**Figure 10** Percentage of Study Group with Family Experience of University



However when the pupils were asked if they have members of their family who are currently studying at university the numbers who have this direct and current experience was more balanced. In the response to this question 31% of primary pupils and 29% of post-primary pupils answered yes.

### **5.3 Choice of University**

As was stated earlier the pupils were asked about their current knowledge of universities. In question 1.8 on their questionnaire they were asked to name some universities that they had heard of. They were allowed to list 3 universities, and therefore the figures in the table for “*Named Universities*” on the following page reflect the number of times an institution appeared on pupils’ lists of known universities and therefore some totals are greater than the total of pupils in the study group. Question 2.4 asked the pupils to name the university that they would like to attend. They were allowed to name just one university and to give their reasons for making that choice. In the table below I have presented the lists of universities, institutes of technology and private colleges that this enquiry produced and have ranked them in order of popularity for both the named universities and the preferred choices. There are 7 universities in Ireland however it is important to include choices, given by the pupils, which are not universities as this reflects their understandings of what constitutes a university. The table is divided according to results for primary and post-primary school. The intuitions which proved most popular with both sets of pupils are Irish. I have not included separate entries in this table for universities or other institutions which were mentioned by only one pupil. These tended to be foreign institutions, both within the EU and beyond, and are grouped together as “*Others*” in this table.

BREAKDOWN OF UNIVERSITIES BY NAME AND PREFERRED CHOICE							
Named Universities				University of Choice			
	Primary	Post Primary	Total		Primary	Post Primary	Total
DCU	22	23	45	DCU	7	13	20
UCD	16	23	39	Trinity	6	5	11
Trinity	14	17	31	UCD	4	6	10
NUI Maynooth	3	5	8	NUI Maynooth	2	2	4
Dublin University*	3	0	3	Dublin University*	2	0	2
IT Tallaght	0	3	3	Music Performing Arts#	2	0	2
National College of Ireland	0	2	2	Harvard	0	2	2
NUI Galway		2	2				
Oxford		2	2				
Others	14	7	21	Others	8	5	12

Figure 11 Breakdown of Universities by Name & Preferred Choice

\* The pupils who entered this may be referring to either DCU or UCD

# Pupils here were referring to a type of university rather than identifying it by name.

The universities which proved to be the most popular choice with the study group, Trinity and DCU, are also among the popular choices for students applying for places from the Central Admissions Office (CAO). Thus the point requirements for entry to these universities tend to be higher than other universities or institutions and consequently competition for places can be very keen. It could also be argued that the popularity of DCU as a university of choice with the pupils might have been influenced by the fact that this study was conducted by a student from DCU and there was a desire therefore to create a good impression by favouring that university in this context. However analyses of the reasons behind the selection of a preferred university are suggestive of deeper thought processes and personal motives. The chart below shows the 6 most prominent reasons given for these choices and how these are reflected across the study group.

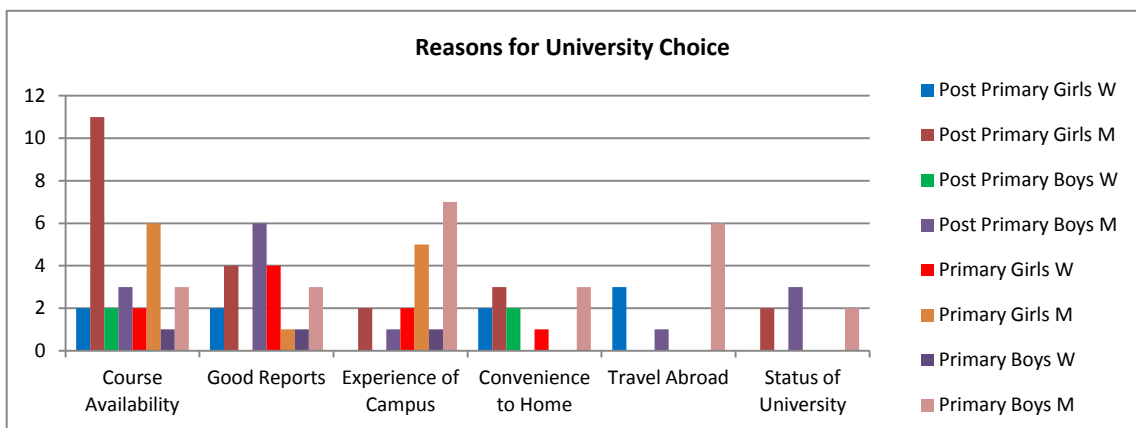


Figure 12 Reasons for University Choice

Some pupils combined two or more of these reasons to justify their preferred choice of university. A small number of pupils, three in each case, mentioned other reasons for their choice which are not included in the chart above these were extra- curricular activities and the standard of facilities at the university. There was only one pupil who said that their choice was influenced by parental pressure and a further pupil who said that they did not know which university they would choose to go to. The university that is preferred, the motives behind these choices and the influences which inform them will be explored further in the following chapter.

# CHAPTER 6 – OVERAL FINDINGS & EMERGENT THEMES

## 6.1 Introduction

The following sections of this chapter discuss the overall findings of the study by exploring the themes that have emerged during the analysis of the qualitative data. This process is designed to highlight the main findings of the study and to reveal the perceptions that young children and adolescents have of university. The themes are presented below not in order of quantitative responses but rather in a chronological order which firstly compares university with school. This is followed by a discussion of perceptions of the type of people who choose to study at university and their motivations for doing so. Finally the analysis looks at the perceptions of teaching methods and the perceived benefits of graduating from a university.

The exploration of these themes is supported by the use of quotes from the pupils who contributed to the study. Comments are copied exactly as they were written by the pupils on their questionnaire or are transcribed verbatim from the group interview recordings. Any grammatical errors or colloquial expressions used by the pupils remain uncorrected in order to preserve a true representation of the discourse they used to describe their perceptions and allow the tenor of their voices to be heard through the analysis. The comments are referenced in the text by adding the short identifiers mentioned earlier. (see page 58)

The pupils who were involved in this study were found to have specific perceptions of university, its role in society and the benefits that might accrue to those who chose to study at, and graduate from university. They did not define a university in its physical context but chose to concentrate on what happens there. They saw university as a means to an end, a place where they, or students they imagined to be at university now, went to study for the qualifications they needed for their chosen career. They understood that university is a voluntary part of their education that follows on from primary and post-primary schooling which is obligatory under the Education (Welfare) Act (2000) for pupils up to 16 years of age.<sup>1</sup> However despite their understanding of the non

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<sup>1</sup> Pupils who wish to apply for university places through the CAO must complete a further 2 years and sit the Leaving Certificate Examinations. It is the results of this examination which determine the total points a pupil is awarded and consequently the courses they are offered by the CAO.

compulsory status of higher education, it was generally agreed that a university degree is essential for anyone who wished gain qualifications and “*to get a better and higher paid job*” (Janet, 15 4<sup>th</sup> year, Birchfields Post-Primary).

## **6.2 How Perceptions Were Described by the Study Group**

The youngest pupil to take part in this study was aged 9 and in 4<sup>th</sup> class. The oldest post-primary school pupil was 18. It could be another 8 or 9 years before the youngest pupil has completed their leaving certificate and is ready to go to university. For this reason it is important to understand the differences between perceptions held by pupils who are so young and those who are older and are being educated about university and what to expect when they go there. Typically pupils used their experiences of their current school as a reference point from which to develop a comparison with university.

Primary school children assumed that university was just a continuation of their education and therefore studying there must be more or less the same as being at primary school. When they discuss university they describe it as being bigger, but not unlike their current school. They see themselves, as students, attending classes and studying subjects which are the same or similar as at primary school but because the students are older they believe that they would be expected to be studying these same subjects at a more advanced level.

*I think university is a lot harder than school because you are older and you do more advanced subjects. (Cian, 10, 4<sup>th</sup> Class, Bushfield Primary).*

This assumption that their future studies would be conducted in the same way throughout their educational career might be a cause of concern to the casual observer. But their young age and lack of concrete experience of other educational methods means that their minds are not open to an exploration of ideas which are outside their current understanding of what it means to be a learner within the educational system. Exceptions to this type of schemata were found in the responses of pupils who had direct contact with family members who had spoken with them about their experiences at university. These pupils were able to adapt their perceptions to accommodate the information they had received. Where this happened their perceptions were brought more into line with those of the post-primary pupils in that they considered that there might be differences between school and university. This adaptation of their

perceptions, under the influence or guidance of their family members, reflects the theory of the zone of proximal development put forward by Vygotsky which he defines as,

...the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86)

Post-primary pupils at least have their current school experience to scaffold on top of those of primary school and are able, therefore to use these experiences to make comparisons and assumptions about how university might be. Their assumption is to expect further changes and this leads to an exploration of what those changes might be. They are more likely to talk about the changes they will face than what might be familiar to them and how they believe those changes would impact on them as university students. The different ways in which both sets of pupils describe their perceptions does not imply that this is a developmental process as there was no longitudinal aspect to this study which would allow a comparison to either confirm or refute this.

This study cannot imply that the primary pupils will change their perceptions later in life to accommodate their new experiences or that the post-primary pupils did use more simplistic language in the past. However the age range of the study group represent the ages which transit the final two stages of Piaget's stages of cognitive development (1952), the concrete operational stage, where children can think logically about objects and events, and the formal operational stage, where children can think logically about abstract propositions and test hypothesis systematically. It is interesting that despite the distinctly different ways both sets of pupils describe their perceptions, and the theory that they are operating across two stages of cognitive development, the overall themes which emerged were constant across the entire study group. The generalisations of the perceptions that young children and adolescents have of university, which were outlined at the beginning of this chapter, can be elaborated by discussing the following themes which have emerged from the data.

### 6.3 University as Freedom from Control

The pupils who are currently preparing for Leaving Certificate Examinations and therefore are considering their options once the examination results and CAO offers are known are more in tune with the institutional realities of university. These pupils will have had guidance classes and may have visited universities as part of outreach and access programmes run by universities in conjunction with feeder schools. Their comments show that they have a better understanding of how a university works and what will be expected of them when they begin their studies there. However the data does highlight some concerns about how this knowledge is being processed and understood, by the pupils in this age group. In their current schools their course progress is monitored by their teachers and year heads. Homework and exam preparation is tightly controlled and inspected on a daily basis. When the pupils look forward to studying at university they speak of freedom and choice in the courses they choose and how they conduct their studies when highlighting the differences between their current school and what they expect in university. But few appear to have an understanding of the implications that are inherent in adopting a self motivated study regime for the first time. They do mention that they will be expected to deliver assignments or sit exams but show little understanding of the personal commitment needed to prepare their work for these.

*I think it's different in that it's bigger, the way they teach is different. You are given work to study and if you need information on it you are expected to find out for yourself. You also go to lectures which are long classes that provide information for your course.*

(Connor, 16, 4<sup>th</sup> year, Plunket Post-Primary).

*You are your own boss. There is nobody instructing you what to do and when to do it. Like I said it's your life at the end of the day. It's nobody else's burden.*

(Gavin, 14, 3<sup>rd</sup> year Heathlands Post-Primary).

Some pupils saw the idea of choice and self motivated learning as an escape from compulsory subjects which they did not like doing at their current school.

*You get to study what you want instead of mandatory subjects like Irish etc.*

(Christopher, 17, 5<sup>th</sup> year Plunket Post-Primary).

During his interview Christopher elaborated further by adding:

*It's better because you are not under so much pressure. I think it's better because you focus on something that you like instead of all different subjects.*

The following statement by James hints at the frustration pupils feel when studying for subjects which they believe have no relevance in their life.

*In university people don't just sit around and do math all day they actually study things like engineering or architecture.*  
(James, 10, 5<sup>th</sup> class Mayfield Primary).

Both these quotes focus in on the idea of moving away from studying for compulsory subjects in the Leaving Certificate Examinations and the chance to choose a subject which is of interest rather than being required learning. Christopher speaks of focusing in on a subject which is of interest to the student and assumes that there will be less pressure on him as a consequence. This is based on his assumption that studying for a course at university entails only studying in a clearly defined area and will not involve the type of work he has done thus far.

The second sentence of his interview response suggests that he, like other pupils, may not appreciate that studying for a particular qualification does not preclude study in disciplines which may seem irrelevant to, or prove unpopular with, the undergraduate student. It is interesting to look at James's example and see that the two disciplines he chose as being better than "*sitting around all day doing maths*", engineering and architecture, both require further study in mathematics while at university. In primary and post-primary schools pupils are used to the idea of studying and being examined in subjects such as English, Irish or Mathematics which are presented as separate and independent for the purpose of examination. This is unlikely to prepare them for the idea of modular courses where subjects are designed to interconnect, complement and combine to produce the final qualification and lead to a more rounded educational outcome for the undergraduate student.

Not all of the students felt that the freedom to choose a subject in university was coupled with a release from the pressure of having a complex study programme, meeting deadlines and the production of work for examination and assessment.

*You have to study all the time like nonstop studying.*  
(Amy 15, 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Riverside Post-Primary).



Later in interview I asked Amy to elaborate on what she meant by nonstop studying. She spoke of independent learning and how she felt that her work would not be checked on a daily basis like school homework.

*You have to be more independent, there is nobody there to chase you for your homework or to tell you, you have to meet your deadlines, it's up to yourself.*

The main concern here is if this notion of freedom to do as you wished was to transform into a poor study ethic when these pupils began their university studies. However there is evidence in the data that some pupils do appreciate the responsibility that having this level of freedom to choose how they might conduct their studies places upon them.

*More independence and responsibility is needed for university but it is studying for something you enjoy doing.*  
(Jack 17 6<sup>th</sup> year, Plunket Post-Primary).

During interview I asked Jack how he felt he would handle having that independence and responsibility. He responded by saying,

*Nobody will be looking after you. I don't mind that, like, they won't push you for home work and stuff like that. I don't know it depends on what you are like yourself.*

Jack's thoughts look towards the type of person who can be successful in university in that he believes it is up to the individual to take on the independence and responsibility. Not all pupils felt that having the freedom to choose their course of study and how they were to conduct their studies were without concern.

*Studying at university you cannot look at the teacher for guidance.*  
(James, 17, 6th year, Heathlands Post-Primary).

James's response suggested that he relies heavily on his teacher for advice on his studies and on his future plans for his education. However in interview I asked him how he felt about taking on the responsibility of looking after his own study. He responded by saying,

*It's better because I'm studying on my own I can work around my own sort of preferences. It's better than being told here's what to do. It adds more pressure because you still have to get the work done.*

James was one of few pupils who appeared to be aware that despite the absence of the checking of homework and attendance which pupils currently experience in school; there are still real deadlines and responsibilities placed on the undergraduate student to

produce work for assessment. His comparison between his own preferences for learning and being told what to do at school suggests he is looking forward to getting the chance to learn independently rather than been told to work towards the requirements for an exam.

*University would consist of more independent learning. Deadlines could be more rigid and there would be a lot less of an attachment to your lecturer or tutor than your school teacher.*

(Ari, 18, 6<sup>th</sup> year Ashgrove Post-Primary.)

The final part of Ari's statement echoes James's concern about not having a teacher to turn to for support. He voices a concern that undergraduate students have when arriving at university for the first time; the fear of being lost in a crowd in a large lecture hall or vast university campus and not having the close, familiar relationship they currently have with class teachers or year heads.

*There is less attention on a single student in university in comparison to school due to the mass amount of people that there would be at a university. You have a lot more freedom in university; you make your own choice.*

(Thomas, 16, 5<sup>th</sup> year, Ashgrove Post-Primary).

If we compare Thomas's statement with the response given by Jack in interview when I asked him about his plans for university and how he gathered the information he needed we can easily see why pupils can be concerned that they may feel isolated in a big university.

*Our career guidance does everything for us we have that once a week. She organises everything and prepares you for interviews for PLCs<sup>1</sup> and helps us with the CAO.*

(Jack, 17, 6<sup>th</sup> year, Plunket Post-Primary.)

The current Department of Education and Skills statistics show that the Pupil-Teacher ratio for primary schools is 16.2 and at post-primary this drops to just 13.9 (2012). There are no figures for student – lecturer ratios available at university level but it is safe to say that they are significantly higher than those in primary and post-primary schools. The perception of being alone amongst a larger group of students in unfamiliar surroundings that these higher ratios and other institutional factors create in first year students is a concern for these pupils. It provides a counterpoint to the sense of freedom from the discipline of their current school that they are looking forward to and it is easy to sense the foreboding that they have when comparing this aspect of university with

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<sup>1</sup> Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs) can be considered as qualifications in their own right or as a method of bridging the gap between second level results and third level education.

their current school experiences. The impact of these institutional factors, such as the selectivity and size of institutions, the interaction between students and between staff and students are real concerns which have been cited as factors in attrition rates amongst first year students at university (Morgan et al., 2001).

Having freedom to choose subjects and to decide when and where to study was seen as an attractive proposition by some of these post-primary pupils, however few made the connection between this freedom and the responsibility of maintaining a good study ethic. Those who did believed that, while they might have more freedom to choose their area of study, those studies would be in specialised fields and that they, as students, would be responsible for conducting their own studies and for delivering assignments to strict deadlines. However while they may be able to describe how they imagine being a student at university might be they do not show deep understanding of the consequences which they will face if they do not maintain personal responsibility for their studies. They showed little awareness of the challenges and distractions that they may encounter during their day to day activities while at university and the impact these can have on their studies if they are not managed properly (Gibney et al., 2011).

#### **6.4 University as Preparation for Professional Life**

The pupils who took part in this study were in general agreement that the primary role of universities is to provide education and training for those who choose to pursue occupational career qualification and progression.

*University exists to provide qualified skilled people in our world today. It enables people to acquire further knowledge of the world we live in so we can make the world a better place.*

(Ari, 18, 6<sup>th</sup> year Ashgrove Post-Primary)

Looking across all the data provided by Ari shows that his close contact with family members who have experience of university, both Ari's parents have graduated from university and his sister is currently at college, has allowed him to develop a clear perception of what a university is for. He has gained cultural capital which has allowed him to develop a very positive outlook towards study at university and he is eagerly awaiting his chance to attend. His perception strongly reflects those of the majority of pupils in this study who connected university study with the improvement of employability and preparation for their future careers.

The level of importance that they placed on this perception was seen during group interviews, in questionnaires, and in particular by analysing the responses to the multiple choice question 2.3 which asked: “*What would make you want to go to University?*” In this question the pupils were given 5 options to choose from but the biggest number of responses were given to two options which dealt with careers. Option a, “*I would need a qualification for my chosen career*”, was chosen by 25 primary pupils and 28 Post-primary pupils, or 86% of the total study group, and option e, “*Graduates get better jobs*”, was chosen by 24 primary pupils and 26 post-primary pupils which equates to 78% of the study group.

The pupils returned to the theme of career development constantly throughout the study. Some of their responses even suggested that studying at university would guarantee that they would be working in their chosen profession.

*A university is a place where students go after secondary school to develop their education and to gain a career path by studying a subject and getting a career.*

(Hanna, 16, 5<sup>th</sup> year, Riverside Post-Primary)

*A university is a place you go to after school to study a chosen subject so that you can have a degree / qualification to work at a particular job.*

(Ashling, 16, 5<sup>th</sup> year, Riverside Post-Primary).

Owen who is a 14 year old boy in 2<sup>nd</sup> year at Ashgrove Post-Primary elaborated more by connecting qualifications with career prospects when he said,

*University is a place where people go for third level education, after leaving cert / A levels<sup>1</sup>, or I.B.<sup>2</sup> So they can get qualifications for higher paid jobs like doctors or lawyers. People can take many subjects such as arts, microbiology etc.*

Owen’s comments showed a broad understanding why he felt people were motivated to study at university and the benefits they gain from having a professional qualification as opposed to those who have none. The connection between going to university and career paths was not limited to the older pupils who may have been exposed to the influences of information provided by guidance professionals or by university staff during open days. Some primary school pupils also made this connection but on a more

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<sup>1</sup> A Levels qualifications are completed within the UK by students at educational institutions. These qualifications are completed after the mandatory GCSEs in secondary schools. A levels are not mandatory but in order to be offered a university place in the UK pupils must either complete A Levels or equivalent qualifications (ALevels.org.uk, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The International Baccalaureate® (IB) offers three programmes for students aged 3 to 19 to help develop the intellectual, personal, emotional and social skills to live learn and work in a rapidly globalizing world. . There are more than 900,000 IB students in over 140 countries (2005-2012).

simplistic level. They used language which was not as clear or precise when talking about their perceptions of university. These pupils talk of studying at university for a career and gaining qualifications but very rarely mention the processes which are necessary for this to happen.

*University is a place where most students go to because they want to learn and have a good job afterwards.*

(Kimberly, 11, 5<sup>th</sup> class, City Primary)

*University is a place in which you go to do different courses to work up to a better future and job.*

(Peter, 12, 6<sup>th</sup> class, Old Church Primary)

This focus on university education as a method of improving a graduate's employability sits well with the modern idea of entrepreneurial pedagogy and the development of highly skilled, critically thinking and roundly educated graduates for the modern workforce (Jones & Iredale, 2010; Rae, 2007). Lynn, who is aged 14 and in 2<sup>nd</sup> year in Plunket Post-Primary, looked deeper into the idea of training for a career or specific job when she stated that "*students were learning to achieve their goals*", suggesting that she felt that those who chose to go to university had set out a plan to achieve their chosen career. However later in interview she reflected on university as a way to defer the prospect of unemployment.

*If you leave secondary school after 6<sup>th</sup> year and you just don't do anything, you are best off like going to college and be actually doing something with your time instead of like staying in bed for most of the day and doing nothing.*

(Lynn, 14, 2<sup>nd</sup> year Plunket Post-Primary).

In recessionary times, when employment is in short supply, it is tempting to see university from this perspective. Further study can be seen as a way to delay entry into the jobs market and to ensure improved employability through education, qualifications and personal development.

The potential economic, social and cultural empowerments that can be gained by holding a university degree are strong motivators for those who are considering their educational future. These have been shown to increase the employability and potential earning power of graduates (OECD, 2011). However throughout the responses of the study group there is evidence of assumptions being made that studying at university guarantees qualification and employment in the students chosen profession, an

assumption which is not wholly supported by statistical reports on graduate employment (Higher Education Authority, 2010).

In summary then career and future life benefits were seen as the major reason for university education by the pupils in this study. They believe that the route their future will take will be decided by whether they complete a degree and gain a recognised qualification or not. They believe that their time spent studying at university will give them the life skills they need to be successful in their careers and to be able to interact with other people on both a professional and social level.

## **6.5 University Developing the Rounded Individual**

Despite the strong focus on university as preparation for a professional life a small percentage of pupils explored the concept of learning for the sheer joy of new knowledge. They talked of learning new things and of developing as a person during that process. Some touched on the idea of research and the disinterested creation and exploration of new knowledge. Pupils who adopted this approach spoke of continuing or furthering their education in an area that interest them. They mentioned careers and jobs as secondary motives for someone continuing their study in university.

*People go to university to get better at what they do in order to become a better scholar - to get a good job.*

(Marie, 14, 2<sup>nd</sup> year Birchfields Post-Primary).

Once again the analysis showed that this perception was not limited to the more mature pupils in the senior years at post-primary school. While the comments of the primary school children might have used a more simplistic language some revealed an understanding of the link between education and self improvement.

*University is a place you go to after your other schools to learn about more things.*

(Kira, 11, 6<sup>th</sup> class City Primary).

*It's a place where you go after secondary school. If you go there you will be smarter.*

(Darren 11, 5<sup>th</sup> class Old Church Primary).

Darren's use of the word smarter hints at university not just providing educational qualifications but also developing the individual as a person.

It is interesting to find young children and adolescents speaking of learning for its own sake or even for the joy of learning when it is often assumed that they find school work

a chore and as something that is compulsory which they are legally bound to pursue (McCoy & Byrne, 2011, p.149). It is even more interesting to find that these ideas are also shared by the children at primary level. Laska, 10, 4<sup>th</sup> class, City Primary, spoke of university being good for a student's education; she finished her comment by saying "*it makes you clever!*"

Furthering ones education in an area of interest purely for the sake of expanding your knowledge of that subject is not something most would expect to find pupils talking about while still in compulsory education but this topic was raised by pupils across the study group. Some of those who spoke of career advancement as their primary motivation for choosing university study also showed an understanding of the concept of learning as a path to personal development and the growth of a more rounded individual.

Choice is a word that surfaced in many of the pupils' comments on this theme and throughout the research. Pupils believe that people go to university to learn more about subjects they have chosen to study so they can choose to work in the field that interest them.

*People go to university to get a degree in their chosen subject.*  
(Hanna, 16, 5<sup>th</sup> year Riverside Post-Primary).

*To have a better chance of having a good secure job and to do something that they like.*  
(Jack, 17, 6<sup>th</sup> year Plunket Post-Primary).

Roisin, who is aged 10 and is in 4<sup>th</sup> class Newtown Primary showed eloquence beyond her years throughout her questionnaire, she wrote at length on each question and showed how being able to draw on the experiences that a number of members of her family have of university allows her to express clear ideas about why people go to university.

*People go to university to train to be what they want to be as a job. It's a good place to learn lots of things about the person you want to be and at the end of the years there they might become what they want to be or they might become something way different.*

Roisin's response hints at university as providing something more than just training for a career. She, whether intentionally or not, speaks of learning about personal development as much as gaining a recognised qualification for a career. She suggests

that taking a course for a particular qualification might not necessarily guarantee that that will be the field in which the graduate may find employment.

While no one in the study group made the direct connection between study and extracurricular activities, the analysis shows that some pupils understood that social interaction between students was part of university life.

*You go to lectures, get involved in clubs and societies and meet new people.  
You gain maturity and get to experience new things.*  
(Eunice, 18, 6<sup>th</sup> year, Riverside Post-Primary).

Those who wrote about extra-curricular activities saw this as a big attraction for students while at university. They explored how education is an enriching experience which contributes to the development of the rounded individual. They spoke of gaining self confidence and experience as much as gaining a qualification; of personal development and how this would be an asset to them when they had graduated and entered the jobs market. They can see beyond the fundamental motives of qualifications and improved employability to the more personal benefits of education. This perception of education as an enrichment of the person as much as of the mind is one which should be encouraged in young children and adolescents as it will inculcate in their minds the love of learning as a lifetime pursuit.

## **6.6 University is for Clever Rich People**

Despite there being limited understanding of the connection between freedom of choice and responsibility for personal study in many of the responses, most pupils had strong opinions on the type of person who goes to university. They believed that access to a university education was equally available to all, regardless of social class, but with the proviso that those who choose to study at university must meet the characteristics which they had defined as typifying the habitus of a university student. They used phrases such as clever and rich people, or those who have done well in their Leaving Certificate Examinations, to define what they saw as the typical university student who they see as being intelligent, ambitious towards their future career and having a good study ethic.

*University is mostly filled by ambitious people looking to succeed.*  
(Ari 18, 6<sup>th</sup> year, Ashgrove Post-Primary).

The data shows that the pupils believe that only those who meet these criteria are capable of gaining admission to a university or are likely to be the type of person who is



capable of seeing a university course through to its successful conclusion. This topic was the first where a division between the types of people who go to university and those that do not was brought into focus.

The influence of social status on perceptions could be clearly seen when the pupils spoke of their ideas of the type of people who attend university. Regardless of their own social status pupils attempted to define a difference between those who do go to university and those who do not. The difference can be seen by analyzing the discourse of their comments which reveals on which side of the divide they perceive themselves to be. Not all pupils made this distinction in obvious or open statements but a closer look at their comments can reveal an insight into the perspective that they view these opinions from.

*People who get good education and want to have a good job also people who are quite intelligent.*  
(Amanda, 13, 1<sup>st</sup> year, Plunket Post-Primary).

It is unclear from this statement whether Amanda places herself within this category or without. She, like many who wrote on this topic, did so in the third person and never suggested if they were including themselves in that group of people. However Linda, who is 12 and in 1st year at Birchfields Post-Primary echoed the same sentiments in her questionnaire response but in interview spoke of those who may find themselves excluded from university education while putting herself firmly with those who would be included.

*People who grew up in poorer areas or are less fortunate then we are might not be able to afford it and they might need money so they might go straight to work after school.*

Her statement goes to the heart of how social status can influence the perceptions any pupil can have of university. While they may personally have positive perceptions, a willingness and ability to do what is necessary to achieve an offer of a place on their chosen course and a supportive family to help them in their endeavour, all of this can count for naught when the realities of the financial situation that their family find themselves in are brought into consideration. If the need to contribute to the family's financial wellbeing is perceived to hold more value than the family incurring the expense of sending a child to university then those needs can inculcate the perception of university as an elite institution which is open to some but closed to them.

McCoy and Smyth's (2011) research conducted between 1980 and 2006 bears out the differentiation that social class places on entry to university in particular. While their study showed some equality in the institute of technology sector their hypothesis that the removal of tuition fees in 1996 would result in a reduction in social differentiation in university admissions was not borne out by their data. They conclude that the removal of just one of the direct costs is not enough to reduce the differentiation across the social classes. Add to this the attraction of immediate employment or apprenticeship, even in the short term, after compulsory secondary education and it is unlikely that this differentiation will decrease significantly in the long term. Even if the pupil does have aspirations towards study at university the data gathered for this study shows that there is little concern among the pupils regarding the financial costs of university study. Only 9 pupils, equal to 14% of the study group, stated in their questionnaire that their parents would pay their fees at university. Beyond this small group the topic of cost was only broached when I raised the idea with pupils during interview.

*It's going to be around 4,000 I think according to one of the girls who did it last year. That's including registration and the books and everything like that.*

(Emma, 13, 1<sup>st</sup> year, Riverside Post-Primary).

Emma's response in interview is typical of the misperceptions that were found in the data in the area of fees, what they cover and how other expenses would be financed. The overall impression the interview comments give is that fees and how they are paid are of little concern to the pupils themselves.

While each pupil had expressed a desire to go to university they had clear ideas about the type of person they would need to be in order to realise that aspiration. Once again career focus was mentioned in this context but to a lesser extent than in previous discussions. Here the pupils focused in on the personality and social class of the individual and their ability to gain the necessary points in their leaving certificate exams in order to be offered a place on their chosen course. The data show that some pupils have an understanding of the benefits of a good study ethic and how that is helpful in preparing for exams and gaining a place in university. This was most prevalent amongst those pupils who had expressed confidence in their own abilities to cope with their current studies. Five pupils who felt they were doing "good" and 14 who believed they were doing "very well" in their studies either mentioned or alluded to good study ethics. Only one pupil who felt that he was doing "ok", James aged 17 in 6<sup>th</sup> year at Heathlands Post-Primary, commented on study ethics by speaking of "smart and

*mature people working hard*” as the type of people he believed were to be found at university. The pupils who commented on this topic felt that those who had developed a good study ethic at school would be better prepared for university study and would be more capable of coping with the workload.

*People with a good attitude to school, good grades, attendance etc. and who want further education.*

(Jack, 17, 6<sup>th</sup> year, Plunket Post-Primary).

*Much more mentally strong people who care and want to do well in the world. These people are willing and ready to work. The people who don't care usually don't make it this far.*

(Gavin, 14, 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Heathlands Post-Primary).

In interview Tom, 14, 2<sup>nd</sup> year in Heathlands Post-Primary spoke of work ethic and being able to cope with the pressure that comes with preparing to go to university.

*You need to search it up, know what I mean? And work at that to get what you are aiming for. It's not for the faint hearted you need the work ethic it's all in your own head.*

Tom's statement points towards the research pupils do into the suitability, or attractiveness, of courses, the work they must do to gain the necessary points in the Leaving Certificate Examinations and the application process which they go through in order to receive an offer of a place on their desired course. Jack, aged 17, who wrote earlier of good attitude to school grades felt that this may not be enough in the end. During interview he showed concern that he may not achieve a place on the course he had chosen and suggested that his current choice of course was as a direct result of his guidance teacher pointing him towards the course.

*I picked multimedia I was just told by my career guidance then decided. I just need to see if I get my points. It's 4 something, (400+ points), for multimedia but I only got 335 in the mocks so..?<sup>1</sup>*

At this point Jack looked questioningly at me and raised his hands as if to say “*If I don't get the points what will happen then?*” The idea of being excluded from university because of a less than adequate academic performance is a real concern for pupils across the study group.

*I feel that people who are smarter (or Richer) go to university to study because lesser able students can't get enough points on their leaving certificate.* (brackets in original)

(Liam, 17, 5<sup>th</sup> year, Heathlands Post-Primary).

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<sup>1</sup> “*Mocks*” refers to examinations which pupils sit at the end of 5th year and are designed to simulate the Leaving Certificate Examinations and give the pupils a guide to their revision requirements for their final year.

It is likely that the offer of places at university through the CAO points system is the only method of accessing university education that young children and adolescents are aware of. They would not necessarily understand therefore that there are other options available to those who wish to gain a place on a university course. Only one pupil, Jack, aged 17 from Plunket Post-Primary mentioned Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs) as another route to university. If pupils believe that their performance in their Leaving Certificate Examinations and the points they are awarded as a result are their one and only chance at gaining a place on their chosen course then this must, despite their expression of confidence in their own abilities, place enormous pressure on these pupils to achieve the best possible results in their exams.

*Mainly people who aim higher than others. Someone who left school at 16 has about 0% chance to go, but someone with all A1s would go for options like the sciences, teaching, law, mathematics.*  
(Owen, 14, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, Ashgrove Post-Primary).

When considering the accessibility of places in university and the type of person who can gain access to courses there, the pupils placed standards of educational achievement and their ability to maintain a good study ethic as the main determinants in their ability to gain a place on their chosen course and see it through to a successful conclusion. They believe that only those who meet these criteria would be able to go to university.

The perceptions that children and adolescents have of university are, in their minds, predicated by how successful they perform in their Leaving Certificate Examinations and whether they gain sufficient points to be offered a place on their preferred course at their preferred university when they apply to the Central Admissions Office. Therefore university still holds an elitist aura for these pupils, not because they feel excluded due to social status, or economic restrictions, but because they believe that there are standards which a prospective student must measure up to in order to gain entry and that while university entry is open to all, they believe only a select few are fortunate, academically gifted or rich enough to meet the requirements and pass through the portals to take their place at university.

## **6.7 Teaching and Learning Methods at University**

While contemplating the differences between their current learning methods at school and what methods might be used in university the post-primary pupils focused in on what they regarded as gaining freedom from the rigid disciplinary methods they are

experiencing in their current schools. While the primary school pupils felt that university was just more of the same except that the students were older and therefore would be expected to study those subjects on a more advanced level.

Regardless of their assumptions about teaching methods at university each pupil placed the dyad of pupil and teacher, and the relationship between these two roles as they currently understood it to be, into the university context. There was no evidence of an understanding of the notion of a community of masters and scholars sharing the exploration of new knowledge as equals; rather they placed the university student in the more traditional role of the passive receiver of someone else's opinion and perceived knowledge. All pupils made the connection between their current teachers and professors by assuming that professors were the people tasked with teaching in universities. There was some suggestion that these professors had higher qualifications than school teachers, and that they were specialists in their field.

*Professors are the teachers that are highly qualified to teach. They provide you with the information which you learn.*  
(Connor, 16, 4<sup>th</sup> year, Plunket Post-Primary).

*Professors are like teachers to the students. There is a different professor to every subject.*  
(Craig, 12, 1<sup>st</sup> year, Ashgrove Post-Primary).

While most of the pupils used expressions like “*they teach*” or “*they are teachers*”, some referred to the terminology used in university such as lecturers, lectures and tutorials. This language was not restricted to pupils who had direct experience of family members attending university however the use of this terminology was more prevalent where those experiences had taken place. These pupils showed a deeper understanding of the terminology and its use. The following quote on role of professors and the difference between lectures and tutorials gives an example of the understanding some pupils had of the terms used in university.

*They teach the courses and do tutorials as well which means they help smaller groups of students understand certain topics.*  
(Penny, 16, 4<sup>th</sup> year Riverside Post-Primary).

Hanna, aged 15 and in 5<sup>th</sup> year in Riverside Post-Primary, while explaining her ideas about the role of a professor, referred to the student's responsibility for their own study and how this changes when a pupil leaves second level education and begins their studies at university.

*Professors are like teachers. They attend lectures to explain the course to the students but they do not take responsibility for your education.*

Her statement suggests that she believes that teachers, in second level schools, are more involved in insuring that their pupils reach the outcomes which are set out in the curriculum. They take a more active role in insuring that their pupils meet their obligations within the learning process than a professor at a university would. The professor is perceived as a provider of knowledge who has little concern whether the student takes responsibility for their own learning or achieves the outcomes of the course. Another example of this idea can be seen in the following statement.

*Professors are people who have already acquired knowledge and are willing to pass it on. But only to those who want to learn.*  
(Gavin, 14, 4<sup>th</sup> class, Heathlands Post-Primary).

However Terry who is in 4<sup>th</sup> year in Heathlands Post-Primary felt that professors had a more involved role in administration and teaching at university.

*They try to teach their students about the subject they specialise in. They correct students' essays and exams and grade them.*

Only one pupil, Lauren aged 13 and in her 2<sup>nd</sup> year at Riverside Post-Primary suggested that there are other types of teachers at university. In interview she mentioned that universities had other lecturers and that students would occasionally attend lectures by guest speakers. However she concluded her comments by pointing out that professors are educated to level 10, referring to the highest level on the National Framework of Qualifications, thus suggesting that she felt other lecturers might hold qualifications that are ranked lower on the same scale than those held by the professors.

It is interesting that almost all of the pupils surveyed appeared to assume that the majority of their lectures would be delivered by professors and that these professors would be the same people who set out course assignments and prepare examination papers. Some also believed that the professors would also be responsible for the assessment of work and the awarding of degrees. The pupils assumed that they would be in daily contact with professors and that these professors presuppose that their students are taking responsibility for their own studies.

## 6.8 University as Cultural Capital

With the exception of just two primary and one post-primary, all pupils in this study expressed a desire to go to university regardless of their social status or family educational traditions. However there are noticeable differences in the way pupils from different social classes talked about their perceptions of university. During the literature review for this study I looked at the concept of cultural capital and research into the role this has in the educational progression of young children and adolescents (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). I reviewed how cultural capital is used by society to gauge a person's social status and educational ability and allow them access to different societal or institutional groups (Swartz, 1997). The review highlighted concerns about whether cultural capital can be considered a valid means of assessment of a person's educational ability. Does the use of expansive educational language and an apparent understanding of how a university works directly correlate with ability to be academically successful at university?

In this study pupils who had experience of family members attending university readily used language which is more identifiable with an understanding of university than that used by those who were not able to draw on family experiences. Having the ability to talk directly to a family member and explore their experiences with them does help these pupils to adapt their perceptions by giving them the opportunity to compare their own experiences of school with those that their parent or sibling has of university. This reorientation of their perceptions to accommodate another's experiences helps them to better understand what lies ahead of them if they decide to go to university and what will be expected of them as students. It does not mean, however, that they have the academic skills required to give their time at university a successful outcome.

The pupils in this study may not understand the concept of cultural capital. However they can be seen to draw on their acquired capital when speaking of their perceptions. Those whose families have traditions of attending university are more open to the idea that they will in turn attend university when the time comes. In some cases it is almost an assumption that this will happen and that they are well prepared for the rigors of study at university. One pupil, Abraham, 12, 6<sup>th</sup> class in Mayfield Primary gave Trinity as his preferred university in answer to question 2.2, "*If you had a choice, what university would you like to go to?*" However his response when asked why he chose Trinity was to say that his parents want him to go there.

Both Abraham's parents are Trinity graduates. In fact they met there and have shared their positive experiences of that university with their son. The desire that parents have to see their children follow them into university and their promotion of this idea with positive reminiscences does not mean that the pupil will become more open to the idea of attending university. In Abraham's case he stated in his questionnaire that, despite his parents' wishes, he did not want to go to university as he felt that he did not need a recognised qualification to work in the career he had chosen.

The accumulation of cultural capital can also be seen when pupils talk of their plans to study in disciplines where they have prior experiences. Pupils who believed that they have excelled at sports, computer science or spoke of having talent for musical or other creative pursuits, said that they would choose to study in these areas as they felt that their prior knowledge and experience would be an asset which would give them an advantage in their studies.

*I have an ear for music and want to make a career from it. I just need to get my head down in the music. I'm already quite good at music but I need to get my head down and start studying.*  
(Lynn, 14, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, Plunket Post-Primary).

These perceived advantages were given further capital by pupils who had personal experience of a particular university. 47% of the post-primary pupils in this study said that they had visited a university either as part of access or outreach programmes or to study or engage in sporting activities there. They spoke of having prior knowledge of the layout of the campus, of how things worked there and how this in turn would help them to feel at home in that environment.

*I want to do sports education and fitness, diets and that. I train in DCU so I know the layout of the place.*  
(Gavin, 14, 3<sup>rd</sup> year, Heathlands Post-Primary).

An awareness of the effect of institutional capital was also evident in a small number of pupils who spoke of the reputation or the status which is inferred on certain universities and how that capital would be transferred onto them as individuals if they were to graduate from one of those universities. Choosing a university based on its reputation was unique to pupils from middle class backgrounds. However, personal benefit gained from a university's reputation or status was viewed in two distinct ways. The post-primary boys, who were from Ashgrove Post-Primary which is a fee paying school



believed that graduating from and being associated with these universities would, just like their association with their current school, increase their own cultural capital.

*Trinity: It is the best university in Ireland and it would look good on a C.V. to say that you attended Trinity.*

(Mike, 16, 4<sup>th</sup> year, Ashgrove Post-Primary).

The post-primary girls and the primary boys spoke of the status of the universities they had chosen as being represented by their reputation for excellence in their teaching methods and the quality of student that graduates from them. They see this standard of excellence being embodied in all who graduate from those universities.

*Harvard: Because they have taught some of the world's smartest people.*

(Brendan, 11, 5<sup>th</sup> class, Newtown Primary).

Both of these perceptions display awareness of institutional cultural capital which is associated with graduating from any university perceived to have a better reputation than others. However the first quote places the capital in the association of the graduate with the name of the university, the wearing of the old school tie and being part of a social elite while the second places the capital in the standard of education that a student can expect from the university and the assumptions that others might make about the educational achievements of a graduate from that university.

# **CHAPTER 7 – DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

## **7.1 Introduction**

The perceptions which children and adolescents have of university are, like any perception which a person holds, subjective and malleable. They are formed when the pupil encounters the influences, experiences and opinions of others they meet in their daily life (Connor, 2001, p.213). Those who have a stakeholder interest in the development of these perceptions are able to bring their influence to bear on the perceptions of university that pupils have. If this is approached correctly then they can prepare pupils for their transition to university in more concrete ways than just insuring they have gained enough points in their Leaving Certificate to get an offer for a course at university. They can develop the methodologies they use in their contact time with their pupils to ensure that they are not just academically but psychologically and socially prepared for the rigors of university education.

## **7.2 How have Perceptions been Formed and Influenced?**

As pupils begin to ponder their future and to consider their likelihood of studying at university, they will seek out information from many different sources to try and understand what it means to study at university. In order to make sense of these ideas they either inherit or develop schemata which help them to arrive at a personal subjective understanding of what a university is and what it must be like to study there. The cultural value that a pupil places on these typifications of university, the type of people who work, or study, there and if they in turn will get to study there are powerful influences in the development of their current and future perceptions of university.

This study has shown that pupils' perceptions are influenced by many different sources. When speaking of their perceptions those who have direct family experiences of study at university readily use the correct terminology and seem to understand the progression of awards that can be achieved at university. For example Owen aged 14 from Ashgrove Post-Primary, who's parents both attended university, when asked why people go to university wrote,

*They go there for lectures to learn from presented by professors. They study for their end exams. It mainly depends on your course e.g. Masters Degree, Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) or just if you're an undergraduate taking a course.* (Brackets in original)

The cultural capital embodied in this response points to the influence that conversations with parents, and other family members, have on the perceptions that young children and adolescents have about university. Their use of terminology is not the only way in which their acquired capital is revealed. They also openly speak of the whole experience of being at university and are able to place these ideas into the context of their own perceptions. When asked what happens at university Margaret, aged 17 who is in 6th year in Birchfields Post-Primary covered most of what she had been told by her cousin.

*Students choose a course and throughout the year have lectures on the subject matter of that particular course. Students join societies, meet new people, make friends. Practical work involved in some cases + placements, Erasmus<sup>1</sup>.*

Those who do not have access to family experience of university tend to form their perceptions by referring to their current experiences of school. Their schema reflects their knowledge of their current school and they show little understanding of the institutional realities of university education.

*You study and do exams to earn points. Depending on how many points you get they give you a list of jobs you are capable of.*  
(Jane, 10, 5<sup>th</sup> class, Newtown Primary).

Jane's statement on initial reading appears to be confusing Leaving Certificate Examinations and the awarding of CAO points with studying as an undergraduate at university. However it is more likely that she is referring to that concept, which she understands, to try and rationalise ideas she has about ECTS credits and career guidance at university particularly when she mentions being provided with a list of jobs which might prove suitable.

The influence of guidance councillors can be seen in the perceptions of the older pupils where they begin to talk more about the relationship between university education and better career prospects. While talk of careers, or good or better jobs, can be seen throughout the data the post-primary pupils in this study were more likely to talk of choosing a course or university which will allow them to gain a specific qualification.

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<sup>1</sup> Erasmus is the European Union's flagship educational exchange programme for Higher Education students, teachers and institutions. It was introduced with the aim of increasing student mobility within Europe. (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus-about-erasmus.htm>)

Almost 50% of the pupils in this study group gave their choice of course as their prime reason for selecting a university. This suggests that these pupils have done at least some personal research or have been guided by members of their family, guidance councillors at their school or university access and outreach programmes.

Once a pupil has decided on the career they would like to pursue they begin to form ideas about the route through university that lies before them. They speak of the points they will require from their Leaving Certificate and of the type of work that will be required of them at university.

*I want to teach science and to do that I need to go to university and get my teaching qualification hopefully in 4 years by doing an education in science course if not in 5 years.*  
(Eunice, 18, 6<sup>th</sup> year, Riverside Post-Primary).

The perception of university as a route towards career development can also be attributed to parental and family influences which can be seen across the social divide. Those parents who believe that they have reaped the benefits of career success assisted by higher education and professional qualification are eager to see their children follow them into occupational careers. In turn pupils whose family members have graduated from university refer to their parents or siblings current jobs as evidence of how a university education can be a liberating and empowering influence on their own future careers.

*I don't know much but my cousins have good jobs now.*  
(Linda, 10, 5<sup>th</sup> class, City Primary).

*I want to have a better chance in life and earn more money. I need to live a proper comparable life. I also think it would benefit me in many ways.*  
(Marie, 14, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, Birchfields Post-Primary).

Marie uses words like proper and comparable to show that she perceives a standard of living set by her middle class upbringing that she wants to maintain in her own life while Jack, who is 17 and in 6<sup>th</sup> year in Plunket Post-Primary, sees university education as a way to improve his social status.

*I have an interest in going to a university because I want a good start in life.*

Family members who have graduated or are currently studying at university tend to provide their child with positive reminiscences about their time at university and either directly, or indirectly, invest in them the cultural capital that they have gained from these experiences. This capital is transferred to the thoughts and writings of the pupils,

not only when they are talking about their family members' experiences but throughout their responses to the questionnaire and during group interviews.

Parents who have not had the opportunity of higher education are motivated to give their children better educational opportunities and a higher social status than their own. Again this desire to gain cultural capital through better education can be seen in the writings of their children. Those who have no direct experience of a family member attending a university tend to speak of university as providing them with the opportunity to gain qualifications for roles which, in their opinion, are better, professional and therefore more secure.

*People go to university to learn and become better at things, also you can get a lifetime job out of university.*  
(Jack, 17, 6<sup>th</sup> year, Plunket Post-Primary).

Their comments suggest that they are looking to education as a means to improve their status both socially and professionally and that this motivation is driven by how their family's current social status is perceived either by the parent, the pupil or both.

*To improve and equip themselves for the best possible chance in the big bad world. This is vital in today's society.*  
(Gavin, 14, 3<sup>rd</sup> class, Heathlands Post-Primary).

There is little evidence in the data to suggest that peer pressure is having an effect on the pupils who took part in this research. When asked in the multiple choice question 2.3 "*What would make you want to go to university?*", only 4 primary and 4 post-primary pupils or 12.5 % of the study group selected option c. "*Some or all of my friends are planning to go*" as one of their reasons for wanting to attend. This does not suggest however that peer pressure is not at work during the formation of perceptions. Post-primary pupils do receive guidance and visit universities in groups giving them ample opportunities to discuss their perceptions of, and aspirations for university at peer level not to mention that second level schools are places where there is a lot of talk about what pupils will do after they have completed the Leaving Certificate. However the data suggests that peer pressure is ignored once a pupil begins to have firm plans for their future education. None of the post-primary pupils who chose option c. were in their final year of school which suggests that by this time their thoughts on their personal career have become more egocentric and are less influenced by the opinions of their peers.

Further evidence of this can be seen by looking at the responses given to the same question by the five pupils who were in their final year at post-primary school. They all chose either: option a, *“I would need a qualification for my chosen career.”* three pupils, option e, *“Graduates get better jobs.”* all five pupils, or both options, three pupils. This final observation shows the strong influence that future career and job security has on the formation of a pupil’s perception of university and their motives for wanting to study there. While there may be many different sources vying to influence their perception such as parents and family members, peers, teachers, and career guidance councillors, it was found that pupils who had clear goals began to focus on what was required of them to gain their place on their chosen course.

### **7.3 The Role of Schemata in the Development of Perceptions**

To understand how the perceptions of young children and adolescents can be shaped under the influences of others we need to take a brief look at the concept of schemata, how they operate and how they are developed and modified in the mind of the individual or in the collective minds of society. Psychologist and cognitive scientists describe schemata as organised patterns of thought or behaviour (Brewer, 1999). They can also be described as mental structures of pre-conceived ideas, frameworks representing some aspect of the world, or as a system of organizing and perceiving new information (Kant, 1855). People use these building blocks of cognition to aid them in understanding and giving meaning to their current world ideas and to assist them in making sense of new knowledge and situations by adapting their schema to accommodate their situations and experiences (Rumelhart, 1980).

Schemata can be inherited from the person’s family, peer group or wider social grouping. For example a child will learn to interact within the family and eventually within their wider social grouping by learning and understanding the schemata which define these situations. Other schemata can be developed by the individual and these are formed from their attempts to understand and categorise their own experiences. When the child experiences their first day at school they may find that their schema for being at home does not fit perfectly with their experience of school. This can lead to distress and conflict within their mind as they try to rationalise the conflict and fit their new experiences into their current understandings. Conflict can happen again when they move on to secondary school where they find that the schema they had developed for school is once again in disagreement with their experiences of this new environment.

Over time they will restructure their school schema to accommodate these new experiences. As they move towards the end of their secondary school education and the Leaving Certificate Examinations they will once again attempt to construct a mental pattern of what might be different in university. If this constructed pattern is not an accurate reflection of university then they will return to the conflict of trying to rationalise their schemata with their actual experiences. DiMaggio (1997, p.281) speaks of this process as analogy and generalization where someone will attempt to characterize a culture or group of people by drawing analogies between classes of objects, such as different levels of schooling within the educational system, and attempt to understand them by forming generalisations which fit their current schemata.

It is the processes which influence the development of these personally held schemata which have consequences for the outcomes of this study. If these processes, which are conducted within the mind of the individual pupil, can be influenced from without then the perceptions of university that they hold can be modelled into a set of assumptions which better reflect the institutional realities that they will find when they go to university. By assisting pupils in remodelling their perceptions, and providing them with schemata which support those perceptions, parents, teachers, guidance professionals, and university access and induction programmes can help to prepare them for a better and less distressing transition from secondary school to university

Schemata are the building blocks on which perceptions are formed and developed over time. They inform the perception that an individual has of any given object, person or situation. Casson (1983) speaks of how schemata allow a person to fill in the gaps in the causal chain of an event. In the following example one person's experience of university can be encapsulated into two simple sentences.

John went to university. He was there for three years and graduated with a first class degree.

Within these two sentences there are gaps in the causal chain which can be filled in by inference by anybody who understands the process of studying for a degree. There is no mention of study, assignments, examinations, assessment or work ethic in the story yet it can be inferred that John worked very hard to achieve his first class honour. However if the person reading this statement has no experience or understanding of the processes involved, then they are just as likely to fill in the gaps with inaccurate information from the schemata that they currently hold for study or education.

In the case of the pupils in this study this can be seen where they try to rationalise their thoughts about university by referring back to their current or past experiences. They may also refer to new information which they have gathered about universities and try to make sense of the story by referring to this. Depending on the level and accuracy of the information they have at their disposal they could infer that those who work hard and study diligently will do well at university or they are just as likely to infer that anyone who spends three years at university will graduate with a degree.

*People who are willing to work hard for an education and want to have a good job.*

(Penny, 16, 4<sup>th</sup> year, Riverside Post-Primary).

*You choose a course that you have an interest in and then you stay there and study for 4 years. It sets you up for a career and if you finish the course you get a degree.*

(Eunice, 18, 6<sup>th</sup> year, Riverside Post-Primary).

Bruner, speaking of the “schematizing power of institutions” states that;

Experience and memory of the social world are powerfully constructed not only by deeply internalized and narrativized conceptions of folk psychology but also by historically rooted intuitions that culture elaborates to support and enforce them (1990, p.57).

The four institutions which have the most power to elaborate and enforce accuracy and stability in the perceptions of university in young children and adolescents are their family, their social grouping, the schools that they attend and the outreach and induction programmes run by the universities. Each has a role to play in the promotion of a good understanding of what a university is, the role they play in society and what it means to study at university in the minds of the future university cohorts.

## **7.4 What can be done to Aid the Development of Perceptions?**

It would be very easy for those who have a stake in the formation of perceptions of university in the minds of young children and adolescents to assume that all the information they invest in their pupils is being absorbed and used to accurately perceive what it means to be a student at university. This study has shown that while young children and adolescents are indeed open to influence the perceptions they form expose gaps in the causal chain in their representations of the institutional realities of university. Other studies have shown that inaccurate perceptions have a detrimental effect on the first year non mature undergraduates’ ability to cope with the transition



from secondary school to university (Gibney et al., 2011; Patterson, 2010; Morgan et al., 2001). This study has revealed five areas where pupils' perceptions of university are inaccurate and where work is needed to bring these perceptions more in line with institutional realities.

The first area is in the concept of developing a good study ethic. The main concern here is the theme of seeing the change from secondary school learning to university learning as an escape from school homework and the freedom to do as you please when studying at university. It was found that the pupils did not equate this freedom with consequences for their studies should their desire for independent learning not translate into behaviour. The second area of concern is that the current system of learning at secondary school does not prepare the pupil for the change of onus from teacher and parental checking to personal responsibility for their own work. Currently focus in the final two years of secondary school is on preparing for the Leaving Certificate Examinations and both pupils and their teachers can get caught up in the race to gain the maximum amount of points possible (Smyth et al., 2011).

*I think there is too much emphasis on points. Like if you get x amount of points you might say that looks like a nice course I might do that. Like I don't know that's just the system we have here. You can go to the guidance counsellors but they might not know a lot about the course you choose you kinda have to do the research yourself.*

(Margaret, 17, 6<sup>th</sup> year, Birchfields Post-Primary).

The second part of Margaret's statement leads towards the third area of concern. The research into first year students mentioned earlier in this section cites concerns about choice of course as one of the causes of students abandoning their studies in the initial year at university (Gibney et al., 2011, p.359). Pupils need to have more precise information on the courses they choose and the areas of study that the course will take them into. There needs to be more work done to help match the skill sets of pupils to the course which will best utilise these skills. There is a need perhaps for discipline specific interventions during university visits and open days. These types of experiences will allow pupils to reap the benefit of the cultural capital of past experience, talent and knowledge of the topic of their studies and help them to make more informed choices about their future.

The fourth area of concern is the transition from school to university. Learning towards a set of final exams and rigorous checking of homework does not prepare the pupil for the teaching and learning methods which they will encounter at university. This is a

time of great change for a young person so some preparation for this transition needs to be included in the final years of secondary school. The current exploration of third level reform between the Department of Education and Skills, Universities, and Institutes of Technology (2011) questions the Leaving Certificate examinations and how points for CAO applications are awarded. This discussion also looks at the assessment methods and has considered if the points system should be brought in line with ECTS method of awarding points for individual work done rather than, as some see, the regurgitation of rote learning in a final exam. Adopting this method of assessment would give pupils some experience of the responsibilities inherent in independent learning.

The idea of changing the method of assessment for the Leaving Certificate points towards the fifth and final area of concern in this study. Pupils who are in transition from secondary school to university have little or no experience of continuous assessment or of preparing an academic paper as part of their assessment. These methods of assessment are widely used in university so it is important that pupils gain experience in how they work and learn about the level of commitment that is required of the undergraduate student to achieve good results.

Each of these areas is vital to an adolescent's successful transition from pupil to undergraduate. It is essential that prior to going to university they should have some experience of what it is like to be a student at university. It will take more than induction sessions or campus visits to remove the concerns about the perceptions of university that pupils have in these areas. It may require a root and branch change of how senior cycle secondary school education is conducted. It is not enough to inform pupils about university and why they should aspire to study there. They need to be given real experience of independent learning, of how they should manage their own learning and the level of responsibility that they need to adopt to insure that their learning is progressing to the required standard.

All of the stakeholders have an input to this change. At each level they can help pupils to fill the causal gaps in these areas without causing them undue concern about their academic abilities. It might be considered a high stakes gamble to try and change how we educate children at this important time in life. But the universities have continued to ask why the new students they accept each year are lacking in the critical thinking, problem solving and independent learning skills required for successful engagement in higher education (HEA, 2013; Strategy Group for Higher Education , 2011).

Perhaps we should return to teaching our secondary school children the core skills that were taught in the *trivium*; grammar, logic and rhetoric, in their modern forms, as part of the secondary school programme. These skills would not only guide them towards preparation for university study but, should they decide to disengage from education, the idea of pupils learning to be more rounded individuals would give them the skill set which would prepare them for a more productive role in society.

## CHAPTER 8 – CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature review showed that while the concept of the “*Idea of a University*” is in a constant state of flux the main motives why society values and supports universities have remained more or less the same: the preparation of a skilled and educated workforce to take their place in society and the exploration of current and new knowledge in the continuous quest to seek the truth.

This study was concerned with the perceptions that young children and adolescents have of university, how these perceptions are formed and influenced and if they accurately reflect the institutional realities of university that pupils will face. The study also asked that if the influences that inform these perceptions can be identified, then how can their effects be moulded by those who have a stake in the education of pupils preparing for the transition to university? The motives behind this question were to encourage the exploration of strategies which could be deployed across the educational community to better inform pupils about the institutional realities of study at university and guide them towards better academic preparedness.

Analysis of the perceptions pupils have of university in the key areas revealed in the themes discussed earlier; career or personal development, type of person who goes to university, freedom of choice while studying, teaching and learning methods at university and the cultural capital a graduate gains from having studied at university, showed that the pupils hold in-depth perceptions of university, the professors who teach, and the type of student who studies there. Most pupils in this study were able to write or comment confidently about their perceptions and to think forward to a time when they themselves would study at university. They were able to describe their aspirations for their future career and, in some cases, outline what they believed would be required of them to see that plan through to its successful conclusion. While some expressed personal concerns about the likelihood of their attending university, or their ability to cope with the rigors of university study the pupils were, in the main, happy that their perceptions of university were reasonably accurate. I found however that within these perceptions lay certain misperceptions and assumptions which tend to gloss over the institutional realities of university study.

Research explored during the literature review highlighted the reasons why first year students disengage from their studies (McCoy & Byrne, 2012). While it is recognised that prior academic achievement is the main factor in determining if a student continues beyond their first year of study (Mooney et al., 2010, p.59), some of the lesser recognised causes of disengagement, such as misinterpretation of study requirements or workload, time management, poor or misguided choice of course were identified as having their roots within the misperceptions and assumptions made by pupils in this study. I sought therefore to highlight these misperceptions to encourage debate among stakeholders on what needs to be done to correct these misperceptions and so guide pupils towards a better understanding of institutional realities at university.

Probably the most surprising finding of this study is the lack of evidence of peer pressure being brought to bear on pupils once they have chosen a career or course of study to pursue. It reflects the importance that pupils place on their personal choices for their future that they are willing to ignore the influences of their peers and follow the path towards their future career that they have set out for themselves. In the light of this finding it would be interesting to explore whether pupils would be more amicable to interventions which they believe are sympathetic to their career aspirations. This presents an opportunity for university outreach programmes to explore discipline specific programmes which give the potential student real experiences of the content of the course they plan to undertake.

The findings of this study are of interest to educationalist in primary schools who are engaged in the development of young minds. Stakeholders in post-primary schools who work in guiding pupils through their transition to university can use these findings to direct their development of research based practices which point pupils towards better preparation for transition and by inference work towards reducing the numbers of first year students who do not complete their degrees. However it is important that these interventions are linked to a core objective across the entire educational community from primary to third level. As long as there are significant differences between how pupils are taught at primary and secondary level and the methods used at university then there will always be inaccuracies in the perceptions of pupils who are about to enter university

Research has shown that children begin to develop concrete ideas about their future education and career as early as 10 years of age, (Atherton et al., 2009, p.1; Gottfredson, 2002, p.94), therefore it is realistic to assume that these young children are open to influences which inform these ideas. An opportunity presents itself here for primary schools introduce role play and workshop type sessions in their classes to begin to explore the idea of further and lifelong learning in simplistic ways which will inculcate those concepts in receptive minds at an early age.

At secondary level, where pupils are more cognitively developed, some of the teaching methods used in university could be introduced into the curriculum to help develop the type of student that the universities want to accept onto their courses: those that bring more than just the required number of CAO points. The transition year option, which is currently offered in most post-primary schools between the junior and leaving certificate programmes, is an ideal opportunity to begin teaching pupils the skills that they need for a successful transition to university. By designing programmes of study for this year which introduces the pupils to concepts such as group projects, team based learning, group study, research, analytical thought and enterprise pedagogy the schools can inculcate the beginnings of a university student ethos in the minds and practices of their pupils. During the Leaving Certificate Programme years, which follow transition year, the skills and experiences learned during these yearlong programmes could transfer to pupils' study towards their final examinations. Skills which can help relieve some of the worries and pressure felt by pupils when they study alone or feel isolated within their class. By the time these pupils arrive on a university campus they would have had 3 years real life experiences of using key competences which support the development of their academic preparedness.

University access programmes, such as DCU's, which "*exist to empower and support students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to realise their full potential*" (2013) do excellent work in addressing the imbalance of students from this sector within the university cohort. The supports provided by these programmes within the schools, at pre admission, induction and during the first year for students from disadvantaged backgrounds needs to demonstrate high standards and relevance as this student profile has been shown to have the largest single non-presence rates across the social divide (Mooney et al., 2010, p.60). However the work done by this type of initiative needs to be closely related to the type of primary and post-primary programmes suggested above. This intermeshing of programmes can help to alleviate

the misconceptions and gaps in the causal chain found in this research. The Higher Education Authority, in their Submission to the National Strategy for Higher Education (2009), highlighted the importance, “*complementarily and consistency in the skills and aptitudes that are nurtured and developed at all levels of education*”, in producing the rounded university graduate.

Society as a whole can benefit from this interlinking of programmes across the pre university educational career of young children and adolescents as there are both economic and personal advantages to be gained from insuring that our future students are given the best possible preparation for their future studies and careers. If a new undergraduate student can approach their first year of study with confidence that they have made informed choices, can cope with the rigors of study and understand the many varied aspects to university life then they are more likely to continue their studies and graduate from their chosen course (Mooney et al., 2010, p.45). The economic advantage gained at national level from this is that there are fewer resources expended on students who, through no fault of their own, disengage from their studies within the first or subsequent years because of misperceptions and confused messages which they bring to university. If these savings can be made by the development of well planned and managed interventions across the educational community then these resources can be directed towards the development of the well rounded university graduate from the moment they set foot on campus. At a social and family level this means that all pupils, regardless of their social status or aspirations towards a university education, will be able to make informed choices and decisions about their academic future. If their perceptions have been nurtured in a complementarily and consistent environment then they should be more aligned with the institutional realities of university and therefore they would be better prepared for what lies ahead.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to an exploration of how we educate and prepare our young children and adolescents for their continued education and place in society beyond the compulsory phase of their education. Well planned and interlinked programmes which bring learning and the development of life skills into closer harmony and by tapping into the positive attitudes that young children and adolescents have towards the idea of pursuing a course of education at university.

However further research is needed to investigate how this can best be approached and what teaching methods are best suited for the development of positive and realistic

perceptions of university in the minds of young children and adolescents from the earliest possible age. Perceptions which would equip pupils with the skills to make optimal decisions about their education beyond the end of their secondary school programme and therefore send them forward better prepared to take their place at university.



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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A Plain Language Statement<sup>1</sup>

### **What is a university? – Perceptions of university among adolescents and children.**

Research on behalf of DCU School of Education Studies

Dr. James O'Higgins – Norman

Email: [james.norman@dcu.ie](mailto:james.norman@dcu.ie)

Ph: 01 7007417

2260678

Alan Lyons BSc.Ed

Email: [alan.lyons24@nmail.dcu.ie](mailto:alan.lyons24@nmail.dcu.ie)

Ph: 087

As a volunteer subject of this research you will be asked to fill a questionnaire at your school. This will take around 30 minutes and will be taken away for review later.

Pupils will be asked to fill out their questionnaire at the same time and will be under supervision of a member of school staff and the researcher.

These questionnaires are designed to find out what students think of universities. They will be conducted in a relaxed way and at no time will you be asked to supply information that you feel you don't want to. If at any time you feel uncomfortable you may move on to another question or to stop completely.

Your participation in this research will help universities and schools to better understand the thoughts that young students have about what universities are and what happens there. This will help them to design better programs to help their young students to prepare for university life.

The final report of this research will not identify any pupil or school by their name. It will not link any pupil with their school or home background. The information given by pupils will only be used in a general way to show the views of pupils as a whole. Pupils' names will not be used in the report when quoting answers given in the questionnaire. Their names will be held in a separate file and will only be known to the research team. If at any time you feel unsure or unhappy about information you have given you may contact the researcher and they will be willing to put your mind at ease.

All interview notes and other records of this research will be held in a secure location for a period of not more than 6 years. They will then be destroyed in a secure manner.

While we are delighted that you have chosen to be part of this research project we must remind you that you have volunteered your time and thoughts to the project. You have the right at any time to refuse to offer information or to ask that you be withdrawn from the project. We will not ask that you continue or feel that you have in any way damaged the project by your actions. Our objective is that you feel happy with your input and that you do not at any time feel worried about what you have said.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Office of the Vice-President for Research, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

## Appendix B Informed Consent Form Primary School Pupils

### Informed Consent Form Primary School Pupil

**Research Title: What is a university? – Perceptions of university among adolescents and children.**

Research on behalf of DCU School of Education Studies

Dr. James O'Higgins – Norman & Alan Lyons BSc.Ed

This research will look into what young children and adolescents think about university. It will ask how these ideas are formed and how they affect the student's views of university. It will also ask how these ideas affect the student's decisions to attend university or not.

#### What will I be asked to do?

As a volunteer member of this research group I will be asked to fill out a questionnaire at my school. As a pupil I will attend as part of a group who fill out their questionnaires at the same time. What we say on the forms will be used in a report which will help universities and schools learn about pupils' ideas about universities. As a Post-Primary pupil I may be later interviewed as part of a group to help clarify some of the information given in the questionnaire.

I understand that what I say on my questionnaire will only be used for this research and that I will not be identified by name in the report. I understand that I am able to stop at any time during the questionnaire and ask not to be involved.

#### Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

- |  |        |
|--|--------|
| I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)  | Yes/No |
| I understand the information provided  | Yes/No |
| I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study  | Yes/No |
| I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions   | Yes/No |
| I am aware that my questionnaire will be taken away for review   | Yes/No |
| I understand that my contribution to this research is voluntary,<br>and that I may withdraw at any time. | Yes/No |

All information gathered during this research will be kept confidential. No School or pupil will be identified by name. All records will be kept in a secure location for a period not exceeding 6 years after which they will be destroyed in a secure manner.

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

**Participants Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name in Block Capitals:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Witness:** \_\_\_\_\_

(Parent or Guardian where the student is under 18 years of age)

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

## Appendix C Informed Consent Form Post-Primary School Pupils

### Informed Consent Form Post-Primary School Pupils

**Research Title: What is a university? – Perceptions of university among adolescents and children.**

**Research on behalf of DCU School of Education Studies**

**Dr. James O’Higgins – Norman & Alan Lyons BSc.Ed**

This research will look into what young children and adolescents think about university. It will ask how these ideas are formed and how they affect the student’s views of university. It will also ask how these ideas affect the student’s decisions to attend university or not.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

As a volunteer member of this research group I will be asked to fill out a questionnaire at my school. As a pupil I will attend as part of a group who fill out their questionnaires at the same time. What we say on the forms will be used in a report which will help universities and schools learn about students’ ideas about universities. As a Post-Primary student I may be later interviewed as part of a group to help clarify some of the information given in the questionnaire.

I understand that what I say on my questionnaire will only be used for this research and that I will not be identified by name in the report. I understand that I am able to stop at any time during the questionnaire and ask not to be involved.

#### **Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)**

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes/No
I understand the information provided	Yes/No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes/No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes/No
I am aware that my questionnaire will be taken away for review	Yes/No
I understand that my contribution to this research is voluntary, and that I may withdraw at any time.	Yes/No

All information gathered during this research will be kept confidential. No School or pupil will be identified by name. All records will be kept in a secure location for a period not exceeding 6 years after which they will be destroyed in a secure manner.

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

**Participants Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name in Block Capitals:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Witness:** \_\_\_\_\_

(Parent or Guardian where the student is under 18 years of age)

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

## **Appendix D Letter to Primary Schools Requesting Access to Pupils**

Dr. James O'Higgins – Norman / Alan Lyons  
School of Education Studies,  
Dublin City University,  
Glasnevin, Dublin 9.  
Tel: +353 1 700 7417

### **What is a university? – Perceptions of university among adolescents and children.**

Dear xxx,

The school of Education Studies at Dublin City University plans to undertake research into the perceptions of university among adolescents and young children. This project is rooted in an understanding that the transition to university begins well before new students arrive on campus to participate in induction programmes. The objective of the project is to extend our knowledge about how young people perceive university and the implications these perceptions have for their participation or non participation in university.

The research will be undertaken by Alan Lyons, a post graduate student at DCU, who will use the process and findings to write a thesis for an MA in Education & Training. The research will entail visiting primary and secondary schools as well as adult education facilities in the greater Dublin area, to interview students about their perceptions and aspirations towards 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. The project will be qualitative in nature and will involve interviews, and or questionnaires, with children and young people between the ages of 10-18 years.

We would like your school to take part in this important research, which will take place during January 2012. We are very conscious of the heavy demands placed on pupils and teachers and aim to keep disruption to the school routine to an absolute minimum.

In the case of primary schools we are conscious of concerns that young children may have about strangers entering their school to talk to them about subjects outside their normal school routine. We therefore propose that the school staff will select a total of 6 pupils, (2 each from 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> year), to fill a questionnaire under the direct supervision of a member of staff and the researcher. It is intended to spend no more than 30 minutes with your group. Participation in the survey is completely voluntary and confidential: school and pupil names will not be identified in any way in the final report.

We very much hope that your school will want to take part in this research. You may confirm your support for the project by contacting Alan at the email address below and he will be delighted to furnish you with consent forms and plain language explanations of the process for your chosen students and to discuss the process with you in more detail should you have any concerns.

Yours Faithfully

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Alan Lyons BSc. Ed. Mob: 00353- 87 2260678 Email: alan.lyons24@mail.dcu.ie



## **Appendix E Letter to Post-Primary Schools Requesting Access to Pupils**

Dr. James O'Higgins – Norman / Alan Lyons  
School of Education Studies,  
Dublin City University,  
Glasnevin, Dublin 9.  
Tel: +353 1 700 7417

### **What is a university? – Perceptions of university among adolescents and children.**

Dear xxx,

The school of Education Studies at Dublin City University plans to undertake research into the perceptions of university among adolescents and young children. This project is rooted in an understanding that the transition to university begins well before new students arrive on campus to participate in induction programmes. The objective of the project is to extend our knowledge about how young people perceive university and the implications these perceptions have for their participation or non participation in university.

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We very much hope that your school will want to take part in this research. You may confirm your support for the project by contacting Alan at the email address below and he will be delighted to furnish you with consent forms and plain language explanations of the process for your chosen students and to discuss the process with you in more detail should you have any concerns.

Yours Faithfully

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Alan Lyons BSc. Ed. Mob: 00353- 87 2260678 Email: alan.lyons24@mail.dcu.ie

## Appendix F Questionnaire for Primary School Children

### What is a university?

#### Perceptions of University among adolescents and children



This questionnaire is to help us find out what you think about university and what goes on there. We want you to try and answer the questions as best as you can. There is no wrong answer because we want to know what you feel and how you think about university. If you are not sure about any question ask your teacher or Alan and they will explain the question to you.

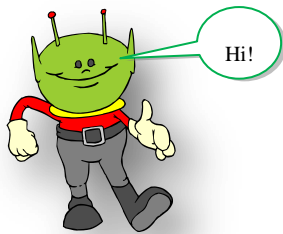
Thank you for taking the time to  
could be of help to us.

help us in this important study, we are glad you

#### 1. About University



1.1 If I was from Mars, how would you explain to me what a university is?



1.2 And what happens there?



1.3 Why do people go to university?



1.4 What sort of people do you think go to university?



1.5 In what ways do you think going to university is different to going to school?



1.6 What do professors do?



1.7 What do you think a university is for?





1.8 Can you give me the names of some universities?




- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

2. **You at University** Place a ✓ on the face to show your choice or write numbers in the circle.



2.1 Would You like to go to university? Yes  No 







2.2 If you had a choice, what university would you like to go to and why?



University: \_\_\_\_\_

Reason:

2.3 If you answered **YES** to 2.1, what would make you want to go to university? You can give more than one answer.



a. I would need to go for the job I want to do  e. You get a better job if you go there 



b. All my family have gone to university  f. My parents will pay for me to go 

c. Some or all of my friends are planning to go  g. It might be fun to go 

d. Other reasons: Please explain

2.4 If you answered **NO** to 2.1, why do you not want to go to university? You can give more than one answer.

a. It is too expensive to go there  c. I do not need to go for the job I want to do 

b. I will be happy to leave school as soon as I can  d. My friends are not going 

e. Other: Please say what you mean

**3. About You:** Place a ✓ on the face to show your choice or write numbers in the circle.



3.1 I am	Boy	Girl	I am aged: <input style="width: 30px;" type="text"/>	and I am in <input style="width: 30px;" type="text"/>	Class
<b>3.2</b> How well do you think you are doing at school?					
OK	Good			Very Well	
<b>3.3</b> How many are there in your family? Write the number in the circle. If none write 0.					
Adults <input style="width: 30px;" type="text"/>	Brothers <input style="width: 30px;" type="text"/>			Sisters <input style="width: 30px;" type="text"/>	
<b>3.4</b> Has any of your family gone to university? Write the number in the circle. If none write 0					
Parents <input style="width: 30px;" type="text"/>	Brothers <input style="width: 30px;" type="text"/>	Sisters <input style="width: 30px;" type="text"/>	Others <input style="width: 150px; height: 25px;" type="text"/>		
<b>3.5</b> Is any of your family at University now?					
			Yes	No	
<b>3.6</b> If so what have they told you about their experiences?					
<b>3.7</b> If you answered the question above, has what they have told you changed your ideas about university?					
Yes	No				
Please explain your answer:					

Thank you for giving your time to help us with our questionnaire. We wish you the very best for all you do in the future. If you ever get to go to Mars do drop in and say hello!



## Appendix G Questionnaire for Post - Primary School Children

### What is a university? – Perceptions of University among adolescents and children Questionnaire for Post - Primary School Children



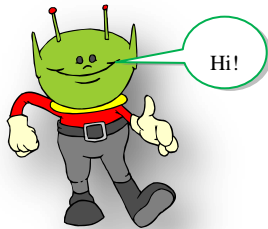
This questionnaire is to help us find out what you think about university and what goes on there. We want you to try and answer the questions as best as you can. There is no wrong answer because we want to know what you feel and how you think about university. If you are not sure about any question ask your teacher or Alan and they will explain the question to you.

Thank you for taking the time to help us in this important study, we are glad you could be of help to us.

#### 1. About University



1.1 If I was from Mars, how would you explain to me what a university is?



1.2 And what happens there?



1.3 Why do people go to university?



1.4 What sort of people do you think go to university?



1.5 In what ways do you think studying at university is different to studying at school?



1.6 What do professors do?



1.7 What do you think a university is for?



1.8 Can you give me the names of some universities?



- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_



2. You at University

2.1 Have you visited a university as part of an access programme or open day?

Yes 

No 







2.2 Would You like to go to university?



Yes 

No 

2.3 If you answered yes, what would make you want to go to university? You can give more than one answer.





- a. I would need a qualification for my chosen career 
- e. Graduates get better jobs 
- b. All my family have gone to university 
- f. My parents will pay my fees 
- c. Some or all of my friends are planning to go 
- g. g. It might be fun to go 
- d. Other reasons: Please explain

2.4 What university would you like to go to and why?

University: \_\_\_\_\_

Reason:

2.5 If you answered no to 2.2, why do you not want to go to university? You can give more than one answer.

- a. It is too expensive to go there 
- c. I do not need to go for the job I want to do 
- b. I will be happy to leave school as soon as I can 
- d. My friends are not going 
- e. Other: Please say what you mean



**3. About You:** Place a ✓ on the face to show your choice or write numbers in the circle.



<p><b>3.1</b> I am Male <input type="radio"/> Female <input type="radio"/> I am aged: <input type="text"/> and I am in <input type="text"/> Year</p>
<p><b>3.2</b> How well do you think you are doing at school?                  OK <input type="radio"/> Good <input type="radio"/> Very Well <input type="radio"/></p>
<p><b>3.3</b> How many are there in your family? Write the number in the circle. If none write 0.                  Adults <input type="text"/> Brothers <input type="text"/> Sisters <input type="text"/></p>
<p><b>3.4</b> Has any of your family gone to university? Write the number in the circle. If none write 0                  Parents <input type="text"/> Brothers <input type="text"/> Sisters <input type="text"/> Others <input style="width: 100px; height: 20px;" type="text"/></p>
<p><b>3.5</b> Is any of your family at University now? Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/></p>
<p><b>3.6</b> If so what have they told you about their experiences?</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 150px; width: 100%;"></div>
<p><b>3.7</b> If you answered the question above, has what they have told you changed your ideas about university?                  Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/>                  Please explain your answer:</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 100px; width: 100%;"></div>

Thank you for giving your time to help us with our questionnaire. We wish you the very best for all you do in the future. If you ever get to go to Mars do drop in and say hello!

## Appendix H Interview Question Prompt Sheet

<b>What is a University? Perceptions of university Among Irish Adolescents and children.</b>	
<b>Interview question prompt sheet</b>	<b>Post - Primary school Children</b>
<p>Read the following statement and ask that the children understand.</p> <p>Thank you for your help in this project. This research will look at how you think about university and if you would like to go there when you are grown up. The answers you give will be recorded and used to help me remember what was said and to write a report on your thoughts. You can say whatever you feel and can refuse to answer any question. There are no right or wrong answers only what you think so feel free to say what you feel. This will take about 20 minutes to go through but you may leave at any time if you are not happy with what you are been asked.</p>	
<b>Question</b>	<b>Check and short notes</b>
<b>If I was from Mars, how would you explain to me what a university is?</b>	
<b>What happens there?</b>	
<b>Why do people go to university?</b>	
<b>What sort of people do you think go to university?</b>	
<b>Do you want to go to university?</b>	
<b>If so, why?</b>	
<b>If not, why not?</b>	
<b>In what ways do you think studying at university is different to studying at school?</b>	
<b>What is a Professor?</b>	
<b>What do professors do?</b>	
<b>What do you think a university is for?</b>	
<b>Can you name some universities?</b>	
<b>Has any of your family attended university?</b>	
<b>Is any of your family currently at University?</b>	
<b>If so what have they told you about their experiences?</b>	
<b>What would make you want to attend?</b>	
<b>What would make you not want to attend</b>	

<sup>1</sup> The original formatting of these documents has been altered to accommodate their content on the original page count. This adjustment was made to accommodate wider margin requirements of the DCU Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis ([https://www.dcu.ie/info/regulations/postgraduate\\_regulations\\_g.shtml](https://www.dcu.ie/info/regulations/postgraduate_regulations_g.shtml))