



Youthreach graduate's perspective  
on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level experience

Master of Arts in Education Studies

Dublin City University

Supervisors: Dr. Justin Rami  
Dr. Jane O'Kelly

School of Policy & Practice

Carl Sheridan

BSc.

September 2018

Declaration

*I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Masters of Arts (Research) is entirely my own work, that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.*

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would to express my gratitude to the following people for support during this research. The students in Youthreach both past and present for giving me the opportunity to work with some exceptional young people and learn from them.

Dr. Justin Rami, my research supervisor for his time, support, patience, guidance and without his advice would not be submitting this research and also to Dr. Jane O’Kelly for her insight and gentle assistance.

To my colleagues in Youthreach Blanchardstown, especially the Co-ordinator Tracy Phillips. I would like to offer my gratitude for your collegiality, assistance and appreciation of my research.

My father Ray for the reading of the chapters, my mother Ann for her chats on the phone from foreign lands and my brother in-law Keith for the extra advice and nuggets of information.

I dedicate this thesis to my wife Caroline for her support, patience and love and for my children Isabella and Oscar and their lifelong journey of education that is only just beginning.

## Table of Contents

Declaration .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
Table of Contents .....	3
Abstract .....	12
Chapter 1 Introduction .....	13
1.1 Introduction .....	13
1.2 Aims and objectives of the research.....	13
1.3 Rationale for the research.....	14
1.4 Youthreach student’s progression routes 2015 .....	16
1.5 Irish education system.....	17
1.6 Origins of the policy governing Youthreach.....	18
1.7 Current status of the Youthreach programme .....	22
1.8 Youthreach staff .....	25
1.9 Student teacher relationship .....	27
1.10 Student centered focus .....	28
1.11 Funding of Youthreach .....	28
1.12 Special Education Needs Initiative .....	29
1.13 Youthreach Blanchardstown .....	32
1.14 Profile of a Youthreach student .....	33
1.15 Researchers work context .....	36
1.16 Summary .....	36
Chapter 2 Literature review .....	38
2.1 Introduction .....	38
2.2 Early school leavers .....	39
2.2.1 Other national early school leaving programmes.....	41
2.3 Characteristics of an early school leaver.....	43
2.3.1 Parents of early school leavers .....	47
2.3.2 Signs of early school leaving .....	49
2.3.3 Teenage pregnancy and early school leaving.....	50
2.3.4 Early school leaving and unemployment/crime.....	51
2.3.5 Disengagement from education.....	53
2.3.6 Culture of early school leaving .....	57
2.4 The school environment.....	58
2.5 Teacher training .....	59

2.6 Disadvantaged students in education .....	61
2.6.1 Postal codes higher education progression rates .....	63
2.6.2 Grants for further/higher education.....	65
2.6.3 Access programmes .....	67
2.6.4 HEAR & DARE access routes .....	71
2.7 Summary .....	73
Chapter 3 Methodology.....	74
3.1 Introduction .....	74
3.2 The research approach.....	74
3.3 Triangulation .....	76
3.4 Research methodologies.....	76
3.5 Research methods.....	77
3.6 Case study .....	78
3.7 Sample of population .....	80
3.7.1 Breakdown of samples .....	81
3.8 Timescale of the research.....	81
3.9 Limitations to the research .....	83
3.10 Validity/reliability .....	84
3.11 Surveys/questionnaires.....	84
3.11.1 Open and closed questions .....	85
3.11.2 Pilot questionnaire.....	86
3.12 Interviews .....	87
3.13 Other data sources .....	91
3.14 Data Collection.....	91
3.14.1 Vignettes .....	92
3.14.2 Analysing and coding the data .....	93
3.15 Ethical considerations .....	97
3.16 Summary .....	98
Chapter 4 Research Findings .....	99
4.1 Introduction .....	99
4.2 Research Sample .....	99
4.2.1 Sample 1 .....	100
4.2.2 Background to student's sample 1 .....	100
4.2.3 Why progress to further education? .....	101
4.2.4 Support progressing to further/higher education.....	102

4.2.5 Reasons for leaving mainstream education.....	103
4.2.6 Youthreach versus mainstream school.....	103
4.2.7 Opinion of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> level college experience.....	104
4.2.8 Concerns progressing to 3 <sup>rd</sup> level.....	104
4.3 Summary .....	106
4.4 Sample 2.....	106
4.4.1 Background to student's sample 2 .....	107
4.4.2 The college experience.....	108
4.4.3 Concerns of starting college.....	109
4.4.4 Route when applying for college .....	110
4.4.5 Youthreach support with college .....	111
4.4.6 College versus Youthreach experience .....	112
4.4.7 College expectations .....	113
4.4.8 Advice and support for college .....	114
4.4.9 What could Youthreach improve to aid the transition to college?.....	114
4.5 Summary .....	116
4.6 Sample 3.....	116
4.6.1 Background to student's sample 3 .....	117
4.6.2 Why did you go to Youthreach .....	117
4.6.3 Youthreach versus mainstream school.....	118
4.6.4 After completing Youthreach.....	118
4.6.5 Return to education in the future.....	119
4.6.6 What would you change about your education? .....	119
4.7 Summary .....	120
4.8 Sample 1-the progression (6 months after leaving Youthreach).....	120
4.8.1 Student's background sample 1-part b.....	122
4.8.2 Employment after Youthreach .....	122
4.8.3 Did Youthreach impart enough information for progression?.....	123
4.8.4 Returning to college in the future.....	124
4.9 Progressing to further/higher education sample 1.....	126
4.9.1 Did Youthreach prepare you for college? .....	127
4.9.2 Youthreach versus college .....	128
4.9.3 Expectations of college .....	128
4.9.4 Advice for students starting college.....	129

4.9.5 What could Youthreach do to help in the transition from Youthreach to education? .....	129
4.10 Summary .....	129
Chapter 5 Discussion of research findings.....	131
5.1 Introduction .....	131
5.2 Students experience of mainstream education compared to the Youthreach programme .....	132
5.2.1 Teaching environment.....	132
5.2.2 Class sizes .....	133
5.3 Students experience of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> level experience/further education.....	135
5.3.1 Applying for college .....	135
5.3.2 Concerns/worries about college .....	136
5.3.3 Reasons to progress to college .....	137
5.3.4 Funding the college experience.....	138
5.3.5 Youthreach support in progressing to college.....	141
5.3.6 SENI programme for support.....	142
5.3.7 College expectations .....	143
5.4 Students not progressing to further education/gaining employment after the Youthreach programme.....	145
5.5 Areas for further research.....	147
5.6 Limitations/implications of the research .....	148
5.7 Summary .....	149
Chapter 6 Conclusion and Recommendations .....	150
6.1 Introduction .....	150
6.2 Conclusion headings .....	150
6.3 Appraisal of the research objectives .....	150
6.4 Future for the Youthreach programme.....	154
6.5 New knowledge acquired from the research .....	155
6.6 Where else can the research be applied?.....	156
6.7 Recommendations .....	156
6.8 Final thoughts.....	157
References .....	160
Appendices.....	171

## **Abbreviations**

ASTI - Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland

BTEA – Back to Education Allowance

CAO – Central Applications Office

CTC – Community Training Centre

ETB – Education Training Board

EU – European Union

DARE – Disability Access Route to Education

DCU – Dublin City University

DES – Department of Education and Skills

DEIS - Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DSP – Department of Social Protection

ERSI – Economic and Research Social Institute

ESF - European Social Fund

FET – Further Education & Training

FETAC – Further Education and Training Awards Council

FIT – Fastrack into Information Technology

HEA – Higher Education Authority

HEAR – Higher Education Access Route

HSCL – Home School Community Liaison

IACTO - Irish Association of Community Training Organisations

ITB – Institute of Technology Blanchardstown

LCA – Leaving Cert Applied

LLN – Language Literacy & Numeracy

NAYC - National Association of Youthreach Co-Ordinators

NESSE – Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training

NEPS - National Educational Psychological Service

NESF – National Economic and Social Forum

NFQ – National Framework of Qualifications

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PG1 – Priority Group 1

PG2 – Priority Group 2

PLC – Post Leaving Certificate

QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland

SENI – Special Education Needs Initiative



SOLAS - Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanúnaigh Agus Scileanna

SUSI - Student Universal Support Ireland

UCD – University College Dublin

VTOS - Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme

## **Appendices**

- A. Dublin post codes with deprivation levels
- B. Mind map of qualitative coding
- C. Interview questions sample 3
- D. Coding sample questionnaires
- E. Coding sample interviews
- F. Consent Form
- G. Approval for Research by DCU research ethics committee
- H. Letter to Co-ordinator
- I. Plain Language Statement
- J. Questionnaire sample 1 – Reasons for applying for college
- K. Questionnaire sample 2 – Past Youthreach students survey
- L. Questionnaire Youthreach students sample 1 (part b)
- M. Interviews transcripts

## List of Tables

Table 1- Number of students participating in Youthreach 2013-2017 .....	23
Table 2 - Measures against early school leavers European Commission .....	44
Table 3 – Measuring Ireland’s progress; Ireland/EU early school leavers percentage .....	54
Table 4 – Estimated participation rates by Dublin Postal codes 2014.....	62
Table 5 – Participating in higher education by people disadvantaged by socio-economic .....	69
Table 6 - Advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires.....	83
Table 7 - Advantages and disadvantages of interviews .....	88
Table 8 - Advantages and disadvantages of other data sources .....	90
Table 9 – Number of responses received for data collection .....	91
Table 10 – Code identification of key themes .....	94
Table 11 - Background/progressing to further education <b>sample 1</b> .....	99
Table 12 - Motives to progress to further education .....	100
Table 13 - Student vignette <b>sample 1</b> .....	104
Table 14 - Background to student’s <b>sample 2</b> .....	106
Table 15 - Reasons to progress from Youthreach to college .....	112
Table 16 – Vignette of student <b>sample 2</b> .....	114
Table 17 – Vignette of student <b>sample 2a</b> .....	115
Table 18 – Background to student’s <b>sample 3</b> .....	116
Table 19 – What did you do after Youthreach?.....	118
Table 20 - Vignette of student <b>sample 3</b> .....	119
Table 21 - Students background <b>sample 1</b> -part b.....	121
Table 22 - Vignette of student <b>sample 1</b> - part b.....	125
Table 23 - Research progression breakdown .....	130
Table 24 - Comparative matrix of mainstream education versus Youthreach.....	133
Table 25 - Comparative matrix of Youthreach versus further/higher education .....	144
Table 26 - Reasons for not applying for college. ....	145

## List of Figures

Figure 1 - Student progression from Youthreach nationally 2015.....	15
Figure 2 - Student percentage progression from Youthreach centres 2015 .....	15
Figure 3 - Irish Education system .....	16
Figure 4 - National Framework of Qualifications.....	18
Figure 5 - Skills outcome of each level, Irish National Framework of Qualifications .....	19
Figure 6 - Youthreach Webwheel .....	29
Figure 7 - Youthreach connects with several domains .....	30
Figure 8 - Early leavers from education & training EU28-2010-2016 .....	55
Figure 9 - Deprivations area of Dublin 15 (2016).....	63
Figure 10 - Coding of data .....	92
Figure 11 - Snapshot of questionnaire coding.....	95
Figure 12 - Snapshot of interview coding .....	95
Figure 13 - Was education encouraged within the family?.....	102
Figure 14 - How long after Youthreach did you start college?.....	107
Figure 15 - Experience of college sample 2.....	108
Figure 16 - The route taken when applying for college.....	109
Figure 17 - How did you fund your time in college?.....	110
Figure 18 - Did you feel overwhelmed by the workload in college?.....	113
Figure 19 - Questionnaire format/layout, progression to education/not to education .....	120
Figure 20 - If you eventually return to education college in the future .....	123
Figure 21 - Ranking of important aspects if you return to education .....	124
Figure 22 - Rate your experience of college so far -sample 1 .....	126
Figure 23 - Reasons to progress to college .....	137
Figure 24 - Aspects if you return to college in the future .....	139

## **Abstract**

### **Youthreach graduate's perspective on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level experience**

**Carl Sheridan**

This study investigates the experiences of current and former Youthreach students as they progress from the Youthreach programme to further/higher education. Though the study attempts to focus primarily on the pathways for progression to education rather than employment this study also involves an exploration of other progression pathways.

The research design is informed by a post-positivist paradigm within the Qualitative domain. A Case Study approach was chosen as the most appropriate method for this investigation. Data tools included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and extant data. These data collections endeavour to capture the real-life story through the voices of current and former students.

The literature review focusses on but is not limited to early school leaving, alternative education routes and programmes and urban educational disadvantage. A significant discussion in the thesis looks at the innovative and holistic approaches adopted by teachers in the Youthreach programme.

The findings highlight the positive aspects of the Youthreach programme for the students, and the challenges and barriers they encountered after completing the programme in choosing and pursuing their chosen pathway in education or employment. The thesis concludes with recommendations for Youthreach and policy makers in regards to improvements that Youthreach centres can implement which may support students progressing to further/higher education.

# **Chapter 1**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The fundamental focus of this research is the education progression of Youthreach students after completing the Youthreach programme as they moved to further/higher education. The work documents their experiences in the world of education, their fears, worries, concerns, aspirations and their motivation to progress after their Youthreach programme. Specific consideration is given to students who did not progress in their education and possible reasons are provided. Also considered are the many factors that lead to students leaving school early and not completing secondary school. The literature pertaining to the research will be integrated throughout the research. From this point forward, the author will use the first person in relation to himself.

## **1.2 Aims and objectives of the research**

The aim of this research is to investigate students that have completed their Youthreach Blanchardstown education programme and their progression to further/higher education. To understand and hear the student's voices, their perceptions, their stories and experiences and how they fared in their education, especially pathways between Further Education & Training (FET) and 3<sup>rd</sup> level rather than employment. The research will endeavour to answer the following question. What is a...

Youthreach graduate's perspective on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level experience?

The objectives of the research are to establish how Youthreach students:

- Find the progression route to further/higher education.
- Perceive the challenges of progressing to further/higher education through their lived experiences.
- Feel about Youthreach: is Youthreach doing enough to support/facilitate them in progressing to further/higher education.

- Could Youthreach do more for students looking at making the move to further/higher education?

### **1.3 Rationale for the research**

I have worked with early school leavers for just over a decade at Youthreach Blanchardstown, teaching students Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) levels 3, 4 and 5. Prior to this position, I have worked in management positions for various corporate companies. Within Youthreach Blanchardstown, one of my roles aside from the teaching, is within the career guidance team and mentoring programme. From these roles and my teaching experience, I regularly observe certain students wanting (and capable) to progress to further/higher education and said students do not always progress. On the other hand, however, I also see reasons for some students not to progress to further education and instead gain employment. For some reason, there seems to be something that holds some students back to progress in education. I have speculated that fear, uncomfortableness and awkwardness is at the root of this for some students causing them not to engage in any education progression options and lack of confidence in them. I am constantly surprised by some of the students I teach in respect of why they did not complete upper secondary as a significant portion are very capable and show great motivation, energy and ambition to complete their QQI modules. In reality they all came to Youthreach for various reasons. Some students attend Youthreach for the training allowance, others for a second chance at education and to acquire a qualification. For a limited few, the attraction is to be with friends that also attend Youthreach.

The reason this topic was chosen was to get a better understanding and insight into Youthreach students and the reasons why some do not progress in an education journey after Youthreach. I also want to understand the experiences of Youthreach graduates and how they fare in the world of further/higher education and to ascertain if Youthreach is doing all it can to give these students the coping skills necessary to participate and

complete further/higher education. Within the research I want to find out, why some students in Youthreach have that fear of progressing to further/higher education. Within my years of working in Youthreach Blanchardstown only a small number of students annually express an interest to progress to further/higher education but rarely take that last step in progressing in their education (apply, go for interview, take up offer). Some students take time away from education after completing their Youthreach programme and at a later stage (roughly 1-2 years), then return to further/higher education. Students who have completed a full QQI level 4 initially progress to a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC)/FET course and then onto 3<sup>rd</sup> level education.

Another question I wish to answer is in respect to the role that Youthreach plays in fostering *lifelong learning* in the mind-sets of the students. For instance, for the students that do progress into further/higher education, how influential are the two/three years spent at Youthreach to foster an appetite to continue their education studies? Lifelong learning is widely recognised as an important part of future development both for the individual learner, the wider community and the economy. The European Social Fund (ESF) (2014) suggest that the Youthreach programme, ‘seeks to instil a pattern of lifelong learning and integrate participants into further education and training opportunities and the labour market’ (p.52).

The research will look at the student’s journey through their education and their experiences in this regard. What was good, what was bad, what they liked, what they disliked. Why do some students stay in school whilst others don’t, is it family issues, peer pressure or something else? Would life have been better/worse/similar if they had of stayed in school and completed their Leaving Certificate?



### 1. 4 Youthreach student’s progression routes 2015

The following information is the nationwide progression for Youthreach students from 2015. This information is taken from the National Association of Youthreach Coordinators (NAYC) brochure (2017). There is no public data available for other years for the progression numbers for Youthreach students nationally. The following is the numbers derived from the NAYC chart for the year 2015 (p.9). Sample total from the brochure, is over 3000 students.

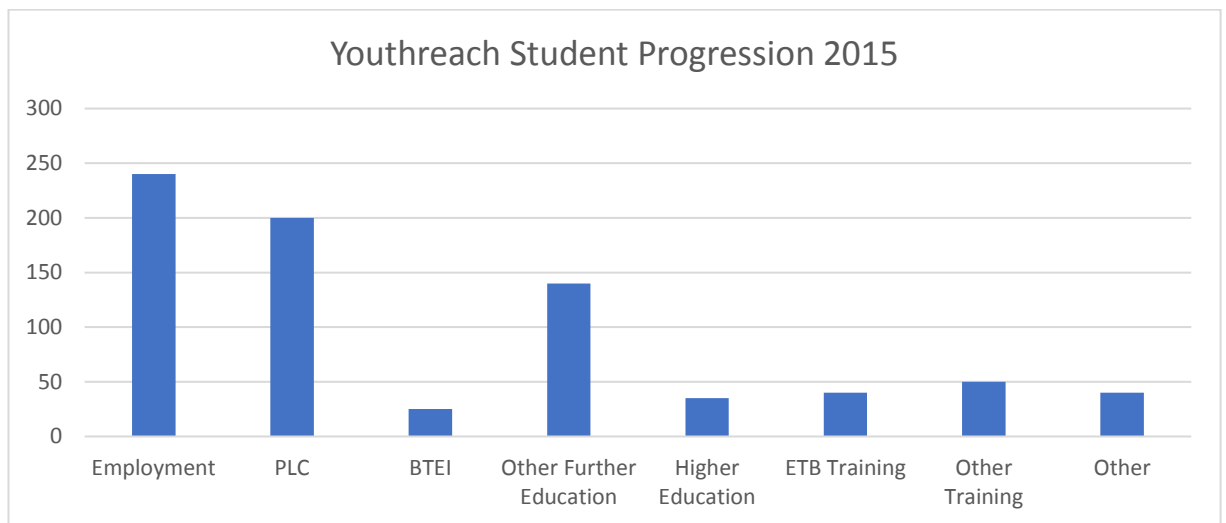


Figure 1: Student progression from Youthreach nationally 2015. Source, NAYC (2017).

Taking into account that over 3000 students were enrolled on the Youthreach programme for 2015, Figure 2 is interpreted from Figure 1 and displayed as a percentage. Figure 2 looks at the destination of progressing students from Youthreach in 2015.

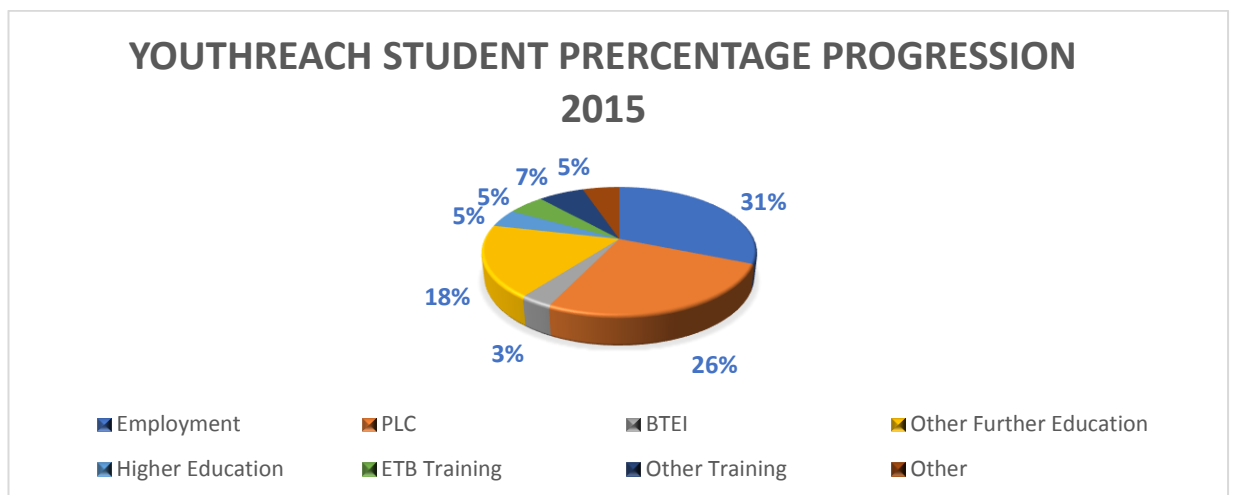


Figure 2: Student percentage progression from Youthreach centres 2015. Source NAYC (2017).

The data from this chart (figure 2) represents that 5% of students from 2015 progressed to higher education whilst 26% progressed to a PLC course. 31% went onto employment and the remainder progressed to other training/other options. Interestingly, 64% of students progressed to some form of education after completing the Youthreach programme in 2015.

### 1.5 Irish Education System

The following figure (3) depicts the Irish Education system. NAYC (2017) comments regarding the Youthreach Programme related to the Irish Education system that,

Youthreach bridges gaps between second level and further and higher education by supporting students for whom mainstream is no longer an option. It also shows our uniqueness in being able to meet the needs of a diverse range of students in an ever-changing society. (p.4).

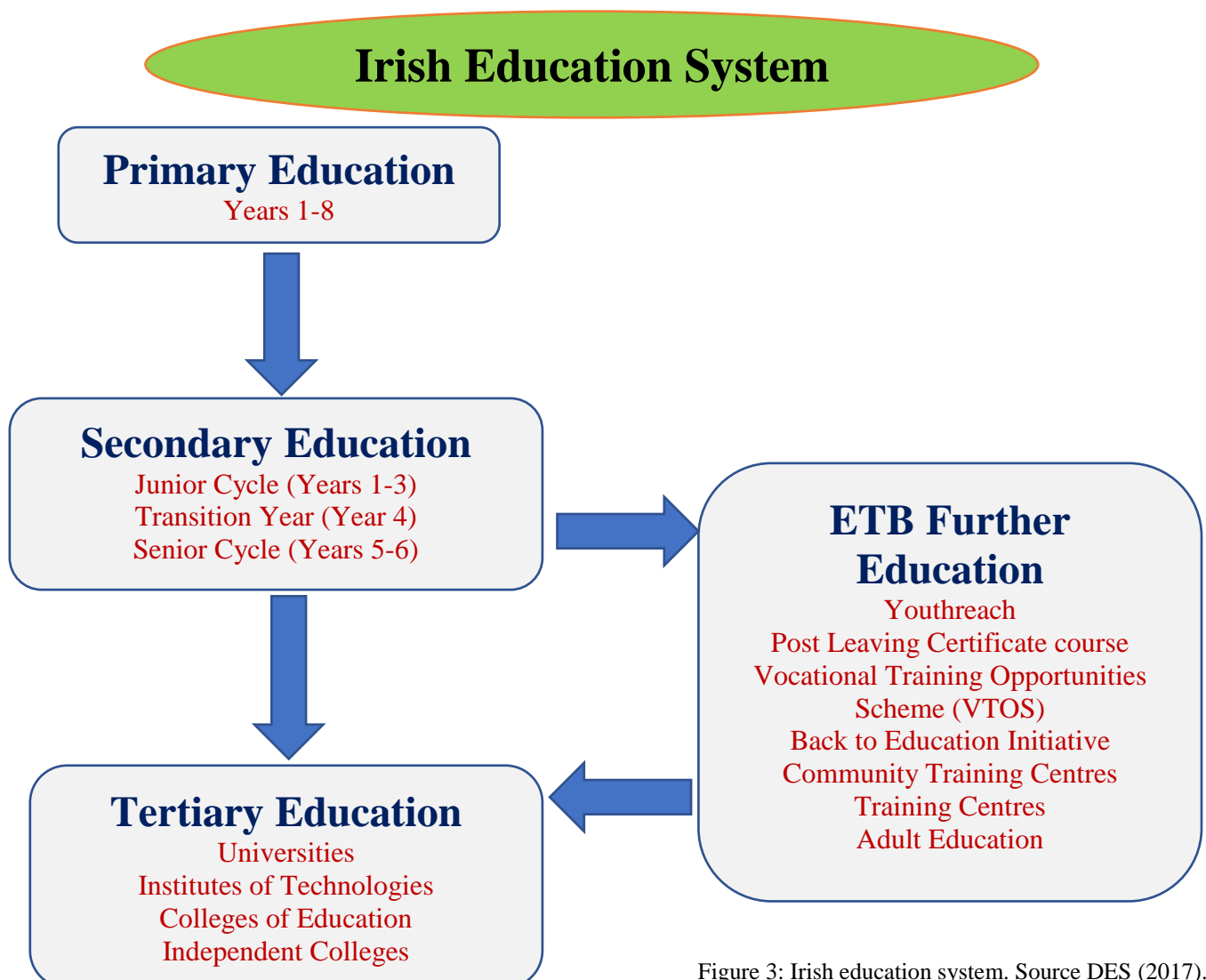


Figure 3: Irish education system. Source DES (2017).

## **1.6 Origins of the policy governing Youthreach**

The 1983 Council of the European Community, Resolution on Vocational Training Policy, (known as the Social Guarantee) was launched in Ireland in 1985 with aims and objectives of providing basic education and training and improved opportunities for unemployed school leavers. The Social Guarantee was aimed at two distinct groups of school leavers, referred to as:

Priority group one (PG1) - left school with no qualifications.

Priority group two (PG2) - left school at or about Junior Certification standard.

The Youthreach programme was launched in 1989 by Mr. Bertie Ahern (Minister for Labour) and Ms. Mary O'Rourke (Minister for Education). The focus for Youthreach was and is early school leavers, identifiable as PG1 from the Social Guarantee. The Education Welfare Act (2000) states that the legal definition of an early school leaver (in Ireland) refers to 'non-participation in school before a young person reaches age 16 or before completing three years post-primary education, or whichever is later.'

The Departments of Education and Labour, now the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in conjunction with the Vocational Education Committee, now the Education & Training Board (ETB) coordinated the Youthreach programme and each Youthreach centre (known as centres and not schools) was managed locally. During this period (1990s) the country had high unemployment, mainly young adults having left school early and were predominantly male. The Youthreach programme was initially established as a pilot programme, a temporary programme for the high levels of early school leavers that Youthreach focused on, especially young males aged 15 years plus, leaving school with little or no qualifications (PG1). The Department of Education Youthreach Operators Guidelines (1989) stated,

Youthreach is intended for young people who are typically at least six months in the labour market, are aged between 15 and 18 years, have left the school system

without formal qualifications or vocational training, who are not catered for within traditional educational or training provision and have not secured full-time employment. Departments of Education and Labour. (p.4)

The Youthreach programme is an alternative education or second chance education for early school leavers. Students are both male and female and between the ages of 15 and 20. The principal objectives are to guide, support and encourage the students in their transition from education to employment or to further their education and attend a further/higher education course. Students are offered a programme of general education, vocational training and work experience. The students involved, have various learning abilities and come from diverse backgrounds, many of which are disadvantaged. The majority of Youthreach Centres teach courses accredited by the QQI, previously known as Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). Each Youthreach centre varies in the courses that they teach, including: QQI level 1 to 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (see figure 4), Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate. Stokes (2017) comments about the NFQ that ‘it is of particular importance in Further Education & Training, and Ireland offers strong (but perhaps under-appreciated) second chance and lifelong learning opportunities’.

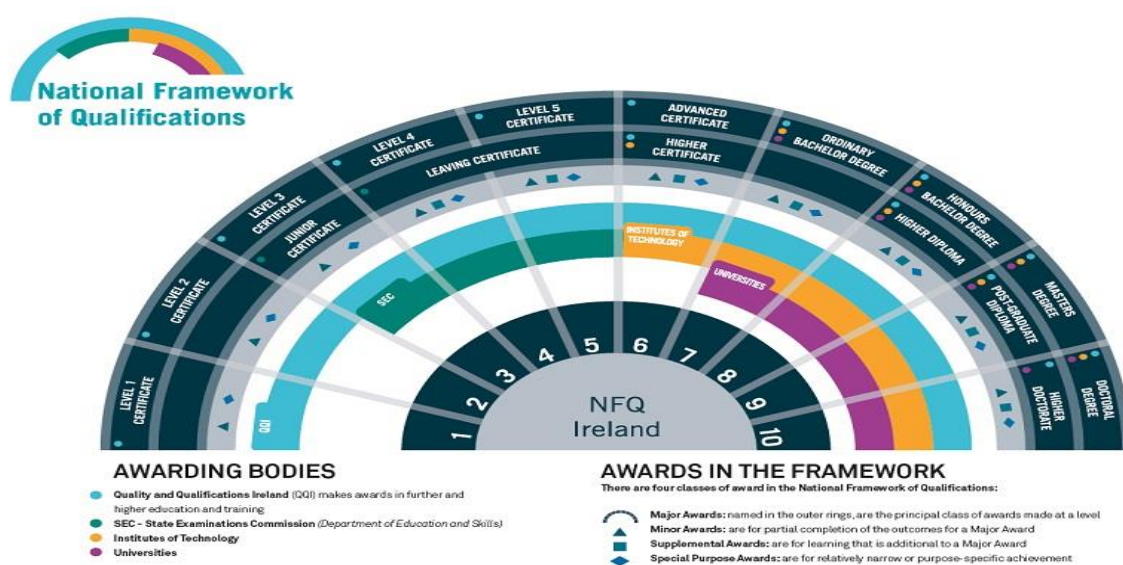


Figure 4: National Framework of Qualifications source: NFQ.

Figure 5 represents the skills outcome of each level of the NFQ that Youthreach centres can teach.



Figure 5: Skill outcome of each level, Irish National Framework of Qualifications, source: NFQ.

The majority of Youthreach Centres teach QQI level 3 and level 4 with only a handful teaching QQI level 5. The Qualifax website (2017) confirms that currently eight Youthreach centres teach QQI level 5. Decisions on what courses that are taught are made at a local centre level and representation regarding these courses must be made to the relevant ETB and all courses must be approved by the ETB before commencement. Module descriptors regarding all modules taught are available to all ETB staff only and these can help and support teachers in developing the content to be delivered. Courses are full time and a training allowance is paid to all students, the amount paid depends on the

age of the student. This payment is funded by Seirbhísí Oideachais Leanunaigh Agus Scileanna (SOLAS) and the ESF. The allowance is intended to motivate participation and to reflect the vocational and holistic training element of the Youthreach programme. Furthermore, the allowances go some way towards counteracting the attraction of low skilled paid work instead of education to the Youthreach target group. The standard training allowance for students over 18 years of age only is equivalent to the Department of Social Protection (DSP) and the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) rates. The current weekly training allowance for Youthreach students as of March 2018 is, 16-17 years of age €40 and 18 years and over €198. By participating in a Youthreach programme students are afforded the higher social welfare rate instead of a means tested social welfare allowance, which may be considerably less. There are also additional allowances available for food, travel and accommodation.

McHugh (2014) cites Barnardos (2009) that early school leavers are more prone to resorting to crime or ending up in prison and the training allowance costs to society is substantially lower. Again, from personal experience, most students attend Youthreach for the payment but appreciate and acknowledge the benefits of the programme (more so after they leave). The Youthreach programme has a respectable reputation in European Union (EU) circles, The European Commission (2013) states that, ‘The Youthreach project in Ireland highlights its warmth, respect and order’ (p.36). Stokes (2017) mentions that the ‘Youthreach programme has frequently been recognised as a European model of provision for early school leavers’.

If these students were not to attend Youthreach, what would their fate be? Would they be unemployed, in a low skilled job or would they resort to crime? One could consider that the allocation of the training allowance is justified as students who complete the programme obtain a recognised qualification, gain practical and social skills and have

progression opportunities available to them. Re-engaging in education at that age should enable students to improve their literacy, numeracy, personal and social skills, their life chances and remove the necessity for possibly much more expensive interventions at a later stage. Barnardos (2015) consider that ‘Giving all children a positive start vastly reduces the need for remedial actions later on. Interventions to repair the damage caused by lack of appropriate support in early childhood are expensive and often arrive too late to be effective’ (p.14).

### **1.7 Current status of the Youthreach programme**

The DES (2015) cited in the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), (2017) comment that,

The Youthreach programme is defined as an education and training programme, targeted at those aged between 16 and 20 years who have left the mainstream school system with poor qualifications or none and which aims to equip this group with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and progress to further education, training and employment. (p.6).

The Youthreach Operations Guidelines (2015) state that Youthreach is intended as a key element of the Government's contribution to the achievement of a *lifelong learning* society. There are 106 Youthreach centres and 35 Community Training Centres (CTC) located throughout the Republic of Ireland in small out-of-school settings. Currently, the number of places in Youthreach and CTC centres is 5,500 students (NEPS 2017). Centres are situated mainly in cities, large towns and some rural towns. SOLAS fund the Youthreach programme but centre budgets are managed by the local ETB. Youthreach is currently managed in a *Further Education & Training* context. This can be somewhat misunderstood as most students are aged between 16 and 18 years of age and Youthreach is categorised as an alternative to mainstream school with alternative teaching methods. NEPS (2017) state that,

Unlike the other FET programmes, Youthreach caters for children and young people who are, for the most part, the same age as the students in the upper part

of secondary schooling. However, by being located in a Further Education and Training programme, these learners are not included in the service brief of most of the agencies and sections of the Department that support mainstream. (p.6).

The Youthreach Operation Guidelines (2015 p.9) state: For the participants, the programme aims to promote,

- personal and social development and increased self-esteem.
- independence, personal autonomy, active citizenship and a pattern of lifelong learning.

and the guidelines go on to mention that,

Youthreach is the principal national response in Ireland to the difficulties faced by young people who have left school early. It is an education and training programme targeting in particular those between 16 and 20 years of age who have left the mainstream school system with poor qualifications or none. (p.9).

The guidelines indicate that students attend the programme 5 days per week, 226 days per year and attend between the hours of 9.00 am and 3.30 pm (or similar). The centre Co-ordinator decides the hours for opening as long as 28 hours per week are carried out by the students. Second level education runs 167 days per year. It is ironic that students who had difficulty attending mainstream school for 167 days are now asked to participate in a programme that runs for 226 days.

Student numbers attending Youthreach has stayed relatively the same in recent years but have declined since the early 2010s. This may be due to the fact that students are staying in school longer. NEPS (2017) suggest the main reason for declining Youthreach numbers, as suggested in their recent report, is in respect ‘the improving retention of students within mainstream education, the numbers of young early school leavers requiring a second chance option is decreasing’ (p.46). Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025 (2016), states that, ‘When it comes to leaving school, retention of students to



Leaving Certificate is at 90.6%, ahead of the 90% target set for 2020. Table 1 depicts numbers of students attending the Youthreach programme nationwide.

Total 2013		Total 2014		Total 2015		Total 2016		Total 2017	
3,313		3,217		3,292		3,266		3,225	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1,961	1,352	1,881	1,336	2,007	1,285	1,911	1,355	1,847	1,378

Table 1: Number of students participating in Youthreach 2013-2017, source CSO website (2018).

The number of places assigned to Youthreach is almost 3,700 with the remainder (1800) provided by SOLAS in CTCs. Schools are required to give confirmation to the Youthreach centre stating that the student has left or is not being afforded a place in that school anymore. The Youthreach Guidelines (2015) mention that, ‘Confirmation by centres with the last school attended that the young person has left school and there is no possibility of them returning and/or confirmation of same by the Education Welfare Officer’ (p.27). This can be an opportunity for schools to get rid of troublesome students and to not have to deal with them. However, St Vincent de Paul advises caution between schools and the Youthreach programme, cited in Houses of the Oireachtas report (2010) they state, ‘it is important to ensure that Youthreach is not being used simply to remove underachieving or problematic students from mainstream education’ (p.241). Lally (2012) states that ‘An amicable working relationship with local schools is essential in meeting the challenge that early school leaving presents’ (p.12). Schools should not use Youthreach as a way of ‘getting rid’ of the ‘problem students’ that mainstream teachers cannot manage/teach. Early school leavers may have declined in numbers recently but as research still highlights, the associated issues have not gone away.

## **1.8 Youthreach staff**

Youthreach staff are a valuable and important strength of the success of Youthreach. Most of the staff in Youthreach centres have taken the onus on themselves to upskill and achieve further qualifications. Teachers in Youthreach do not require any qualification to teach. This can pose difficulties for some, especially if new to a teaching environment. If some Youthreach students could not be taught by qualified teachers in mainstream education, will a person with no teaching background/qualifications possess the skills/theory/experience to teach students? In the quote below the ‘often complex needs of participating learners’ could be disconcerting to teaching in Youthreach. This may put teachers off considering a teaching career in a Youthreach environment. The complex needs of Youthreach learners do not necessarily compare favourably to teaching in a mainstream environment. The Youthreach Guidelines (2015) state that,

While relevant qualifications are desirable, no qualifications are specified for staff working in the programme. This is intended to give ETBs maximum flexibility to recruit staff with the combination of personal qualities and professional skills most likely to meet the often-complex needs of participating learners. (p.25).

The upskilling that Youthreach staff participates in, not only enhances the learning for the students but also for the centre. In the original Youthreach Operators’ guidelines (1989), the stated prerequisite of staff was:

Staff should bring to their work an understanding of just how troubled a young person can be at this time of her/his life, as well as an awareness of the broad social context in which the young people live, and which is usually a source of many of the difficulties they experience. (p.16).

Youthreach teachers participate in numerous training sessions, these include courses on how to deal with disruptive students in the classroom, behavioural issues, students with Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Asperger Syndrome and numerous other conditions/circumstances. Each centre also has a designated Language Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) support teacher and one to one LLN sessions are organised for students

if need be. All students are assessed for LLN on the first week of attendance and results analysed to see if additional support is needed and these results are disseminated to all staff if necessary. CHL Consulting from their report in 2006 state that,

Young people recruited to Youthreach typically suffer from economic and social disadvantage as well as educational disadvantage. Many experience severe problems in their homes and neighbourhoods. All have left, dropped out or have been excluded from mainstream schools and, almost without exception, they have become deeply alienated from schools and the formal education environment. (p.5).

The Youthreach Consultative Process (2000) suggests that a good working practice in Youthreach should entail, 'A focus on the holistic development of the individual, set in a learning environment which is safe, structured and challenging' (p.55). One of the core principles stated in The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) was 'A holistic curriculum, focused on a broad sphere of learning and on catering for the learners educational and personal needs in a way which reflects his/her cultural and community context and experience' (p.30).

Schools need to recognise that not all students are capable of the mainstream curriculum and an alternative like Youthreach may be more suitable for the student. Do we really need second chance education? Should first chance education not work for all. The Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (2010) notes that,

Youthreach has been very successful in many settings but that there is a lack of linkage between this sector and mainstream schools. It comments that there needs to be a more widespread recognition by staff in mainstream schools that this programme is appropriate for some students. Clear and ongoing lines of communication between schools and local Youthreach centres need to be established. Cited in Houses of the Oireachtas. (p.241).

The Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training (NESSE) (2010) state that,

Second chance programmes have been introduced to "rescue" those who have already left school early. These have been most successful when they have offered

alternative experiences to conventional schooling, but generally it is considered better to try to ensure “first chance” success. (p.7).

For the young person to succeed in second chance education, it needs to be seen why they first dropped out of mainstream education. There is no point in the student going to a second chance education setting if it is similar to their first chance education. Rumberger (1987) suggests,

Some students are not able or willing to get anything out of school, others choose other alternatives over going to school, alternatives that in some cases can be more fulfilling and rewarding. And some students who remain in school can be very disruptive to these students who want to be there and to learn. (p.112).

### **1.9 Student teacher relationship**

Laxman *et al.* (2014) consider that, ‘Research indicates that having at least one positive and caring relationship with an adult can buffer children against risk factors in their lives and can predict positive outcomes in later life’. Youthreach students when considering their mainstream education experience, do not mention the responsibility of the teacher regarding education, the understanding, the explaining, guiding, demonstration, support, etc. Students mention the distrust, punishment, the representation of power that was used against them, and accordingly set up the teacher and student relationship as constantly unfriendly. Francis (1999) points out that,

Among many participants, a key differentiating factor between Youthreach and school is the sense of individuality and freedom that young people experience. The ability to ‘speak one’s mind’ appears as one of the dominant features of a renewed sense of freedom that young people value. (p.311).

McGrath (2006) when viewing the Youthreach programme and prospering through relationships stated, ‘For vulnerable youth to find their way back into learning, and to find room for change in their lives, associative relationships are needed with practitioners and other young people so that these elements can flow more easily’ (p.611). Stokes (2003) also suggests that ‘young people overwhelmingly cite the breakdown in their relationship with teachers as causing their early school leaving’ (p.83).

### **1.10 Student centered focus**

Carl Rogers (1969 pp.157-166) discussed a format to restructure the power base within the classroom, from the traditional one of the teacher holding all the power and meting out instructions to students, to a collaborative one where the teacher takes on the role of facilitator, who empowers and aides the students to gain knowledge. Knowles (1980) went on to state that ‘Within the classroom it is the behaviour of the teacher which influences the character of the learning climate more than any other single factor’ (p.47). The following is an extract from the Youthreach newsletter (June 2016), from a student in the Priory Youthreach Tallaght, Dublin 24.

Everyone helps each other out and the teachers are very supportive and are there for our best interest. They’re not asked or paid to care about how we are outside Youthreach and how we feel but they do it anyway. (p.32).

This captures the essence, the feeling and respect that the students get from the majority of teachers in any Youthreach. With the holistic approach used in Youthreach, students can fulfil their achievements and progress with the skills into the working world. Lally (2012) notes that ‘We must appreciate the right of a young person to receive their education in the medium that they feel is most appropriate. Mainstream education may not be the most appropriate form of education for all’ (p.5). The European Commission (2015) state ‘Schools cannot effectively work alone. They need to move from isolated and short-term actions to engaging in a more holistic and systemic initiatives’.

### **1.11 Funding of Youthreach**

The Youthreach programme is funded by SOLAS and managed by the local ETB. The Youthreach Operations Guidelines (2015) states, ‘in certain ETBs (Youthreach) is co-funded under the European Social Fund’ (p.21). SOLAS are currently in the process of reviewing the Youthreach programme (Economic and Research Social Institute (ERSI)

2015), this review commenced in 2017 and should be finalised by 2018. The ERSI (2015) state that the SOLAS review of Youthreach will be,

Based on a robust mixed-methods analysis of Youthreach participants, instructors, coordinators and managers/stakeholders, we examine the experiences and outcomes of Youthreach participants focussing on the extent to which the programme facilitates young people to return to learning and prepare them for employment and adult life. The findings will generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the outputs and outcomes of the Youthreach programme and the effectiveness of this type of provision.

This could have major implications for Youthreach staff, students and the whole of the Youthreach programme. Previous programme reviews have been generally favourable (Youthreach Consultative Report 2000, DES-Value for Money review 2008) regarding the running of Youthreach, but with the large budget that Youthreach receives this may alter the programme.

### **1.12 Special Education Needs Initiative**

In 1997 the Special Education Needs Initiative (SENI) was implemented into some Youthreach centres nationwide as a pilot programme in conjunction with NEPS. Blanchardstown Youthreach was one of 20 education centres selected to receive funding to support the special education needs of students attending the centre. For the purpose of SENI evaluations and research comparisons, Youthreach centres that run the SENI programme are classified as SENI centres, whereas non-SENI centres do not have an allocated budget for SENI programmes. Non SENI centres can run the SENI programme if they wish to do so with no budget support. Cited in NEPS (2017) Gordon (2013) states,

The SEN Initiative, however – a pilot intervention to respond to learners’ SEN in twenty Youthreach Centres – has proved itself to be an effective means of increasing retention, accreditation and the acquisition of key personal and social competencies by learners and of improving inter-agency working by staff. (p.38).

Underpinning the project is one to one mentoring provided weekly to support the students during their time on the programme and monitor their transfer on completion. This project

is reviewed annually in a separate SENI evaluation. Part of the SENI is a mentoring tool called the Webwheel (Figure 6). This is a unique attribute and innovative tool only used in a Youthreach setting. The Webwheel was championed by the then director of NEPS Dr. Mary Gordon.

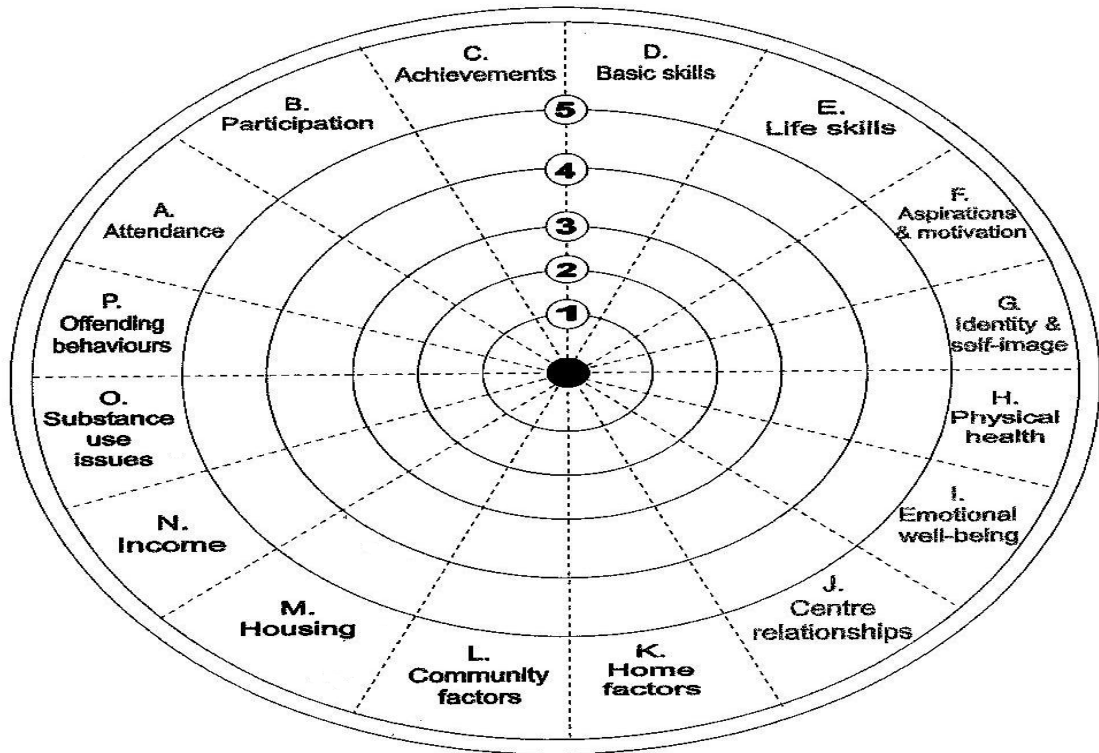


Figure 6: Youthreach Webwheel.

The Webwheel enables the mentor (normally also a teacher) to look at the student's life and outline any barriers that the student feels hinder their participation in the education process and these can be addressed. A good rapport between the mentor and the student is paramount in helping the student become more effective in their learning. The mentoring sessions take the form of an informal conversation and take place normally 20-30 minutes per week. The student is invited to reflect on themselves and talk about any issues they have, which the mentor or the centre may be able to help with or give them direction. It also looks at how students are progressing in the programme and if they require any educational support that they feel can benefit them successfully completing the Youthreach programme, getting their qualification and progressing to further/higher

education or employment. As Gordon (2013) in her SENI report suggests ‘Barriers to participation and progress were defined as factors relating to life outside the centre which had the effect of creating barriers to good attendance and participation or to successful learning and progression’ (p.10). An important aspect of the SENI session is looking at student progression from the centre. These sessions set out plans on what the student requires to progress in their education or to gain employment, as some students just need to work and progression to education is not an option (at that time, due to circumstantial reasons). Gordon (2013) also comments, ‘the SENI model crucially involves listening to the learner’s voice and understanding their view of the world. It augments professional support services with informal and non-formal approaches and provides additional training, guidance and support to staff’ (p.4).

The SENI aims to identify key areas that a student can look at to make improvements during their time on the Youthreach programme. If students have any issues including mental health issues, they can avail of internal and external resources that the Youthreach programme has to offer. As mentioned, the SENI session may also inform the mentor if the student requires any additional supports from outside agencies. These supports are put in place to help the student get through their Youthreach programme and the progression routes ahead. Figure 7 shows the some of the outside agencies that Youthreach centres link in with for student support.



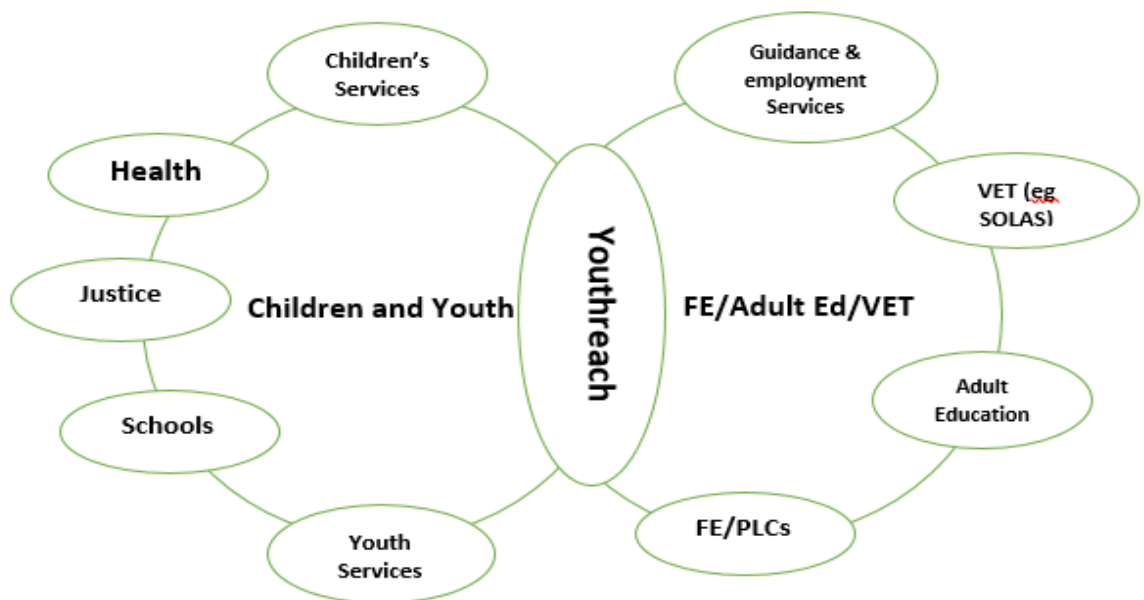


Figure 7: Youthreach connects with several domains. Adapted from Griffin (2016).

### 1.13 Youthreach Blanchardstown

Youthreach Blanchardstown was opened in 1989 and it is located in the old Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) building on the main street in Blanchardstown village, Dublin 15. Therefore, some of the students refer to the programme as FÁS and not Youthreach and the FÁS name would still be prevalent with the older generation of Blanchardstown and the students' parents. The centre has capacity for 72 students, which is a large volume for a Youthreach centre. Most centres around the country would have approximately 25-30 students. The centre teaches QQI accredited programmes. These programmes are at level 4 and 5 on the NFQ. Up to 2015 Youthreach Blanchardstown also taught a QQI level 3 programme but due to the fact that students are staying in school longer and completing the Junior Certificate, a decision was taken not to teach the QQI level 3 (the equivalent to the Junior Certificate on the NFQ, see figure 4) and start new students at a QQI level 4 programme. This is in line with NEPS (2017) as they note students are staying in school longer and completing their education.

The centre has one Co-ordinator, two resource managers, three resource teachers, ten teachers, and one special needs assistant. Programmes currently being taught are,

QQI level 5 Business Studies one-year programme. (eight QQI modules in this programme)

QQI level 4 General Learning two-year programme. (eight QQI modules in this programme)

### **1.14 Profile of a Youthreach student**

Some of the students in Youthreach Blanchardstown tend to have a variety of problems that can include, violence in the home, substance abuse by themselves/close family members, emotional disturbance and/or involvement in crime. These issues were outlined as Youthreach students' problems by O'Brien *et al.* (2002), Stokes (2003), NEPS (2017) and others. NEPS went further and highlighted the issues and termed them Adverse Childhood Experiences, adding issues such as, receiving or witnessing verbal abuse, family financial difficulties and parent separation/single parents. Other Youthreach students may have a mild learning disability or other conditions as mentioned earlier. Some may not have experienced any of the problems and cope very well in the Youthreach learning environment. Other students will have left school or dropped out simply because they wanted to, because school did not suit them, and/or they wanted to rebel. There seems to be a mixed profile for a Youthreach student and not a consistent one.

Words that have been mentioned regarding Youthreach are 'last resort', 'second chance education', 'last chance education' but maybe Youthreach is not a place of 'last resort' or 'second chance education' or 'last chance education.' As I have been teaching in Youthreach for over 10 years and by listening to the students experience of mainstream school, maybe it is 'first chance education' for some, perhaps the education system may have failed the students as many seem to excel in a Youthreach environment. Byrne and Smyth (2010) point out that, 'While many young people on Youthreach expressed a preference for the learning environment, there was the impression that they saw

Youthreach as an alternative rather than a choice' (p.164). Not all students finish the Youthreach programme, some drop out early in the programme, others further along the way. The Youthreach programme and the methods of teaching is not for all students.

Some Youthreach students tend to have had a negative experience in secondary school, Stokes (2003), McHugh (2014). This stripped them of confidence and self-esteem. Students felt that in primary school they were nurtured. All students remember at least one teacher they admired and liked. Upon entry to the secondary school system, they were not getting the attention they had before, due to class size and the volume of work that needed to be covered. In the Houses of the Oireachtas report (2010), Staying in Education: A New Way Forward School and Out-of-School Factors Protecting Against Early School Leaving, it states that,

The Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) had noted that current class sizes can act as indirect barriers to the promotion of literacy and numeracy. Particularly in the core subject areas, class sizes can undermine teachers' willingness to diversify their teaching methodologies, and this means that students with literacy and numeracy problems will be particularly disadvantaged. (p.234).

Making students stay in school when they don't want to, this can turn them off education. They can become disruptive, resentful and even depressed which can lead to mental health issues and will possibly have a negative impact on other students in the class. Stokes (2003) mentioned that 'If a child's experience of school is negative..... retaining him/her in school longer is likely to be seen as a punishment, not an opportunity' (p.262).

Due to the students generally negative experience of mainstream education, the staff in Blanchardstown Youthreach try to change the attitude of students to develop and encourage *lifelong learning* by directing, guiding and trying to motivate them. Stokes (2003) feels that trying to motivate early school leavers is influenced by their personal development since leaving education and the negative aspects that leaving school early can have, for example, limited employment opportunities. As NEPS (2017) states,

If Youthreach learners can successfully arrive at the same place as their secondary school peers, the issue is less about early *school* leaving and more about early leaving from *education*. Better retention of these young people within FET, then, becomes the key challenge. (p.8).

Youthreach is now, not just where to put “the bold students”, but where students can excel outside of mainstream education, learning in a more holistic and a student-centred environment. As McHugh (2014) recounts from her research,

These students left school with the impression that they were not good enough to make it through the system. They are now attending Youthreach programmes and are working towards their future goals, yet they are not receiving any recognition for their achievements as they are continually regarded as school dropouts. (p.115).

The environment that we live in or our upbringing can also affect our motivation level. If all persons within a family progressed onto further/higher education, it is normally presumed that other persons in that family will progress in education. If all the family left school to gain employment, then that can also be the motivation to get a job after school, family values can be different. As cited in Stokes (2003), Fleming and Kenny (1998) comment that ‘School leaving works like a trigger or domino effect: if one in a family or in a group of friends leaves school others will follow’ (p.72). The European Commission (2015) consider that ‘Early school leaving has multiple and often intertwined causes. It results from a combination of personal, social, economic, educational and family related factors.’ Garry (2014) considers that,

when a person is living in such situations where they are struggling to feed themselves, or clothe themselves, or wondering where they will be able to find a bed for the night, because their parents are not present due to their own issues, going to school and pleasing their teacher do not make the ‘to do’ list. (p.108).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter not all Youthreach students have had a negative experience of school and the education system did not fail them, they progressed satisfactory.

### **1.15 Researchers work context**

I am teaching in Youthreach Blanchardstown for over 10 years, teaching QQI level 4 and 5 modules. I am also part of the work experience/guidance team, which supports student in obtaining work experience, which is an important element of their QQI modules. Within the guidance section, this element supports and directs students as they look at moving on from the programme including applying for further/higher education courses, applying for grants, looking for employment etc. Another aspect of my position is to carry out annual centre evaluations, from the SENI review and the newly actioned Centre Evaluation Implementation Plan to completing the student and subject evaluations on a yearly basis. As part of the Youthreach Guidelines (2015), centres are required to keep track of past students for up to two years after completing the programme. This aspect of my role is carried out bi-annually. After carrying out these evaluations, the results are submitted to the Co-ordinator and then forwarded to the relevant personnel for dissemination.

### **1.16 Summary**

Having set the scene in this chapter, the research will aim to bring the reader on a journey of Youthreach students, develop the story lines and shape conversations as they progress in their next chapter as they move on from Youthreach. Why is the Youthreach programme suitable for a certain profile of students but possibly not for others? From SENI and career guidance perspectives, why for some reason(s) - do students aspire to progress and gain a qualification, whereas others seem content with their status quo and have little or no educational ambition. These students may struggle later in life due to lack of qualifications. The next chapter will look at the existing literature related to early school leavers and disadvantaged students progressing to further/higher education, including written papers, numerous government documents and various theses. This research will highlight any common themes regarding disadvantaged students moving to

further/higher education and why some students leave school early and become a statistic of an early school leaver.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the literature review will be conducted on the relevant material that has previously been documented regarding early school leavers, education programmes for early school leavers and to the wider context of educational disadvantage. The literature review will seek to develop a conclusive finding and background in relation to the research aims. The literature review will consist of the outline of theories that have been researched and analysed. As Bell (2005) states, ‘Any investigation, whatever the scale, will involve reading what other people have written about your area of interest, gathering information to support or refute your arguments and writings about your findings’ (p.62).

Within the literature review it is important to note that although numerous studies have been carried out specific to the Youthreach programme. There is very little direct research related to Youthreach students progressing to further/higher education or when exiting the programme. The review will look at the accessibility for disadvantaged students progressing to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. The literature review will be presented under the following headings,

#### **Early school leavers (2.2)**

In this section, literature on early school leavers will be reviewed, also connecting the Youthreach programme and to provide relevant background information for the research. Other national early school leaving programmes outside of the Youthreach programme will also be mentioned. Why do some students leave school early and some do not? What are the factors that influence their decision to leave school early? The value of education juxtaposes the limited employment opportunities associated with early school leaving.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> level access for disadvantaged students (2.6)**

Within this heading, I will examine the reasons why some students pursue higher levels of education and some do not? In this regard, I will discuss the obstacles these student encounter when applying and progressing to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education This element will also look at reasons why some students do not progress in their education and take up alternative opportunities such as employment.

#### **2.2 Early school leavers**

The European Commission (2015) states early school leavers ‘are young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education, or less, and who are no longer in education and training’. Another definition by the Combat Poverty Agency (2001) is ‘leaving the education system without a minimum of five passes in the Leaving Certificate or equivalent qualification’ (p.3). Under Irish law as provided for through the School Attendance Acts (1926-67) and in conjunction with an extending order of (1972), children are required to attend school between the ages of 6 and 16.

Specific measures to assist in the occupational integration of young people were provided at the time of the first reform of the ESF in 1971. In 1976 the European Council of Ministers for Education adopted a resolution towards the development of a training provision for young people and the improvement of vocational preparation during compulsory schooling and to prepare the transition from education to working life, documented in the Official Journal of the European Communities (1976). In an Irish context, the Culliton Report (1992) recommended vocational education at second level and the need for it to be provided in tandem with the more traditional academic education system. The Green Paper on Education (1992) rejected the recommendations proposed by the Culliton report. In 1998 a Green Paper on Adult Education was published. After consultation with various stakeholders, the government committed to establishing a comprehensive system of *lifelong learning* for all. The White Paper on Adult Education



(2000) was published. The White Paper on Adult Education (2000) cites the profile of lifelong learning and states that 'Education must be lifelong if we are to have an inclusive and democratic society which can adapt successfully to meet new challenges' (p.9).

During the second reform of the ESF (1978), a new form of targeting the recruitment and job creation for young people was introduced. There has always been an awareness of the issue of early school leavers and in the 1980s due to social and political issues, the Irish Government became aware of the unacceptably high volume of underachievement and dropouts from second level education. Stokes (2003) states 'in 1980 the unemployment rate for young people with no qualification was 14 per cent higher than for those with a Leaving Certificate' (p.7). Stokes (2003) considered that early school leavers that leave school with little or no qualifications run the risk of long-term unemployment and disadvantaged lifestyles. Both the White and Green papers (1995 and 1998) outlined the need to encourage participation of the poorer socio-economic groups and the employed. The White Paper, Charting our Education Future (1995), sought to have early school leavers eradicated by 2002, it also recognised the need to address the issues/obstacles regarding early school leavers from disadvantaged areas leaving school early. The NESSE report on Early School Leaving (2010), stated 'early school leavers are more likely to come from schools with low socio-economic status intakes' (p.6).

The White Paper (1995) also looked at the learning styles within the school environment. Moving away from the traditional methods of the chalk and talk element of the teacher imparting and delivering of knowledge, to one of the student taking responsibility and control for their own learning and to prepare themselves for *lifelong learning*. In line with this Stokes (1996) suggests 'Different individuals have different ways of thinking and different gateways to learning.... we must find each individuals gateway to learning and discover how s/he learns, in order to maximise possibilities' (p.4). The NEESE report (2010) emphasised '... the need to move from subject based to skills-based curriculum

and the recognition of key competencies.’ The Education & Training 2020 schools policy (2015) suggested that teachers attitudes and teaching styles, can also ‘contribute to the decision to leave school prematurely’ (p.6). This report also suggested that other factors can include, unfavourable school climate, violence and bullying, a lack of learner centeredness, unawareness of educational disadvantage, poor teacher student relationships, teaching methods and the curriculum that is considered irrelevant to the student’s background/culture. As Stokes (2003) comments, ‘another reason why a young person might not ‘like’ school is the unsuitability of the curriculum’ (p.80).

### **2.2.1 Other national early school leaving programmes**

If a child leaves school for various reasons before they complete upper secondary level they are classified as an early school leaver, Stokes (2003) states that ‘early school leavers themselves cite their school experiences as the main reason for leaving school and do not regret their decision to leave’ (p.74). If a child wishes to return to education or if their current educational setting is not suitable for their needs, alternative education programmes are available including, Home School Community Liaison (HSCL), Foróige -Youth Services, Youthreach/CTCs.

#### **Home School Community Liaison Scheme**

The HSCL is a DES initiative set up for early school leavers in 1990 through Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS). Downes and Gilligan (2007) states that it was introduced ‘as an initiative to alleviate the effects of educational disadvantage’ (p.133).

This scheme involves a HSCL Co-ordinator, who are teachers released from their teaching duties. The five goals of the HSCL (2005-2006 p.11) scheme focus on,

- supporting marginalised pupils.
- promoting co-operation between home, school, and the community.
- empowering parents.
- retaining young people in the education system.

- disseminating best practice.

Stokes (2003) suggests that the HSCL scheme ‘promotes active co-operation between home, school and community and raises awareness of education’ (p.250). The HSCL Co-ordinators are aware that the child and in some cases the parents have had negative experiences of schooling and the HSCL schemes encourages parents to get involved in their children’s education whilst supporting the child to stay in education. Downes and Gilligan (2007) state, ‘Traditionally, marginalised parents or, indeed schools did not see parents as having a role in their children’s learning: they tended to view school as a place apart, placing the teacher in the mode of expert’ (p.134).

### **Foróige - Youth Services**

Foróige - Youth Services is another education strategy that caters for early school leavers or potential early school leavers. These early school leavers are mainly under the age of 16 and can be as young as 12 years of age. Youth Services is run in conjunction with the local ETB. Most students attending Youth Services would not have any secondary education qualifications and would have left the education system before Junior Certificate year. Youth Services carry out QQI level 1, 2 and 3 programmes, but predominantly the Junior Certificate. Lally (2012) states that ‘Many youth services have the staffing and resources available to provide case management and support for young people at risk of leaving school early’ (p.12). Foróige Youth Services (2013) deal with children who have many challenges and they provide services such as,

Garda Youth Diversion Projects, Teen Parent Support Programmes and Neighbourhood Youth Projects, help young people to deal with issues associated with poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion, under-achievement at school, early school leaving, youth crime, substance abuse and family difficulties in a safe friendly environment.

Youth Services is funded by numerous organisations including Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tulsa - The Children and Family Agency. Students attending

Youth Services can progress onto Youthreach/CTC programmes when they are 16 years of age or if circumstances are appropriate they can preferably return to mainstream education.

### **Community Training Centres**

CTCs are part of the overall Youthreach programme and similarly they are funded by SOLAS and run by the local ETB. CTCs are also part of the Irish Association of Community Training Organisations (IACTO) of which the Youthreach programme is not. Most CTCs run NFQ level 3, level 4, some facilitate programmes at level 5, with other centres running the LCA. The primarily age is between 16 and 21 years of age and each centre has an average of 55 students. There are 35 CTCs centres located across the Republic of Ireland (NEPS 2017). These centres were originally under the remit of FÁS but were transferred to SOLAS and subsequently to the ETB's. The IACTO website (2018) remarks that,

CTCs have been set up with the needs of the early school leaver and the young unemployed especially in mind. The CTC provides a fresh opportunity for young persons to get national certificates at their own pace and with the assistance of friendly and supportive staff.

### **2.3 Characteristics of an early school leaver**

Stokes (1996) identified that early school leavers come from families where (traditionally) the young person left school early for employment and that many come from households with low income. The paper also identified that education has little merit in the family and that the young person is not encouraged or expected to achieve much or very little in life. The 1997 National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) report on Early School Leavers and Youth Unemployment identified characteristics of early school leavers including:

- Those who leave school with a primary qualification and are at risk of unemployment especially long-term unemployment.

- Those below the poverty line with an early school leaver as head of the household (90% in this regard).
- 75% of early school leavers come from working class background and 55% from a household where the father is unemployed.
- Boys moreover girls are more likely to leave school early, young women may leave the workplace and become a single parent.
- 5% of 12-15-year-old traveller children attend secondary level education. Traveller children are at substantially increased risk of leaving school early.

In line with Stokes, the European Commission Report Preventing Early School Leaving in Europe (2013) stated that 'The labour market can act as a 'pull' for learners to leave school early to enter paid employment where there are opportunities for low skilled workers, in countries such as Ireland' (p.33). According to Eivers *et al.* (2000) groups early school leaver into four categories (encompassing anyone who leaves school without completing the senior cycle in post-primary school) as those who: 1. Do not complete primary schooling. 2. Complete primary schooling but do not transfer to a post-primary school. 3. Attend Junior Cycle courses in a post-primary school, but who leave without taking the Junior Certificate examination. 4. Leave full-time formal education after taking the Junior Certificate examination.

In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (2012 p.19-20) regarding school dropouts, the report identifies six key predictors of a student dropout.

Educational performance - low grades are a signal of lower preparation to progress through the educational system.

Students' behaviour - matters for success in school. Students who are engaged, both in academic and social matter, and value schooling tend to stay in school.

The background of students and family - exerts an important influence on their performance. Students from families with low education, negative attitudes towards schooling, inability to support their children or poverty-stricken single parents have a higher likelihood of dropping out.

School structures, resources and practices - like the way learning is delivered, extra-curricular activities, discipline, relations with peers and teachers.

Education system level policies - such as early tracking, grade repetition or specific issues such as the lack of sufficient apprenticeship places or school violence can contribute to increased dropout.

Labour market conditions - have an impact on school dropouts, regional and seasonal labour markets (e.g. tourism, construction) can attract young people out of school into unskilled jobs with poor prospects.

NEESE (2010) suggests that a person's background is a significant factor when related to early school leaving and they mention that very poor and community backgrounds and experience are all factors related to early school leavers. However, they also state that many early school leavers have none of these factors and in other cases many students from this type of family/community background complete schooling successfully. In 2010 the EU education ministers met and agreed policies to look at tackling and preventing early school leaving and subsequently The European Commission released the report 'Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support' in 2013. It looked at Prevention, Intervention and Compensation.

Prevention	Access to good quality early childhood education and care Relevant and engaging curriculum Flexible educational pathways Integration of migrants and minorities Smooth transitions between educational levels High quality VET Involvement of pupils in decision-making Teacher education Strong guidance systems
Intervention	Effective and evidence based early warning systems Focus on individual needs Systematic support frameworks Extra-curricular and out-of-school activities Support to teachers Empowering families and parents
Compensation	Accessibility and relevance of second chance education Recognition Commitment and governance Personalised and holistic approach Distinctive learning experience Flexibility in curricula Teacher involvement and support Links to mainstream education

Table 2: Measures against Early School Leaving, European Commission (2013 p.12).

Prevention – To look at what can be done to stop the circumstances of early school leaving before it starts. Having a conducive stimulating and holistic environment to learn and equal access for all.

Intervention – Addressing any issues that could lead to early school leaving especially at the early stages, to be aware of the early warning signs of early school leaving.

Compensation – Having compensatory measures in place for students for various reasons who have their education interrupted and to support them in re-engaging in education.

The NEPS report (2017) when relating the Youthreach programme to the above three aspects mentions that,

The Youthreach programme is described as a compensation measure under this EU framework. However, it could just as easily be thought of as a prevention and intervention measure because its function is to retain young people in full-time education until they achieve an upper secondary qualification. (p.1).

### **2.3.1 Parents of early school leavers**

An OECD report (2011b) considers that children of early school leavers run the risk of becoming early school leavers themselves and strategies need to be put in place to address educational disadvantage. Byrne and Smyth (2010) consider that early school leavers parents' expectations of education can be low, ranging from them having different expectations (i.e. in the same context of said, expectations not involving academic pursuits), to being supportive in respect to education and even helping with homework. Interestingly they also state that 'students who frequently had dinner with their parents were less likely to drop out of school'(p.59). Kavanagh (2013) considers that if parents have had a negative experience of education, they may not feel much value to education and this will filter through to their children and further states that 'parents with lower levels of education or those who have had negative experiences of education are less likely to take an actively involved role in their children's education' (p.10). Education and Training 2020 schools policy (2015) suggests that, 'Raising the educational level of parents is one of the successful actions to prevent early school leaving... and greater involvement in their child's school as well as greater parental confidence in helping their child at home' (p.16).

Drudy and Lynch (1993) determined that parents employed in semi-skilled and unskilled employment hail - for the most part - from a working-class background. These parents are most likely to have found their own education unrewarding, alienating and experienced elements of failure from their time in school. Although, as Mooney (2018) points out, 'The life-long benefits generated by staying in school up to and beyond the Leaving Cert have been well learned by today's generation of parents who benefitted from second-level education themselves.'



Eivers *et al.* (2000), found that parents negative experience concerning their own schooling, can have a detrimental effect on their children. The authors identified, that in cases where children want to finish school before the Leaving Certificate, half of the parents had tried to persuade their children to stay in school but one in eight did not mind and said it was their decision to leave school. The Education & Training report 2020 schools policy (2015) suggest a shared responsibility for the education of the student between the student, parents and the school with ‘mutual respect and cooperation between the two’ (p.5). Lally (2012) has a similar response and suggests that ‘engaging with parents and involving them in the learning process can be of significant importance’ (p.65). The OECD (2012) state that,

Parents’ educational expectations for their children are one of the keys through which they influence their children’s schooling careers. Parents can play a vital role in their children’s learning and development by engaging as “learning” partners from the earliest age, during the school years and into youth. (p.142).

Eivers *et al.* (2000) indicated that the fathers of early school leavers are normally unemployed, and subsequently the young person is twice as likely to be unemployed compared to students who have completed upper secondary education. These findings beg the question, “Is this just a vicious cycle of early school leaving generation after generation”? In Garry’s (2014) research on social disadvantaged children, whom she noted, the majority were early school leavers, she comments that the ‘vast majority follow in the footsteps of their family and continue the cycle of dropping out of formal education and this leads to low-paid jobs or unemployment, possible crime and substance abuse, following the same cyclical pattern as previous generations’ (pp.108-109). Stokes (2003), considers that early school leavers run the risk of being exploited in the labour market, the possibility of dealing in drugs and may even end up involved in criminality.

The Education & Training 2020 schools policy (2015) considers that the education achievements of parents is an extremely high factor regarding early school leaving. The

policy also points out that the home environment for the child is crucial for learning and developing to take place and that parents benefit from being involved in their child's education . The Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2013) consider that 'For children to succeed in education, their parents need a positive local community educational network and infrastructure, which will give them the support they require to develop their parenting skills and support their children through the education system' (p.11).

### **2.3.2 Signs of early schooling leaving**

Eivers *et al.* (2000) state that signs of early school leaving can be identified as far back as Junior Infants,

Teachers [in mainstream] reports reveal a higher rate of absenteeism among early school leavers at Junior Infants and 6<sup>th</sup> class than at other grades in primary school. Thus, not only is absenteeism more prevalent among early school leavers, but the problem is apparent as early as Junior Infants. (p.162).

They also suggest that early school leavers are likely to have repeated a primary school year and that absenteeism was highest in second year. Barnardos (2009) advises interventions and support services for parents when absenteeism at school is an issue and that children who are regularly absent in their early years of school will be playing catch up throughout their school careers. NESSE (2010) indicates 'that in very many cases the route to early school leavers begins before the child goes to school. Later academic, behavioural and social patterns are often laid down in the first encounters with pre-school' (p.10). They further state that schools need to be aware of the signs of early school leaving and have appropriate resources and supports in place to prevent.

Stokes (1996) noted that early school leavers can find making the transition from primary to secondary school a challenge and schools need to be aware of this as a sign of early school leaving. For instance, his paper describes how these students did not make the connection with teachers, the curriculum and the school organisations policies. Stokes (2003) also suggests that some students find going from a senior student in primary school

to a junior student in secondary school hard to adapt, and this can be a difficult period. In McHugh (2014) findings from *No Way Back?* (2010) echoes what Stokes (2003) considers the difficulties transition stages being, teacher/pupil relations, the classroom environment, lack of academic ability and negative peer relations. This could be the start of the road for early school leavers. As cited in *The National Plan for Equity of Access for Higher education 2015-2019* (2015), the *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: the national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020* commits the

government to research and adopt strategies to strengthen transitions through the educational system: into primary school, from primary to second level, from second level into higher or further education, employment or, in the case of early school-leavers, to Youthreach. (p.17).

### **2.3.3 Teenage pregnancy and early school leaving**

Boldt (1997) suggested that children from a single mother household are at risk of becoming an early school leaver. If a girl gets pregnant at an early age, the majority of these girls will leave school when they have their child, unless they have supportive parents or relatives that will encourage them to return to school to finish their education. Lally (2012) notes that ‘There is a strong correlation between teenage pregnancy and early school leaving; this correlation is especially strong for young mothers. Teenage mothers have only a 49% (Berthoud and Robson 2001) probability of having their upper secondary qualifications’ (p.10). She goes on to mention that early school leavers run risk of increased chances of teenage pregnancy, criminal activity and psychological issues such as depression and anxiety. Some Youthreach centres had crèche facilities on their premises but due to economic factors these were all shut down. Youthreach Centres currently can support and help (financially) young parents to find crèche facilities in local community or privately-run crèches. *The Youthreach Operations Guidelines* (2015) states,

Under The Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) programme, qualifying students and trainees can avail of childcare places

at a small fee in day care services across the country, including those operated by ETBs, for the duration of their courses. (p.24).

Riordan (2002) considers that schools need to encourage young mothers to stay/return to education citing the benefits both short and long term, also to have policies in place to allow the young mother to return to education in a seamless fashion by support and providing access to childminding facilities. However she also points out that ‘Community and family values may impact upon young parents’ decision whether to remain at home or return to education or employment’ (p.21). Stokes (2003) regarding teenage pregnancy considers that, ‘of itself this is unlikely to cause them to leave school early. However, it seems of a piece with other problems and may be indicative of both ecological and personal influences’ (p.101).

#### **2.3.4 Early school leaving and unemployment/crime**

Stokes (2003) identified possible reasoning behind early school leavers to include social exclusion, peers/families/parenthood, lack of autonomy and economic factors such as lack of money. This finding is in agreement with Boldt (1997), the authors found that decisions for early school leavers to leave school early can include, home factors, school factors, peer pressure, to participate in an earn, learn and train programme (example Youthreach and opportunities to find employment. In *No Way Back?* (Byrne and Smyth, 2010) parental social class (background) was also identified to be a factor of early school leavers. In this regard, working class or unemployed households were identified as being prevalent. This report explains why keeping children in school holds much importance over leaving school early as such action creates boredom and increased likelihood of getting into trouble with the authorities.’ Stokes (2003) comments on social class that ‘the association between social class and early school leaving is undeniable’ (p.96). The European Commission (2015) when viewing early school leavers and the related problems states that,

Early school leaving is linked to unemployment, social exclusion, poverty and poor health. There are many reasons why some young people give up education and training prematurely: personal or family problems, learning difficulties, or a fragile socio-economic situation. The way the education system is set up, school climate and teacher-pupil relations are also important factors.

They go on to mention,

Since there is not a single reason for early school leaving, there are no easy answers. Policies to reduce early school leaving must address a range of triggers and combine education and social policy, youth work and health related aspects such as drug use or mental and emotional problems.

Stokes (2003), Byrne and Smyth (2010), NESSE (2010) and NEPS (2017) and numerous others, all identified that the majority of early school leavers come from disadvantaged schools/areas and families, unemployment/lack of employment, substance abuse (by both early school leaver and family members), poverty, violence/crime, single mothers and parents with little or no education. Stokes (1996) indicated that early school leavers come from a family where the children have left school early to gain employment. Also, that the income, employment or education expectations are relatively low and there is very little benefit put on the value of a good education. NESSE (2010) state 'While there is a clear association between leaving school early and unemployment, not all early school leavers move into unemployment. Indeed, in some cases early school leaving is motivated by the possibility of gaining employment' (p.17). Byrne and Smyth (2010) consider that students that leave school early without completing upper secondary level can become a statistic and live life mainly on the poverty line, drifting through low skilled employment, minimum hour contracts, low paid employment and this employment can be short lived. McCoy *et al.* (2014) considers 'that a significant proportion of disadvantaged young people fail to make a successful transition to work or further study. This is likely to have an adverse effect on individual lives, as well as on wider society' (p.9). Lally (2012) writes about the Celtic Tiger and effect on leaving school early,

The 'Celtic Tiger' had a massive effect on educational trends. With the construction industry booming in Ireland, the trend of leaving school early to

pursue an apprenticeship became prevalent in Irish society. For many, this decision led to the chance of training, a full-time job and job security for a number of years....This is as a result of the employment market becoming increasingly competitive and the Leaving Certificate is the minimum level of education required for many occupations. (p.4).

In the Barnardos Written Out, Written Off report (2009) they mention, that early school leavers are more likely to report poorer health, long term illness, experience anxiety or depression and are 4.5 times more likely to be in receipt of a medical card and related to criminality. In his sample on Mountjoy prisoners, O'Mahony (2002) found 80 per cent of prisoners had left school before the age of 16, 50 per cent had left before the age of 15 and 75 per cent had never sat a state examination. Over a quarter of the prisoners had difficulties in relation to literacy. Cited in McHugh (2014), Byrne and Smyth (2010) indicated that 'poor literacy skills and falling behind in their work were core reasons why students were dropping out of school' (p.104).

Lally (2012) when looking at the risk of offending states, 'The question is whether the prelude to offending behaviour was leaving school early or if leaving school early led to the offending behaviour' (p.8). In line with this, Garry (2014) suggests that by not participating in education, this can be a underwriting factor in unsocial and unlawful behaviour. McHugh (2014) also advises in relation to the Youthreach programme that 'Although Youthreach is not a safeguard against crime or anti-social behaviour it does provide greater opportunities for students to progress onto employment or further training' (p.261). Stokes (2003) iterates the sentiment and advises caution against 'connecting' early school leavers and crime.

### **2.3.5 Disengagement from education**

The Education & Training 2020 schools policy (2015) suggests that schools need to be aware of any early signs of disengagement, including absenteeism, inappropriate behaviour and that these are detected quickly with suitable and appropriate responses put

in place. Furthermore the report looked at having a support plan agreed by all (schools/students/parents) with their goals and suggests that students who have career plans in place are more likely to remain and finish upper secondary level schooling. Children whose mothers have higher levels of education are also more likely to reach Leaving Certificate level (School Leaver's Survey, 2007). As mentioned in chapter 1, Stokes (2003) suggests that keeping a child in school when they do not want to be there can be seen as a punishment and if a young person wishes to leave school and is not happy being in school then why force them to stay. Providing alternative education like Youthreach, apprenticeships or other programs to succeed and successfully gain employment is important. Lally (2012) suggests, 'it is essential not to push a young person into a course when they are resistant' (p.20). Byrne and Smith (2010) found from their study in *No Way Back?* that,

Young people are found to drop out of school at different stages, from first year to just before the completion of senior cycle. Trends over time suggest that later cohorts appear to have postponed leaving school from directly after the Junior Certificate exam until sometime after entering fifth year. (p.128).

Basic skills (the communication skills of oral language, literacy, numeracy and IT. Gordon 2013 p.23) are needed to be able to effectively engage in basic and coping life skills. Not all young people are college material and may have potential in other aspects and this is where vocational training and apprenticeships should be the next step. The OECD (2014) states,

Apprenticeships can help those young people who do not undertake further academic studies to gain useful skills and make a smoother transition from school to work. With the active participation of social partners, action could be taken to design and implement a modern apprenticeship system to replace the existing, narrow, craftsbased apprenticeship system. (p.10).

Not having an upper secondary education has its problems as Lally (2012) states 'as a result of the employment market becoming increasingly competitive and the Leaving Certificate is the minimum level of education required for many occupations' (p.4) and

she goes on to emphasise that ‘in addition to this, many employers or training courses require completion of the Leaving Certificate at a minimum’ (p.6). McCoy *et al.* (2014) considers that by not having a Leaving Certificate, which is now a minimum requirement for most post-school education, this can leave early school leavers with less opportunities. The Education & Training 2020 schools policy (2015) mentions that,

The skills and competences gained in upper secondary education are seen as the minimum credentials for successful labour market entry and as the foundation for further learning and training opportunities. These skills and competencies help prepare young people for life, developing the potential in every person so that they become fulfilled and active citizens. (p.6)

This policy also found that ‘early school leaving is mostly a mixture of personal, economic and family related factors, strongly intertwined and leading to cumulative disadvantaged’ (p.6). Statistics released in the DES report - Early Leavers – What Next? (2013 p.5) for the 2009/2010 academic year, there were 257,060 pupils enrolled in second-level schools (September 2010), the number students not enrolled in September 2011 stood at 7,713 compared to September 2010. Early school leavers numbers are decreasing annually, but there is still a large volume of students not completing upper secondary school. Table 3 outlines the CSO figures for Ireland and the EU percentage of population for early school leavers from 2012-2015.

	Ireland			European Union		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
2015	6.9	8.4	5.4	11.0	12.4	9.5
2014	6.9	8.0	5.7	11.1	12.7	9.5
2013	8.4	9.8	6.9	12.0	13.6	10.2
2012	9.7	11.2	8.2	12.8	14.5	11.0

Table 3: Measuring Ireland’s progress: Ireland/EU Early School Leavers, % of population 18-24, 2012-2015. Source CSO.



These figures reflect the work of mainstream school to ease/stop the flow of early school leavers, which of course could have a detrimental effect on the Youthreach programmes and other similar projects, so will there be a need for second chance education in years to come? Ireland's percentage of early school leavers is decreasing, this trend of decreasing numbers is in line with EU figures for the same years. For all years, males are most likely to leave school earlier than females, Ireland's average has been lower than the EU average. The European Commission (2013) states that,

Male students are almost two times more likely to be early school leavers than females. In addition, male early school leavers are more likely to engage with the scheme (early school leavers schemes) than females. This could possibly be linked with the practical emphasis, and links with employers in male dominated trades. (p.28).

Figure 8 shows the decrease for the EU28 countries for early school leavers from 2010 to 2016 and a target of less than 10% of early school leavers from education and training by 2020.

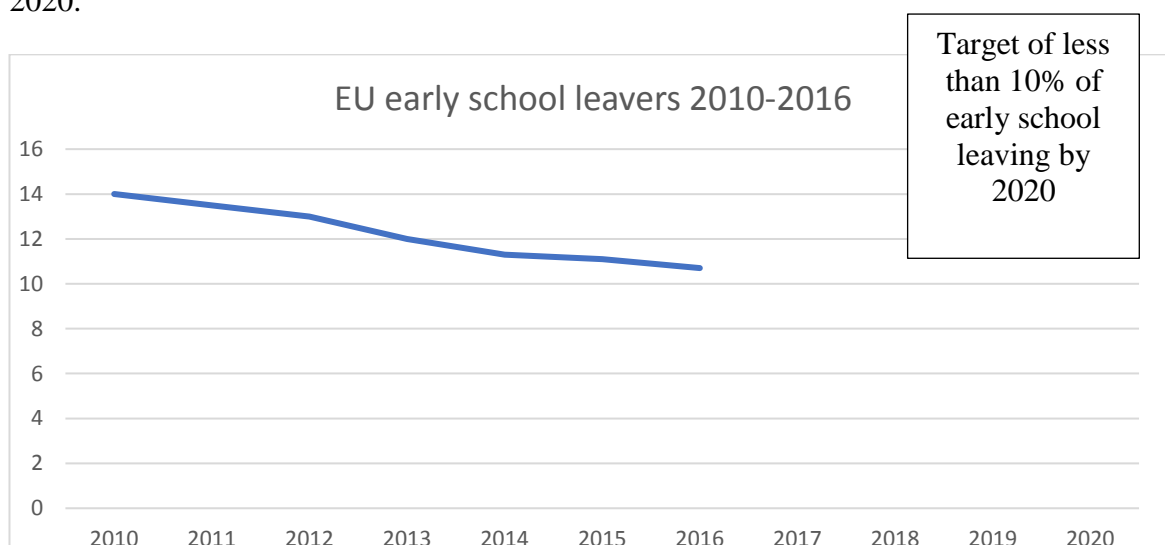


Figure 8: Early leavers from education and training, EU-28, 2010-2016. Source CSO.

All social standings have early school leavers, but it is mainly associated to working class and disadvantaged areas (Byrne and Smyth 2010). Within these areas there exists lower levels of achievement in education, poverty levels are higher and also higher levels of crime. NESF (1997) found that people who live in poverty do not benefit fully from the education system. It also found that young people from unskilled manual labour

backgrounds are represented in early school leavers and leave school with minimum qualifications, this can be mainly the Junior Certificate or in some cases no qualifications at all. If the education system worked for this category of students, why would they want to leave?

As Redden (2016) suggests that, 'The country's wealth now goes disproportionately to workers with letters after their names.' Is the country's wealth more so afforded to privilege as opposed to qualifications? There needs to be access to the available wealth for other skills not necessarily represented by formal qualifications. Barnardos suggest from the DES report, Education at a Glance OECD Indicators (2014) that, 'In Ireland your earning power is more closely tied to whether or not you have attended 3rd level in comparison to other OECD countries' (p.22). Education needs to be reformed to change the widening gap between the rich and the poor.

### **2.3.6 Culture of early school leaving**

The OECD report (2011b) clearly establishes that children born to parents who have themselves left school early, have a higher probability of becoming the next generation of early school leavers. Indeed, the report recommended the need of suitable interventions to be put in place to combat and prevent this issue reoccurring. The report further states that, 'Intervening in this cycle of deprivation demands that a systematic, integrated and effective strategy is put in place to address educational disadvantage' (p.18). The European Commission in the report (2015), Education & Training 2020 schools policy, A Whole School Approach to Tackling Early School Leaving considers that,

The school is a key actor to tackle early school leaving but it cannot work in isolation, as there are factors outside the school that will influence a learner's level of engagement and success. Therefore, a 'whole school approach' to early school leaving is needed. In this approach the entire school community (school leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, parents and families) engages in a cohesive, collective and collaborative action, with strong cooperation with external stakeholders and the community at large. (p.5).

Within Irish law, students can leave school at sixteen years of age or after three years of post-primary education, whichever applies (DES p.6). Could this be an issue to look at going forward? In most European countries the legal age to leave school is 16. In the Netherlands, England (not the rest of the United Kingdom) and Germany, children must be 18-years-old to leave school but granted you can leave at 16 but must participate in some part time education if you seek employment, (Compulsory Education in Europe 2015/16). As part of the governments Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 (2016) the school leaving age will be reviewed looking to increase the age, although no actual set age is mentioned in the strategy. At 16 years of age they are too young to vote, yet old enough to enter the adult working domain.

In Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 (2016 p.101) the retention rate for students who sat the Leaving Certification 2013/2014 is 90.56%, DEIS school figures stand at 82.1% and non DEIS schools is 92.63%. But the drop out for an early school leaver at second level happens between upper secondary year one and year two. Early school leaving, and educational disadvantage still represents an issue in our education system and society. As Lally (2012) suggests that 'Many young people who have left school early feel that they are viewed as 'wasters' or 'losers' by the community at large' (p.5). In relation to the Youthreach programme, McHugh (2014) from her study comments that 'There also exists a degree of socially constructed embarrassment or shame about being a Youthreach attendee' (p.ix) and she goes on to comment that 'I believe that the major problems for Youthreach centres are that they have a poor public image' (p.40).

## **2.4 The school environment**

The Education and Training 2020 schools policy (2015) suggests that a significant influence for learning to take place is in respect to an environment conducive for the students to learn in. The policy further states that 'The school should offer a caring, stimulating and conducive learning environment and set high expectations for all learners

to reach their full potential' (p.5). The Youthreach website (2014) regarding staff/student relations in a Youthreach setting considers that,

interactions are less formal, and relationships with staff are 'warmer' than in schools and many observers argue that this is an important component in the programme's success. The young people perceive themselves to be listened to and respected, i.e. treated as adults. Groups are relatively small – the tutor-learner ratio is about 10.5 to 1.

Morgan *et al.* (2008) suggest that,

Youthreach offers a parallel path to schooling and has evolved into a project that appears to be able to deal with young people disengaged from school in an alternative manner. Although they have a captive audience it is divorced from the young person's concept of traditional school. (pp.993-994).

They go on to state that 'Youthreach offers as a parallel educational experience that young people can avail of and engagement is perceived by those young people as 'different' to school' (p.998). For any relationship to work, the teacher needs to appreciate that they are of paramount importance for students to learn and that they make a 'real difference' in their education experience. Teachers are in the best position to have an awareness of any potential underlying issues with a student and can identify these at an early stage.

## **2.5 Teacher training**

In the European Commission report on Education & Training 2020 Schools policy (2015), it suggests that teacher, tutors, trainers and other school staff, need to have a commitment to continuous professional development regarding awareness and potential signs of students that could be prone to early school leaving. Teacher training needs to adapt to include looking at signs of early school leavers as mentioned by McCoy *et al.* (1996), Eivers *et al.* (2000), Stokes (2003). They suggest teachers when on work placement during their training should include working in a disadvantaged area, in a DEIS school or possibly in a Youthreach/CTC environment. Stokes also considered 'that teacher training should be redesigned to better equip practitioners to work more effectively to retain children in school and maximise the benefits they derive from

schooling.’ (p.272). Downes (2012) suggests that the teacher student relationship ‘as impacting upon students’ decisions to leave school early; much of this is preventable through adequate preparation of teachers’ conflict resolution and diversity training skills’ (p.12). An Garda Síochána ‘some of whose members spend time on work experience in the centre’ (Evaluation of Youthreach Blanchardstown Report 2007), have in the past used Youthreach Centres for training of trainee Garda. They used this as a platform to understand ‘problem teenagers’ and to try and get an appreciation and empathetic view of their background. The Education and Training 2020 schools policy (2015) reports suggests that,

Student teachers should be offered practical exposure to the everyday reality of early school leaving, e.g. through participation in work placements in schools with high drop-out rates or high levels of socio-economic exclusion or in supervised activities with vulnerable families. This would provide student teachers with the opportunity to consider their role as teachers and how they address the educational needs of children at risk. (p14).

It is essential that teachers are aware of progression pathways/routes for students completing education. This aspect should be for all education sectors, primary, secondary, tertiary education, further education, adult education, etc. The National Plan for Equity of Access for Higher education 2015-2019 (2015) states,

Students who have successfully participated in higher education often reflect on the role an individual teacher played in providing them with the support they needed to realise their educational aspirations. Because teachers play such a critical role in shaping student expectations, it is vital to ensure that the value of that role is understood during initial teacher education and in continuing professional development (CPD) programmes. (p.17)

The Limerick regeneration report (2008) consider that ‘some teachers do not fully understand or appreciate the ‘culture’ values and norms of ‘disadvantaged’ communities where many of their students come from’ (p.58). As Garry (2014) suggests

What needs to be recognised is that these children from birth are at a significant disadvantage to some of their peers and there is a need for a new approach in education to entice them to participate and become involved in their development. (p.109).

## **2.6 Disadvantaged students in education**

The Education Act (1998, 32(9)) states that educational disadvantage is: ‘The impediments to education arising from social and economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in school.’ National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) states ‘Equity of access to higher education is a fundamental principle of Irish education policy, and one that has been endorsed by successive governments in policy statements and commitments over the past thirty years’ (p.6). McCoy (2014) considers that there has been an increase in overall numbers attending higher education, but there still is a under-representation from students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending.

There have been numerous reports on disadvantaged students progressing to further/higher education. For instance, the White Paper (2000), National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015). However, there is very little (reports/data/information) available on Youthreach students progressing to further/higher education. Most of this information would be available from individual Youthreach centres and is not in the public domain. As mentioned earlier the majority of Youthreach centres do not carry out level 5 QQI programmes. The Youthreach Operations Guidelines 2015, notes ‘It is not intended that Post Leaving Certificate type courses be run as part of the Youthreach programme’ (p.10). Most PLC courses are at level 5 on the NFQ, so for a Youthreach student who has completed a full level 4 QQI programme in Youthreach, they can progress to a PLC and after that progress onto higher education. Therefore, the access route for that student would be acknowledged as a PLC route and not Youthreach.

Strategies for change in the educational field, cited in Burke (2009 p.23) which were put forward in Lynch (1999) included:

- additional supports for disadvantage students are needed for these students to participate on an equal footing, as they are more reliant on the in-college services.

- educational supports such as personal guidance and study skills need to be improved as these supports are vital for first year students in particular.
- reservation of places to increase participation in higher education for students from working class families .

However, students who are early school leavers are mostly from disadvantaged areas, so they have more issues in school like absenteeism and behavioural issues (Byrne and Smyth 2010). This means they can be at a disadvantage because they are less prepared for college, compared to students from advantaged areas. Lynch (1999) suggests that students from a working-class background do not always have access to the resources for school compared to students from more affluent environments. Such resources include books, uniforms, money for school trips and concern both primary and secondary schools. O'Brien (2017) suggests that 'as well having an educational advantage, middle-class students are far more able to draw upon family resources and have access to influential social networks to help them land work experience or internships while they study.' The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) states that,

The chances that a student has of participating in higher education are directly related to the community the student comes from, and it is very clear that there is much lower participation in higher education among people from communities experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. (p.20).

In the Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study of Post-School Transitions report (2014), McCoy *et al.*, found that parents were asked for advice on progression in their children's education across all social classes. The report suggested that students from middle-class backgrounds emphasised the mother as the person to seek advice from for progression more so than the school guidance counsellor. Whereas, students from working class backgrounds, the guidance counsellor was more prominent than the mother or indeed any relative, this could be due to the fact that more family members of working class backgrounds not completing upper secondary education. The report found that 94

per cent of students from middle-class backgrounds applied to higher education, compared to 80 per cent from mixed schools and 50 per cent from working-class schools. Stokes (2017) comments on the report that ‘almost certainly this is a reflection of cultural capital and system knowledge in middle class families.’

### 2.6.1 Postal codes higher education progression rates

Some Dublin postal codes have higher rates of 3<sup>rd</sup> level progression than others. Table 4 from the HEA: Towards the Development of a New National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, Consultation Paper (2014) looks at the participation rate to higher education from the various Dublin postal codes. A nationwide county participation route is also available.

Postcode	Participation Rate	Postcode	Participation Rate	Postcode	Participation Rate
Dublin 1	23%	Dublin 8	28%	Dublin 16	79%
Dublin 2	26%	Dublin 9	55%	Dublin 17	15%
Dublin 3	60%	Dublin 10	16%	Dublin 18	58%
Dublin 4	84%	Dublin 11	28%	Dublin 20	32%
Dublin 5	47%	Dublin 12	37%	Dublin 22	26%
Dublin 6	99%	Dublin 13	36%	Dublin 24	29%
Dublin 6w	82%	Dublin 14	76%	County Dublin	53%
Dublin 7	41%	Dublin 15	47%	Dublin Total	47%

Table 4: Estimated participation rates by Dublin Postal codes (2014), source HEA.

There is a large disproportion of students from the working-class areas and the more affluent Dublin areas going to higher education. (Appendix A highlights the postal areas for the Dublin region in relation to Pobal maps 2016 deprivation levels). 99% participation from Dublin 6 compared to 15% from Dublin 17 and 16% from Dublin 10. A figure of 47% is specified for the Blanchardstown, Dublin 15 area. The average figure



for attendance for Dublin is 47%, compared to a national average of 51% (HEA 2014 p.28). The HEA (2014) states ‘we need graduates from all parts of society, of all ages and abilities. At present we are not supporting all our population to realise their potential. We must work collectively to change this’ (p.13). The HEA (2014) report goes on to say in the underpinning areas of action for discussion and development, ‘Initiatives that raise awareness of further and higher education pathways and opportunities in the potential student population, in particular those from under-represented groups, are essential’ (p.16). Many of Youthreach Blanchardstown students reside in the Dublin 15 area. Certain areas of this catchment would be classified as disadvantaged and some but not all of the local schools are categorised as DEIS Schools. Figure 9 shows the deprivation levels from the Dublin 15 area. This map is taken from the Pobal deprivation map for 2016. There are pockets of different deprivation levels throughout the Dublin 15 region and a high level of the Youthreach Blanchardstown students resides in the marginally below average to the very disadvantaged areas.

Figure 9 Legend.

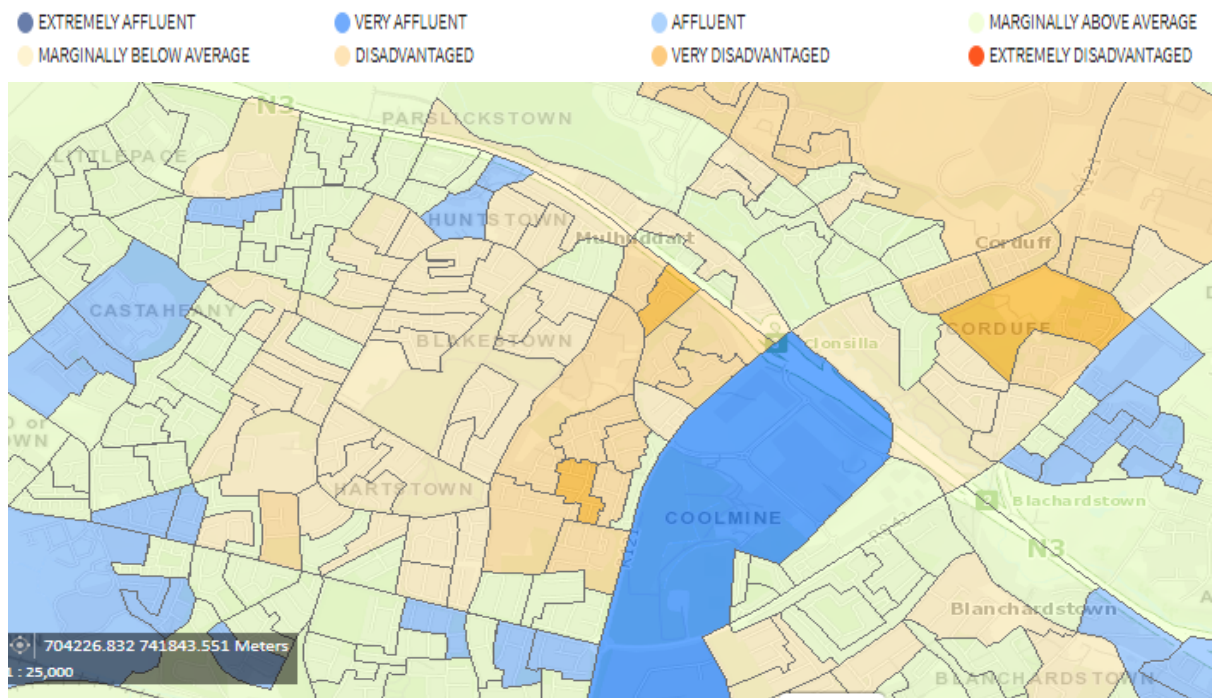


Figure 9: Deprivations area of Dublin 15 (2016). Source Pobal maps.

Barnardos (2015) found that from their report Rise Up that, ‘seven in 10 children from disadvantaged backgrounds will go on to some form of 3rd level education, compared with nine in 10 from more affluent backgrounds’ (p.22).

### **2.6.2 Grants for further/higher education**

The OECD report *Against the Odds: Disadvantaged Students Who Succeed in School* (2011a) highlights the challenge for education policy makers to help disadvantaged students to stay in school and comments that, ‘Understanding how educational systems can support disadvantaged students and help them “beat the odds” to succeed in school is a central challenge facing education policymakers, school administrators and teachers today’ (p.14). McCoy *et al.* (2014) suggests that when it comes to grants for students from disadvantaged backgrounds that ‘financial supports play a central role, with the relative value and coverage of the maintenance grant key policy issues impacting on students from disadvantaged backgrounds’ (p.165). The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) highlight that,

Going to college costs money, and for people from the target groups this presents a particular challenge. The funding supports that are currently in place (including fee grants, maintenance grants and other supports) enable many students to access, participate in and complete higher education. At a policy level, however, we need to establish how well such supports work to counter the cost disincentives that people from economically disadvantaged communities experience. (p.21)

The HEA: *Towards the Development of a New National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education*, Consultation Paper (2014), consider that financial constraints are a factor in groups from disadvantaged areas progressing to higher education especially around the grant eligibility. McCoy *et al.* (2010b) also consider the lack of information regarding the cost of going to higher education could dissuade students from applying to higher education. Also that the difficulties facing students from disadvantaged backgrounds having to rely on the state grant which has declined in value over time.

Lynch (1999) suggests that the education curriculum is biased towards the middle class in subjects, values and language, pointing out that working class children are already at a disadvantage before starting in the education system and in an unfamiliar environment. The main students to benefit from the educational system are the middle class and not the working class. McCoy *et al.* (2014) remarks that ‘young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have less access to networks which provide career advice than their more middle-class peers’ (p.65). They go on to suggest that, ‘Higher education in particular assumes a ‘taken for granted’ status in middle-class school settings, reflecting an expectational climate and culture in such schools which promotes higher education from an early stage in second-level education’ (p.194).

Morgan *et al.* (2008) in relation to grinds for advantaged students found that young people from higher income families were more likely to supplement their education in this way, thus placing them at advantage compared to children from disadvantaged areas. An OECD report (2011a) considers that ‘Education can improve not only an individual’s life chances, but also the conditions of future generations: better educated parents generally have children who are healthier, who perform better at school and who have better labour market outcomes’ (p.14). Regarding the data from the recent report by the HEA (2018), A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education (2014/15 to 2015/16), Dr. Graham Love, Chief Executive of the HEA commented,

We have an education system that is committed to access and to equality but it is still clear that a student from a financially better off background and who may have been able to attend a fee-paying school has an advantage over those from less well-off backgrounds.

Cited in Byrne (2018).

Children from advantaged areas can have an immediate advantage growing up. They can get knowledge, good values and culture from their homes, better family income can help with school especially extra support and through, for example, grinds. McHugh (2014) considers that having a good command of the English language, which includes meaning,

understanding and implementing the words in an understandable language. Failure to have this can make students withdraw from subjects, fall behind quickly, miss certain classes, if not miss school altogether and eventually leave school early. She comments,

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have greater difficulty comprehending subject matter and have to spend more time focusing on what is required within the texts and in understanding what the teacher is asking them to do. In so doing, the students start falling behind in class and they have to work much harder than others to reach the basic requirement levels. This struggle may turn into a losing battle for many and they decide to give up the fight (p.236).

### **2.6.3 Access programmes**

In the DES report on Supporting Equity in Higher Education (2003) it acknowledges that ‘inequities earlier in the educational system contribute to the underrepresentation of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds entering third level’ (p.2). The main body of research on educational disadvantage has tended to focus on access routes to 3<sup>rd</sup> level by students from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds, Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (2001), National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015). O’Brien *et al.*(2002) argues that those who are targeted by access programmes were unlikely to gain entry to third level education before these programmes were put in place and were in the past excluded from the process of knowledge creation . The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) mentions that ‘Access to higher education should be available to individuals independent of socio-economic disadvantage, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances’ (p.14). The Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (2001) advise that,

Any scheme that will increase the number of years which a disadvantaged student is required to spend in full-time education, before graduating with a certificate or a diploma or a degree, could well serve as a disincentive for such students to remain in full-time education. (p.20).

O'Hagan and Newman (2014) suggest that it is those who belong to the socio-economic groups of semi-skilled, non-manual or unskilled manual households, who are least likely to enter third level education. McCoy et al (2010a) suggest that this can be due to such factors as a lack of motivation/interest to participate on their part, little encouragement from peer group and family, financial constraints and fear of failure. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) mention that,

For a student who has no family history of participating in higher education, or who comes from a community or school background where there are very low expectations of accessing higher education, the decision to go to college can be a very difficult one. Students in such situations require particular support and advice on the value of higher education and on a whole range of more practical issues. (p.18).

The report considered that these students need guidance in looking at various college opportunities that are available including the college application processes, access to financial support and dealing with the very different social and learning environment. Confidence both academically and socially plays a factor. This could be the first time that a person from their household has attended 3<sup>rd</sup> level education and this can be again a fear factor for some students (lack of a role model). Entering an unfamiliar environment can be difficult, especially if this unfamiliar environment contains very few people with a similar background. O'Brien (2009) when considering students from non-traditional college backgrounds that 'Entering college, the physical presence of walking in the door and the induction process can be difficult for any young person, but additional anxious sentiments may lie with students from a background of no tradition of progression to higher level' (p.35).

Within Europe and stated in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015), the Bologna<sup>1</sup> Process highlights the need 'of strengthening the drive

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<sup>1</sup> The Bologna Process is a series of agreements contracted by ministers responsible for higher education in 47 countries, designed to create a European Higher Education Area, including commitments to address the social dimension of higher education.

for social inclusion and ensuring that higher education is more representative of the whole of society – including men and women, urban and rural dwellers, and members of all socio-economic groupings’ (p.6).

Access students also have the monetary issue. Accommodation expenses for board away from home is very costly (especially in Dublin). The family income or a lack of cash flow can be a major factor if students from disadvantaged backgrounds go to college or not. O’Brien *et al.* (2002) iterates that ‘A child whose father/mother is in the higher professional category has a seven times better chance of going on to third-level than his/her counterpart whose father/mother is an unskilled manual worker’ (p.32). Lynch (1999) when writing about inequality in education sums it up as ‘the relatively advantaged among the disadvantaged’ (p.309). Access students can fall into this character description and may feel that entering the system as O’Brien *et al.* (2002) consider, thinking they have been afforded a privilege rather than granted a right. McHugh (2014) looked at funding and if the government increased the funding of 3<sup>rd</sup> level budgets, this would have an insignificant effect on disadvantaged students as they are less likely to attend than students from a non-disadvantaged background/school. Harvey (1994) states that,

If organised according to principles of justice, solidarity, and equity, the education system can ensure access to education by all social groups, minorities, geographical areas, all ages and both genders. Education can provide new opportunities for training, reintegration to the workforce and training for citizenship participation. (p.46).

As mentioned earlier, McCoy *et al.* findings for the ERSI (2014) suggests that some 94 per cent of students from middle-class schools applied for higher education, compared to 80 per cent from mixed schools and only 50 per cent from working-class schools. Humphreys (2014) considers that,

For many, education can mean the difference between success and failure, giving them confidence to storm the barriers of social exclusion, enriching their lives, and preventing children at risk from becoming second-class citizens. To anyone

growing up in a disadvantaged community these qualities are of immense significance. (Irish Examiner 2013).

Data recently published by the HEA (2016 p.28) indicates that first year students going to further/higher education from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds has risen to 26% up from 20% in 2011-2012. Represented numerically this is a rise from 8,240 to 10,875 (to all new entrants). The National Access Plan for Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015), aim is to try and increase the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds going to further/higher education to an extra 1,500 over the next five years. They hope to achieve this by looking at equity of access, ensuring clearer pathways to further/higher education and the gathering of more data and evidence to support these. Table 5 from The National Access Plan for Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) identifies the breakdown of participation in higher education by people disadvantaged by socio economic barriers in a cohort of 18-20 years of age. These figures represent an increase of approximately 1500 targeted students (p.35).

	2015	2019 (target)
Non-manual worker group	23%	30%
Semi/unskilled manual worker group	26%	35%

Table 5: Participation in higher education by people disadvantaged by socio economic barriers.

The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) states ‘A better chance of getting a better job, greater job satisfaction and prospects of career progression – these are among the key benefits that higher education brings, and it is a message that we need to communicate clearly and effectively’ (p.19). In their paper ‘The sooner the better I could get out of there’: barriers to higher education access in Ireland, McCoy and Byrne (2011) found ‘that students attending non-DEIS (non-disadvantaged) schools are more likely to complete secondary education than those attending DEIS

(disadvantaged) schools, all else being equal' (p.147). Figures from the DES cited in The National Access Plan for Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) state that,

Entry to higher education from students who have attended DEIS schools. Analysis by the DES indicates that 24% of students completing the second year of senior cycle in DEIS schools progress on to higher education, compared to 50% for all schools.<sup>42</sup> DEIS schools account for 12% of entrants to higher education, of which 8% come from rural areas and 4% from urban areas. (p.37).

The Limerick Regeneration report (2008), Health Impact Assessment of Early School Leaving, Absenteeism and Truancy, considers that 'Delivering Educational Opportunity in Schools, was viewed as positive for disadvantaged area schools, but does bring with it a tendency to stigmatizing of these schools, which in turn can lead to 'ghettoisation' (p.44). A recent report by the HEA (2018), A study of progression in Irish higher education 2014/15 to 2015/16, indicated that 86% of first year college students progress to second year, but that students from DEIS schools are twice as likely not to progress to year two as those from fee-paying schools. This report states that the,

study provides a purely statistical analysis. It does not provide information on the motivation for enrolling in higher education, the financial well-being of students, study patterns, student views on teaching methodologies and staff, attendance and participation in extra-curriculum activities as well as the work practices of non-progressing students. (p.15).

The same report goes on to mention that the HEA believe that perhaps students are choosing the wrong course, and this is a factor for the high drop-out rate from certain courses.

#### **2.6.4 HEAR & DARE access routes**

The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) access programmes run in conjunction with some higher education institutes. These initiatives are in place to help students from socio-disadvantaged backgrounds or that have a disability to gain access to higher education with reduced Central Applications Office (CAO) points and are afforded extra support. The National Plan for Equity of



Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) consider that the HEAR and DARE programmes are effective ways ‘to ensure that students from target groups and communities are more equitably represented across different disciplines and professions’ (p.40).

Interestingly, the HEAR and DARE access programme do not take in account students with a QQI/FETAC qualification and only permits students with a Leaving Certification to use this access route. The HEAR website states that the, ‘HEAR is about making college more accessible and the goal of higher education more reachable for determined and hard-working young people who have some extra challenges, due to being from a socially or culturally disadvantaged background.’ Students with a QQI qualification must contact the college directly as they cannot use the HEAR (or DARE) programmes, if they wish to use a disadvantaged access route. Students who did not complete the traditional route of the Leaving Certificate are penalised for continuing their education on an alternative pathway of a FET qualification. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) suggests that to increase higher education numbers from socio disadvantaged backgrounds and people with a disability that by ‘making the HEAR and DARE schemes available to further education graduates could also make a significant contribution in this area’ (p.40). The report also states that,

It is acknowledged that students from the target groups may require additional academic or other supports in order to complete, but this must be done in accordance with the principles of universal design for learning and should not label them in any negative way. Any such support measures must be transparently available to all students. (p.21).

In the Barnardos Written Out, Written Off report (2009), they mention that,

If we are serious about ensuring the future of Ireland as a modern, thriving society and economy, then investing in education is crucial. We are only as strong as our next generation and if we write them off before they begin, we limit not only their futures but our own as well. Education is the currency for life. (2009 Sec1:22).

## **2.7 Summary**

This chapter considered the literature connected to early school leavers, early school leavers programmes and disadvantaged students going to further education/higher education. It is evident from the literature review that although progress has been made regarding early school leavers decreasing in numbers, the issue of children leaving school early still exists. There also exists inequalities in education in Ireland and this reflects in the widening gap between the well off and the less well off. It is apparent from the literature in that the issue of early school leaving is strongly related to socio-economic factors and this is a key indicator for the risk of leaving school early. There exists no single solution to the problem, but there are possibilities for disentangling what lies behind students becoming early school leavers. There is a community of students with potential needs that needs to be expressed in a different way. NESF (2001) states that ‘There is a danger, therefore, that those who leave school and who do not take up employment can effectively be invisible until they reach 18 years when they become eligible for social welfare’ (p.75). If the correct foundations for education are facilitated at the start of a student’s education journey, then as issues or problems arise as they progress through primary and secondary education, the system should be able to ensure that appropriate safeguards are available along the way. Otherwise, a lack of support in this regard could result in such students having their journey cut short.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter will outline the methodologies and research methods used during this research. The chapter will explain and outline the advantages and disadvantages of these research methods chosen to carry out this research. The aim of the research was to answer the research question of what is a Youthreach graduate's perspective on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level experience? This was carried out by following a sample group of students (sample 1) progressing from their Youthreach programme, a sample group (sample 2) that have progressed to further/higher education and a sample group (sample 3), who after completing their Youthreach programme did not progress to further/higher education.

### **3.2 The research approach**

There are two major traditions for educational research, the quantitative and qualitative approaches. These research approaches have evolved from the positivism and anti-positivism (also known as interpretivism) perspective. The traditional approach to research, for a long time, was the external approach (positivism), where the researcher is abstract from the situation and its subjects. This approach is scientifically based, McNiff and Whitehead (2002) claim that 'people are studied as objects, like machine parts, they occupy particular places which they should keep to maintain the equilibrium of an established order' (p.30). Whereas, the anti-positivism approach for researchers is using methods employed in a bid to gain an understanding from individuals involved in various situations, such as semi-structured interviews or by observing people in action. Thus allowing researchers to obtain an understanding, why people act in the way that they do in certain situations.

Researchers using quantitative methods tend to be drawn towards a positivist approach whereas qualitative research tends to side with the anti-positivist perspective. The quantitative tradition in education research has always been linked with taking the

methods and procedures used by the natural sciences. The quantitative researcher is given hard facts, in which the data/observations are factual, in that they need to be understood, that requires insight, extrapolation and reasoning. Stake (1995) suggests that a weakness in a researcher's quantitative approach stems from the difficulty in understanding this type of research as it employs more statistical approaches. Such challenges manifest in difficulties differentiating between 'the interrelationships that exist in human scenarios' (p.37). In comparison a qualitative perspective considers the anti-positivism approach, where the understanding of the connections that exist in the human experience is taken into account. This experience deals with the more difficult to measure emotional or abstract data. As Bell (2005) explains that 'Researchers adopting a qualitative perspective are more concerned to understand individuals' perceptions of the world' (p.7).

Maykut and Morehouse (2002) advises that qualitative research 'places emphasis on understanding through looking closely at people's words, actions and records' (p.16). This research gathered information using qualitative methods from various samples of students that have participated and completed the Youthreach programme. The use of the qualitative approach enabled the voices of the students to be heard. The major advantage of qualitative data is that it provides depth and detail through direct quotation about situations, events, interactions, and behaviours focussed on understanding peoples' perceptions of the world. Qualitative researchers search for clearness and insight in contrast to scientific analysis. Patton (1987) notes that,

The detailed descriptions, direct quotations, and case documentation of qualitative methods are collected as open-ended narrative without attempting to fit programme activities or people's experiences into predetermined, standardised categories such as the response choices that constitute typical questionnaire or tests. (pp.9-10).

The examination of qualitative data can be difficult because responses are usually much longer and variable in content, making it difficult to analyse data because feedback is neither structured nor standardised. Researchers undertaking qualitative research may as

Seidman (1991) argues, have a challenge to establish the credibility of their research.

Stake (1995) advises that most qualitative researchers favour,

a personal capture of the experience so, from their own involvement they can interpret it, recognise its contexts, puzzle the many meanings while still there, and pass along an experiential, naturalistic account for readers to participate themselves in some similar reflection. (p.44).

The research was endeavouring to capture what further/higher education meant to these sample of students?

### **3.3 Triangulation**

Wallace (2013) states that triangulation is ‘a way of cross checking the reliability and trustworthiness of data either by using more than one method of collecting it’ (p.5). Briggs and Coleman (2002) considers it to be ‘a device for improving validity by checking data, either by using mixed methods or by improving validity by checking data, or by involving a range of participants’ (p.137). The purpose of triangulation is to gain a deeper, richer understanding of the student’s experiences and the meaning contained therein for both the research and the researcher. The data gathering techniques in the course of this research is online questionnaires and semi structured interviews. By using these methods, the triangulation process will enhance the research and make it more valid. Jick (1979) supports qualitative data as an essential part of triangulation as it ‘functions as the glue that cements the interpretation of multi-methods results’ (p.609), whereas Flick (2009) states triangulation can ‘produce knowledge on different levels’ (p.445).

### **3.4 Research Methodologies**

Kaplan (1973) suggests that the aim of methodology is to help us to understand, in the broadest terms, not the products of scientific inquiry but the process itself, cited in Cohen *et al.* (2007 p.47). The key challenges in this section is to ensure that accurate and suitable methodologies are used to get the best results from the students for the research. The students are of a relatively young age, the research seeks to understand the dynamics at

play for them, to tell stories about their world and life experience, is there any private or hidden personal values that have shaped that person's world? It is not a process of just getting information in a pre-packaged form but getting information that is reliable and valid. Merriam (2002) states 'Learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world, the meaning it has for them, is considered an interpretive qualitative approach' (p.4).

### **3.5 Research methods**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider that a combination of methods will assist in the 'development of a general focus of enquiry that would in turn guide the discovery' cited in (Maykut and Morehouse 2002 p.44). Cohen *et al.* (2007) states that methods are 'that range of approaches used in educational research to gather data which are to be used as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction' (p.44). A method is the process of how you gather the information, as MacBeath (2002) states that it 'is important not to be tempted into measuring only what is easily measured. Nor should you yield to the temptation of using tools most immediately to hand' (p.112). The following methods were used to carry out the research.

**Questionnaires:** probably the most commonly used method of inquiry. It is a form of interview by proxy, with the interviewer removed from the face-to-face contact of the interview method. The questionnaire will take the form of an online questionnaire.

**Interviews:** The interview will be in the form of a semi-structured interview. Interviews rely on the fact that people are able to offer accounts of their behaviour, practice and action to those who ask them questions.

The above methods have different strengths and weaknesses, but when combined can give a broad indication of the student's experience. Cohen *et al.* (2007) comments that 'Questionnaires present problems to people of limited literacy and an interview can be

conducted at an appropriate speed whereas questionnaires are often filled in hurriedly' (p.158).

### **3.6 Case study**

Initially, consideration was given to the research to take the form of summative evaluation but as the research progressed, it was concluded that the research should take more of a different implementation direction. The information gathered was beyond evaluation and took the form of a case study, so in this regard, the intention of the research was to investigate rather than evaluate the information received. Wallace (2013) considers that case studies, 'are ideally suited to small scale, classroom based real life setting' (p.41). This case study had a narrative aspect and it provided a qualitative approach with some numerical data to assist the analytical process. Narrative case studies are systemic account of events within a timeframe. Stake (1995) calls story telling case studies 'intrinsic case study' and goes on to state 'Two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others' (p.64.) Denzin and Lincoln, (2003) state 'Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (p.2). Rowley (2002) considers that,

Case study research can be based on any mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Typically, it uses multiple data sources including two or more of: direct detailed observations, interviews, and documents. In addition, case studies can involve single or multiple cases. (p.18).

In essence, in opting to employ the narrative case study the research presented here, it will show the experience of the students and highlight their understandings and concerns in respect to progressing to further/higher education. In other words, "their stories" are the backbone of the research. Myers (2008) suggests that case studies 'can be time consuming' (p.82), but they can use a variety of methods to validate results acknowledging the voices of the participants to tell the story. A case study according to

Stake (1995) 'is both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning' (p.237), whereas Bassey (1999) describes case studies as 'a general phrase for the 'investigation of an individual, group or phenomenon' (p.26). This was emphasised more by Cohen *et al.* (2007) in their interpretation that 'a case study provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than presenting them with abstract theories and principles' (p.253).

What Cohen *et al.* (2007) noted about case studies seems to give a better and clearer insight into the research challenge and will allow more focus on generating optimal questions, for an overall picture. This will enable adaptation for the next set of questions for each further questionnaire provided to students. The case study will facilitate a student perspective in their own words and their 'story' of their time at Youthreach and their progression considerations in respect to further/higher education. This will further facilitate an enhanced understanding of the individual's experience. The case study will afford me a way of 'tapping into and abstracting' from students the information I am looking for, Christensen and Carlile (2009). Wallace (2013) states that 'Case studies are widely used in educational research. One reason for this is that they provide a way of exploring a question within its real-life setting' (p.41). Simons (2009) assesses that if case study research has a central methodology it is that of triangulation. This includes cross-checking of evidence in the pursuit of accuracy, fairness and relevance. It also includes triangulating between methods (checking documentary evidence against firsthand accounts, for example).

This research investigated what happened with a small number of mini cases within the case study. Stake (1995), states 'case study researchers use the method of specimens as their primary method to come to know extensively and intensively about a single case' (p.36). The case study began with a questionnaire that was issued to current QQI level 5 Business Studies students that were due to complete their Youthreach programme in July



2016. This was the first of three questionnaires which drove the research. The questions were designed to get a broad range of data from the participants. The key data obtained from these questions provided a basis for the next set of questionnaire questions for the next sample. One of the most challenging aspects of the research was to bring the investigation from a descriptive account to a piece of research that offers new, updated data or offer a revised appreciation/context. On reflection, a case study research can be suitable when as Yin (1994) states ‘A how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control’ (p.9). This research will take the form of both how and why questions.

### **3.7 Sample of population**

Sampling for the purpose of the research took the form of simple random sampling as I had access to the sample. The sample is homogeneous, and it was not too large a population. The sample is a representative of Blanchardstown Youthreach students that could progress or have progressed to further/higher education since they have completed a QQI programme. All participants have been assigned a number. For example: Student 1, Student 2 and so on. As Field *et al.* (2005) suggest, ‘a sample is a smaller (but hopefully representative) collection of units from a population used to determine truths about that population’ (p.925).

For the purpose of the research and the reader, the groups will be colour coded related to the sample group and questionnaire number or student interview. The colours are as follows:

**Sample 1** (orange), **Sample 2** (blue), **Sample 3** (green).

**Sample 1:** This was a group of eight Youthreach Blanchardstown students studying a QQI Business Studies level 5 course in 2015-2016. They finished their studies in Youthreach in July 2016.

**Sample 2:** Ten past Youthreach Blanchardstown students who have left Youthreach but have already progressed to further/higher education, they are at various stages or have completed their studies.

**Sample 3:** Four students who have left Youthreach Blanchardstown with a full QQI certificate but did not progress to further/higher education.

### **3.7.1 Breakdown of samples**

**Sample 1** is made up of eight students, six males and two females, they finished their Youthreach programme in July 2016. They had all completed their QQI level 5 Business Studies course. Age range is 18-21 and there was a mixture of nationalities, including Irish, English, Lithuanian and Polish. The reason this group was chosen for the research, was all the students had expressed an interest in going to higher education. Also, as a QQI level 5 group they can progress to higher education after completing their QQI level 5 Business Studies course.

**Sample 2** is 10 students who have left Youthreach Blanchardstown at various stages over the last few years. The reason these students were chosen for the research was due to personal and centre knowledge that they had gone onto further/higher education and that they were accessible by phone to contact. With this sample it was necessary to focus on their individual perceptions of college before, during and after they had completed their studies.

**Sample 3** is four students that had left Youthreach but did not go to further education/higher education. Again, the reason these students were chosen was due to easy availability and awareness that they did not progress to further/higher education after completing their Youthreach programme.

### **3.8 Timescale of the research**

The research took place over a two-year period from December 2015 to December 2017. The research gathered data from 22 students who had all completed their Youthreach

programme. This was broken down to 18 online questionnaires and four student interviews. All students were aged 18 plus. Most of these students were early school leavers and for certain reasons some had left school before completing upper secondary school (these reasons were not part of the research). Many students contacted for this research would be a typical example of a Youthreach cohort having all the characteristic traits of early school leavers as mentioned in Chapter 2, (2.3).

Youthreach Blanchardstown has about 70 students at any one time participating in the programme. A group of eight students that completed a QQI Business Studies level 5 (2016) programme are the only students that would be eligible to progress to a 3<sup>rd</sup> level course during the time scale of this research. Other Youthreach students that are finishing their programme in the same year, will leave with a QQI level 4 certification, a level 4 certification and such were not eligible for progression to 3<sup>rd</sup> level but could consider progression to a further education course including a PLC course, which of course can be a gateway to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. Dr. Anne Looney of the HEA stated in a speech at the first Further Education and Training to Higher Education Network conference (October 2016) in Dublin City University (DCU) that,

There is a role for all stakeholders in promoting the Further Education sector not only as the ‘alternative’ to direct entry, but as a first choice for students who want more time to decide on a HE option, who want to develop some of the skills needed to succeed in HE, or who want a more supported transition to independent study.

(SOLAS news article 2016)

The National Plan for Equity of Access for Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) in the context of looking at the further education sector progression routes to higher education states,

For many students who go onto further education, their FE qualification is an end in itself and with it they can achieve an entry qualification for the labour market; for others, it is a step along a pathway to higher education. Currently, however, there are not enough opportunities for further education graduates to make the transition to higher education, and the number of students who do so is low. (p.19)

### **3.9 Limitations to the research**

There was apprehension regarding how many questionnaires would be returned from the samples of students that have finished their Youthreach programme and progressed on. Eight students from [sample 1](#) completed their initial questionnaire. In relation to the follow-on questionnaire ([sample 1](#)-part b) all these students had left the Youthreach programme since July 2016 and have moved on in their respectful lives/careers. In total seven out of eight replies were received. From [sample 2](#), 12 past students stated that they would participate in the research with a total of ten replies received for the research in the end.

In relation to the semi-structured interviews for [sample 3](#), initially four students were contacted for the interviews in April/May 2016 and asked if they would be willing to participate in the interviews and all agreed. After scheduling the interviews with the four students, three of the students did not turn up for their interview. In hindsight, I purposely scheduled the student interviews after lunchtime as I was aware that some students prioritise a sleep-in and are not early risers. Otherwise, I understood that they were likely to not engage. The no-shows set this part of the research back considerably. One student made contact after the scheduled date and said he was sorry and the interview was re-scheduled but again he did not show. A different student was contacted and attended the interview. I considered that having only two interviews would not justify the validity of the research due to the low numbers. The following year (May 2017), I contacted another four students who had left the programme with an awareness that they did not go onto further education, two of these students were willing to participate. For the research it would have been preferred for a larger number of students than four for the interviews, but due to reasons beyond my control, four was all that could be interviewed within the timescale of the research.

### 3.10 Validity/reliability

Wallace (2013) states that data is valid ‘if they are from a source appropriate and relevant to the research question’ and that data is ‘considered reliable if they remain consistent whoever is collecting the data and at whatever time’ (p.5). Yin (1984) and Stake (1995) suggest that in the context of research validity and reliability, one case study is sufficient. Eisenhardt (1989) on the other hand suggests that between four and ten is preferable. For this research question, Eisenhardt’s viewpoint has been adopted, by having more data will make the research more valid, reliable and give a better overview of the findings. As the studies cannot be replicated, the data and results are only valid for the individuals that provide them.

### 3.11 Surveys/questionnaires

Menter *et al.* (2011) considers that ‘Surveys are the most commonly used to collect qualitative information about people in a population’ (p.104). The authors go on to state that ‘When the questions are completed by the respondent, the survey is referred to as a questionnaire or self-administered survey’ (p.104). Questionnaires can be a valuable method of collecting data. It can provide the respondent with relative privacy and anonymity, which in turn offers the respondent the opportunity to address and answer the questionnaire in a way they do not feel threatened. The questionnaires were created using Google Forms. Google Forms is an online software package used to create various questionnaire styles. The questionnaires investigated details about students, their time in the Youthreach programme, what they are currently doing and their experience of progressing to further education. Table 6 outlines the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires.

Advantages of Questionnaires	Disadvantages of Questionnaires
Good for gathering descriptive data	May not get many questionnaires returned

Can cover a wide range of topics	Data may provide a general picture but lack depth
Are efficient and inexpensive to use	May not provide enough information on subject
Automatic collection of data	Need to be aware of respondent's literacy levels
Quick to deploy especially in large numbers	Respondents will need access to the internet
Questions can be answered at respondent's pace	Certain technology devices may not have the required software to access the questionnaire
Respondents may disclose more information as not being interviewed and confidentially assured	

Table 6: Advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires. Adapted from Menter (2011), Wallace (2013).

### 3.11.1 Open and closed questions

The questionnaires included a combination of both open and closed questions. The open questions allowed the respondents to add their own input giving a more enriched answer. However, open questions require more time to think and add a written response, which was a concern, as participants may get bored and not complete the entire questionnaire. Baker (1994) suggests that a danger of using internet questionnaires is the participant not responding to the questions and just moving through the questions quickly, unlike face to face questionnaires which have a much higher rate of achievement. The closed question is quicker for the respondents to complete but also allows for a more quantifiable and comparable analysis of the answers. The use of both open and closed questions was designed to create a well-balanced questionnaire. The respondent can feel like their opinion is valued with the open questions, as Wallace (2013) states 'open questions can potentially provide the rich and complex data which will bring your research alive' (pp.55-56). Closed questions yield specific answers to some of the questions asked in relation to the specific aims of this study. Menter *et al.* (2011) suggest that 'closed questions make for rapid data analysis' (p.105).

The benefits of the questionnaire will seek to outweigh the disadvantages for the research especially as the questionnaires are relatively short and this should help for the scope of the research. The online questionnaires will hopefully shorten the period of the data collection. Questionnaires can offer an excellent opportunity to apply a variety of qualitative research methods. The questionnaires were anonymous, and this will allow an honesty that might not be shown if a student had put their name to it or give personal details that may lead to identity. Maybe the teacher relationship that I have with most of these students will allow for a deeper disclosure and, this will enrich the research process. In hindsight, the issue of how the students' responded could be an eagerness on behalf of the student to answer in a certain way and maybe to please me as a previous teacher of theirs.

### **3.11.2 Pilot questionnaire**

Two of my colleagues piloted the questionnaire with two level 5 students but not from the **sample 1** group. This was to get an understanding from these students looking at the layout of the questionnaire, that the questions were understandable and in a logical order. Chalcraft *et al.* (2008) suggests that 'Piloting or trying out your questionnaire before using it is a good idea. This will provide feedback about the precision of your questions and whether they will give the useful and valid data you hope for' (p.95). It further highlights the importance of trying the questionnaire out first and as Davies and Hughes (2014) iterates to try the questionnaire 'on subjects as similar as possible to those whom you are going to target in the main study' (p.47). A few issues cropped up, which included changing some wording within some of the questions and the length of one question. As Briggs and Coleman, (2002) states that, 'All questionnaire items have to be worded in ways that will make their meaning absolutely clear to students and that are measurable' (p.161). Wallace (2013) further states, 'A questionnaire should be designed with a view to gathering answers we may not even have thought of' (p.55). It can be hard to create a

form that will transmit accurately to all respondents and there was the awareness of the language levels and that some of the individuals are non-nationals and that English would not be their mother-tongue. Bell (2005) states ‘you will only reach the stage of designing a questionnaire after you have done all the preliminary work on planning, consulting and deciding exactly what you need to find out’ (p.136). As Davies *et al.* (2014) suggests ‘In the light of each pilot encounter, you can (and should) continue to amend, adjust and tighten up your research instrument or your overall approach’ (p.48). Foddy (1993) when looking at pilot interviews claims,

there is now general agreement among authors that piloting questions on a small sample of people is more useful for identifying questions or aspects of questions that will cause difficulty for the interviewer than for ascertaining whether or not the participants interpret the questions as intended. (p.185).

### **3.12 Interviews**

Interviews can be more flexible than any other research method. They can be used to extract simple factual information from people. Interviews can be utilised to ask people about their attitudes, behaviour, motives, feelings and other emotions that cannot be directly observed through questionnaires. Interviews can be a valuable means of data collection, as they can capture a realistic response from the interviewee. The interviews conducted as part of this research helped to probe and gather information from the students about their time at Youthreach and why (for some) further education was not pursued as an option. Bell (2005) suggests that, ‘interviews can yield rich material and can often put the flesh on the bones of a questionnaire’ (p.157). Davies *et al.* (2014) suggest that ‘interviews should give respondents freedom to use their own words’ (p.100) and they go on to comment that the interviewer ‘should make it possible for the encounter to feel like a natural conversation’ (p.102). Robson (2011 p.284) recommends that the interviewer divide the interview into five phases:

1. Introduction: the interviewer introduces him/herself and describes the aim of the interview.



2. Warm-up: start with easy questions to ease the situation from the beginning.
3. Main body: the interviewer focuses on the main topic of his/her study.
4. Cool-off: again, simple questions which will conclude the interview.
5. Closure: the interviewer thanks the interviewee(s) for his/her (their) valuable contribution.

Interviews are forms of conversation that can vary from structured to semi-structured and unstructured. For the purpose of this research a semi-structured interview was used, this method is the one most favoured according to Briggs and Coleman (2002) 'by educational researchers as it allows interviewees to elaborate without rambling when answering the questions' (p.149). Stake (1995) contends when carrying out interviews that,

It is terribly easy to fail to get the right questions asked, awfully difficult to steer some of the most informative interviewees on to your choice of issues. They have their own. Most people are pleased to be listened to. Getting acquiescence to interviews is perhaps the easiest task in case study re-search. Getting a good interview is not so easy. (p.64).

Briggs and Coleman (2002) suggests, 'three kinds of face-to-face interview are commonly distinguished: the structured, semi-structured and unstructured interview' (p.148).

**Structured Interview:** These interviews are based, on carefully worded interview schedules. This method is suitable if the questions, to be asked are not particularly contentious or thought provoking. The information collected by this method could be equally collected by a questionnaire.

**Semi-Structured Interview:** This interview method is also carefully worded, but much more freedom of questioning is acceptable.

**Unstructured Interview:** In-depth interviews tend to roam freely and may require great skill and management. They are often used by researchers working in an 'interpretive

paradigm’ according to Briggs and Coleman (2002 p.149) while more structured styles of interviews tend to be favoured by those enquiring along more positivist lines.

The semi-structured interviews in this research can be appropriate for initial stages of research as they allow the interviewee to focus on the questions in a relaxed environment. The questions can take the format of an informal chat, allowing the respondents to disclose more credible and valid information. The interviews used some guiding questions. This approach ensured that specific topics would not be overlooked. The interviews can promote an atmosphere and opportunity for an open and frank discussion for the interviewees. May (2001) states that ‘Interviews yield rich insights into people’s biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings’ (p.121). The researcher needs to let the interviewee be the centre of attention. As Bell (2005) states ‘A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate feelings, which the questionnaire can never do’ (p.157). Table 7 outlines the advantages and disadvantages of interviews.

Advantages of interviews	Disadvantages of interviews
Allows for gathering of rich and detailed information	Time consuming
Strengthening validity (triangulation)	Misunderstanding of the questions
Gives the students a voice on the stage	Non-attendance
Ability to clarify answers	

Table 7: Advantages and disadvantages of interviews. Adapted from Loxley (2003), Menter *et al.* (2011).

Wallace (2013) suggests that interviews have good reasons as into why they are widely used in research, it can enable researchers to ‘probe questions, seek clarification, rephrase questions and so-on’ (p.64). Menter *et al.* (2011) advises researchers to consider that the time taken to carry out the interviews, analyse the data can be time-consuming and expensive.

12 questions were devised for the interviews (appendix C) taking the format of the questions from the questionnaires with the expectation of looking at further/higher education. A dummy run was carried out with a colleague and all went well, on the morning of the first scheduled interview I went over the questions in my head to familiarise myself with the content. As Stake (1995) outlines 'trying out the questions in pilot form, at least in mental rehearsal, should be routine' (p.65). As Wallace further suggests 'It's perfectly acceptable, therefore to not stick rigidly to your prepared list of questions if deviation here and there will enrich or clarify the data' (p.39). The interviews were conducted to try and understand and appreciate why these students did not progress in their education after completing their Youthreach programme. As Stake considers regarding interviewing, 'The purpose for the most part is not to get simple yes and no answers but description of an episode, a linkage, an explanation (p.65).

The interviews took place in Youthreach Blanchardstown during a week in May 2016 and May 2017. The interviews were carried out in a small office, this was intended so that students felt no threat or intimidation by using specific offices (Co-ordinator's office) or areas that could pose pressure. The time available for each interview was indicated prior to the start, and each student was made aware at the start of the interview of the confidentiality of the given data and completed the consent form. Students were informed of the intended outcome of the research. All students were asked if the proceedings could be audio recorded as this would help the process of typing up the interviews and to be able to play the interview back to analysis, all agreed to have the interviews audio recorded. As Wallace (2013) states, 'audio recording is usually considered to be less intrusive than video recording, which can make the interviewee too self-conscious to talk freely' (p.70).

### 3.13 Other data sources

Other relevant data was collected and researched from browsing through various books, journals, government reports, non-governmental organisation reports, theses, websites and numerous articles (as cited in the references section). This research provided the secondary background for the research. Table 8 outlines the advantages and disadvantages of the other data sources.

Advantages of other data sources	Disadvantages of other data sources
Low or no cost	Some information can be dated
High quality of information available	Time consuming
Relativity easy to access	Vast amount of information available (relative to research)
	Some data may not be reliable

Table 8: Advantages and disadvantages of other data sources.

### 3.14 Data Collection

Robson (2011 p.399) provides seven steps to data collection and the approach outlined steered the research. These seven steps served as a foundation during the various stages of the research although not directly through Robson's published order.

1. Know what you are doing before starting the data collection. - research aims, questions, methods and procedures.
2. Negotiating access.
3. Get yourself organised – devising a schedule for interviewing.
4. Pilot if at all possible – important to have a trial run.
5. Work on your relationships.
6. Don't just disappear at the end.
7. Don't expect it to work out as planned- not everything will run smoothly, be flexible and take note.

Due to the fact that I teach in a Youthreach environment there needed to be an awareness of factors that could affect the research. From working in the Youthreach programme and

with my knowledge of the Youthreach programme, there may be bias shown towards the programme. My connection as a teacher/mentor to the majority of the participants and over the years of teaching these students directly may entail participants answering the questions with a view to pleasing me. In retrospect, having worked with early school leavers for over ten years, with an accumulated - and considerable - knowledge of the challenges relating to early school leavers and students from disadvantaged areas will support and guide me in the research process. With this background and my life experiences, this will hopefully enhance and enrich the research. The collection of the data received for the online questionnaires and interviews will take the place of various chart types, tables and text. Table 9 outlines the numbers of responses received for the questionnaires and the interviews.

	Numbers of students contacted	Responses received and analysed	Percentage
Questionnaire 1 Sample 1	8	8	100%
Questionnaire 2 Sample 2	18	10	55%
Interview Sample 3	9	4	44%
Questionnaire 3 Sample 1	8	7	87%

Table 9: Number of responses received for data collection.

### 3.14.1 Vignettes

Each sample of students shows a vignette representing details regarding the student. The vignette is endeavouring to follow the student on their journey, to give a snapshot, a short story, to get an understanding, maybe a typical profile of an early school leavers in a Youthreach setting who completes their programme. In retrospect, The European Commission (2013) iterates ‘There is therefore no single profile of early school leavers, although some groups are more at risk, which differs between regions and countries.’ (p.26).

Hughes (1998), points out, vignettes are ‘Stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes’ (p.381). Within these vignettes and throughout the findings verbatim quotes of the students from the questionnaires and interviews are incorporated. As Myres (2009) states ‘Quotes that are verbatim bring the case to life’ (p.83).

### **3.14.2 Analysing and coding the data**

Adu (2013) states that, ‘Coding is like using Lego bricks to make *an art*: it always starts with using meaningless pieces of bricks to create a meaningful piece of art’. Salanda (2013) suggests coding as Codes, Categories, Themes and Theories. Adu (2013) goes on to specify coding as Pre-coding stage (getting to know your data), Coding stage (assigning labels to the nodes) and Post-Coding stage (Presenting your findings). Corbin and Strauss (2014) comment that, ‘coding requires searching for the right word or two that best describes conceptually what the researcher believes is the meaning of the data’ (p.216) and that coding can be divided into three stages,

Opening coding - Reading through the questionnaires and interviews several times, getting to connect with the participants, what is coming out, what is happening from the findings, initial categories, recordings based on what is emerging from the data and establishing codes. Categorising, exploring data, meanings feelings actions.

Axial coding - Identifying links/relationships from the codes, are there any connections.

Selective coding - Looks at repeated words, phrases, similarities, sentences that crop up in data and selectively coding the data, findings core categories and more connections.

Using the three stages of coding, the acquired data from the research was first applied by looking at the larger picture of all the data and looking at emerging themes and reoccurring data. A coding of the data (figure 10) was developed with a systematic approach looking at reoccurring words, phrases, sentences from the various samples.

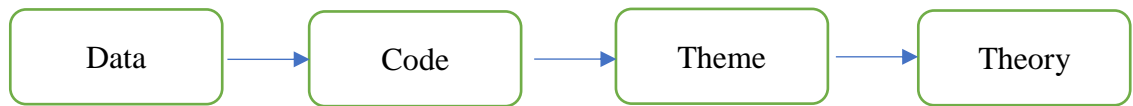


Figure 10: Coding of data.

There was a need to be conscious of validity and reliability for my findings. However, as mentioned earlier I wanted to avoid any bias in my analysis of the data especially due to the fact that I work in a Youthreach environment and could be seen to look at the programme favourably. I ensured impartiality when looking at the data from the research and ensured that I did not influence the interpretation of the data with my personal experience and opinion while still remaining attached to the data. Also, as all the students that participated in this research have completed their Youthreach programme, they have in this regard, all benefited in some form from participating and completing the Youthreach programme. They could be classified as a success of the Youthreach programme.

In an effort to ensure quality for the analysis and findings, language was used from the readings to code the qualitative data to explore and examine the common themes. Analysing the data took the form of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase framework for thematic analysis, cited in Maguire and Delahunt (2017) and they suggest that it offers such a clear and usable framework for doing thematic analysis.

1. Become familiar with the data
2. Generate initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Define themes
6. Write-up

By using a thematic analysis process, the analysing of the research data encompassed reading over the responses from the questionnaires, listening to the interviews again and again, ensuring familiarisation of the data and putting myself in the respondents' shoes, thinking about what they are saying, what do they mean by their words and basically to

make sense of it. As Stake (1995) suggests ‘Getting the exact words of the respondent is usually not very important, it is what they mean that is important’ (p.66). The analysis looked for related categories, themes, patterns running throughout the questionnaires and interviews, relevant and related data (words, sentences, phrases, etc.) data that was repeated, data that was constant, data that was surprising and connected to the concepts in the literature review. Themes were developed and redeveloped to coincide with the words from the questionnaires and interviews. By searching for the themes within the data without having read the related literature, I might have overlooked certain data. Various data was then themed together, for example:

College workload, making friends, (life) balance, dropping out - are all considered under the theme **Concerns**.

No explanations, little support, new opportunities, fun at times - all under the theme **College environment**

From the raw clean data received from the questionnaires and student interviews, this raw data was coded using colours which served as the themes and subsequently broken down into the theory of the findings. Grbich (2007) considers issues that can crop up when coding mixed methods, that the researcher needs to ensure that the methodology used to obtain the qualitative data has not been poorly designed, badly collected and shallowly analysed. This could affect the quality of the analyses and subsequent findings. Wallace (2013) further states that,

When we are analysing interview recordings or questionnaires...we are choosing to deal with evidence which is corruptible or subject to distortion, and we need to be aware of this and take all possible measures to minimise the possibility of researcher bias. (p. 84).

The coding identification key in table 10 refers to the selective data colour coded from the information received from the questionnaires and interview.



<b>Concerns</b>	<b>Aspirations</b>	<b>Mainstream Education</b>	<b>Youthreach Environment</b>	<b>College Environment</b>	<b>Personal Development</b>	<b>Support</b>
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Table 10: Code identification of key themes.

**Concerns** – this aspect looked at what concerns/worries the students had before progressing to college.

**Aspirations** – this part looked at student’s ambitions/goals from progressing to college.

**Mainstream education** – this issue related to the students experience of mainstream education.

**Youthreach environment** – this aspect related to students experience of their Youthreach programme.

**College environment** – this aspect looked at the students experience during their time in college and the route taken when applying.

**Personal development** – this part related to the personal development they experienced from their education, during their time in Youthreach and in college.

**Support** – this issue looked at supports they considered to have been given during their time in the Youthreach programme and in college.

Appendix B shows a synopsis in the form of a mind map outlining the words/phrases employed to support the coding of the quantitative data from the research. Figure 11 below shows an example of coding for the questionnaires, (see Appendix D for full questionnaire coding example). Figure 12 below shows example of coding for the interviews, (see Appendix E for full interview coding example).

**16. Did college live up to these expectations? \***

Assignment and work wise, the assignments were actually easier in college than in Youthreach which I was grateful for. It wasn't a community like Youthreach it didn't have that constantly friendly happy environment I was hoping for. I did receive countless hours of work from assignments to practical exams. It definitely did bring new opportunities my way and it was fun at times but was much more exhausting than fun.

Figure 11: Snapshot of questionnaire coding.

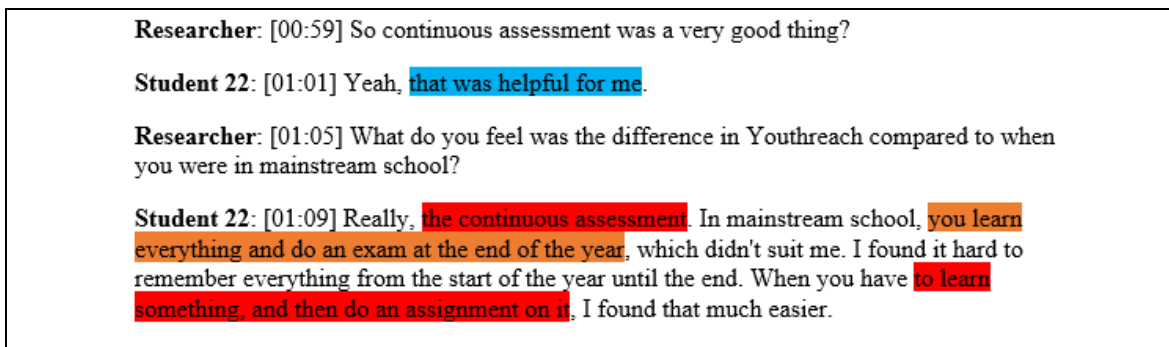


Figure 12: Snapshot of interview coding.

### 3.15 Ethical considerations

There was a social responsibility towards the students during this research. Honesty and openness needed to be exhibited throughout the research. As Wellington (2000) states ‘Ethical concerns should be at the forefront of any research project and should continue through to the write-up and dissemination stages’ (p.4). Permission was sought from the students to conduct the research on their experience in Youthreach and their subsequent progression after Youthreach. As McKernan (1996) states, ‘It is crucial for all participants to know what their rights are in research of any kind’ (p.241). Students opted to remain anonymous for the research. As Dawson (2009) claims ‘Researchers should be open and honest about who they are and what they’re doing. People can then make an informed choice about whether they take part in a project’ (p.151).

As part of this research there needed to be a consciousness of ethics considerations related to the participants of the research. Whilst drawing up the ethics statement and consent form (appendix F), awareness of the profile of the students including their comprehension of the English language and to keep the overall terminology to a minimum was applied. As all participants were over 18 years of age for this study, the ethics proposal to the DCU Research Ethics Committee was considered a low risk study and was approved (appendix G). As this study involved Youthreach students, permission was first sought (appendix H) from my Co-ordinator for approval to conduct the research. A plain language

statement to each student (appendix I) explained about the research and for their permission to participate.

**Sample 1** students received a copy of the plain language statement and the consent form. They were asked to read it to themselves and if they had any questions regarding the language and understanding of the document, to seek answers. They were informed that all information gathered during the research was confidential, their names would not be revealed and not be given to any third party. On completion of the research, a copy of the thesis would be available in DCU library and all data obtained that informed the thesis will be disposed of correctly once examined. Students were also informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time. The British Education Research Association (2011) states that,

(Researchers) must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. (p.10).

### **3.16 Summary**

The methodologies used in this research will enrich the information obtained. The findings of the research will contribute to subsequent and further research opportunities. In the context of this research I validated the findings through a process of triangulation between the various data sources. Chapter 4 will show the results of the three online questionnaires, the four student interviews, the findings from each question and a summary for each questionnaire will be given.

## Chapter 4 Research Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will look at the findings from the three online questionnaires and the four student interviews. In analysing the data from the methods of collection, I was interested in discovering common themes, references or phrases, searching for frequent/reoccurrence use of words. From this analysis, along with my personal reflections and experience, the data was evaluated in respect to my own learning and teaching.

McKernan (1996), suggests there are four stages in the collection of data; ‘processing data, mapping data, interpreting the evidence and presentation of the results.’ (p.221). Maykut and Morehouse (2002) cite Bogdan and Bilken (1982), as insisting that ‘findings must reflect all ‘participant perspectives’, and not solely those of the researcher’ (p.42). This is an important detail of this research, to hear the students voice, their own words, their language, their experiences and to get a better understanding of their personality, even a Youthreach student profile, if such a defined profile could exist. Wallace (2013), states that ‘Analysing our findings is one of the most exciting parts of the research process; and also, perhaps the most dangerous’ (p.83). The analysis of the research is vital in making sound judgements and deductions.

### 4.2 Research Sample

**Sample 1**- Eight students studying their Youthreach programme in 2015-2016 and their status approximately six months after completing their Youthreach programme.

**Sample 2**- Ten students that have completed their Youthreach programme and progressed to further/higher education.

**Sample 3** – Four students who have completed their Youthreach programme but did not go to further/higher education.

#### 4.2.1 Sample 1

**Sample 1** received their questionnaire, survey 1- *Reasons for applying for college* (appendix J) by e-mail in December 2015. These eight students were at the time (2015) in the middle of their Youthreach programme completing a QQI level 5 Business Studies programme. During their time in the Youthreach programme, within the SENI or career guidance sessions, all these eight students expressed an interest in progressing to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education after finishing their Youthreach programme. The questionnaire composed of questions considering their time in Youthreach, their subsequent progression to higher education (if relevant) and what category of courses they were looking at applying for. It also viewed what support they may receive and their overall feelings/concerns regarding progression to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education.

#### 4.2.2 Background to student's **sample 1**

The initial questions in the questionnaire were related to the student's age, gender, the course title they were looking at applying for and the college location for that course.

Code	Gender	Age	Course	College
Student 1	Female	19	Computing and Hospitality Management NFQ level 8	Institute Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) or Griffith College
Student 2	Male	18	Computer Science NFQ level 8	ITB, Griffith College, Fastrack into Information Technology (FIT) apprenticeship
Student 3	Male	20	Information Technology NFQ level 8	Unsure
Student 4	Male	19	Community and Youth Development	ITB
Student 5	Male	20	Information Technology NFQ level 8	FIT apprenticeship
Student 6	Male	20	International Business & Languages NFQ level 8	Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)
Student 7	Female	20	Marketing Management NFQ level 8	DCU

Student 8	Male	19	Sales and Marketing NFQ level 8	University College Dublin (UCD)
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Table 11: Background/progression to further education [sample 1](#)

This sample was made up of six males and two females students aged from 18-20 years of age. These students looked at various courses including computer science/applications, business related courses, hospitality and youth development. The students stated that the colleges they would consider attending for the courses would be DIT, DCU, UCD and ITB, all in the Dublin area. Two of the students mentioned the newly commissioned FIT ICT Associate Professional Tech apprenticeship. ‘ICT Associate Professional is the new National Apprenticeship Programme for all tech enthusiasts wishing to pursue a career in Ireland’s buoyant technology sector.’ (FIT 2018).

#### 4.2.3 Why progress to further education?

Students were asked about their motive for wanting to progress to college. They were asked to answer the statements as, very important, important or not important.

Question	Not Important	Important	Very Important
To learn more about my chosen subject	0	4	4
To get a job	0	2	6
To improve my chances of employment	0	2	6
To improve my self-confidence	1	4	3
Learn more about life skills	0	4	4
To meet new people	2	5	1
Family wants me to go	3	5	0

Table 12: Motives to progress to further education.

Regarding their primary subject choice 50% of the students considered it very important and 50% important to learn more about the subject. As a motive to go to college, the majority of students (75%) considered it was very important to get a job, and the same

percentage (75%) considered it very important to improve chances of employment, whereas 25% of students considered it just important for both aspects.

Relating to improving self-confidence, 37.5% of the students felt it was very important, 50% important and 12.5% not important. To learn new skills as a motive to progress to college, 50% of the students considered it very important and 50% important. When looking at learning life skills, 50% of the students considered it very important and 50% important. Students were asked would meeting new people be a motive to go to college, only 12.5% considered it very important, whereas for 62.5% it was important and for 25% not important to them. In relation to, if their family would be a motive for them to go to college, 62.5% stated that it would be important and 37.5 considered it not important.

Students were asked if they had any other motives to progress to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education outside of those listed in the statements in Table 12. The following were some of the responses,

*“I believe that education is key to achieving the lifestyle I desire, I do not wish to be dependent on anyone, and higher-level education usually leads to better wages.”*  
(student 5)

*“I also want to get a qualification in 3<sup>rd</sup> level college so I could get good career abroad.”* (student 6)

#### **4.2.4 Support progressing to further/higher education**

Students were asked about receiving support from family and peers if they did progress to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. 75% of the students feel they would get support to further their education from family members, whereas 25% did not. The majority (87.5%) of the students felt they would get support to further their education from their peers, and 12% would not get any support from their peers.

Another question was posed regarding if education was encouraged within the family (figure 13), 75% considered that education was encouraged within the family, whereas

12.5% felt no encouragement at all and the same percentage (12.5%) felt somewhat encouraged.

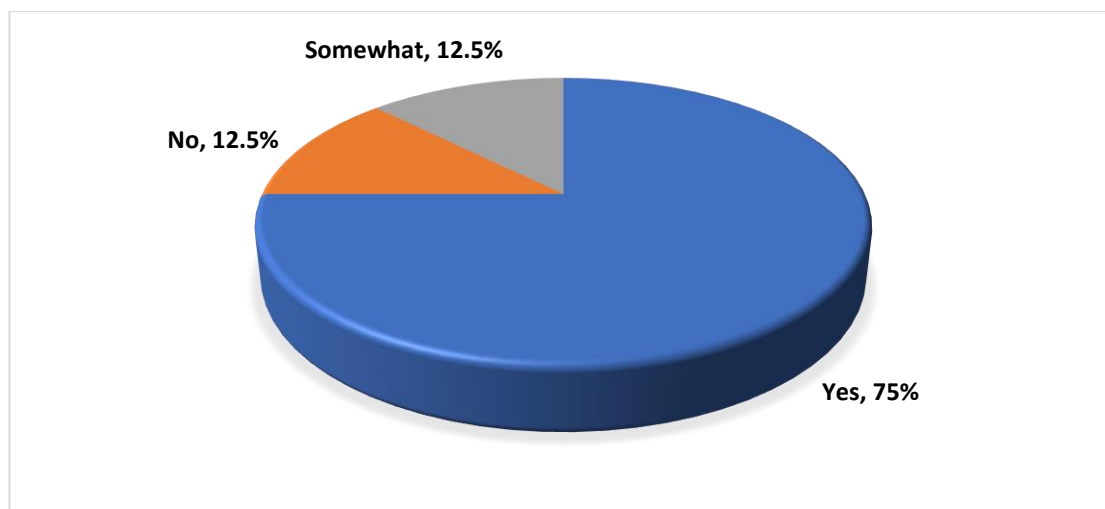


Figure 13: Was education encouraged within the family?

#### **4.2.5 Reason for leaving mainstream education**

Regarding their reasons for leaving mainstream education. 62.5% of the students left mainstream school as they had finished their Leaving Certificate/second level education, whereas 12.5% had behavioural issues/family troubles within school. A further 12.5% left school as they were convinced that if they didn't do so, they would eventually be expelled, and would as a consequence have a negative impact on their education record. The remaining 12.5% did not answer the question with a related answer (and entered 'No' as the response).

#### **4.2.6 Youthreach versus mainstream school**

The questionnaire asked students what they would consider to be the difference between their secondary school experience and their Youthreach experience. 37.5% felt that teachers were the main difference and that the holistic approach shown by the teachers in Youthreach made them feel more relaxed than secondary school. 25% referred to the pleasant atmosphere/environment to learn, whereas 25% mentioned the support given to



them during their time in Youthreach. 12.5% stated they did not feel under as much pressure as they did in secondary school.

*“The staff in Youthreach not just teachers, are all down to earth and treat you like a human being and not just a number in their roll call. When I first joined Youthreach my first thought was, why didn't I come here earlier. If I had the chance, I would inform everyone about Youthreach and how it has helped me during my time here. I can honestly say I would not have the same attitude towards education if Youthreach had not been introduced to me.” (student 4)*

*“The bond between teachers is better, you get financial support and there is less reasons to be stressed.” (student 6)*

Students were asked if they were ever encouraged to go the college by teachers, guidance counsellors or parents during their mainstream schooling, the majority of the students (87.5%) felt that they were encouraged by teachers, guidance counsellors or parents, whereas 12.5% stated no encouragement.

#### **4.2.7 Opinion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> level college experience**

The questionnaire asked the sample their opinion of 3<sup>rd</sup> level college. All of the students (100%) felt that 3<sup>rd</sup> level college would in various ways; benefit them personally and enable them to get a better job/improve job prospect. 12.5% of the students mentioned the expense that would be incurred as a consequence of attending 3<sup>rd</sup> level education and how they perceived a lack of affordability as negatively impacting their ability to engage in 3<sup>rd</sup> level education.

*“.... I would say college is a great place to go if u know what to do with your life in terms of career, but I just wish it wasn't that expensive because not many people get the chance to go because they are not able to fund it.” (student 4)*

#### **4.2.8 Concerns progressing to 3<sup>rd</sup> level**

Students were asked what preparations they would organise if accepted to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. 25% of students mentioned the importance of getting a grant and 25% looked at getting a part time job to supplement college. 25% mentioned that preparing for the

travel to the location and looking at the timetable. 12.5% considered that preparing mentally for 3<sup>rd</sup> level education was important. 12.5% remarked that increasing their motivation levels and to ensure that they kept to a healthy lifestyle.

*“I will have to fund the course if I am eligible for a grant and if this is the case a part time job is in order, this would be my main concern as I do not live far away from the college I might apply for, so I could go home for lunch and also wouldn't have to spend money on travel to get to and from college.” (student 4)*

*“First thing I will start to do is maintain fit and healthy life style in order to feel more determined and sharp minded. I believe that it will have a big impact on my education and life.” (student 6)*

#### Vignette of student-sample 1

**Student 7** started her Youthreach programme in September 2014 and after two years she completed both a QQI level 5 Business Studies and QQI level 5 General Learning certifications.

*“I feel that Youthreach has made me an independent person and got me ready for the work load that college assists of, I also feel Youthreach was broadening my level of English and my vocabulary.”*

She wanted to progress to a Marketing degree and had looked at courses in DIT and ITB. She applied for a course in DIT, she never went for the interview. After completing her Youthreach programme, she signed on with the DSP. The DSP sent her on a QQI level 5 Childcare course and she was offered and position in a crèche in Dublin City centre on completion. She felt that she did not get much support in college when participating in the Childcare course.

*“College is different from Youthreach as they don't offer as much support as Youthreach, college also just give you a brief to go home and do the work load and final you don't have set classrooms or people that attend the classes.”*

*“The tutors are not very helpful or support when needed, and the people in the classrooms are rarely the same.”*

She successfully completed her QQI level 5 childcare course. After working in the crèche in the city centre in Dublin for a year, she applied for a part-time childcare job in a crèche

in Blanchardstown and was successful. She is currently in a full-time position in that same crèche and completing a QQI level 6 in childcare.

Table 13: Student vignette [sample 1](#).

### **4.3 Summary of the questionnaire**

This sample of eight students all seemed to have positive opinions to furthering their education after their Youthreach programme. When this sample completed the questionnaire, they were currently in the middle of their QQI level 5 Business Studies programme and all expressed an interest to go to 3<sup>rd</sup> level colleges to do various courses. They stated that there were various obstacles in their way and in spite of this, they all still wanted to further their education.

### **4.4 Sample 2**

[Sample 2](#) was ten past students who had completed their QQI programme at Youthreach Blanchardstown. The questionnaire, *Youthreach Past Students Survey* (appendix K) was e-mailed in January 2016. With this questionnaire it was necessary to focus on the individual's perceptions of college before, during and after they have completed their studies. In essence what the questionnaire was endeavouring to do was to capture what further/higher education experience meant to these students.

The initial questions were related to the student's age, gender, the year they left Youthreach, the course title they were looking at applying for and the college location for that course.

#### 4.4.1 Background to student's [sample 2](#)

Code	Gender	Age	Year left Youthreach	College	Course
<a href="#">Student 9</a>	Female	20	2013	Inchicore College of Further Education	Dance Studies NFQ level 5
<a href="#">Student 10</a>	Female	21	2015	Coliaste Dhulaigh	Theatre Studies NFQ level 5
<a href="#">Student 11</a>	Female	22	2012	Crumlin College	Makeup for fashion and media NFQ level 5
<a href="#">Student 12</a>	Male	26	2011	ITB	Business and Computers NFQ level 8
<a href="#">Student 13</a>	Male	27	2011	Maynooth	Community Studies NFQ level 8
<a href="#">Student 14</a>	Female	23	2014	ITB	Early Childhood Care NFQ level 8
<a href="#">Student 15</a>	Female	25	2011	DCU	BSc Education and Training NFQ level 8
<a href="#">Student 16</a>	Female	27	2012	FÁS	Microsoft Certified Engineer/Administrator
<a href="#">Student 17</a>	Female	25	2011	Liberties College	Education Youth NFQ level 8
<a href="#">Student 18</a>	Female	27	2010	DCU	BSc Education and Training NFQ level 8

Table 14: Background to student's [sample 2](#).

This sample was made up of 80% females and 20% male and age ranged from 20 to 27.

This sample of students had all left Youthreach Blanchardstown between 2010 and 2015.

The students attended various colleges including ITB, National University of Ireland (Maynooth) and DCU, other students had progressed to PLC's including Inchicore College of Further Education, Colaiste Dhulaigh, Crumlin College and Liberties College and one student progressed to a FÁS (now PLC/SOLAS) course.

The questionnaire asked students how long after Youthreach did they start college. Most (70%) of these students went to college within 6 months of completing their Youthreach programme. 10% of students between 6 and 12 months of leaving Youthreach and 20% of the students progressed to further education within a two-year period of finishing their Youthreach programme. See figure 14.

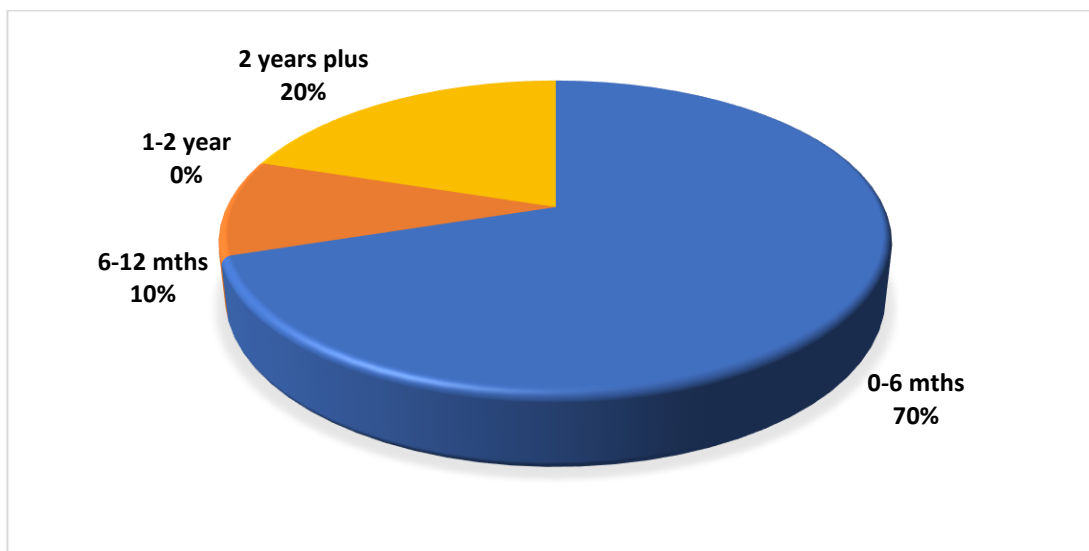


Figure 14: How long after Youthreach did you start college?

#### 4.4.2 The college experience

Students were asked why they chose their respective course. The majority (50%) stated that they had an interest and a passion in the chosen subject matter of their course. 40% stated it was connected to the career they wanted to pursue and 10% mentioned that the key worker (SENI programme) in Youthreach supported/directed them in deciding what course to pursue.

*“I felt I needed this to progress into further fields in any business, knowing about computers are essential in any workplace nowadays.” (student 4)*

*“I chose this course as I am a strong singer and my key worker in Youthreach helped me figure out what course would be best for me as I had fears of not enjoying my course dropping out of college when applying.” (student 9)*

The questionnaire asked students about their experience of college and did Youthreach prepare them for college?

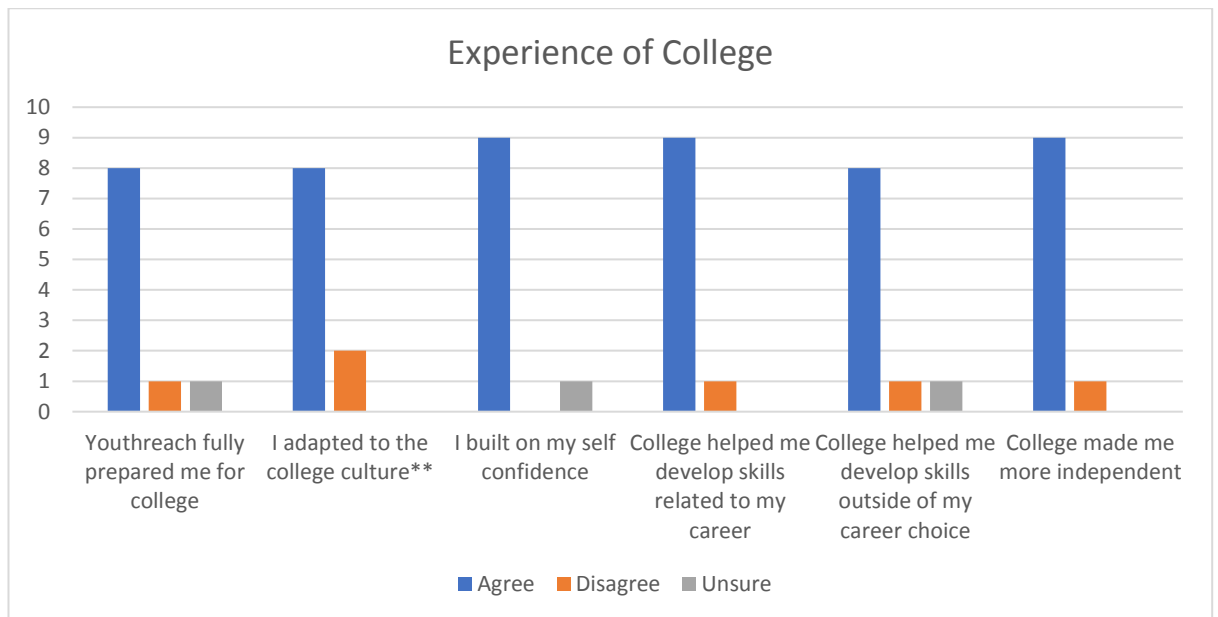


Figure 15: Experience of college [sample 2](#)

Full Question\*\*I adapted to the college culture (workload, personal responsibility, challenges, mindset, career focused etc.)

The majority (80%) felt that their time in Youthreach prepared them fully for college, whereas 10% disagreed and 10% were unsure. 80% stated that they adapted to the college culture (workload, personal responsibility, challenges, mindset and career focus), while 20% disagreed.

Students from this sample felt that their college experience had improved certain personal characteristics. 90% of students stated that they built on their self-confidence in college, however 10% were unsure. The college experience of developing skills related to their career, 90% agreed and 10% disagreed. Regarding the development of skills outside of the students career choice, 80% agreed, 10% disagreed and 10% were unsure. 90% stated that the college experience made them more independent whilst 10% disagreed.

#### 4.4.3 Concerns of starting college

The majority of the students (70%) had concerns about starting college and 30% stated they had no concerns starting college. Of the 70% that expressed concerns regarding starting college, 30% of the students worried about the workload of college. 10%

expressed would it be more difficult than Youthreach and the same percentage (10%) mentioned about making new friends as their concern. 10% stated they had concerns about going into a new environment. 10% specified that due to fact of being a single parent and working part-time could they maintain a balance.

*“Yes, I was concerned it would be much more difficult than Youthreach, I was worried I wouldn’t be able for the workload. I even worried I wasn’t intelligent enough at times. I feared I wouldn’t make any friends.” (student 9)*

*“Am I good enough for college, Will I learn? Will I fall back? Is it too tough for me? Am I ready for the workload and assignments, Am I sure I want to be in college, Did I choose the right course.” (student 12)*

#### 4.4.4 Route when applying for college

This sample of students took various routes when applying for further/higher education (figure 16). 30% applied through the CAO and another 30% directly with the college/course provider. 20% of students applied as mature students and 10% through a VTOS programme. None of these students applied through an Access programme for college.

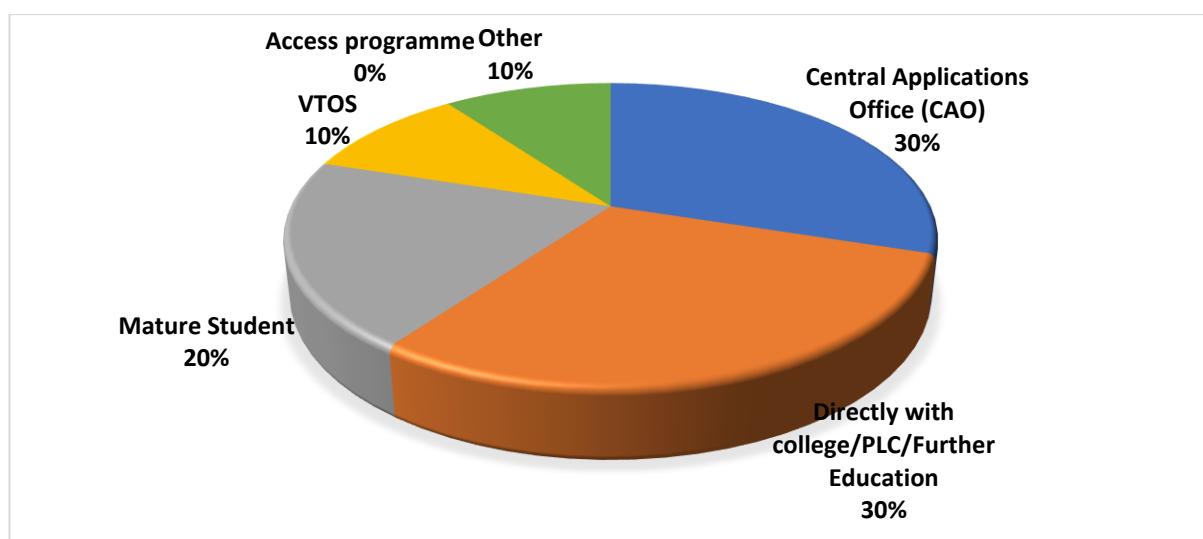


Figure 16: The route taking when applying for college

A question was composed to find out what methods students used to fund their time in college, the students could answer more than once. 50% of the students received a grant

to help them through their time in college and 40% of students had to do part-time work, 10% were currently employed. 10% of students had to get a financial loan for college, whilst another 20% received support from family to help them in furthering their education. 10% had saved money from their time in Youthreach and 10% funded college by way of the BTEA grant.

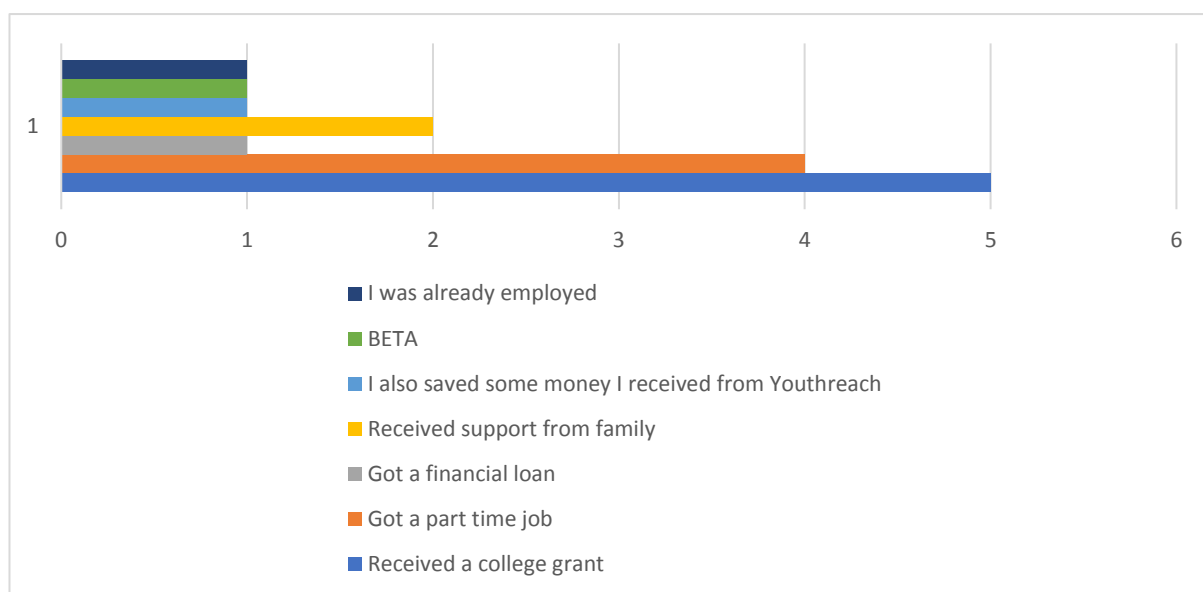


Figure 17: How did you fund your time in college? (more than one answer allowed)

#### 4.4.5 Youthreach support with college

Students were asked about their time in Youthreach and by participating in the programme, did it benefit them going to college. The majority of students (90%) felt the support and direction shown by Youthreach staff really helped them for their college experience. 10% said No.

*“It helped me become more independent and survive off my own earnings. I’ve grown in confidence and found out who I was as a person because of all the help and people in Youthreach. I learned how to work on my own and how to rely on myself and not others all the time while also learning to be a leader in groups. I’ve also learned to say yes I can rather no I can’t, and I won’t even try.” (student 9)*

*“It definitely gained my confidence in my intellectual ability but mainly socially, I speak up more now and the continuous assessments structure is the same in college and I learned essay formats in Youthreach too and referencing.” (student 14)*



Students identified the level of support afforded to them in Youthreach as being totally different to the support available in college. 50% mentioned that the support around assignments in Youthreach helped them in the college environment. Students identified that in college very little support was given, especially around the area of assignments, with little or no insights or explanation given around how to carry out assignments. Some students suggested that no support was given from college teachers and any requests for support were basically ignored. 10% of students reported being put down by college teachers and that no care was shown about the student's well-being.

*"In Youthreach I learned how to properly write assignments & essays, do research and work in a team, all of which gave me a huge advantage when it came to college work. Also, as I had been studying SNA in Youthreach, I had already done some childcare subjects which helped me greatly in understanding the contents of my course."* (student 17)

#### **4.4.6 College versus Youthreach experience**

70% of this sample mentioned that the support and teaching were preferred in Youthreach compared to their college experience. 30% of the same sample considered that very little support was given in college.

*"I prefer Youthreach over college as the teachers are better at explaining the briefs and also seemed to have more interest in the students' lives which can affect your learning rather than just teaching the lesson whether a student is interested or not. In Youthreach you do a lot of personal development and teachers make sure you know what your doing so you have a better chance of succeeding."* (student 10).

*"Different approach to teaching and communicating. Sometimes if felt like you weren't supported, even coming to understanding and explaining an assignment. When you're out sick project material wasn't kept for you. You had to find work from someone else."* (student 11)

Students were asked about their reasons for considering progressing from Youthreach to college. Table 15 represents their reasons. (question allowed for more than one answer)

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My Youthreach experience encouraged me to further my education	8 students responded to this question
I was always planning to go to 3 <sup>rd</sup> level education whether I went to Youthreach or not	4 students responded to this question
My family encouraged me to progress to 3 <sup>rd</sup> level education	1 student responded to this question

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Table 15: Reasons to progress from Youthreach to college (answer more than once).

#### 4.4.7 College expectations

The students were asked about their college expectations before they started their college course. The student's college expectations differed quite vastly, some had very little expectations (20%) and did not really expect much. Other students (20%) expected college to be a lot harder/more challenging than Youthreach and to have a heavy workload but with support given from tutors. 20% expected to be treated like adults and 30% of students expected to have more freedom than Youthreach and that college would bring new opportunities. 10% mentioned that they expected to hate every minute of college.

*"I expected college to be much harder and much more challenging. I expected it to be like a community like Youthreach was. I expected countless hours of work to be given (which was true). I expected it to be fun and exciting bringing new opportunities my way."* (student 9)

Students were asked if college lived up to these expectations. 50% mentioned that college did live up to these expectations whereas 40% did not. 10% stated both Yes and No, stating that they course happened so quick that they did not get time to think about it.

*"It wasn't a community like Youthreach it didn't have that constantly friendly happy environment I was hoping for."* (student 9)

*"In the most part yes. I feel I learnt everything I needed to know to prepare for starting in a work environment and was happy with my college experience."* (student 17)

Figure 18 depicts if the students felt overwhelmed by the workload in college. Most of the students (60%) felt overwhelmed by the workload in college while the other students (40%) did not feel overwhelmed.

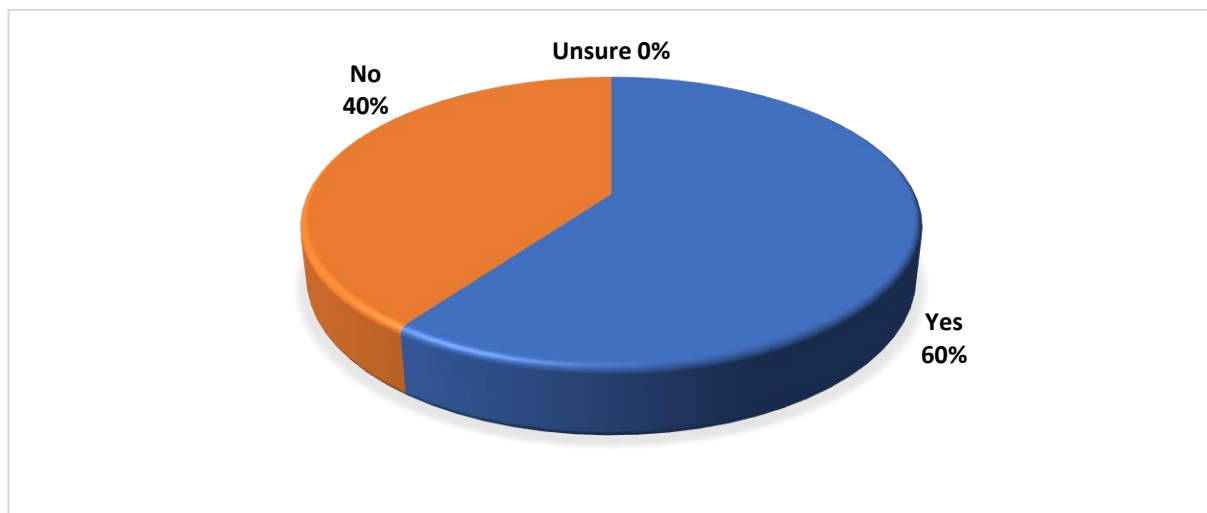


Figure 18: Did you feel overwhelmed by the workload in college?

#### 4.4.8 Advice and support for college

Students were asked what advice you would give a student starting in college. The key advice was to be aware of the workload and not get overwhelmed (40%) and to be mindful of time to get work completed/starting assignments (40%). 20% stated that asking for help/support if not sure of something was very important.

*“To take everything day by day don't let yourself get overwhelmed of what the tutors expect for you and make sure you ask questions no matter how stupid you anything they are. I also advise students to take advantage of any opportunities that come your way. And most of all have confidence in yourself and your abilities.” (student 10)*

*“Make sure you keep on top of your assignments and if you don't understand something make sure you ask and ask again.” (students 11)*

#### 4.4.9 What could Youthreach improve to aid the transition to college?

The final question asked students what could Youthreach improve on to have helped them in their transition from Youthreach to college. The majority of the students (80%) stated that Youthreach could do nothing more preparing them for their transition to college. 10% mentioned the need to give more support around research methods for assignments and

10% said to prepare students for the hard work ahead and to prepare them to be able to stand on their own two feet in college.

*“Just prepare people for hard work and to stand on their own feet and not give up when times get tough, life already is hard, and you need to learn that, fast, you are out for yourself and no one else, ask for help when need be, but make sure it's people you trust. College is only the start, after college that's when life kicks in, but as long as you have a degree behind you, that'll make the journey a little bit easier.” (student 12)*

#### Vignette of student – sample 2

**Student 14** started in Youthreach in 2012 in a QQI level 4 programme and excelled throughout and received her full QQI level 4 in 2014. She progressed to a Business Studies QQI level 5 and again excelled in this course (all distinctions) and received her full QQI level 5 certification.

*(Youthreach) “definitely gained my confidence in my intellectual ability but mainly socially, I speak up more now and the continuous assessments structure is the same in college and I learned essay formats in Youthreach too and referencing.”*

During her level 5 programme she carried out work experience in the local PCWorld/Curry’s store. PCWorld/Curry’s offered her part time work during her time in Youthreach and subsequently offered her full-time work on completion of her Youthreach course. She worked in PCWorld/Curry’s for a few years and then had a baby before starting an Early Childhood Care & Education degree in ITB. She still works part time in Curry’s whilst completing her degree.

*“The teachers in Youthreach were so nice and I was afraid lecturers wouldn't be, plus there are so many people in college, it's not as personal.”*

*(in college). “When you get a brief, start the assignment straight away don't leave it till last minute, go to all the lectures and make friends.”*

Table 16: Vignette of student [sample 2](#).

#### Vignette of student – sample 2a

**Student 17** started in Youthreach in 2008 and completed both a FETAC (QQI) Business Studies and a Special Needs Assistant course. She left Youthreach in 2010 and went to Liberties College in Dublin to do a Montessori and Childcare course.

*“In Youthreach I learned how to properly write assignments & essays, do research and work in a team, all of which gave me a huge advantage when it came to college work. Also, as I had been studying SNA in Youthreach, I had already done some childcare subjects which helped me greatly in understanding the contents of my course.”*

She felt the staff of Youthreach helped her during her time there and they gave her the confidence and skills to progress and adapt to the college environment.

*“In my personal experience, the staff at Youthreach did everything they could to prepare me for this transition. They encouraged me to apply and helped me with every aspect of my transition from preparing for an entrance interview to ensuring I was ready to move on to further education.”*

Table 17: Vignette of student [sample 2a](#).

#### 4.5 Summary

These ten students have all successfully progressed from the Youthreach programme to further/higher education, some had used the PLC route and others directly to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. Most went directly onto further education when they finished their Youthreach programme, whilst others took a period out of education but eventually progressed in their education. They all found elements of their further/higher education experience very different, especially to their Youthreach experience, but they all seem to have positive words for certain aspects of their college experience.

#### 4.6 Sample 3

**Sample 3** is four past students who left Youthreach Blanchardstown with a full QQI qualification but did not progress to further education after the programme. This element of the research took the form of semi-structured interviews.

#### 4.6.1 Background to student's sample 3.

Code	Gender	Youthreach Qualification	Year finished Youthreach
Student 19	Female	QQI Level 4 & 5	2014
Student 20	Male	QQI Level 4	2015
Student 21	Male	QQI Level 4	2017
Student 22	Female	QQI Level 5	2017

Table 18: Background to student's sample 3.

The gender of the sample was two males and two females, and all had completed their Youthreach programme between 2014 and 2017. Of these students, 50% had completed a QQI level 4 qualification, 25% completed a QQI level 5 General Learning qualification. The other 25% received both a QQI level 4 and level 5 qualification as they had been in Youthreach for a three-year period and progressed between QQI levels.

#### 4.6.2 Why did you go to Youthreach?

The students were asked why did they go to Youthreach? 50% of the students attended Youthreach due to not wanting to be in mainstream school anymore. 25% went to Youthreach because they needed to get a qualification as they had no education qualifications due to leaving school early. 25% of the students were kicked out of school and stated after leaving school they felt Youthreach could be good opportunity to get a job when successful in the programme. Of the students interviewed 75% had family that had attended Youthreach before and decided as one student stated to "give it a go really."

*"Went to Youthreach because I didn't want to be in school anymore, so I heard about Youthreach from a family member and just decided to give it a go really."* (student 19 interview 0:13)

*"I was kicked out of school, but did not mind kicked out cause when I came to Youthreach then it was a lot better anyway, the teachers here helped more than they would in normal school, so it was a lot better."* (student 21 interview 0:13)

#### **4.6.3 Youthreach versus mainstream school**

Students were asked about what they felt was the difference between their Youthreach and mainstream education experience. Students had various opinions on their mainstream education and why they came to Youthreach. 100% of the students mentioned that the teachers being the main difference. 50% of this percentage emphasised the teachers were easier to deal and talk to and the same amount (50%) mentioning that Youthreach teachers gave time to students and you felt treated like an adult instead of a child.

25% of the students mentioned the method of continuous assessment throughout the QQI was a key aspect as they felt that by doing the assessment as you go along and not at the end of the year improved their retention of the topic and helped improve their overall results. 25% mentioned there was no career guidance in mainstream education whereas in Youthreach students had access to career guidance.

*“the style of learning really suited me and doing all the work doing as the course went on suited me rather than doing an exam at the end and also I found like the teachers really easy to deal with and people are very easy to talk too.” (student 22 interview 0:44)*

*“In mainstream school really, the teacher would not have time for every student but in Youthreach the teacher would get around to every student if they need it, so it is more helpful in a way and better, I think for the student as well.” (student 21 interview 1.14)*

#### **4.6.4 After completing Youthreach**

Students were asked why did you not progress to further education after completing their Youthreach programme? 25% needed to work and earn so could not afford to go to college, 50% mentioned they had no interest in college and 25% wanted to take a year away from education.

*“No interest in going to college after leaving school. After Youthreach it didn’t change a lot.” (student 22 interview 2:16)*

Students were then asked what they did after finishing the Youthreach programme?

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Applied for college but not eligible for grant as both parents worked and earned too much money. Then looked for a job. (student 19)

Worked in three different jobs (student 20)

Travelled to Spain and then the rest of Europe (student 21)

Looked for suitable work (student 22)

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Table 19: What did you do after Youthreach?

*“I wanted to take a year off, because I’ve been doing work nearly my whole life in school. Then, when I wasn’t in mainstream school anymore, I was in my last year, and then when I came to Youthreach, I had to do two more years. It was nice to take a break.” (student 21 interview 2:19)*

#### **4.6.5 Return to education in the future**

Students were asked if they would look at going to further education in the near future?

100% of the students expressed an interest, 50% stated that they would leave it for a few years and 25% of that percentage, until they were classified as a mature student.

75% of the students mentioned that if they did progress to further education, the course they would wish to pursue would be sports orientated. 25% of the students were unsure what course they would like to do but stated they would like to get a degree.

#### **4.6.6 What would you change about your education?**

Students were asked, what would you change about their education? 75% mentioned that they would not really change anything, 25% mentioned they would have studied for exams when in school

*“I probably would have went back to college... got me qualification for that, by now I would be qualified and, in a job working.” (student 19 interview 4:40)*

*“Might have actually studied for exams when I was actually in school.” (student 22 interview 3:10)*



### Vignette of student - sample 3

**Student 21** started in Youthreach in 2015, he completed his QQI level 4 in General Learning in 2017. He enjoyed his time in Youthreach.

*“I met a lot of new people from all the other classes, and then everyone really became friends. There was no one was left out from anything. I enjoyed having a laugh with all the teachers, as well as the students.”*

On completion he decided that he did not wish to progress in his education and that he wanted to go travelling as he felt that he had enough of education. He travelled to Spain and other parts of Europe.

*“I wanted qualifications to get myself a good job. Afterward, to do things like go to other countries and travelling, then come back and then get my Level 5 done, do my PLC, and then go on further then from that.”*

He returned to Ireland after travelling and is currently looking for an apprenticeship.

Table 20: Vignette of student [sample 3](#).

## 4.7 Summary

All these students interviewed appreciated their time in Youthreach, but due to economic reasons, lack of interest and travelling these seemed to be the main reason that they did not wish to progress to further education. Retrospectively, they all stated that they wanted to return to education at a later stage in their lives. They all praised Youthreach and the teachers and highly recommended the programme for other early school leavers. The students all seemed to highlight the value of Youthreach and that it was second to none.

## 4.8 Sample 1 - the progression (6 months after leaving Youthreach)

**Sample 1** (eight students) had completed their Youthreach programme and had left Youthreach in July 2016. This questionnaire *Youthreach students part b* (appendix L) was to view their status after completing the Youthreach programme. All eight students had completed the questionnaire *Reasons for applying for college* (appendix J) during their time in Youthreach and all expressed an interest in progressing to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. This current status questionnaire was e-mailed in January 2017. This gave these eight

students approximately six months to have progressed on from Youthreach and the data was to provide an insight of what led them to their current situation. A total of seven questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire (sample 1-part b) was broken into two sections. When answering questions in section 1 and if students state they are in further education, this will lead to questions related to status of progressing to further education in the section 2. When answering questions in section 1 and if students state they are in employment, unemployment or actively seeking work this will lead to questions related to progressing to employment, unemployment, actively seeking work in section 3. See figure 19 for questionnaire format/layout.

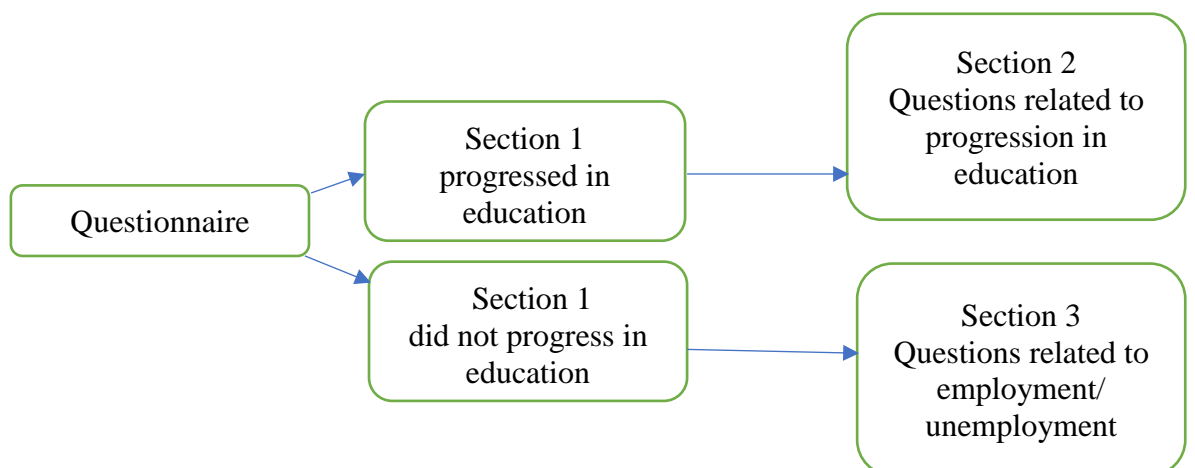


Figure 19: Questionnaire format/layout, progression to education/not to education

#### 4.8.1 Student's background **sample 1-part b**

Code	Did you obtain a full QQI	Current status
Student 23	Yes	FET
Student 24	Yes	FET
Student 25	Yes	Unemployed
Student 26	Yes	Unemployed
Student 27	Yes	Part time work
Student 28	Yes	Full time work
Student 29	Yes	Full time work

Table 21: Students background **sample 1**, part b

The students had all finished their Youthreach programme and all were successful in completing their full QQI level 5 programme in Youthreach Blanchardstown in 2016. The status of the students at the time of the questionnaire was 28.5% in FET, 28.5% unemployed and 42.8% in full/part-time work.

The following data relates to the students that emphasised in section 1 that they did not progress in their education after Youthreach.

#### Section 2 Moving onto Employment/other

#### 4.8.2. Employment after Youthreach

Of the students that did not progress to further education, 40% were unemployed and 60% were in employment. From the 60% of the students that stated employment, 40% of these students were working in the catering industry and 20% working in administration support.

Students were asked why they did not go onto further education after Youthreach. 60% of the student sample stated that they wanted to work and earn money. 20% stated that

they did not have confidence/motivation to progress in their education and 20% mentioned that the course they wanted to do, did not start until the following September.

A question was penned asking would they like to ever go back to further their education? and if they did go back to education what course would they like to do? 80% would eventually like to go back further education with 20% going back if circumstances allowed, the courses indicated if they were ever likely to go back to education were,

- Foundation Certificate in Marketing (level 6).
- Psychology Studies or Veterinary Practice (level 8.)
- Technology (Level 8).
- Business and Language (level 8).
- Nursing (level 8).

As mentioned, 100% of these students had not gone onto further education at this time. The majority (80%) felt that their time in Youthreach was beneficial to them. It gave them numerous coping skills, increased confidence and knowledge, better able to deal with people and conflict and that the modules they completed within the programme benefited them. 20% of the students felt that due to their current status Youthreach had not prepared them for this current situation as stated below,

*“Youthreach prepared me for numerous situations sadly this was not one of them. I am currently unemployed claiming job seekers benefit with no motivation to get a job. But if I was to set my mind on getting a job the skills and attributes I learned whilst attending Youthreach would definitely have prepared me for actively seeking work.” (student 26)*

#### **4.8.3 Did Youthreach impart enough information for progression?**

During their time in Youthreach, all the students (100%), stated they were given enough information to make informed choices about progressing to work/seeking work or to further education before they had finish their programme. 80% of the students felt the career guidance support and the SENI mentoring programme was the best source of

information in Youthreach to help them look at progressing. 20% stated their previous school as best source of information.

*“Career guidance and research with my mentor.” (student 27)*

*“The guidance team and my mentor.” (student 29)*

#### 4.8.4 Returning to college in the future

Students were asked about if they eventually decided to return to college (at a later stage) to rank the statements (see figure 20).on a scale of 1-3 with, 3 being very important, 2 important and 1 not important.

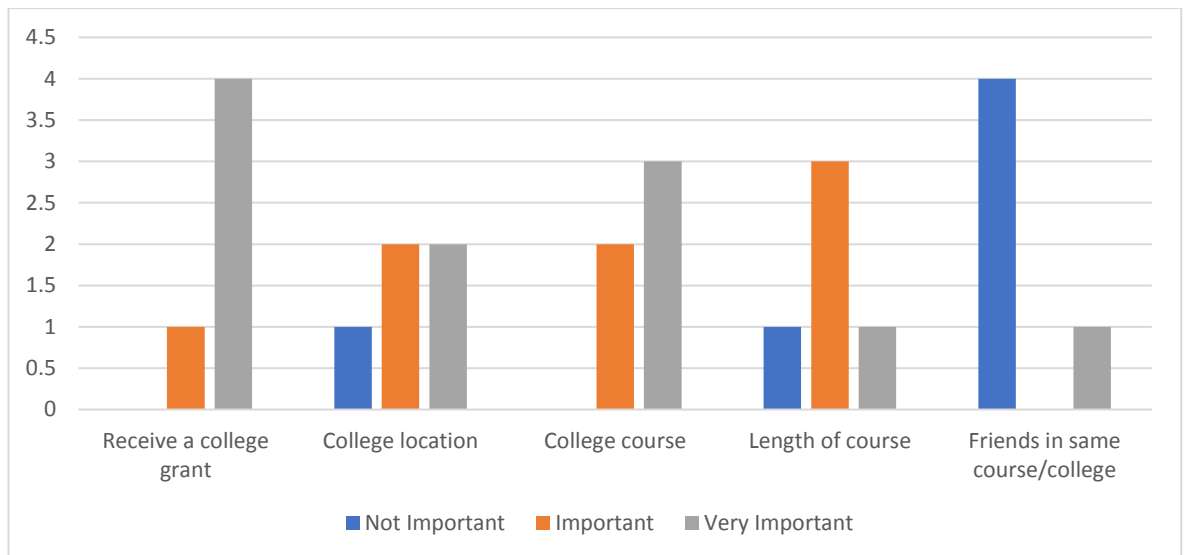


Figure 20: If you eventually return to education college in the future.

80% of the students considered that receiving a college grant was very important whereas 20% considered it important. On the location of the college, 40% stated that this was very important with the same percentage (40%) considering it important, 20% stated this was not important. 60% specified that the college course was very important for them and 40% stated it important. Regarding the length of the course, 60% considered this important whilst 20% considered it very important and the same percentage (20%) stated not important. Students were asked about having friends in the same course/college and 80% stated that this was not important and 20% that it was very important.

Students were asked if they did return to further education, to rank the following, Finance, Home Life/Security, Peers/Friends and Family as very important, important or not important for them to make that return to education. (Figure 21).

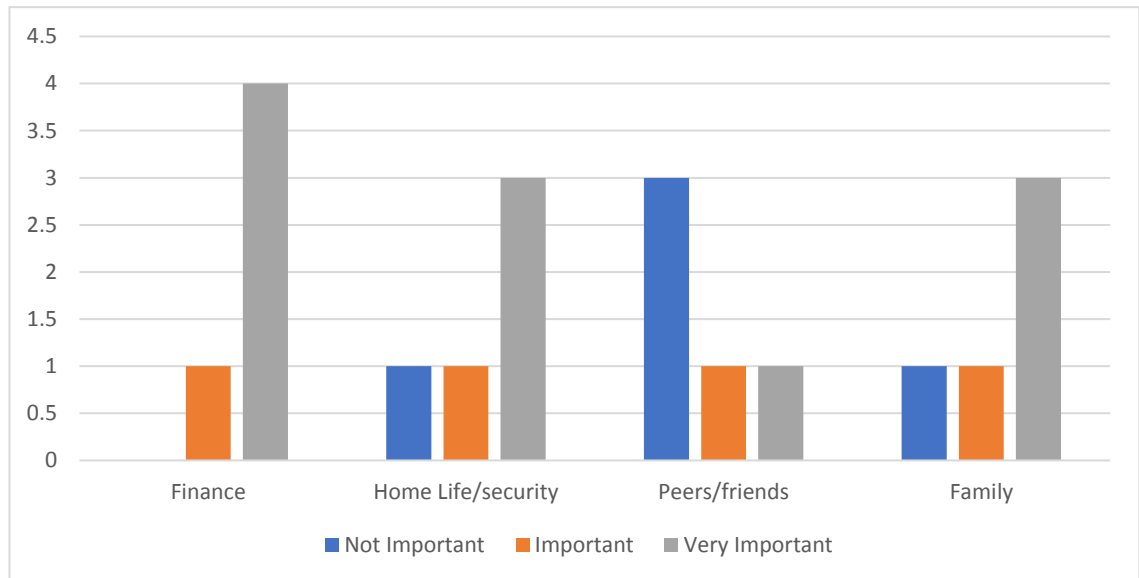


Figure 21: Ranking of important aspects if you return to education.

80% of the students stated that finance was very important whilst 20% stated it was important. 60% considered that their home life/security was very important to return whereas 20% considered it important and 20% considered it not important. When looking at peers/friends to make that return to education, 60% specified it as not important, whereas 20% stated it was important and 20% very important. Related to their family and if that was an aspect for returning to education, 60% considered it very important, 20% important and 20% not important.

## Vignette of student- **sample 1**-part b

**Student 26** started in Youthreach in 2012 after he left mainstream school, he had numerous issues including substance misuse and anger management issues.

*“My mother was tired of having to go up to the school when I got into trouble with staff in the school, so she made me leave to avoid getting kicked out as it would have looked bad on my record for education.”*

He completed his two-year QQI level 4 programme and progressed to a QQI level 5 course and completed a QQI Business Studies and QQI General Learning courses with mainly distinctions and merits. He always expressed an interest in going to 3<sup>rd</sup> level and looked at a Psychology Care course in ITB but opted not to go in the end as he felt that he was in education too long and needed a break.

*“I found the best place to actually plan out how I was going to progress was in mentoring sessions, even though I did not go onto further education or even to work I found that the mentoring program was the best way to plan my progression.”*

He is currently unemployed.

*“Youthreach prepared me for numerous situations sadly this was not one of them. I am currently unemployed claiming job seekers benefit with no motivation to get a job.”*

Table 22: Vignette of student **sample 1**. Part b

The following data relates to the students from **sample 1** that emphasised in section 1 that they did progress in their education after finishing in Youthreach.

### **4.9 Progressing to further/higher education **sample 1****

#### Section 3 Moving onto Further Education

Of the total amount of students from **sample 1** only 28.5% of these students progressed to further/higher education, of this percentage 50% progressed to Dunboyne College of Further Education to complete a QQI level 5 in Early Childhood Care and Education. The other 50% to study a bachelor’s degree level 8 in International Business & Languages (Spanish) in the Dublin Institute of Technology.

Students were asked to rate their experience of college so far (this would be 5-6 months into the course.). They were to rate the statements as Agree, Disagree and Unsure (Figure 22).

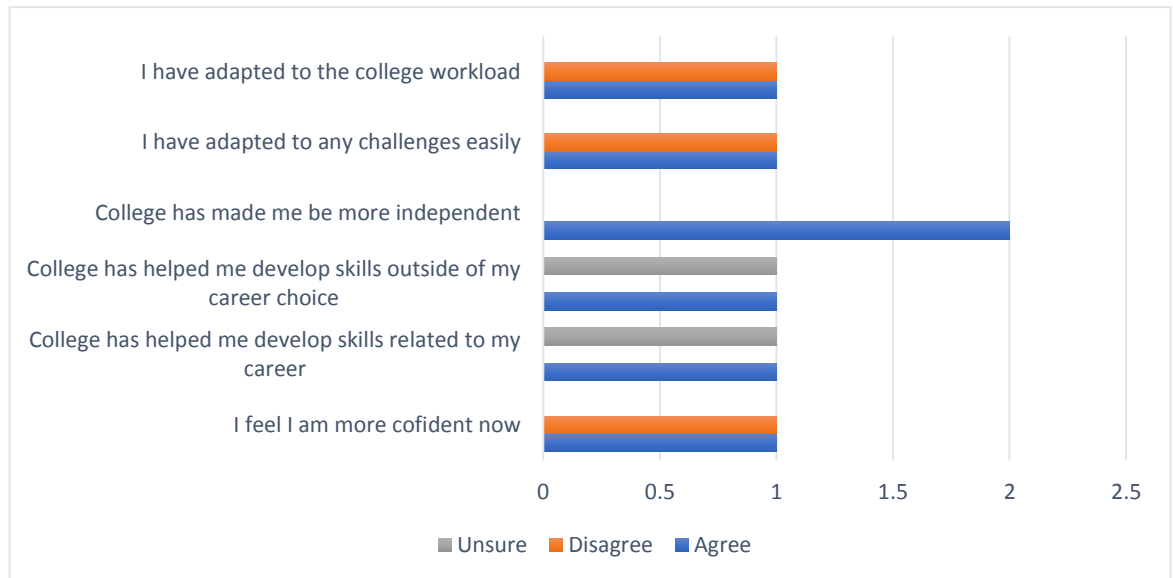


Figure 22: Rate your experience of college so far -sample 1

50% specified that they agreed they had adapted to the college workload, whereas 50% disagreed. The same percentage (50%) stated that they agreed and 50% disagreed, when asked if they adapted to any challenges easily in college. When asked if college made them more independent, 100% agreed with this statement.

50% of the students agreed that college had helped them develop skills outside of their career choice whereas 50% stated that they were unsure. When asked about their position, that college helped them develop skills related to their career, 50% agreed and 50% were unsure. 50% feel more confident from their experience of college so far whereas 50% disagreed.

#### 4.9.1 Did Youthreach prepare you for college?

Students were asked did they feel their time in Youthreach prepared them for college?

50% felt that Youthreach has prepared them for the college experience, whereas 50%



stated not fully and mentioned for Youthreach to prepare students for the stress of college.

*“Not fully, I wish Youthreach would prepare you more to cope with fast pace and high levels of stress.” (student 24)*

100% of the students felt that Youthreach supported them with information and guidance that they needed to help them choose their college course. They also mentioned the support with applying for college, 50% of the students applied through the CAO for college and 50% applied directly with the college. 100% of the students has no difficulties applying for grants/funding with the support. 50% of the students supplemented their grant with a part-time job.

#### **4.9.2 Youthreach versus college**

Students were asked about their experience of Youthreach compare to college. 50% of the students expressed the fast pace and the workload of college and the other 50% expressed the lack of support in college compared to Youthreach.

*“College is different from Youthreach as they don’t offer as much support as Youthreach, college also just give you a brief to go home and do the work load and final.” (student 23)*

*“Extremely fast pace! More exams! More freedom but a lot more responsibilities.” (student 24)*

#### **4.9.3 Expectations of college**

Students were asked about their expectations of college and did it live up to these expectations. 100% of the students expected it to be a similar environment to Youthreach. 50% stated that they thought they would get more support. 50% stated that they knew college would be a lot harder.

*“As the tutors are not very helpful or support when needed, and the people of the classrooms are rarely the same.” (student 23)*

*“I was excited! I thought that it will be similar to Youthreach, yes, I knew it will be harder, but college is a lot harder.” (student 24)*

Regarding feeling overwhelmed by the college workload, 50% of the students stated that they felt overwhelmed by the college workload, and 50% did not feel overwhelmed.

#### **4.9.4 Advice for students starting college.**

Students were asked, what advice would you give to a student starting college? Getting mentally prepared was an aspect for 50%, the other 50% stated to stay on top of assignments.

*“To be well prepared, also to be fully sure that this is the course they want to do and that this is the career they want to be in for life. I would also suggest they do the assignment when they are giving out first as they can pile up.” (student 23)*

*“My advice for them is to live a healthy life style! most importantly to have a strong mental health, you need to be ready for it mentally before you start, also to be very focused.” (student 24)*

#### **4.9.5 What could Youthreach do to help in the transition from Youthreach to education?**

The question asked the students what could Youthreach improve to have helped them in their transition from Youthreach to college? 50% stated that Youthreach did enough whereas 50% stated that possibly Youthreach could look at preparing for college mentally.

*“Nothing, as they already made sure I was aware of what college was going to be like, and the differences of Youthreach to college.” (student 23)*

*“It is hard for me to tell, but maybe try and motivate students somehow, so they could be strong mentally before they go to third level education. It is easy enough to get a mental break down when you trying to catch up with studies and work.” (student 24)*

#### **4.10 Summary**

All of this sample (sample 1) had initially expressed an interest in going to college during their time in Youthreach, but not all ended up going in that direction. Aspects developed in their life and changed during their time in and after Youthreach. For some the lure of employment and a wage made them progress towards employment. A particular concern

related to the students who were unemployed six months after completing Youthreach. In particular, there was one student that highlighted they had little motivation to move on from their current status. Of the students that had gone on in their education, they seemed to be enjoying the experience although one was finding the experience, tough, the workload time consuming and stressful. On a positive note, all the students that did not progress to further/higher education after completing the Youthreach programme, mentioned that they did wish to return to education in the near future.

## Chapter 5 Discussion of research findings

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the results from the findings as outlined in chapter 4 and related to the literature reviewed in chapter 2, which is interlinked with existing knowledge of the subject. The discussion of the findings is presented under the following headings,

- Students experience of mainstream education compared to the Youthreach programme (5.2).
- Students experience of the 3<sup>rd</sup> level experience/further education (5.3).
- Students not progressing to further education/gaining employment after the Youthreach programme (5.4).

The research set out to investigate Youthreach students and their experience of and progressing to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education, including their concerns and aspirations and to investigate the following, “A Youthreach graduate’s perspective on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level experience.” There is potential for overlap within the headings, but the discussion will try and avoid excess duplication. As Stake (1995) mentions ‘The more quantitative approach usually means including many repeated observation situations to get a representative coverage of the relationships for this particular case’ (p.63). Of the total number of students (21) for discussion from the research, the progression breakdown is as follows

Sample	Number of Students	3 <sup>rd</sup> level	PLC	Employment	Unemployment	Other
Sample 1	7	1	1	3	2	0
Sample 2	10	5	5	0	0	0
Sample 3	4	0	0	3	0	1*
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>

Table 23: Research progression breakdown.

\*student went travelling

## **5.2 Students experience of mainstream education compared to the Youthreach programme.**

All the students in this research completed their Youthreach programme and all expressed positive views towards the Youthreach programme. They all used the Youthreach programme in some way as their stepping stone to progress. The majority (75%) of the students from **sample 1** had completed upper secondary level education and do not fit into the category of early school leavers (what Youthreach was originally set up for), 25% of this sample did leave school early due to student/teacher relationships and family issues. This is in line with what Stokes (1996 and 2003), Bolt (1997) Eivers *et al.* (2000), NEPS (2017) and numerous others consider to be some of the issues regarding students leaving school early.

Students from **sample 1** and **sample 3**, had mixed opinions of mainstream education and most got through their education with little or no difficulties. Regarding Youthreach, students mentioned the friendliness and connection they had with teachers, the atmosphere created, and the support given albeit not what they experienced in mainstream education. These are similar to findings by Stokes (1996 and 2003), McHugh (2014) and NEPS (2017). **Student 19** pointed out the following,

*“I thought you were treated more like an adult in Youthreach than you were in school. In school they treated you more like a child.”* (**student 19**)

The indication of increased confidence from participating in Youthreach, the level of support, less stress (compared to mainstream education) was apparent throughout the data. These are also expressed by Byrne and Smyth (2010), McHugh (2014) in their findings.

### **5.2.1 Teaching environment**

Students considered the teaching approaches and styles in Youthreach more suitable for their learning needs compared to mainstream education. As far back as 1995 The White

Paper-Charting our Education Future and as recent as 2015 The Education & Training 2020 report, these documents looked at the learning styles and attitudes of teachers, as factors for the decision of students to leave school early, also agreed by Eivers *et al.* (2000) Stokes (2003) and NEPS (2017) and numerous others. As Knowles (1980) states,

people tend to feel more "adult" in an atmosphere that is friendly and informal, in which they are known by name and valued as unique individuals, rather than in the traditional school atmosphere of formality, semi anonymity, and status differentiation between teacher and student. (p.47).

Byrne and Smyth (2010) in their research, quote a Youthreach student and that she 'felt that the teaching approach used by the teachers in her school was not particularly effective now that she had experienced a different type of teaching approach at Youthreach'(p.79).

**Student 4** commented regarding their time in Youthreach,

*"The staff in Youthreach are not just teachers, are all down to earth and treat you like a human being and not just a number in their roll call. When I first joined Youthreach my first thought was, why didn't I come here earlier. I found it difficult to learn in mainstream school as the teachers never really wanted my opinion but where as in Youthreach my opinion is appreciated and valued."* (student 4)

**Student 4** (as did students in **sample 3**) maintained that in mainstream school their opinion was not appreciated, this could suggest a negative teacher/student relationship, this is similarity highlighted by Stokes (2003), Byrne and Smyth (2010), McHugh (2014) and the European Commission (2015), in relation to early school leavers, that the school environment and teacher/student relations are important factors to keep students in school and not leave school early.

*"The way each subject is thought is completely different to the way you are taught in secondary school and also the teachers are less strict"* (student 2)

### **5.2.2 Class sizes**

Students in **sample 3** considered the large class sides were a factor to their learning in mainstream school and that the smaller class sizes in Youthreach enabled them to learn more effectively.

*“You're in a smaller class, as well, which is a lot easier. There's not 30 people to deal with. There's only ten or eight or whatever. I found that much easier, too” (student 22)*

With small class sizes (as in Youthreach) the teachers get to know the names/personality of students quicker than in mainstream school and students related to this. Large class sizes can have a detrimental effect for some students, they get lost in the system, get know as a problem child, thrown to the back of the class, sent to the principal’s office. This is also in line with Byrne and Smyth (2010) and the European Commission (2010) who suggest that second chance schools need to be alternative schools rather than alternatives to school with: smaller in size, more teachers per pupil. Class size was also considered by Lally (2012) suggesting that ‘With ever-decreasing support in schools and ever-increasing class sizes, many young people fall through the cracks and are isolated in mainstream schools’(p.5). Table 24 looks at the comparison of the students from the interviews and the questionnaire from their experience of mainstream education and Youthreach.

Subject	Mainstream	Youthreach
Atmosphere/environment	Plain Stressed Little support Large classes	Enjoyable/Comfortable Less stress/pressure More support Smaller classes Connection with students Finance given
Teaching environment	Strict Treated like a child No opinion listened too  Hierarchical (teachers address as Mr/Miss) No repeating of information No time for students  Number on a roll call	Friendly Treated like an adult Opinions appreciated and valued Call teacher by first name  Go over information if required Get to every student if need be
Assessment strategy	End of year exams	Continuous assessment

Table 24: Comparative matrix of mainstream education versus Youthreach.

### **5.3 Students experience of the 3<sup>rd</sup> level experience/further education**

As mentioned in Chapter 2 (2.6) there is little research regarding Youthreach students progressing and participating in 3<sup>rd</sup> level education or further education. There are numerous reports on disadvantaged students going to further/higher education, OECD (2011a), McCoy (2014), National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) among others. This discussion element will interlink with the literature review aspects for disadvantaged students progressing in their education. McCoy and Byrne (2011) states that ‘the benefits of higher education participation to the individual and to society are well-established. However, in the Irish context much less is known about what shapes young people’s post-school choices and the decision to enrol in higher education’ (p.155).

#### **5.3.1 Applying for college**

Students took various routes when applying for college/university. While most engaged with the CAO and directly with the college (PLC), others applied through the VTOS/mature student route. Interestingly, no student applied through any Access programme. The HEAR and DARE access programmes are only for students who have completed the Leaving Certification (Hear 2017). As most Youthreach centres carry out QQI approved modules, students are unable to apply through this access route, some Youthreach centres facilitate the LCA programme, but students would still need to progress to a PLC course before moving into 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. As McCoy and Byrne (2011) point out ‘a small proportion of students (7% per annum) take the LCA, which offers a general prevocational type curriculum but does not offer direct access to higher education’ (p.145). So, in this regard, students who do not take the traditional education route of the Leaving Certification and completed a LCA or FET course instead are disadvantaged. The HEAR website (2017) points out that ‘The HEAR is a college and



university scheme that offers places on reduced points and extra college support to school leavers from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.’

The HEAR and DARE access programmes are for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and the majority of Youthreach students would fall into this category. However, this only applies if they have completed a Leaving Certificate and not a QQI qualification. The NFQ (Figure 4) shows that the Leaving Certification and a level 5 course are on equal par, but perhaps not in everyone’s eyes.

On a positive note, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015), recommends making the HEAR and DARE schemes available to the FET sector. This National plan also mentions at broadening entry routes into higher education and trying to improve college retention levels. It should also be noted here that research in an Irish context by McCoy *et al.* (2010a) suggests ‘that the groups faring least well in terms of higher education entry are not confined to those traditionally defined as disadvantaged, but span those from lower white-collar backgrounds and the sons/daughters of those in largely service sector occupations’ (p.142).

### **5.3.2 Concerns/worries about college**

Samples 1 and 2 had concerns regarding the workload in college and were they intelligent enough for college. Some mentioned the unfamiliar and new environment as considered by O’Brien (2009) and McCoy *et al.* (2014) and will they be able to fit in and make new friends.

*“I had fears of not liking college and dropping out. I also had fears of not being able for the workload but Youthreach prepared me for this. I had fears of not making friends as I know nobody when entering the college but the teachers in Youthreach helped me work on my confidence throughout the two years.” (student 10)*

This is in line with McCoy *et al.* (2014), they found from their research that,

Not knowing any of the students before enrolling in the course was found to be daunting for several young people, particularly for those from socio-

economically disadvantaged backgrounds perhaps with little experience of post-school and higher education in their family or among their peers. (p.142).

It should also be considered that peer pressure can have a positive effect on encouragement as well as negative. Cited in Healion (2013), Connor (2001) looked at having a contact person when attending college, and ‘mentions the importance of children who don’t know anyone in college having access to young people, mentors, who are in or have attended higher education’ (p.125).

Some students mentioned the fear of choosing the right course, the difficulty/not liking the course (a key point for students dropping out of college, HEA 2018), maybe not liking college and dropping out early, these are similar aspects considered by McCoy *et al.* (2014) when students encountered obstacles and difficulties in their post school transition.

### **5.3.3 Reasons to progress to college**

The majority of students (80%) who progressed to further/higher education stated that their Youthreach experience encouraged them to progress in their education, McHugh (2014) found this sentiment from her research, that the Youthreach experience encouraged students to progress in education, but also noted that the progression routes from Youthreach are limited. McCoy *et al.* (2014) refers to there being an increase in numbers going to higher education but in the same research they mention that there is under-representation from disadvantaged backgrounds. Whereas the HEA, report on the Higher Education System Performance 2014–2016 (2016), note that in spite of numbers been relatively low, there is a steady increase annually for students from socio-disadvantaged areas.

Figure 23 depicts students’ reasons as into why they wanted to progress in their education. Of the 100% of students from all the samples that progressed to further/higher education, 83.3% highlighted Youthreach as a reason that they progressed in their education and in

respect of lifelong learning, the remainder (16.7%) stated that they were always going to college. As stated in the Youthreach Operations Guidelines (2015) ‘Youthreach is intended as a key element of the Government's contribution to the achievement of a lifelong learning society’ (p.6). **Student 7** considers a reason they would like to go to college,

*“I believe that education is key to achieving the lifestyle I desire, I do not wish to be dependent on anyone, and higher-level education usually leads to better wages”.*

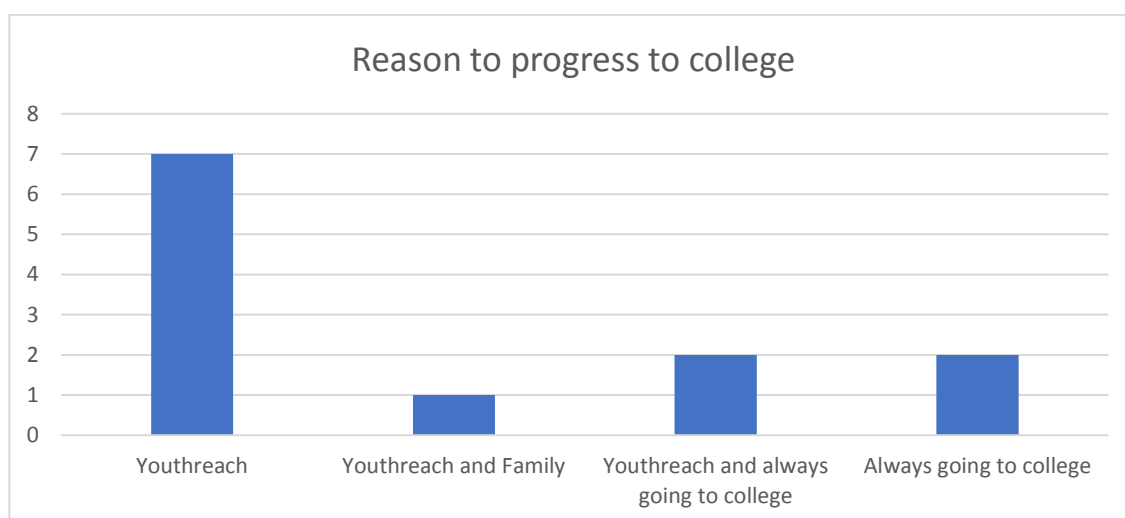


Figure 23: Reasons to progress to college.

This is expressed by Gordon (2013) when she states that by ‘completing the (Youthreach) programme in itself leads to a wide range of benefits for the early school leaver and increases their chances of progressing successfully to further education, training or employment’ (p.35). The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015) states ‘Access to higher education should be available to individuals independent of socio-economic disadvantage, gender, geographical location, disability or other circumstances’ (p.14).

### 5.3.4 Funding the college experience

Financial factors are a key issue for students from disadvantaged areas progressing to college, suggested by the HEA Consultation Paper (2014). Lynch (1999) looked at

students from working class backgrounds not having the money for the college experience. Students in [sample 1](#) stated the following when expressing an interest in progressing to college.

*“I would also make sure I would get a job as well, so I can fund the education.”*  
([student 2](#))

*“I will have to fund the course if I am ineligible for a grant and if this is the case a part time job is in order, this would be my main concern.”* ([student 4](#))

Of the students that progressed in their education, 60% of the students received a grant and 50% of had to get a part time job to fund their time in college. O’Brien *et al.* (2002), consider that students who are poor enough for the grant, are poor enough to survive. Finance was an aspect considered by McCoy *et al.* (2010b) and that students from lower social backgrounds are very dependent on the state grant, and in other research also by McCoy *et al.* (2010a) that students on the margin for the eligibility of the grant are among the lower participants in higher education in Ireland. McCoy *et al.* (2010b) also noted that a lack of information over grants, the declined value of the grant and the blurred view of how much (financially) college engagement will set students back was an issue.

20% of the students received financial support from family. There would be very little support from families of disadvantaged backgrounds compared to perhaps middle and upper-class families, which is in line with McCoy *et al.* (2014) who remarks that the majority of students in higher education are dependent on (at least some) family support. Financial constraint is the challenge for most students from disadvantaged areas looking at progressing to college, trying to juggle education with employment and maybe family/home issues. [Student 14](#) mentions that,

*“I was a single parent and working part time, so was afraid of the balance of all three”.*  
([student 14](#))

Aside from getting the grant students also need to be aware of the hidden costs of education, like transport to and from college, books, printing of material, college trips and even the social aspects related to college life. This issue is as McCoy and Byrne, (2011) state, ‘Furthermore, financial strain among more disadvantaged groups had implications for their opportunity to fully participate in college life, that is, to participate in the non-academic social and cultural dimensions of college life as well as the academic’ (p.154). Education policy makers need to look at the grants for students as highlighted by the OECD (2011a) and the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 (2015). The financial burden of going to college seems to be the most important aspects not just for Youthreach students but perhaps for the majority of students progressing to college. Recent numbers from the HEA for 2016 state that 46% of students work during term-time (Harmon and Erskine 2017). McCoy *et al.* (2014) considers that for students in their first year of college, finance was a major concern and was an implication to dropping out after year 1.

From [sample 1](#) of students that did not progress to college after their Youthreach programme. Figure 24 below, looks at what they consider to be very important, important or not important if they return to college in the future.

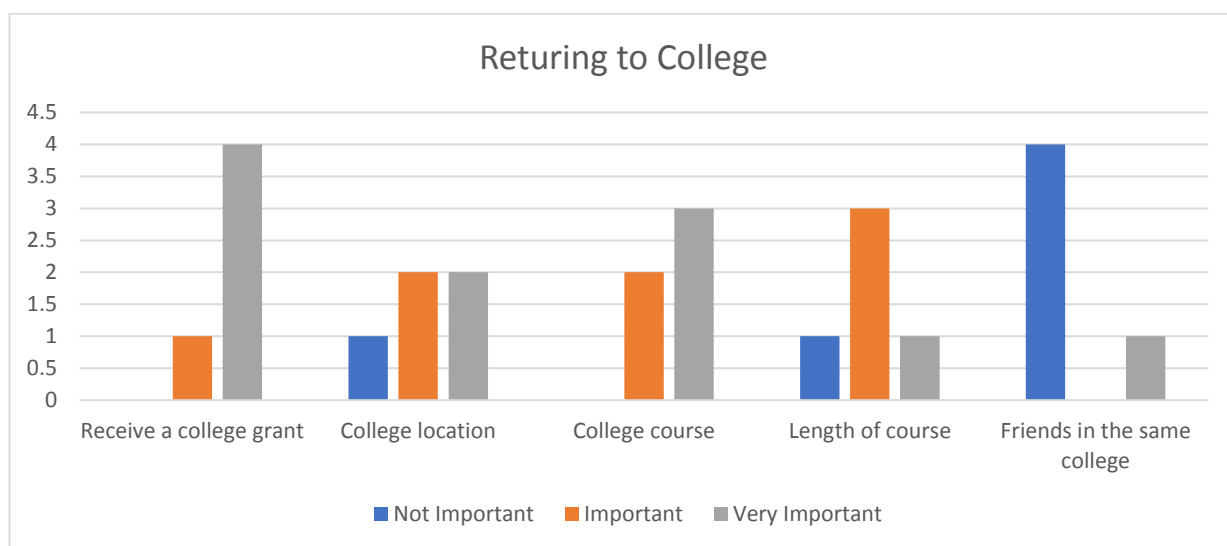


Figure 24: Aspects if you return to college.

The majority (80%) consider that getting a college grant was very important for their returning to education in the future. Interestingly it was not important for students to have friends in the same college/course. This could be due to the fact that not many of their immediate friends/family would have gone to college. This can be a norm for Youthreach students and is in alignment with McCoy *et al.* (2014) as they suggest students from disadvantaged areas may not have friends in further/higher education. Russell, Maitre *et al.* (2010) as cited in Healion (2013) consider that,

disadvantaged students do not believe in their ability is because members of their family or the community that they live in don't believe that these children will be able to make it to higher education. This is because there has been no history of previous generations of family members or other members of that community proceeding to college. (p.118)

This aspect could also be related to emotional support and also to the theory of social capital by not having that association with a network of people of a similar background to have support/relations/trust with. From the findings of McCoy *et al.* (2010b), McCoy *et al.* (2014) and the HEA (2014) they found that students from working class backgrounds worry about the cost of college and the affordability. In this regard do the benefits of college outweigh the fear factor, of the cost and having that burden each year of payments, transport, stationary, etc. over their heads? Is it easier just to find employment?

### **5.3.5 Youthreach support in progressing to college**

The students suggested that their Youthreach experience helped them in various ways, to apply, participation and achieve their qualification in further/higher education.

*“The staff at Youthreach did everything they could to prepare me for this transition. They encouraged me to apply and helped me with every aspect of my transition from preparing for an entrance interview to ensuring I was ready to move on to further education” (student 17)*

The Youthreach programme benefits students (Stokes 2003, McHugh 2014, NEPS 2017) and by partaking in SENI/guidance and allowing students to access college open days,

thus making them as prepared as possible for further/higher education during their time in Youthreach. This is also considered by McCoy *et al.* (2014) for students going to higher education and the role of guidance (formal and informal) in shaping young people's decisions. McCoy *et al.* (2012) state that 'For many of the young people across a range of schools, open days and guest speakers were seen as useful in supplementing class-based discussion with more detailed information on specific courses and pathways' (p.74). McCoy and Byrne (2011) noted that the 'Lack of information about the financial aspects of college, the supports available and eligibility for these supports, and the likely costs of college are especially problematic barriers for the children of lower non-manual workers' (p.155). The National Plan for Equity of Access for Higher education 2015-2019 (2015) also considers that more advice be given to students regarding college information and supports available. Student 9 noted the following about their time in Youthreach,

*"I feel Youthreach prepared me a lot for college, but because my course was so different to the one I was going to study in Inchicore College (Business to Dance Studies) there is no possible way they could have prepared me for the practical part. I feel I was very prepared for every other aspect". (student 9)*

Overall the students considered that Youthreach supported them in their progression to further/higher education. Some students considered that Youthreach could support them more in areas including, developing research skills, preparing students for the college workload, also to prepare them mentally for college and to possibly get past students and guest speakers to come in and talk about college. The NAYC (2017) brochure states that 'Students receive guidance and support to plan their progression pathway from Youthreach' (p.11).

### **5.3.6 SENI programme for support**

As mentioned in chapter 1, Youthreach Blanchardstown carries out the SENI programme. Students from sample 1 considered that the SENI programme was the most informative

aspect for looking at their progression from Youthreach. The time afforded to them to make these decisions and not put under pressure to decide. The students also receive career guidance in the last year of their programme. Gordon (2013) in regards to Youthreach SENI centres states, that the budget allowance for SENI allows for extra guidance and extra support opportunities for students outside of each education centre budget. McCoy *et al.* (2014) considers that guidance becomes important for working class students at the later stages of their education. In these guidance sessions students investigate options, apply for further/higher education courses through the CAO or directly with the college. McHugh (2014) from her study found that the Youthreach students highlighted the importance of having access to guidance sessions.

In a SENI session, if a student does not wish to progress in their education, employment opportunities are investigated and what skills, qualifications, etc. would be required to secure this type of employment. Gordon (2013) mentions that from studies of the SENI programme that, 'learners showed significantly greater rates of retention in the programme, higher levels of formal accreditation, better progress in the acquisition of personal and social competencies and more successful progression' (p.4).

### **5.3.7 College expectations**

Students expected college to be a lot harder and more time consuming than Youthreach, but with supports to achieve qualifications. They mentioned a non-holistic and the just get on with it approach in college with little or no support and very little care about them as a person. McHugh (2014) in regards to the teacher/student relationship considers that,

one may discover that it may not be a lack of care per se that the student is experiencing but rather a lack of insight into their needs. Also, for the teacher in the classroom, there is no merit in empathy, as this will not get a student through the system and this may be part of the reason that students' feel that teachers do not care about them. (p.79).



The recent SOLAS review of PLC's (2017) stated that 'Students who undertake PLCs learn to take responsibility for their own work and to complete assignments and skills demonstrations. This improves their outcomes when they progress to higher education' (p.33).

Students felt confused by the minimal amount, if any support was even given in further/higher education. This could also be the fact that possibly Youthreach are too supportive in their programme and words that have been mentioned would be 'too much hand holding' and 'spoon-feeding', McHugh (2014) suggests it may be more of a helping hand. In hindsight, if the Youthreach programme did not give the support and direction would these students leave the programme and then of course, not progress in their education?

*"In Youthreach tutors were always available to discuss projects and assignments if I needed guidance but in college I found in certain class we were handed a summary of what we needed to do and requests for further help fell on deaf ears"* (student 17)

Lynch (1999) noted that, educational supports such as personal guidance and student skills need to be improved as these supports are vital for first year students in particular. 3<sup>rd</sup> level education has over 6,000 students (2015 figures) who do not progress from year 1 to year 2 of college (HEA 2017). These figures are alarming and could suggest a relationship number wise with early school leavers not completing upper secondary level education. Is there more similarity here, maybe field chosen (choices in upper secondary level), lecture/student relations, less supports available, the workload and even deadlines? Table 25 echoes the students' perceptions of their Youthreach experience compared to further/higher education.

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Youthreach</b>	<b>Further/higher education</b>
Environment/atmosphere	Treated like an adult  Attendance/participation	Talked to like a child More relaxed Stressful Choose to go to class More freedom More responsibility
Teachers	Cared about students Showed an interest in students One to one help/support	Little or no caring Distance/remote from students Little/less support (than Youthreach)
Subjects	Good explanation of assignments/briefs Slower pace  Less work	Little to no explanation of assignments/briefs Fast paced and more responsibilities More workload

Table 25: Comparative matrix of Youthreach versus further/higher education

#### **5.4 Students not progressing to further education/gaining employment after the Youthreach programme.**

Of the students that participated in the research 28.5% sought employment, 9.5% were unemployed and 4.7% went travelling. The main reason for some in seeking employment was due to the economic factor of money, this is in line with Stokes (2003) who suggests that early school leavers can come from families where getting a job is more important than education and to contribute to the family income. This point is supported by McCoy et al. (2012), they found that students not wanting to further their education are more focused on earning money as a priority. Money was a considerable factor in their decision to seek employment. The majority of Youthreach students would have come from DEIS schools and socio-economic areas, this is aligned with Stokes (1996) and Boldt (1997) and working-class backgrounds. As stated by Byrne and Smyth (2010) in *No Way Back?* economic factors are a considerable concern for students in Youthreach coming from families with high unemployment or low levels of income.

*“Further education doesn't suit me too much. I had no interest in going to college after leaving school. After leaving Youthreach, it didn't change a lot.” (student 22)*

This is a similar response that McCoy and Byrne (2011) received from their study that, ‘Respondents were most likely to indicate that the reason for not seeking entry into higher education related to the intrinsic value of higher education they indicated that they weren’t interested’ (p.153). They go on further to mention that students spoke that higher education was ‘not for me’ (p.154). They also infer from their findings that there is some motivation from students to get out into the workplace and earn at the earliest opportunity. McCoy *et al.* (2012) found similar sentiments from their research, of not feeling college was for them, lack of interest and not feeling they would get the required grades. The following table is the percentage details derived from McCoy *et al.* (2012) research Leaving School in Ireland: A Longitudinal Study of Post-School Transitions which followed the pathways of over 750 students as they progressed from second-level school into the next phase of their lives. Table 26 looks at the reasons from the study for not applying for higher education. Totals are of more than 100%, as more than one category could be selected.

<b>Category</b>	<b>%</b>
Wanted to earn money straight away	36.4%
Wasn’t interested or didn’t think it was for me	32.9%
Didn’t think I would get the grades	26.6%
Wanted to do other education/training instead	20.4%
Felt I couldn’t afford it/too expensive	16.9%
Wanted to travel/have gap year/take time	4.2%
My school/teachers didn’t encourage me to	4.0%
My family didn’t encourage me to	3.5%

Table 26: reasons for not applying for college. McCoy et al. (2012), research study.

Interestingly from this research similar comments were derived from Youthreach Blanchardstown students not progressing to further/higher education, such as, wanting to earn money, was not interested and wanting to travel.

From this research, all the students that did not progress in their education after completing Youthreach did mention that they would consider going to further their education sometime in the future.

*“I might go back and do night education classes or something, a couple of years, five or six years maybe.” (student 22)*

Byrne and Smyth (2010) from their research of early school leavers remark that, ‘It was interesting to note that many of the early leavers expressed a desire to go to college or to further their education’ (p.157). Furthermore, McCoy and Byrne (2011) note that,

While some of these young people now reflect on these choices with some regret and see themselves as more vulnerable than college educated peers, it seems that teachers and Guidance Counsellors should place a greater emphasis on highlighting the implications of taking various post-school options in the longer term. (p.153).

and they go on to mention that ‘For many of these young people, the pull of the booming labour market offered an acceptable post-school pathway’ (p.154).

## **5.5 Areas for further research**

The research of the 21 students only captured a snap-shot of Youthreach students experience of further/higher education. The literature review and the research highlighted the challenges facing young people and shows there is opportunity for further research, especially Youthreach student’s progression routes either to further or higher education but more so higher education. Progression statistics at other Youthreach centres nationally would enhance (positively or negatively) the contributions from this research as they would offer wider-ranging contextualisation. Commencing from September 2017, more Youthreach centres are carrying out QQI level 5 programmes. This demonstrates that

there is the potential for Youthreach centres to run QQI level 5 programmes and will this be the pathway for Youthreach students to go to higher education instead of progressing to a PLC course? Interestingly the SOLAS PLC review (2017) found that ‘PLC participants who subsequently progressed to HE (Higher Education) were typically from more highly educated backgrounds than their counterparts who did not make this transition. (p.14).

By gathering information from other Youthreach centres nationally about the progression of their students. This could be an ideal means of connecting and building on the progression pathways for Youthreach students wishing to progress to further/higher education and highlighting their experience of 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. Future Youthreach students could benefit from similar research but with a larger nationwide sample and the additional data.

### **5.6 Limitations/implications of the research**

This research investigated students from Youthreach Blanchardstown. A more in-depth and comprehensive research consideration might have been facilitated by showing a more substantial and clearer picture of students from other Youthreach centres nationwide and if any of these students eventually progressed to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education. As stated earlier not many Youthreach centres carry out a QQI level 5 programme and due to this factor, students would have to do a PLC course to progress to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education.

The SOLAS PLC review (2017) suggests that PLC courses provide an important progression route to higher education and furthermore that ‘PLCs can break the cycle of educational disadvantage and unemployment for many individuals’ (p.32). The research has thrown up some interesting issues especially around the Youthreach programme and if it is working appropriately to bring out the best of students. Also, are there elements of the programme that need to change to being more vocational and less academic? What

aspects of the Youthreach programme could be looked at as access route towards the apprenticeship scheme?

### **5.7 Summary**

It was apparent from the research that by the students attending Youthreach, it was instrumental in building student confidence and other skills (communications, problem solving, taking ownership etc.) and that by participating in the programme, it was an influential reason for progressing in their education. It also emerged that Youthreach Blanchardstown is identified as a positive aspect of the student's education, maybe it is not as much about the Youthreach programme but more about the way the programme is delivered. Staff engagement is a critical aspect of the programme and ensuring the success for the students and thus the pathway for their future whether in education, employment or other. The work can be stressful (at times) for the staff, but also be positive affirmation for them when students succeed, Youthreach (2000), suggests that for the staff 'successful participants are a source of motivation' (p.16). Students acknowledged the work, support and time that the staff give to get them to complete their modules and give them the tools and skills to survive in life after Youthreach, whichever pathway they take. Students progressing in their education all clearly noted that the Youthreach programme supported/encouraged/directed them in making that decision to progress.

## **Chapter 6 Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This study has highlighted the experiences of Youthreach students progressing to further/higher education. The objective in conducting this research was to document the educational progression of Youthreach students after completing their Youthreach programme and capture their experiences and stories of progressing to further/higher education. The research was based on students from Youthreach Blanchardstown. These students, some who are labelled early school leavers, and represent one of the most vulnerable marginalised groups in society. The verbatim of their experiences have been summarised and narrated in previous chapters.

### **6.2 Conclusion headings**

The conclusions for this chapter are presented under the following headings,

- Appraisal of the research objectives (6.3)
- The future for the Youthreach Programme (6.4)
- New knowledge acquired from the research (6.5)
- Where else can the research data be applied? (6.6)
- Future research (6.7)

### **6.3 Appraisal of the research objectives**

In the introduction, chapter 1 the objectives of the research were outlined to establish how Youthreach students:

- Found the progression route to further/higher education.
- The challenges of progressing to further/higher education and their student experiences (and how they lived them).
- Felt about Youthreach; did Youthreach do enough to support/facilitate them in progressing to further/higher education.

- (In the context of the student sample) Could Youthreach do more for students looking at making the move to further/higher education.

Over the course of the research other transfer examples, such as some students progressing to a PLC course and then in other cases directly onto 3<sup>rd</sup> level education, were also considered. In this regard, the information returned from the interviews and questionnaires were on the students experience of 3<sup>rd</sup> level education and further education. The data received from students that went to higher education answered the question of their perspective of 3<sup>rd</sup> level education and it also brought up similarities of students progressing to PLC courses.

**Progression route to further/higher education:** The research showed that the progression route for students was considered satisfactory. Some went straight to 3<sup>rd</sup> level from Youthreach whilst others choose the PLC route. The research showed that the progression route showed no concerns for students with the support they received during their time in Youthreach, and this helped them make their decision to progress in their education.

*“They encouraged me to apply and helped me with every aspect of my transition from preparing for an entrance interview to ensuring I was ready to move onto further education”.*(student 17)

**Challenges of progressing to further/higher education, their lived experiences:**

Numerous challenges were identified in the research by the students that progressed to further/higher education experience.

Student support: From the sample of students, the lack of support in further/higher education was a theme that was mentioned by some students. They felt that very little consideration was afforded to them around the areas of assignments, coursework, workload and their well-being. It may be considered that these students either expected more support compared to the Youthreach programme or their support expectations were



too high. As mentioned earlier the Youthreach programme may be over supportive in some respects and this could be detrimental to students moving on from the programme. It is worth mentioning that 3<sup>rd</sup> level colleges have numerous helpful supports in place (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) etc.). In a report from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (2017) (funded by the HEA) of higher education students, the report found that 59% of students feel they are well supported to help them succeed academically.

*”Different approach to teaching and communication. Sometimes I felt like you weren’t supported, even coming to understanding and explaining and assignment” (student 11)*

Workload in connection to further/higher education experience: Most of the students found the workload in further/higher education satisfactory, some considered the workload overwhelming and they were ill-prepared. This is the importance of college open days and for students to seek clarification on the course. A HEA study (2017) consider the average full-time student workload in college is 37 hours per week.

“Be prepared for a large workload and a lot of independent study” (student 17)

Lack of connection with lectures/teachers in further/higher education: This was a common theme expressed by several students. They considered that the level of connection in Youthreach was very different to what they received in college. Again, it may be that their expectations in this regard are too high and students considered the Youthreach teachers model to be in parallel with the further/higher education system.

Students applying for and receiving grants: There were no concerns from students regarding applying for grants, but some students did not receive the grant or were not entitled to the grant (higher/further education has supports in places to help with grants). Some students obtained part-time employment to fund their college period.

**Is Youthreach doing enough to support/facilitate?** The research shows that students are satisfied with the Youthreach programme and the level of support they received during their time in Youthreach and the personal benefits they derived from attending. From the responses acquired, all students considered that the support and direction they were shown were sufficient and greatly appreciated. Indeed, most considered it more support than they ever received in mainstream education.

*“They did amazingly. They gave me every support I needed. I felt like I was spoken to like an adult, an equal rather than a student in school”* (student 11)

**Confidence from participating in the Youthreach programme:** Students considered that their time in Youthreach has helped them in their confidence and thus provided them with one of the necessary skills to adapt to the college environment. They emphasised the confidence which was instilled by the teachers. This confidence gave them the motivation to progress in their education journey and be comfortable with their acquired academic talents to progress from Youthreach to further their education.

*“I had fears of not making friends as I knew nobody when entering the college but the teachers in Youthreach helped me to work on my confidence throughout the two years”* (student 10)

**Guidance from the Youthreach programme:** The guidance that they received in Youthreach facilitated the respondents to progress to further education or to gain employment. This facilitation was not in the context of the student experiences received in mainstream school. This is possibly due to the fact that career guidance had been cut back in mainstream schools in 2012 and only recently been reintroduced (in some schools/centres). However, it is too late and potentially too little for some students.

**The value of the SENI programme for students:** The SENI/guidance programme was highlighted as a key platform for the students to make decisions regarding their future. The research strongly suggests that SENI be retained as an integral component of the

Youthreach programme and that students can avail of external supports if required through the SENI programme to help them continue their educational journey.

*“I found the best place to actually plan out how I was going to progress was in mentoring sessions, even though I did not go onto further education or even to work I found that the mentoring program was the best way to plan my progression.” (student 4)*

#### **6.4 Future for the Youthreach Programme**

In line with numerous previous researches (Stokes 2003, Byrne and Smyth 2010 and others), the research has shown that the Youthreach programme is a success for students who complete the programme, and that the programme is looked on with high regard throughout Europe (European Commission 2017). The sample of students who completed their studies in Youthreach were able to use the programme as their stepping stone to further their lives.

*“I feel if hadn't of went to Youthreach I wouldn't have made it to college level. They helped to prepare and shaped me into becoming a functioning adult. I learnt time keeping skills and how to effectively break down assignments. This was knowledge I didn't receive while at school. I feel I got more support, encouragement and praise at Youthreach than I ever did within my 5 years in school.” (student 11)*

**SOLAS review:** As mentioned in section 1.11, the Youthreach programme is being reviewed by SOLAS. It is unclear at this stage what recommendations will come from this review. Hopefully any recommendations will inform policy makers with a view to enhancing and improving the programme. Needless to say, any recommendations such as suspension or closure of the programme (such as happened with the Senior Traveller Training Centres in 2012) will have major adverse implications for the Youthreach student. They will be the real losers, already have being failed by the education system that could not meet their educational needs in the first place. McHugh (2014) comments ‘Youthreach will still need to exist, as we cannot continue to fit students into a one-dimensional system’ (p.285).

## **6.5 New knowledge acquired from the research**

Reading numerous researches on early school leavers to disadvantaged students made it appear that this research would not add any new information. However, some interesting new knowledge was represented from the research. Hopefully this new knowledge will enhance students educational experience.

**SENI:** It is apparent that one of the main points to emerge from the research was the importance of the SENI programme for the students. This programme is only available in 20 Youthreach centres nationwide. There is no comparison to this programme in Ireland as it is not run in any other education setting except Youthreach. Students considered that the time afforded to them in a SENI session enabled them to contemplate which pathway to take on the completion of their Youthreach programme.

**Youthreach student profile:** An unexpected theme to emerge was the changing profile of Youthreach students outside of being recognised as early school leavers. Students who have not achieved the relevant points in the Leaving Certificate to progress to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education or have an LCA qualification are participating in the Youthreach programme as a pathway to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education by completing a QQI level 5. Anecdotally, are students using the non-means tested training allowance that the Youthreach programme provides. This ensures that they have the security of the training allowance compared to applying for the means tested SUSI/BTEA grants and still being afforded a QQI level 5 qualification on completion of the Youthreach programme, if successful. Therefore, using the pathway route of Youthreach to higher education. As the profile of the Youthreach student evolves so must the Youthreach programme to ensure accommodation of students' educational needs.

**Return to college in the future:** The research identified that all students that did not progress in their education after completing Youthreach, stated that they would at some time in their lives, return to education. They had positive words about progressing in their

education and what career path they would like to pursue. This is a positive affirmation for Youthreach but also for lifelong learning.

## **6.6 Where else can the research data be applied?**

This is one of the first qualitative researches on Youthreach students experience of further/higher education. The data from the research will be disseminated to my colleagues in Youthreach Blanchardstown. It has also been requested that the information obtained will be shown to other Youthreach centres (the Youthreach Community) and a presentation given to all Youthreach Coordinators at the next (2019) NAYC annual conference. Hopefully other Youthreach centres especially those running QQI level 5 programmes will find insights from the research helpful with their programme and progression routes and improve students' educational experiences. Some of the initial findings from the research have already been presented at a Further Education Network meeting in DCU in April 2017 and a request for a final outcome from the research to be presented at a subsequent meeting.

## **6.7 Recommendations**

The following recommendations are derived from the research:

**1. Youthreach programme:** A up to date in-depth qualitative study of the Youthreach programme should be undertaken, having regard to the fact that the Youthreach programme has evolved in its programme delivery over the last decade.

**2. Past Youthreach students:** There is very little research on Youthreach students when they complete and progress from the programme. Research needs to be carried out on that cohort after they progress from the programme and follow them for a 2-3-year period. Investigating where they are within their lives, did they further their education or seek employment and did the alternative educational approach they took provide them with the skills to reach their goals?

**3. SENI:** Consideration should be given to rolling out the SENI programme to all Youthreach centres nationwide, so as to enhance the educational prospects of these non-SENI students. From the sample in this research, these students felt the SENI was an optimum part of the programme to look at their progression routes. Consideration should also be given to incorporating elements of SENI into mainstream schools which may facilitate the decrease of early school leavers.

**4. QQI qualification:** The QQI qualification should be given the merit it deserves and not make it a “second chance” qualification. Consequently, the relevant bodies ensure that the QQI qualification is accepted through the HEAR and DARE access routes and that the QQI qualification is a suitable pathway to 3<sup>rd</sup> level education and given equal status to the Leaving Certificate.

#### **5. Teacher/student relationship in Youthreach**

The reasons why the holistic approach within the Youthreach environment suits the majority of students participating in the programme and what elements, if any could be incorporated into mainstream education should be further researched.

#### **6.8 Final thoughts**

This research has been a journey, at times trying, exhausting, time-consuming, painful, draining, frustrating, trying to put it all together but I feel that I have learnt and experienced so much and all invaluable. Once the topic and research question were decided, it became very interesting to see the research develop, mature and to appreciate the experiences of Youthreach students who had progressed through education with relative ease and not so relative ease.

Deciding what is important to include in the research can be a daunting task, what if someone else would consider that aspect important, but not me? It also became disheartening in some respect, as to why numerous government reports have been

commissioned regarding early school leavers, ministers have come and gone, but in one way or another these reports all come up with the same re-stressing points. Reports need to take the focus off the early school leavers and instead focus on the relevant government bodies looking at strategies to facilitate these students staying in school to complete their education. Numerous groups may want to solve the problem of early school leaving but do not want to engage in a process of change. Research recognises there can be no one solution or single perspective on early school leaving. As Byrne and Smyth (2010) state ‘early school leavers are the most disadvantaged group in the labour market, experiencing low employment rates and wages, employment instability and longer spells of joblessness as well as lower job quality and entry into low skill occupations.’ (p.144). In hindsight what measures have been implemented by the relevant bodies that will make any considerable or real difference(s) to these students to prevent them from becoming early school leavers?

### **Side-lined students**

In my view, these early school leavers can be known as “*side-lined students*”, although part of society, but always on the periphery of groups, getting picked occasionally but never really getting the full benefits of participation, they have much to contribute but very little opportunities. This will follow them as they go through life, employed in low income employment and moving through numerous jobs throughout their life and as mentioned earlier these jobs will more than likely be short lived. This was mentioned as far back as 2000 in the Youthreach Consultation report, this report suggested that ‘A significant proportion of early school leavers had multiple short-term jobs. They may have difficulty in sustaining employment’ (p.18). They often feel undervalued in society and that they have no voice. Stokes (2017) states that ‘many in Ireland believe that one’s education outcomes define one’s station in life it is at least equally true that one’s station in life defines one’s education outcomes.’ Students, by having obstacles in their way can

hinder them in education and they don't dare to dream big. McHugh's (2014) viewpoint is 'that society has a lot to learn from these young people (Youthreach participants) and they should be given an opportunity to provide their perspectives' (pp.115-116). They often feel undervalued in society and that they have no voice. In retrospect, students also require advice so that they can take personal responsibility for their own education so that they can effectively navigate successful careers. It remains too easy to blame the system for everything!

One final mention must be to thank the students from Youthreach Blanchardstown who participated in this research, by looking through the lens of their real-life experiences, more information was gathered from them than from reading any number of books. Their real-life experiences/stories gave the research its edge. Books offer a concept, they do not offer an experience, but of course experience and reading of books are often the best of both worlds.

Enter into the world. Observe and wonder; experience and reflect. To understand a world, you must become part of that world while at the same remaining separate, a part of and apart from. Go then, and return to tell me what you learn, and what you have come to understand.

Patton (1990 p.199).



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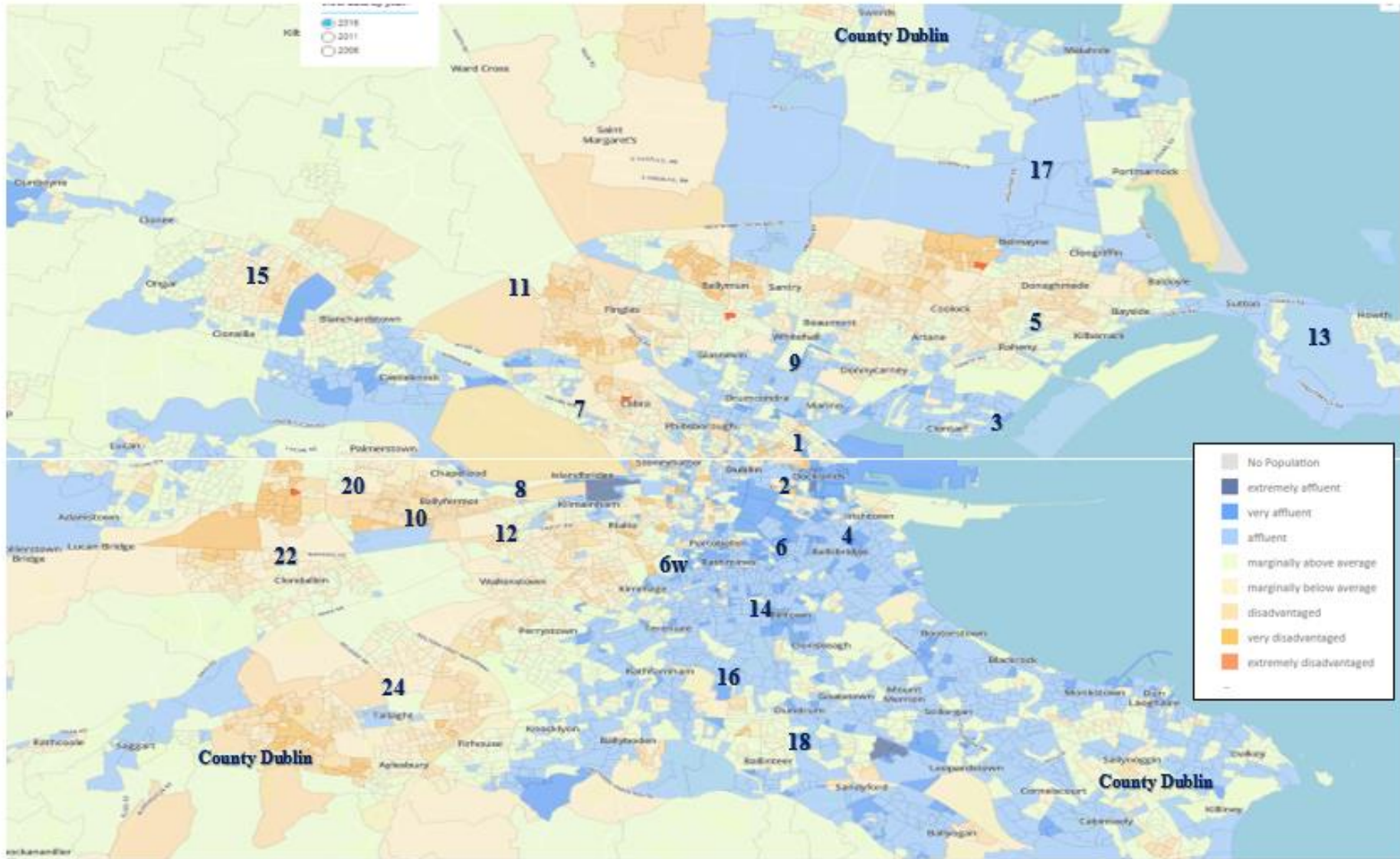
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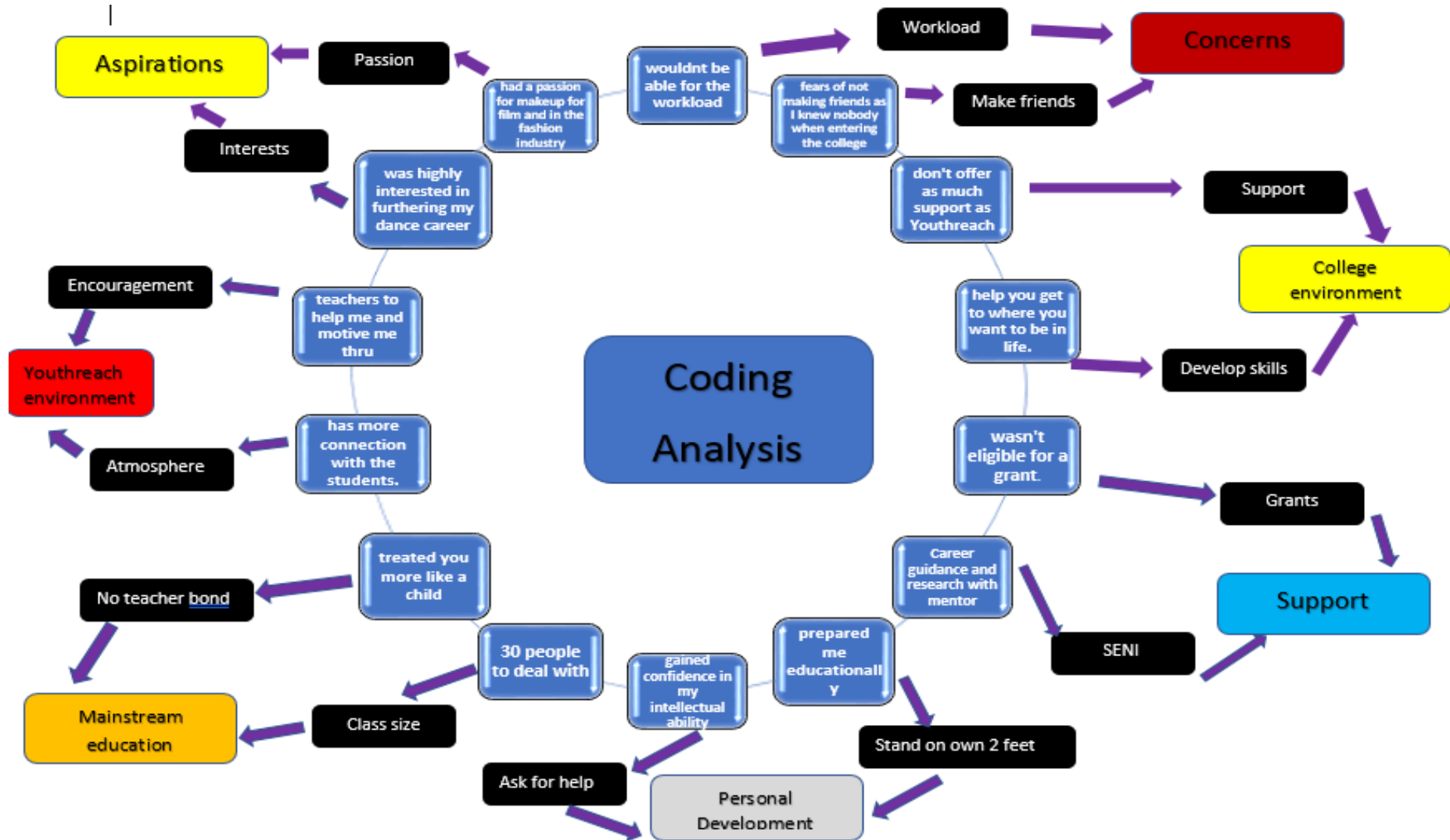
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Appendix A: Dublin post codes with deprivation levels. Source Pobal maps.



Appendix B: Mind map of qualitative coding



Appendix C: Interview questions -sample 3

1. Why did you go to Youthreach?
2. What year did you leave Youthreach?
3. What qualifications did you obtain?
4. Looking back, do you think you enjoyed your time in Youthreach, Why?
5. What do you feel was the difference between your education in Youthreach compared to mainstream school?
6. What do you feel was your main reason you stayed in Youthreach and completed your programme?
7. What did you do after leaving Youthreach?
8. Why did you not go onto Further Education after Youthreach?
9. Looking back, how do you feel about this decision?
10. Do you think you will go to Further Education in the near future?
11. What course would you like to do, if you went to Further Education?
12. If you have a magic wand, what would you change about your education?

Appendix D: Coding sample questionnaires

**1. Are you male or female? \***

Male  
Female  
Other:

**2. What age are you? \***

20

**3. What year did you leave Youthreach? \***

2013

**4. What college/school did you attend after Youthreach? \***

Inchicore College of Further Education

**5. How long after Youthreach did you start college? \***

0-6 months

**6. What course did you complete/currently studying? \***

Dance Studies

**7. Why did you choose this college course? \***

I chose that course because I was highly interested in furthering my dance career and felt it was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

**8. Rate your experience of college \***

	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
Youthreach fully prepared me for college	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I adapted to the college culture (workload, personal responsibility, challenges, mindset, career focused etc.)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I built on my self confidence	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College helped me develop skills related to my career	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College helped me develop skills outside of my career choice	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College made me more independent	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**9. Did you have any concerns, worries or fears of college before you started? \***

Yes, I was concerned it would be much more difficult than Youthreach, I was worried I wouldn't be able for the workload. I even worried I wasn't intelligent enough at times. I feared I wouldn't make any friends.

**10. What route did you take when applying for college? \***

CAO

**11. How did you fund your time in college? (you can answer more than once) \***

Received a college grant

Got a part time job

Got a financial loan

Received support from family

Other: I also saved some money I received from Youthreach.

**12. Do you feel your time in Youthreach helped with college? Explain \***

Youthreach helped me in so many ways that I could write and talk all day about. Youthreach helped me not only skill wise but also personally.

Youthreach helped me learn how to do assignments properly, how to read comprehend and carry out a task properly. It helped me use laptops and computers which I honestly didn't know much about. It helped me become more independent and survive off my own earnings. I've grown in confidence and found out who I was as a person because of all the help and people in Youthreach. I learned how to work on my own and how to rely on myself and not others all the time while also learning to be a leader in groups. I've also learned to say yes, I can rather no I can't, and I won't even try.

**13. How did the college experience differ from Youthreach? \***

In college assignments got handed out with little or no explanation of what they expected of us. At times there was no word count required which I found particularly strange. I found there was no care about the student's well-being, when in Youthreach you feel so cared about and valued. I sometimes felt put down in college by teachers and talked to like a child. When in Youthreach you were built up by all these teachers that really cared about you and talked to you like another adult. I overall had a much better experience in Youthreach than college.

**14. What do you think was the reasons behind your decision to progress from Youthreach to 3rd level education? (you can answer more than once) \***



- My Youthreach experience encouraged me to further my education [REDACTED]
- I was always planning to go to 3rd level education whether I went to Youthreach or not
- My family encouraged me to progress to 3rd level education
- Other: .....

**15. What expectations did you have before you started college? \***

I expected college to be much harder and much more challenging. I expected it to be like a community like Youthreach was. I expected countless hours of work to be given (which was true). I also expected it to be fun and exciting bringing new opportunities my way.

**16. Did college live up to these expectations? \***

Assignment and work wise, the assignments were actually easier in college than in Youthreach which I was grateful for. It wasn't a community like Youthreach it didn't have that constantly friendly happy environment I was hoping for. I did receive countless hours of work from assignments to practical exams. It definitely did bring new opportunities my way and it was fun at times but was much more exhausting than fun.

**17. Did you feel overwhelmed by the workload in college? \***

- Yes [REDACTED]
- No
- Unsure

**18. What advice would you give to a student starting in college? \***

To be organised, to also give time for work and fun. To have a schedule and to give yourself goals to meet weekly monthly and each quarter. To also make sure you do what you want to do! To not make yourself sit in and study while your friends go out, make sure to join your friends but keep working hard to achieve those goals. Also, to believe in you and know it's okay to ask for help!

**19. What could Youthreach improve on to have helped you in your transition from Youthreach to college? \***

To be very honest, nothing comes to mind straight away when asked that question. I feel Youthreach prepared me a lot for college, but because my course was so different to the one I was going to study in Inchicore College (Business to Dance Studies) there is no possible way they could have

prepared me for the practical part. I feel **I was very prepared** for every other aspect.

## Appendix E: Coding sample interviews

### Student 22 interview

**Researcher:** [00:05] Hi [REDACTED], thanks for coming today for this interview. I'll just go through, ask you a few questions. Then, if you just want to answer them as best as you feel, is that OK?

**Student 22:** [00:14] No problem.

**Researcher:** [00:15] Thanks a lot. Why did you go to Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [00:18] When I left school, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I just thought Youthreach would be a **good opportunity to get a qualification that I could go on and get a job.**

**Researcher:** [00:27] What year did you leave Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [00:29] 2017.

**Researcher:** [00:30] So it's just recently?

**Student 22:** [00:32] Yeah.

**Researcher:** [00:33] What qualifications did you obtain while you were in Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [00:36] I obtained a QQI Level 5 in General Learning.

**Researcher:** [00:38] That's very good. Looking back, do you think you enjoyed your time in Youthreach and why?

**Student 22:** [00:44] I really enjoyed my time in Youthreach. The **style of learning** really suited me. **Doing all the work as the course went on suited me better than doing the exam at the end.** Also, I found that the **teachers are really easy to deal with and people are very easy to talk too.**

**Researcher:** [00:59] So continuous assessment was a very good thing?

**Student 22:** [01:01] Yeah, **that was helpful for me.**

**Researcher:** [01:05] What do you feel was the difference in Youthreach compared to when you were in mainstream school?

**Student 22:** [01:09] Really, **the continuous assessment.** In mainstream school, **you learn everything and do an exam at the end of the year,** which didn't suit me. I found it hard to remember everything from the start of the year until the end. When you have **to learn something, and then do an assignment on it,** I found that much easier.

**Researcher:** [01:27] What about anything else within your mainstream to Youthreach that would have been different?

**Student 22:** [01:32] Teachers are not as easy to talk to. You're in a smaller class, as well, which is a lot easier. There's not 30 people to deal with. There's only ten or eight or whatever. I found that much easier, too.

**Researcher:** [01:48] What do you feel is your main reason you stayed in Youthreach and completed your program?

**Student 22:** [01:53] I wanted to get my full cert, my full QQI Level 5. That was my main reason for staying in.

**Researcher:** [02:01] What did you do after leaving Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [02:04] Looked for work for a while, had a look around, trying to get something that suited me.

**Researcher:** [02:12] Why did you not go onto further education after Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [02:16] Further education doesn't suit me too much. I had no interest in going to college after leaving school. After leaving Youthreach, it didn't change a lot.

**Researcher:** [02:26] Looking back, how do you feel about this decision?

**Student 22:** [02:29] I still agree with it. I still don't want to go back.

**Researcher:** [02:32] Do you think you'll ever go back to further education in the near future?

**Student 22:** [02:36] Not in the near future. Maybe years and years away, but not in the near future.

**Researcher:** [02:41] How many years would you say?

**Student 22:** [02:44] I might go back and do night education classes or something, a couple of years, five or six years maybe.

**Researcher:** [02:52] If you did go back, what course would you like to do?

**Student 22:** [02:55] I'd like to do sports psychology, if I had the chance to do it.

**Researcher:** [02:58] Is there any reason why that?

**Student 22:** [03:00] Just playing sports and realizing the mental side of myself. I'd like to look further into it.

**Researcher:** [03:06] Very good. If you had a magic wand, what do you think you'd change about your education?

**Student 22:** [03:10] Might have actually studied for exams when I was in school.

**Researcher:** [03:16] That's it, [REDACTED]. Thanks very much for answering those questions, much appreciated.

**Student 22:** [03:21] No problem.

Appendix F: Consent Form

**Research Title:** Youthreach post graduate's perspective on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level experience.

**Researcher:** Carl Sheridan

<p>I have read and understand the contents of the Participant Information Sheet</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>I understand that my participation in the research is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>I am aware of any risks associated with the research for me and I was given the opportunity to ask questions</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>I understand that the information I give will only be used as part of the thesis and my details will remain anonymous</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>I consent to take part in this research</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/></p>
---

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix G: Approval for Research by the DCU Research Ethics Committee

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University



Dr Justin Rami  
School of Education Studies

17<sup>th</sup> December 2015

**REC Reference:** DCUREC/2015/244  
**Proposal Title:** Youthreach post graduates perspective on the 3rd level experience  
**Applicant(s):** Dr Justin Rami, Mr Carl Sheridan

Dear Justin,

This research proposal qualifies under our Notification Procedure, as a low risk social research project. Therefore, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this project.

Materials used to recruit participants should state that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Dónal O'Mathúna'.

**Dr Dónal O'Mathúna**  
Chairperson  
DCU Research Ethics Committee



Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht  
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,  
Baile Átha Cliath, Éire

Research & Innovation Support  
Dublin City University,  
Dublin 9, Ireland

T +353 1 700 8000  
F +353 1 700 8002  
E [research@dcu.ie](mailto:research@dcu.ie)  
[www.dcu.ie](http://www.dcu.ie)

Appendix H: Letter to Co-ordinator

20<sup>th</sup> December 2015

Dear [REDACTED]

As you are aware I have commenced a part time Masters in Education Research in Dublin City University. As part of research I want to research Youthreach students both current and past to answer the following question.

What is a....

Youthreach graduate's perspective on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level experience?

I am seeking permission to carry out the research involving Youthreach Blanchardstown students. I expect the research to take approximately a two-year period starting in January 2016. I will seek permission from all students involved in the research and all students contacted will be over 18 years of age. I have sought and obtained approval for the research by the DCU research ethics committee. I will forward you a copy of this approval.

All this research will be carried out in my own time and will not hinder my teaching in Youthreach at any time.

If you need any further details, please don't hesitate to ask me.

Regards

---

Carl Sheridan

## Appendix I: Plain Language Statement

**Research Title: “Youthreach graduate’s perspective on the 3<sup>rd</sup> level education experience.”**

**Researcher:** Carl Sheridan

I am currently undertaking a Research Masters in Education studies in Dublin City University (DCU). The research project will look at the experiences of both current and past Youthreach students on their journey from studying and completion of qualifications in Youthreach into 3<sup>rd</sup> level education.

The research

I have been working in Youthreach for the past eight years previously working in the corporate sector with various businesses. From my experience of dealing with students in Youthreach I see a considerable amount of students whom would like/have progressed from Further Education to 3<sup>rd</sup> level Education using non-traditional routes. From detailed conversations with my DCU Supervisor and my Youthreach Co-ordinator

I feel that value can be obtained from the research.

The research will be both quantitative and qualitative, it will involve online surveys and a focus group with current students and an online survey with past students. The research will give the student a chance to outline their own experiences on their personal journey.

All information gathered during the research will be strictly confidential and all participants will remain anonymous. All information will only be used for my research Masters. On completion a copy of the thesis will be available in the DCU library for students.

If you are willing to take part in the research I will be obliged if you could sign the attached consent form which accompanies this information and return to myself, you can withdraw from the research at any time.

If at any time you feel uncomfortable regarding any aspects of this research please inform me as soon as possible, if I am unable to help you or you feel the response was not adequate, please contact my DCU supervisor, all contact details are below.

Regards

Carl Sheridan

[carl.sheridan27@dcu.mail.ie](mailto:carl.sheridan27@dcu.mail.ie)

DCU Supervisor

[Justin.rami@dcu.ie](mailto:Justin.rami@dcu.ie)

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 Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

Appendix J: Sample1 Reasons for applying for college



# Why apply for college

\*Required

What age are you \*

Your answer

---

Are you male or female \*

- Male
- Female

What is the name of the course you are looking at applying for? \*

Your answer

---

What college are you looking at attending for this course? \*

Your answer

---

If you do go to 3rd level college, do you feel you will get support from your family? \*

- Yes
- No

If you do go to 3rd level college, do you feel you will get support from your peers? \*

- Yes
- No

Motive for going to college \*

	Not Important	Important	Very important
To learn more about my chosen subject	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To get a job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To improve my chances of employment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To improve my self confidence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learn more about life skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To meet new people	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family wants me to go	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Have you any other reasons not listed above as into why you would like go to college? \*

Your answer

---

Was education encouraged within in your family? \*

Choose ▼

Why did you leave secondary school? \*

Your answer

---

What do you consider to be the difference between your secondary school experience and Youthreach? \*

Your answer

---

Were you ever encouraged by teachers, guidance counsellors or parents to consider going to college? \*

Yes

No

What is your opinion of 3rd level college? \*

Your answer

---

What preparation are you going to do if you get accepted for 3rd level education? \*

Your answer

---

**SUBMIT**



100%: You made it.

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Appendix K: Sample 2 Questionnaire Past Youthreach Students Survey

## Youthreach Past Students Survey

Youthreach Past Students Survey 2016

This survey is related to the research title "Youthreach graduate perspective on the 3rd level experience".

The research is being carried out by Carl Sheridan as part of a Masters research for the School of Education in DCU. Contact details [carl.sheridan27@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:carl.sheridan27@mail.dcu.ie)

From the findings from the survey, it is hoped that the outcomes will help and give a clearer understanding of Youthreach students progressing to 3rd level and to encourage and give support to future Youthreach students.

All information gathered during the research will be strictly confidential and no individual will be named or identified in the research report. All information will only be used for research purposes. No information will be given to a third party.

On completion of the study, a copy of the thesis will be placed in the DCU library and data that informed the report/thesis will be securely held and disposed of professionally once the thesis is marked and examined. There is very little risk associated with any contribution to this research.

Participants of the survey can withdraw from the research at any time. 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 Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

Consent Form

Research Title: Youthreach graduate perspective on the 3rd level experience.

Researcher: Carl Sheridan

I have read and understand the contents of the Plain Language Statement

Yes    No

I understand that my participation in the research is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time

Yes    No

I am aware of any risks associated with the research and I was given the opportunity to ask questions

Yes    No

I understand that the information I give will only be used as part of the thesis and my details will remain anonymous

Yes    No

I consent to take part in this research

Yes    No

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

\*Required

\*Required

1. Are you male or female? \*

- Male
- Female
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. What age are you \*

Your answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. What year did you leave Youthreach? \*

Your answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. What college/school did you attend after Youthreach? \*

Your answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. How long after Youthreach did you start college?

Choose ▼

6. What course did you complete/currently studying? \*

Your answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Why did you choose this college course? \*

Your answer  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Rate your experience of college \*

	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
Youthreach fully prepared me for college	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I adapted to the college culture (workload, personal responsibility, challenges, mindset, career focused etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I built on my self confidence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College helped me develop skills related to my career	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College helped me develop skills outside of my career choice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College made me more independent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. Did you have any concerns, worries or fears of college before you started? \*

Your answer

---

10. What route did you take when applying for college?

Choose



11. How did you fund your time in college? (you can answer more than once) \*

- Received a college grant
- Got a part time job
- Got a financial loan
- Received support from family
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Do you feel your time in Youthreach helped with college? Explain \*

Your answer

---

13. How did the college experience differ from Youthreach? \*

Your answer

---

14. What do you think was the reasons behind your decision to progress from Youthreach to 3rd level education? (you can answer more than once) \*

- My Youthreach experience encouraged me to further my education
- I was always planning to go to 3rd level education whether I went to Youthreach or not
- My family encouraged me to progress to 3rd level education
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

15. What expectations did you have before you started college? \*

\*

Your answer

---

16. Did college live up to these expectations? \*

Your answer

---

17. Did you feel overwhelmed by the workload in college? \*

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

18. What advice would you give to a student starting in college? \*

\*

Your answer

---

19. What could Youthreach improve on to have helped you in your transition from Youthreach to college? \*

Your answer

---

**SUBMIT**

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Appendix L: Sample 1 Questionnaire Youthreach Students Part B

## Youthreach Blanchardstown Graduate 2016 level 5

Youthreach Graduates (2016) Survey January 2017

This survey is related to the research title "Youthreach graduate perspective on the 3rd level experience".

The research is being carried out by Carl Sheridan as part of a Masters research for the School of Education in DCU. Contact details [carl.sheridan27@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:carl.sheridan27@mail.dcu.ie)

From the findings from the survey, it is hoped that the outcomes will help and give a clearer understanding of Youthreach students progressing to 3rd level and to encourage and give support to future Youthreach students.

All information gathered during the research will be strictly confidential and no individual will be named or identified in the research report. All information will only be used for research purposes. No information will be given to a third party.

On completion of the study, a copy of the thesis will be placed in the DCU library and data that informed the report/thesis will be securely held and disposed of professionally once the thesis is marked and examined. There is very little risk associated with any contribution to this research.

Participants of the survey can withdraw from the research at any time. 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 Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

### Consent Form

Research Title: Youthreach graduate perspective on the 3rd level experience.

Researcher: Carl Sheridan

I have read and understand the contents of the Plain Language Statement

Yes No

I understand that my participation in the research is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time

Yes No

I am aware of any risks associated with the research and I was given the opportunity to ask questions

Yes No

I understand that the information I give will only be used as part of the thesis and my details will remain anonymous

Yes No

I consent to take part in this research

Yes No

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

**\*Required**

**How old are you \***

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

**Did you complete your full QQI level 5 programme \***

Yes

No



What is your main status currently ? \*

- In Further Education
- Working full time
- Working part time
- Unemployed/seeking work
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

NEXT

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## Moving onto Further Education

1. What Post Leaving Cert/3rd level College/other are you attending for your course ? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is the name of the course you are participating in ? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

3. What level is this course? \*

Choose ▼

4. What is the final qualification of the course? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

5. Did you have difficulty choosing this course ? \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

6. Rate your experience of college so far \*

	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
I feel I am more confident now	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College has helped me develop skills related to my career	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College has helped me develop skills outside of my career choice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College has made me more independent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have adapted to any challenges easily	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have adapted to the college workload	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. What route did you take when applying for college? \*

Choose

8. How are you funding your time in college? (you can answer more than once) \*

- Received a college grant
- Got a part time job
- Got a financial loan
- Received support from family
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

9. Did you have any problems with applying for fees/grants/funding? Please comment

Your answer

---

10. Do you feel your time in Youthreach prepared you for college? Explain \*

Your answer

11. Do you feel in Youthreach you were given enough information & guidance to help you with your course/college choice? \*

Your answer

---

12. How does the college experience differ from Youthreach? \*

Your answer

13. What expectations did you have before you started college? \*

Your answer

---

14. Has college so far lived up to these expectations? \*

Your answer

15. Do you feel overwhelmed by the workload in college? \*

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

16. What advice would you give to a student starting college? \*

Your answer

17. What could Youthreach improve to have helped you in your transition from Youthreach to college? \*

Your answer

---

BACK

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## Moving to work/seeking work/unemployed

1. Are you currently..... \*

- Working full time
- Working part time/casual work
- Actively seeking work
- Registered unemployed
- Claiming Social Protection
- On sick benefits
- Other:

2. If working, what are you currently working at ?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

3. Why did you not go onto further education ? \*

- Wanted to work/earn money
- Further Education was not for me
- Needed to take a break from education
- Work more important than education
- Other:

4. Would you like to ever go back to further your education ? \*

Choose \_\_\_\_\_

5. If you do go back to education what course would you like to do ?

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

6. How has Youthreach prepared you for your current position ?  
Please comment \*

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you feel you were given enough information in Youthreach to make a choice of work/seeking work or further education ? \*

- Yes
- No
- Somewhat
- Unsure

8. During your time in Youthreach, where did you feel you got the best information from, to progress? \*

Your answer

9. On a scale of 1-3 (3 being very important, 1 being not important) rate the following if you eventually return to education \*

	Not important	Important	Very Important
Receive a college grant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College location	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
College course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Length of course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friends in same course/college	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. If you do return to further education, rank the following as important for you to make that return \*

	Not important	Important	Very Important
Finance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Home life/security	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Peers/friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

BACK

SUBMIT

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## Appendix M Interview Transcripts

### Student 19 interview

**Researcher:** [00:03] Hi, [REDACTED]. Thanks for coming down. This is just a few questions around your time in Youthreach and what you're doing now. Why did you go to Youthreach?

**Student 19:** [00:13] I went to Youthreach because I just didn't want to be in school anymore. I heard about Youthreach from a family member, so I decided to give it a go.

**Researcher:** [00:31] What year did you leave Youthreach?

**Student 19:** [00:37] 2014.

**Researcher:** [00:37] What qualifications did you get when you were here?

**Student 19:** [00:40] I got my FETAC Level 4, and me FETAC Level 5 in Business.

**Researcher:** [00:46] Looking back, do you think you enjoyed your time in Youthreach, and why?

**Student 19:** [00:51] Yeah, I thought it was brilliant here. I enjoyed it, because it's a fun atmosphere, like learning and because the buzz.

**Researcher:** [01:05] Did you enjoy the teachers and the different styles of teaching?

**Student 19:** [01:08] Yeah. I thought you were treated more like an adult in Youthreach than you were in school. In school they treated you more like a child, that kinda way.

**Researcher:** [01:19] That leads into the next question. What did you feel is the difference between your education in Youthreach compared to mainstream school?

**Student 19:** [01:26] When you talked to teachers, they treated you different, like. For instance, you don't have to call them sir or miss, like, you can call them by their first name, which I thought was really good and you can feel more comfortable with them then. In that way so.

**Researcher:** [01:43] What do you feel was your main reason you stayed in Youthreach and completed the program?

**Student 19:** [01:49] So I could get the qualifications. That was it.

**Researcher:** [01:55] What did you do after leaving Youthreach?

**Student 19:** [01:57] I went to work in three different places, the chemist, and two hairdressers but did not work out.

**Researcher:** [02:05] Do you think from your time in Youthreach, helped you get those jobs?

**Student 19:** [02:14] Yes, the chemist definitely did because I done my work experience there, so they kept me on after my work experience.

**Researcher:** [02:24] Was there being a reason why you didn't go on to further your education after Youthreach?

**Student 19:** [02:33] Probably just didn't really feel interested in anything to go on to, really.

**Researcher:** [02:40] There was not really courses that you felt like that?

**Student 19:** [02:41] No. I was going to do a fitness course, and then I went into the hairdressing, so I'd rather the hairdressing over the fitness. Obviously, I didn't get any training out of the hairdressing.

**Researcher:** [02:55] Looking back now, how do you feel about the decision not to go on to further education?

**Student 19:** [03:00] I think I would have rather just go onto do a course and see what I got out of it on to as did not get the training out of the hair-dressing, so I would have liked to go on to do a course.

**Researcher:** [03:16] Do you think, in the future sometime, that you might go in to another, further education or...?

**Student 19:** [03:22] Yeah, I have been thinking about going into it. But don't know what I want to do yet, though. I'm just not going to rush in to something that I mightn't want to do.

**Researcher:** [03:31] Would you look at possibly looking at getting a degree, eventually?

**Student 19:** [03:35] Yeah, and I would, like the whole level of qualification.

**Researcher:** [03:43] If you were thinking of going back to education, what would be the course you'd look at doing?

**Student 19:** [03:48] I don't know. I've been looking around kind of. Looking into child care and care of the elderly as well. Just kind of, I'm just looking around, really. I've nothing set in stone yet.

**Researcher:** [03:54] Looking around, yeah. It's just the hours and all that?

**Student 19:** [04:04] Yeah, it's around the hours. that why care of the elderly came up around the hours and to do home care.

**Researcher:** [04:10] Yes, I understand. Good few jobs around. Do you need your qualifications also?

**Student 19:** [04:16] Yeah, you need the qualifications.

**Researcher:** [04:19] If you had a magic wand, what do you think you'd try change about your education?

**Student 19:** [04:27] I don't know.

**Researcher:** [04:28] From your time in mainstream to Youthreach to...

**Student 19:** [04:40] Maybe nothing, I probably would have went back to college, if I had this magic wand maybe? Got me qualifications for that, by now I would be qualified, and in a job working. That would be what I'd change.

**Researcher:** [04:55] OK, that's it [REDACTED]. Thank you very much.

### Student 20 interview

**Researcher:** [00:02] [REDACTED], how are you?

**Student 20:** [00:02] I'm fine, how are you?

**Researcher:** [00:04] Listen, thanks for coming down for this interview. It's just to do with the DCU. It should last 10-15 minutes. We've just got to go through the questions and give me your answers and see how we go.

**Researcher:** [00:14] Now why did you go to Youthreach?

**Student 20:** [00:18] I came to Youthreach to do my level four and repeat it.

**Researcher:** [00:21] Was there a reason why you came to Youthreach and not somewhere else?

**Student 20:** [00:26] No. like it was close to home and I didn't really do well in school. So, I just thought I would go to Youthreach.

**Researcher:** [00:46] How did you hear about Youthreach?

**Student 20:** [00:48] Me friend, and brother was here, so he sort of egged me on to go down.

**Researcher:** [00:51] Egged you on, very good. What year did you leave Youthreach?

**Student 20:** [00:51] I left Youthreach in 2015.

**Researcher:** [00:59] What qualifications did you get when you finished here?

**Student 20:** [01:01] I got a FETAC Level 4.

**Researcher:** [01:05] Looking back, do you think you enjoyed your time in Youthreach?

**Student 20:** [01:11] Yeah, it was great, cause the teachers are very good...They're like our friends, like back in school. It's a different sort of thing. The students are good like. Well, the people are great and the subjects.

**Researcher:** [01:27] You enjoyed it, yeah?

**Student 20:** [01:34] I really enjoyed it.



**Researcher:** [01:35] What do you feel was the difference between your education in Youthreach compared to mainstream school?

**Student 20:** [01:40] As I said it was the teachers, they help you out a lot sort of thing. In mainstream school, they say something, and you might not look back on it. The teachers in Youthreach, they help you.

**Researcher:** [01:47] They follow through and help. Did you get any career guidance in mainstream?

**Student 20:** [01:54] No.

**Researcher:** [01:55] And here?

**Student 20:** [01:55] Yeah.

**Researcher:** [01:56] How did you feel about that?

**Student 20:** [01:58] It was good. It helps you out a lot. For college and that sort of thing.

**Researcher:** [02:04] It gives you a bit of support.

**Student 20:** [02:07] Yeah.

**Researcher:** [01:59] What do you feel was your main reason you stayed in Youthreach and completed your Level 4?

**Student 20:** [02:13] To compete it, I had nothing. I had to complete it.

**Researcher:** [02:17] Because you had no qualifications?

**Student 20:** [02:19] I had no qualifications.

**Researcher:** [02:20] You have your Level 4 here. Then, of course, what you were saying earlier on with the teachers and all. What did you do after leaving Youthreach?

**Student 20:** [02:31] I looked for a job. I had to go to college, but I couldn't get the grant. I wasn't eligible for a grant.

**Researcher:** [02:46] Did they say why you couldn't get the grant for college?

**Student 20:** [02:51] Because Ma and Da make too much money.

**Researcher:** [02:51] That goes into, so why did you not go onto further education after Youthreach, so it was to do with...

**Student 20:** [02:56] Money.

**Researcher:** [02:57] The grant.

**Student 20:** [02:58] Yeah, I need money, so I just looked for a job after Youthreach.

**Researcher:** [03:02] Then you couldn't find a job?

**Student 20:** [03:03] No.

**Researcher:** [03:05] Looking back, how do you feel about your decision not to go to college?

**Student 20:** [03:08] A bit bummed out, because I wanted to go to college. I wanted to learn, that's what I wanted to go and do. But if you haven't got the money you just, just won't go then. You need money to just...

**Researcher:** [03:20] To survive.

**Student 20:** [03:21] Yeah.

**Researcher:** [03:21] What was the course you were looking at doing?

**Student 20:** [03:25] Soccer Coaching.

**Researcher:** [03:28] In the future, do you think you will go to further education?

**Student 20:** [03:30] Yeah, when I'm 23, I'll go. I'm 20, now. When I am 23 I will go when I'm an adult student sorry a mature student, the grant does not matter that young. I'll still get the grant.

**Researcher:** [03:42] You'll get your grant. Would you still be thinking of doing the Soccer Coaching?

**Student 20:** [03:52] Aye, definitely when I am 23.

**Researcher:** [03:55] That's the next question, "What course would you like to further?" so the last question is, if you had a magic wand, what would you change about your education?

**Student 20:** [04:01] Nothing really.

**Researcher:** [04:03] You happy with things were in mainstream with your...?

**Student 20:** [04:10] No I didn't really enjoyed school. I enjoyed coming here, I didn't enjoy school.

**Researcher:** [04:23] In a sense, would you preferred to stay in school and doing your leaving, if you hadn't had the same support?

**Student 20:** [04:31] Yes, what happened two years ago with the college, I'd have a job now, but it doesn't really matter, I'm finished now.

**Researcher:** [04:33] Would you change anything about your Youthreach experience, or are you happy with that?

**Student 20:** [05:06] No, I'm fine. I'm happy there. It was very good, good people. We just had fun, enjoyed it.

**Researcher:** [05:21] You've got your qualifications.

**Student 20:** [05:22] I got my qualifications.

**Researcher:** [05:23] Listen, [REDACTED], thanks so much you for your time. Much appreciated.

**Student 20:** [05:40] You're welcome.

### Student 21 interview

**Researcher:** [00:03] Hi, [REDACTED]. How are you? Thanks for coming in today to do a little chat about your time in Youthreach. If you could tell me, why did you go to Youthreach?

**Student 21:** [00:13] I was kicked out of school, but well I didn't mind getting kicked out, because when I came to Youthreach it was a lot better anyway. The teachers here help more than they would in normal school, so it's a lot better.

**Researcher:** [00:31] What year did you leave Youthreach?

**Student 21:** [00:33] 2017.

**Researcher:** [00:36] What qualifications did you obtain at Youthreach?

**Student 21:** [00:39] My QQI Level 4.

**Researcher:** [00:41] Looking back, do you think you enjoyed your time in Youthreach, and why?

**Student 21:** [00:47] Yes, I enjoyed it.

**Researcher:** [01:05] What do you feel was the difference between your education in Youthreach compared to mainstream school?

**Student 21:** [01:14] In mainstream school really, the teachers wouldn't have time for every student. In Youthreach, the teacher would get around to every student if they needed. It's more helpful, in a way, better I think for the students, as well.

**Researcher:** [01:33] What do you feel is your main reason you stayed in Youthreach, completed your program?

**Student 21:** [01:39] I wanted qualifications to get myself a good job. Afterward, to do things like go to other countries and traveling, then come back and then get my Level 5 done, do my PLC, and then go on further then from that.

**Researcher:** [02:01] What did you do after leaving Youthreach?

**Student 21:** [02:06] Going to Spain, and then hopefully traveling around the rest of Europe then, after.

**Researcher:** [02:14] Why did you not go on to further education after Youthreach?

**Student 21:** [02:19] I wanted to take a year off, because I've been doing work nearly my whole life in school. Then, when I wasn't in mainstream school anymore, I was in my last year, and then when I came to Youthreach, I had to do two more years. It was nice to take a break for a year.

**Researcher:** [02:41] Looking back, how do you feel about this decision?

**Student 21:** [02:44] I feel it was the right decision. Get to do things that I didn't get to do for all the other years while I was in school.

**Researcher:** [02:55] Do you think you'll go to further education in the near future?

**Student 21:** [03:01] Yes, I think I'll apply next year for a PLC, and then so on after that.

**Researcher:** [03:08] What course would you like to do if you do go after the PLC and then to college?

**Student 21:** [03:13] I'd like to do either sports management or computer science.

**Researcher:** [03:18] Do that in a PLC, and then continue to learn in a college is it?

**Student 21:** [03:23] Yes.

**Researcher:** [03:23] Do you have any college in mind?

**Student 21:** [03:27] Normal college or a PLC?

**Researcher:** [03:30] Both.

**Student 21:** [03:30] For the PLC, I was thinking either Colaiste Ide or Dunboyne. After that, I was just hoping ITB.

**Researcher:** [03:38] If you had a magic wand, what would you change about your education?

**Student 21:** [03:45] I wouldn't change anything. I'm glad the way things turned out. I'm happy about it.

### Student 22 interview

**Researcher:** [00:05] Hi [REDACTED], thanks for coming today for this interview. I'll just go through, ask you a few questions. Then, if you just want to answer them as best as you feel, is that OK?

**Student 22:** [00:14] No problem.

**Researcher:** [00:15] Thanks a lot. Why did you go to Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [00:18] When I left school, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I just thought Youthreach would be a good opportunity to get a qualification that I could go on and get a job.

**Researcher:** [00:27] What year did you leave Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [00:29] 2017.

**Researcher:** [00:30] So it's just recently?

**Student 22:** [00:32] Yeah.

**Researcher:** [00:33] What qualifications did you obtain while you were in Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [00:36] I obtained a QQI Level 5 in General Learning.

**Researcher:** [00:38] That's very good. Looking back, do you think you enjoyed your time in Youthreach and why?

**Student 22:** [00:44] I really enjoyed my time in Youthreach. The style of learning really suited me. Doing all the work as the course went on suited me better than doing the exam at the end. Also, I found that the teachers are really easy to deal with and people are very easy to talk too.

**Researcher:** [00:59] So continuous assessment was a very good thing?

**Student 22:** [01:01] Yeah, that was helpful for me.

**Researcher:** [01:05] What do you feel was the difference in Youthreach compared to when you were in mainstream school?

**Student 22:** [01:09] Really, the continuous assessment. In mainstream school, you learn everything and do an exam at the end of the year, which didn't suit me. I found it hard to remember everything from the start of the year until the end. When you have to learn something, and then do an assignment on it, I found that much easier.

**Researcher:** [01:27] What about anything else within your mainstream to Youthreach that would have been different?

**Student 22:** [01:32] Teachers are not as easy to talk to. You're in a smaller class, as well, which is a lot easier. There's not 30 people to deal with. There's only ten or eight or whatever. I found that much easier, too.

**Researcher:** [01:48] What do you feel is your main reason you stayed in Youthreach and completed your program?

**Student 22:** [01:53] I wanted to get my full cert, my full QQI Level 5. That was my main reason for staying in.

**Researcher:** [02:01] What did you do after leaving Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [02:04] Looked for work for a while, had a look around, trying to get something that suited me.

**Researcher:** [02:12] Why did you not go onto further education after Youthreach?

**Student 22:** [02:16] Further education doesn't suit me too much. I had no interest in going to college after leaving school. After leaving Youthreach, it didn't change a lot.

**Researcher:** [02:26] Looking back, how do you feel about this decision?

**Student 22:** [02:29] I still agree with it. I still don't want to go back.

**Researcher:** [02:32] Do you think you'll ever go back to further education in the near future?

**Student 22:** [02:36] Not in the near future. Maybe years and years away, but not in the near future.

**Researcher:** [02:41] How many years would you say?

**Student 22:** [02:44] I might go back and do night education classes or something, a couple of years, five or six years maybe.

**Researcher:** [02:52] If you did go back, what course would you like to do?

**Student 22:** [02:55] I'd like to do sports psychology, if I had the chance to do it.

**Researcher:** [02:58] Is there any reason why that?

**Student 22:** [03:00] Just playing sports and realizing the mental side of myself. I'd like to look further into it.

**Researcher:** [03:06] Very good. If you had a magic wand, what do you think you'd change about your education?

**Student 22:** [03:10] Might have actually studied for exams when I was in school.

**Researcher:** [03:16] That's it, [REDACTED]. Thanks very much for answering those questions, much appreciated.

**Student 22:** [03:21] No problem.